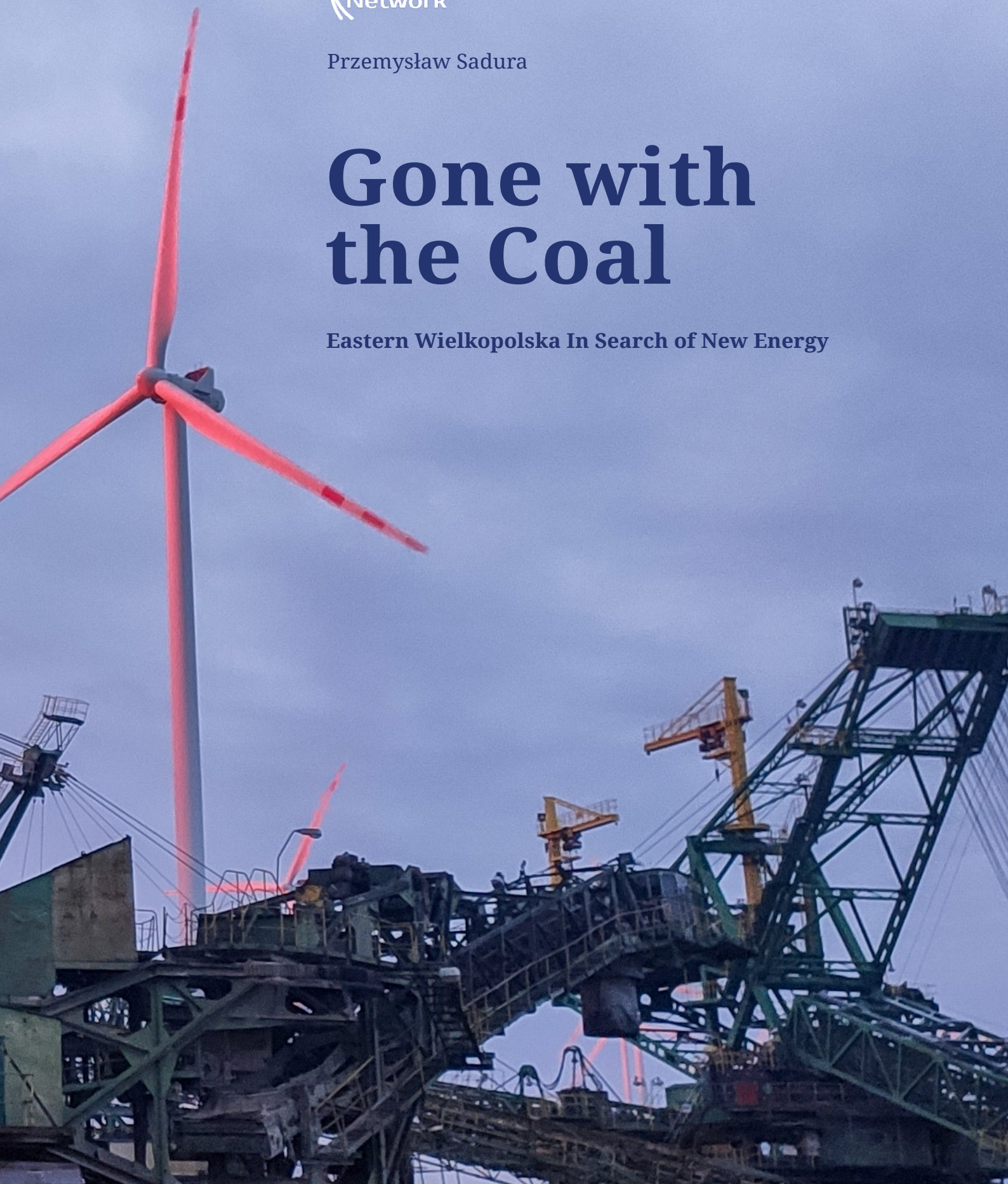




Przemysław Sadura

# Gone with the Coal

Eastern Wielkopolska In Search of New Energy



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# Introduction

The report "**Gone with the Coal. Eastern Wielkopolska in search of new energy**" is the remarkable story of a region that built itself up on the back of coal discoveries. Konin and its surrounding areas – after years of growth based on "coal steroids" – today have to resolve the question of whether there is "life after coal". Our study is also the story of the exceptional mobilisation of the region's community, which has decided to respond positively to this challenge and "reinvent itself". This has only been possible through great determination, courage and vision. In embarking on the path of a just transition, the region decided to leave behind the very thing that had defined it up until then: decades of mining traditions, regional pride and its entire livelihood based on the simple equation: **mines and power stations in Konin = work in the region + energy in Poland.**

