

Just Transition

Uniejów – from a forlorn riverside town to a health resort



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A brief case presentation of Uniejów

Uniejów, a small town with a current population of three thousand inhabitants, gained the status of a thermal spa in 2012. It owes its spectacular boom in the last twenty years to the discovery and utilisation of geothermal waters and the effective integration of external funding, which was mainly allocated to coherently planned and steadily implemented investments. The first step towards development was the establishment of the company Geotermia Uniejów in 1999, which set about building a municipal heating system based on geothermal energy. Further town initiatives resulted in the construction of the impressive Termy Uniejów thermal pool complex, the renovation of a medieval castle, and the revitalisation of the surrounding park. Uniejów focused on the development of tourist and recreational functions, thus gaining the status of a spa town. This would not have been possible without a visionary mayor, who unfailingly put these coherent plans into motion. Key to their implementation was the use of public and EU funds. Between 2002 and 2016, the aggregated cost of all investments amounted to more than PLN 250 million.

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Plans are underway to further develop the spa, which is still at the beginning of its journey, but huge potential has already been built from the ground up. Once the basic infrastructure for recreational and therapeutic needs is in place, work will be carried out to further exploit geothermal deposits – the town possesses the only thermal saline water in Poland that is suitable for drinking (as confirmed by relevant certificate approvals). Plans have been drawn up to ultimately use the water in the food, cosmetic and processing industries. In cooperation with universities, work is being carried out to develop brine use in medicine and rehabilitation. In the future, based on the minerals contained in the brine, it will be possible to create cosmetics, juices, canned regional products and bottled water, which should create new jobs in the commune.

The unrelenting local authorities continue to devise new initiatives all the time. In recent years, the Termy Uniejów thermal pool complex has once again been expanded. The newly built river Warta boulevards were awarded a distinction by the Łódź branch of the Society of Polish Town Planners; the investment was acknowledged in the category of newly created public space. Further areas of investment are being developed. The mayor is fully aware that it is necessary to think ahead, to look well beyond the few years of tenure of the elected local government. Following trends, the availability of technological innovations, and the support of EU funds provide an opportunity to implement bold visions in the present, while in the future, following a reduction in EU subsidies, local authorities may not be able to sustain such a scale of investment. All initiatives, along with the continued expansion of a comprehensive tourist offer, must be guided by common sense. The current balance of profits and losses must also factor in how economic aspects and how the commune's budget possibilities will develop in the coming decades.

1. The here and now – the baseline situation of the Uniejów case

The Uniejów Commune is an urban-rural borough located in the north-west of the Łódź Voivodeship, comprising the town of Uniejów and 30 villages. The urban population percentage in 2021 was 43 per cent. This is lower than the average rate in the country (59.8 per cent) and in the Łódź Voivodeship (61.9 per cent). The Uniejów Commune, with the town of Uniejów – classified as very small – is surrounded by small towns (e.g. Poddębice, Łęczyca – in the Łódź Voivodeship) and medium-sized towns (e.g. Turek, Koło – in the Wielkopolskie Voivodeship). Uniejów is serviced by the town of Poddębice – the county capital – with regards to tasks carried out by the county government. Conversely, other supra-local services depend on the availability of a competitive offer in the neighbouring towns. According to the Central Statistical Office (CSO) data, in 2021 the commune was inhabited by 6,889 people (which constitutes approximately 17 per cent of the wider county's population), of which 3,051 lived in the town of Uniejów, the seat of the commune authorities.

Despite two decades of dynamic development, the Uniejów Commune, according to the Areas of Strategic Intervention, has been classified by the central government (National Strategy of Regional Development 2030) as an area at risk of permanent marginalisation, and from the regional level as an area of tourism-environmental-agricultural assets.