The Eastern Wielkopolska local government has declared its intention to achieve climate neutrality by 2040 – a decade earlier than the ambitious EU policy targets. The region has thus decided to take on the challenge of forming a new identity. Its **Territorial Just Transition Plan** (TJTP) therefore entails greater ambitions than energy transition and a move away from coal mining and burning. It is also a sincere attempt at catching up with Europe and breaking with years of backwardness. The saying goes that **East of Konin, Asia begins**, and this succinctly describes the region's backwardness, which started with the region's incorporation into Russia in the first half of the 19th century. It was then that the paths of Wielkopolska and Eastern Wielkopolska diverged for many years. This report is also the story of the challenge posed by peripheral developmental dependencies.

*What is most important to me is that this idea is stronger than money and the economy. The idea of a new space, a new place, built on the back of the transition, that shows we are modern because we have hydrogen and we are aspiring to be carbon neutral – this creates a certain quality in itself. Transitions will be successful if they have an idea behind it, says one of the decision-makers responsible for the process studied.*

Eastern Wielkopolska is not lacking in 'a guiding concept' or 'an idea for itself'. However, there are many dangers facing the region. These include the simultaneous acceleration of transition processes and a serious delay in the launch of the **Just Transition Fund** (JTF), which is supposed to finance it. This could thwart and wind down the reformist fervour. Fortunately, Eastern Wielkopolska did not make the mistake of the Bełchatów region, which slept through the transition<sup>1</sup> – the latter chose the past and delayed the start of any preparations for much too long. **The question remains whether Eastern Wielkopolska is not in danger of becoming a region that will sleep through its transition – focusing too much on grand visions for the future, neglecting the present.**

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<sup>1</sup> Przespana rewolucja: Sytuacja społeczna w regionie bełchatowskim u progu transformacji energetycznej. A. Dańkowska, P. Sadura. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2021

## A Dream for the Future

Close your eyes. Breathe deeply. Imagine the future. It is 2045. The world is experiencing the cumulative effects of global warming. Europe is additionally struggling with an energy transition designed to allow it to achieve full climate neutrality by 2050. According to most experts, this will be achieved with a delay of several years due, among other things, to the perturbations caused by the European Union's (EU) cut-off from Russian gas following Russia's war with Ukraine, which lasted for most of the third decade of the 21st century. Although the commodity crisis strongly accelerated the massive development of RES, hydrogen and energy efficiency, the lack of a transitional fuel significantly prolonged the coal dependency of some countries including, most importantly, Poland.

However, not all of Poland is at the tail end of the transition process. Eastern Wielkopolska is clearly ahead of the pack, having achieved the ambitious EU target in the early 2000s. It is the first completely climate-neutral region in Poland to absorb more greenhouse gases than it emits. This has been made possible through the use of **renewable energy sources** (RES), increased energy storage potential and the restoration of natural ecosystems (afforestation, wetland restoration, river renaturalisation, etc.). The region's inhabitants have given up coal and rely mainly on electricity, including for household heating thanks to, for example, the very popular locally produced heat pumps.

Regional residents actively participate in energy generation and trading as prosumers, members of energy cooperatives, and stakeholders in infrastructure projects implemented through extended public-private partnerships. The flywheel of the system is the regional and local government. Municipal and cooperative mini-generation plants using RES, transmission networks, as well as energy storage facilities, provide electricity to residents and local institutions. This is complemented by the business activities of **ZE PAK** (Zespół Elektrowni Pątnów Adamów Konin SA, Eng. Pątnów Adamów Konin Power Plant Complex) and those of external investors and local entrepreneurs.

The territorial core of this system is the "Wielkopolska Energy Valley" – an area consisting of five counties: the Municipality of Konin, the Konin county, Koło, Turek and Słupsk, covering a total of 43 municipalities and 15 towns. Designed as recently as 2019, the area has consciously entered the energy transition process, and measures to create clean and green industry have become a driving force for the planning process among local authorities and entrepreneurs.

The price per unit of energy is now much higher than it was before the outbreak of post-pandemic inflation, but investments in energy efficiency have made it possible to reduce energy consumption significantly: most homes are passive or energy-producing buildings. Companies involved in the production and regeneration of batteries or the assembly, installation and servicing of heat pumps, but also various manufacturers taking advantage of the lower prices of locally produced energy have been developing their activities in Wielkopolska's business parks for years.

The rehabilitated post-mining areas have become a focal point for agritourist farms set up by former miners. ZE PAK, in cooperation with local authorities, has used decommissioned machinery to create the world's largest museum – a mining machinery park. Visitors can sit in the cab of a working excavator and take part in the process of loading and transporting the raw material, which is mined only for tourism purposes.

Eastern Wielkopolska has become a symbol of the EU's just transition programme. It is a combination of an exemplary transition, planned and implemented with the involvement of local residents, and possible thanks to cooperation between the provincial government and social partners, and ZE PAK's early decision to move away from coal mining and combustion (initially planned for 2030 and later accelerated to 2024). This guaranteed access to funds from the Just Transition Fund. The region thus had strong incentives to force a rapid transition that protected affected social groups.

The negative effects of the loss (and redundancies) of employees in the ZE PAK complex and those in related sectors were more than compensated by new jobs stemming from investments in green industries. Extensive training packages helped to adapt the skills of the departing employees associated with the lignite sector so that they would be the ones to find employment in the newly emerging RES industry. As many as 25,000 workers were required in this area, which exceeded the most optimistic forecasts and stopped the process of young people fleeing the Konin subregion.

# 60%

**Between 2011 and 2020, employment at ZE PAK CG fell by 60 per cent, to a level of 4,000 people.**

Thanks to access to EU funds and the accelerated closure of mines, the reclamation of existing open pits with river water and the restoration of groundwater resources have been significantly accelerated. These processes have supported measures to slow down water drainage and increase water retention in the region. On large areas of post-industrial mining land, the rich and varied topography has been restored, as have the original tree forest structures. Each post-industrial mining municipality has reclaimed areas for forests and wetlands. A lot of resources have also gone into climate change adaptation measures: retention, changing crop species, designing towns and buildings to avoid urban heat islands.

Good. Now wake up and slowly open your eyes. Do you think this vision is too good to be true? You are probably right. Although such a scenario for the future of Eastern Wielkopolska emerges from the documents, plans and reports written between 2019 and 2021 (e.g., WWF and Instrat's report Just Transition in Eastern Wielkopolska – Diagnosis and Guidelines,<sup>2</sup> the Eastern Wielkopolska Territorial Just Transition Plan,<sup>3</sup> or the Development Strategy of Eastern Wielkopolska until 2040<sup>4</sup>).

The optimism of the authors can partly be explained by the real, as it seemed at the time, prospect of a fast implementation of the Just Transition Fund. Over time, the good mood gradually deteriorated and by mid-2022, when the research underpinning the following report was conducted, there was no trace of the previous buoyancy. It boiled down – in the words of one interviewee representing the provincial government – to one thing: talks with the EC are dragging on and the resources from the Just Transition Fund are simply not there.

The protracted wait for EU funds is the experience of many regions across the European Union. The Just Transition Fund, for better or worse, is part of the new financial perspective in the EU Funds and is subject to the same procedures (above all, protracted intergovernmental consultations). Only the German regions find themselves in a comfortable position, as their transitions are primarily financed from the federal budget. In these regions, JTF funds are treated as supplementary funding or a safety net. However, this is the exception and not the rule. The frustration caused by waiting is the experience of all regions, but in Eastern Wielkopolska, almost all hope for the future was strongly linked with the launch of the JTF. The peculiarities of the region, which have given it a unique position in the European Union as a symbol of the Just Transition Fund, could quickly turn against it.

At the start of work on the Territorial Just Transition Plan, it was assumed that EU funds would be available by the end of 2021 at the latest. In mid-2022, when the research for this report was carried out, the Just Transition Fund had yet to be launched. This lengthy waiting period was filled with anticipation, and it was easy to declare ambitious forecasts and targets in the meantime.

**However, the creation of this vision of transition, more thrilling than realistic, was a great success for the region and an important step for the start of the Just Transition process in Eastern Wielkopolska.** It resulted in an unprecedented mobilisation of regional actors and the networking of local government officials, climate activists, local NGOs and entrepreneurs, as well as representatives of ZE PAK and trade unions. This resulted in the creation of an exemplary energy transition plan – open and inclusive of different social groups. The plan was recognised by the European Commission (EC) and experts as one of the best territorial plans. Interestingly, according to interviews with representatives of organisations, entrepreneurs, local government officials, they were more or less aware of the unrealistic nature of some aspects of the vision.