The commune received its first large development funds in 1999 from the Provincial Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management in Łódź for the newly established Geotermia Uniejów. The creation of this entity allowed for the construction of a district heating network and the infrastructure necessary to operate the thermal pools. It soon

became apparent that there were too few local consumers for the development of district heating, whilst the therapeutic sector did not offer enough potential. Therefore, a far-reaching decision was taken to focus on tourism by moving investments to the other side of the river Warta, to an essentially non-urban area where, apart from the existing attraction of medieval castle structures, the entire infrastructure had to be planned and built from scratch. A vision of a high-quality resort began to emerge.

2. Where do the actions lead, and to what end?

The skillful use of funds for the development of thermal water utilisation in Uniejów allowed for a number of key investments to be made for further dynamic development.

1. The construction of the recreational and therapeutic Termy Uniejów complex was initiated, and it finally opened in 2008. At the time, it was the only facility of its kind in central Poland and one of only two in the country. Initially, it possessed three pools with heated and mineralised water: a brine pool filled with salt water, a 25-metre swimming pool with water at 25-30 degrees Celsius, and a children's wading pool with water at 30 degrees Celsius. Two saunas, a catering facility with cafés and restaurants, and a castellum with accommodation and attractions in the form of organised medieval knight events were also introduced. Further expansion of the complex included a swimming pool and various water attractions that can accommodate around 1,800 people.
2. The Knights' Castellum, with a modest capacity of 25 beds, was complemented in subsequent phases by hotels of a much higher standard: in the renovated castle, in the Dom Pracy Twórczej (House of Creative Work), which is a converted former cinema, in the newly built Zagroda Młynarska (Mill Farm), and in the privately built Lawendowe Termy spa (Lavender Thermal Baths). These successive steps increased the local accommodation base tenfold. In the following years, private facilities were created, including Browar Wiatr (the Wiatr Brewery), Hotel Uniejów and Hotel Termalny.



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3. The neglected buildings of the former workers' hotel, situated in the tranquil, historical castle park, were rebuilt, and a modern facility was created, developed by the Instytut Zdrowia Człowieka (Institute of Human Health) for spa activity purposes (Uniejów Park Spa).
4. The modernisation of the Castle of the Archbishops of Gniezno and its adaptation for new functions was a fruitful idea that breathed new life into the medieval walls. The building offers both luxury accommodations and a unique conference space, which has allowed it to host a variety of business events.
5. One of the key milestones in Uniejów's dynamic development was obtaining health spa status in 2012. This allowed Uniejów to progress from a town relevant almost exclusively to its immediate hinterland to a regional showpiece spa and health resort, as well as a very attractive location on the tourist map of Poland.

All of these investments are driving further investments, thus local authorities have decided to sell off selected facilities to specialised companies.

3. Who is implementing it and with what funds? What is the adopted action strategy for Uniejów

The local authorities took advantage of EU funding opportunities in the pre-accession period. After Poland's European Union accession, fundraising was intensified. From 2002 to 2016, the aggregated value of all investments amounted to over PLN 250 million. The local government embraced a sustainable development strategy, therefore half of the funds raised were invested in the spa and the other half in modernising the local commune infrastructure. To highlight the scale, for the same activities (without external funding) the commune would have been able to allocate no more than PLN 2 million per year from its own budget. The local authorities were guided by a multi-faceted approach to investment, making the most of all grant opportunities from different sources – first and foremost from the EU, but not exclusively, as there is also a sizeable share of funds from regional and national programmes, e.g. from the Provincial Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management in Łódź. The effectiveness of strategy implementation is evidenced by the fact that since 2004, Uniejów has been at the forefront of cities in Poland with the greatest efficiency in obtaining and spending EU funds and with the highest percentage of co-financing of projects. In some cases the value of the co-financing exceeded 90 per cent.

Importantly, the commune also places a focus on the development of social capital. The successes of Uniejów motivate the community to develop entrepreneurship, to undertake various activities and cooperation initiatives, e.g. in associations, and to take an active part in the local social life. This unburdens the local government from taking responsibility for some of the initiatives. Local authorities emphasise that part of their role is to discover and strengthen social potential, to support economic activity, and to encourage independent activity by presenting possibilities rather than offering ready-made solutions. They encourage the inhabitants to take advantage of the development dynamics and the emerging opportunities for bottom-up initiatives. Good examples of such initiatives are investments aimed at renovating village chapels, team building trips, and joining various associations, undertaking a wide range of activities.

The financial resources obtained were so significant on a national scale that in the 2004-2009 classification, the commune took ninth place among all Polish communes according to the criterion of the share of property expenses financed from EU funds in total property expenses. In the same ranking for 2009-2012, the Uniejów Commune was already in first place in the country, with a result of nearly 70 per cent, ahead of such tourist communes as Hel and Szczyrk. In the last published ranking of the magazine Wspólnota, Uniejów took first place for 'Local government investment expenditures 2022' and third place for 'Use of European Union funds 2022'.

4. How has this been implemented? Key projects, decisions and events

It is also worth noting the style in which these activities have been implemented. The key documents for the Uniejów Commune, on the basis of which the action strategy was precisely defined and the individual stages were planned in terms of the implementation of the approved local policy, are the following: 'Uniejów Communal Development Strategy for 2000-2010 and for 2013-2020', 'The Local Communal Development Plan for 2007-2015', and 'The Local Revitalisation Programme for 2011-2018'. Approved implementation planning utilises a management style reminiscent of methods characteristic of the private sector, such as short- and long-term strategic planning, selected financial planning techniques, and objective-based management. The responsibility for service delivery has also been separated from the performance of services. The success of the commune is not only about the amount of funds raised and the completed investments, however. In Uniejów, local government officials have clearly placed an emphasis on the supply of public goods (i.e. air quality, environmental assets, culture and education, and quality of life) in contrast to the typical focus on private goods, such as tax breaks granted to individual companies.

Although the investments in tourism and recreation are the most spectacular and visible in the commune, it should be noted that the commune has also obtained tangible funds for infrastructural construction. The tourism sector has not only become a local economic driver, but has also provided the opportunity to apply for European Union funds for the construction and modernisation of all facilities necessary for serving tourists and visitors. The resulting infrastructure, i.e. kilometres of roads, pavements, water and sewage lines, electricity grids, and the development of public spaces, has become useful to the commune's residents. Additional housing infrastructure in the form of several blocks of flats and an estate of more than 50 houses is currently under construction. In addition, the Włodzimierz Smolarek Football Field Complex is being built.

As a consequence of the measures taken, there was a significant increase in employment numbers in the urban-rural commune of Uniejów based on the indicators: number of employed per 1,000 people and number of employed per 1,000 people of working age. In the case of both indicators, the Uniejów Commune from 2012 to 2014 reached values lower than those of Poddębicki County (Powiat), while in 2021 it not only exceeded the county level, but almost equalled the average value at the level of Łódź Voivodeship. Corresponding to the trend observed in the voivodeship in recent years, the number of unemployed people in the urban-rural commune of Uniejów has been falling steadily, from 501 people in 2012 to 188 in 2021.

In 2021, 743 business entities were registered in the urban-rural commune of Uniejów, which constitutes 20 per cent of all business entities in Poddębice County. Over the last

decade, the number of companies increased by 144 – an increase of 24 per cent compared to 2012 numbers. Taking into account the indicator of the number of entities per 10,000 working age people in the urban-rural commune of Uniejów, it reached higher absolute values, as well as relative growth dynamics, than the wider Poddębice County. This indicator for the town of Uniejów reached higher values in the last decade than for the whole of Łódź Voivodeship.

Finally, it is worth underlining that the town of Uniejów and Uniejów Commune obtained tangible, image-building benefits from implementing all of the activities described. The achievements of the Uniejów Commune have been recognised by the juries of various competitions. Some of the most important distinctions that the Uniejów Commune has received include awards from the Ministry of Regional Development competition Polska Pięknieje – 7 cudów Funduszy Europejskich (Polish Beauty – 7 Wonders of the European Funds) (2009, 2013), high annual rankings in the Rzeczpospolita Local Government Rankings (2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012), as well as awards in National Geographic Traveler magazine's 7 New Wonders of Poland 2012 poll and in competitions of the Polish Tourist Organisation (PTO) for the Best Tourist Product of the Year (PTO Distinction 2011 and PTO Certificate 2012).

5. Is this the end? What next?

In 2015, the city authorities decided on an architectural and urban planning call for action for concepts for developing the area on the other side of the river Warta. Further investments will be made to increase the attractiveness of the spa, such as a brine graduation tower and a conference centre with a sports hall. The architectural design foresees the development of new investment areas with spa treatment, sport and recreation facilities, along with the necessary services and accompanying green areas (in accordance with the Study of Conditions and Directions of Spatial Development of the Town and Commune of Uniejów. Facilities related to medical services, hydrotherapy, hospitality, sports, and recreation based on the use of thermal waters have been planned.

Possible facilities include:

- a building serving as a spa house with a wide range of treatment and rehabilitation services, as well as retail and catering functions;
- two three- and four-star hotel complexes with leisure, medical spa and wellness facilities, along with complementary services;
- a complex of buildings with rental flats for patients, offering functions and rooms that, for example, could be used for the opening of a senior citizens' home or guest house; and
- sports areas for rehabilitation.

The project anticipates a better connection of the Uniejów spa area with the town, the park complex and the thermal baths through the development of a network of pedestrian and bicycle paths, as well as horse trails for recreation in the Warta river valley. The second bank of the river Warta, which is gradually being urbanised, gives the town of Uniejów a completely new, architecturally coherent and modern character.

6. What does this mean for the Bełchatów region's transition process?

The choice of the Uniejów Commune as an inspiring case study for the municipalities and communes of the Bełchatów region was based on two considerations. Firstly, it neighbours the Przekona Commune, which was one of the first that had to socially and economically cope with the mine closure at the Turek-based ADAMÓW brown coal mine. Secondly, it is a very small commune, without much developmental value, which, without a self-developed concept, could have by now been one of the poorest in Poland. Despite the discovery of a geothermal water deposit in 1978, the town of Uniejów started off three decades ago practically empty-handed. The current dynamic development of the Uniejów Commune is the result of a long-term process, taking place mainly at the local level and based on local human capital. Therefore, the challenges facing the commune required it to simultaneously recognise and analyse the area of potential activities and to find funding sources which in turn would not interfere with the sovereignty of the commune and the exploitation area of the springs.

The town of Uniejów is an example of a spectacular success as a result of the combination of the mayor's far-reaching vision, a comprehensive and all-encompassing use of the natural wealth, and a pragmatic approach to the use of EU funds amounting to more than PLN 250 million. The extraction of geothermal water has been the driving force behind numerous transformations in the economic and social sphere of the Uniejów Commune. Development was streamlined by the service functionality of the tourism and leisure industry. Thanks to numerous investments, the municipality has become a modern and distinctive spa centre on the national scale. Current developments are directed towards the versatile use of the Uniejów brine in healing, heating, recreation, cosmetology, and fruit and vegetable processing investments.



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An additional geothermal water application is heating for the town, implemented by a company set up for this purpose – Geotermia Uniejów. The geothermal heat plant, combined with a biomass-fired peak load boiler plant, is to eventually supply 70 per cent of the buildings in Uniejów with heat. The new system replaces 10 local coal-fired boiler houses and 160 boiler houses located in single-family homes. Geothermal water is also used for:

1. health treatments (balneology)
2. heating the football pitch
3. recreation as part of the Termy Uniejów project run by the company PGK “Termy Uniejów” Sp. z o.o.

Following the closure of Bełchatów Power Plant, the city of Bełchatów will face the challenge of how to provide heat for its residents in the next decade. The town of Uniejów, located a few dozen kilometres away, can be a good source of inspiration in the search for zero-emission, climate-neutral solutions.

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