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<sup>2</sup> Just Transition in Eastern Wielkopolska - diagnosis and guidelines, M. Hetmanski, D. Kiewra, D. Iwanowski, P. Czyżak, WWF Poland Foundation (2021), [www.instrat.pl/wwf-wielkopolska-wschodnia](http://www.instrat.pl/wwf-wielkopolska-wschodnia).

<sup>3</sup> <https://arrtransformacja.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2021.06.30-TPSTWW.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://arrtransformacja.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/2021.11.24-Strategia-rozwoju-Wielkopolski-Wschodniej-ZALOZENIA.pdf>

*This may seem like an illusion, but sometimes it needs to be used to generate motivation. A utopia is provided not as the ultimate goal, but to motivate, give direction, and give tools to criticise the status quo. — IDI8\_NGO*

## Research Methodology

**The following report seeks to describe the context and planning process of a regional just transition in light of the narratives of representatives of the main groups involved in the process.** As part of the research conducted between May and August 2022, over a dozen in-depth interviews were conducted with employees of regional and local government, representatives of the Regional Development Agency (RDA) and of the power plant company Zespół Elektrowni Pątnów Adamów Konin (ZE PAK), members of trade unions (TU), local entrepreneurs, activists, the employees and collaborators of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in the Just Transition process (Polish Green Network, Green Future Institute, CEE Bankwatch Network). Due to the necessity in many cases of preserving the anonymity of the interviewees, each quote is described with a symbol containing the interviewee's number (IDI\_) and the relevant general category (NGO/RDA/government/entrepreneur/ZEPAK/TU).

In addition to the interviews, another basis for the report's conclusions are the observations and interviews (more than ten) carried out during the meetings at a three-day study visit of representatives of Lusatian (Sorbian) local governments and NGOs to Eastern Wielkopolska. The study visit was part of the Polish Green Network's project "Oddolne, zrównoważone, odnawialne laboratorium dla Sprawiedliwej Transformacji w polskich i niemieckich regionach kopalnianych" [Eng. Bottom-up, Sustainable, Renewable Lab for Just Transition in Polish and German coal regions].<sup>5</sup> The empirical material was supplemented by an analysis of reports, articles produced during the project, and the TJTP consultation process. In the following report, the description of the historical and socio-economic context of the region has been kept to a necessary minimum. This type of description can easily be found in the numerous reports and articles available in the web archive on the Eastern Wielkopolska Just Transition website run by the RDA.<sup>6</sup> Attention is focused on reconstructing the narratives and positions of the various actors involved in the processes concerning the past, present and future, as well as a proposed interpretation of this information. **The aim of the report is to present a critical description of the adopted transition planning model with a view to its adaptation in other regions.**

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<sup>5</sup> The project is being implemented by the Polish Green Network in cooperation with partners: Fundacja Instytut Zielonej Przyszłości [en. Foundation Institute for the Green Future] from Konin, Lausitzer Perspektiven from the Sorbian region and the Berlin Ecologic Institute. The project is funded by EUKI (the European Climate Initiative), a financial instrument of the German Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Protection.

<sup>6</sup> <https://arrtransformacja.org.pl/publikacje>





## Part I

# Gone with the Coal

Eastern Wielkopolska does not feature in the old lists of Polish historical-geographical regions. The term appeared only at the beginning of the 21st century for the purpose of acquiring EU funds and replaced the previously used name: the Konin sub-region. The new name of the region is also a tribute to the inhabitants of smaller towns (e.g., Turek), who for decades have lived in the shadow of Konin, complaining about what they call "Konin-centrism", i.e., the marginalisation of the importance (and interests) of other local urban centres. The name "Eastern Wielkopolska" also aptly captures the specificity of this unusual place – which simultaneously is and is not part of the historical wider Wielkopolska region.

## Chapter 1.

### Yesterday: Regional Social Histories

#### 1.1. East of Konin, Asia Begins

The sources of contemporary Wielkopolska's identity (eastern and western) should primarily be sought in the 19th century. Poland was then divided among three partitions: Prussia, Russia and Austria. As a result of the Second Partition of Poland (1793), Konin found itself in the Prussian partition. Later, it was briefly part of the Duchy of Warsaw, and finally, in 1815, together with the sub-region, it found itself within the borders of the Congress Kingdom of Poland (the Russian partition). Since then, the identities of eastern and western Wielkopolska have developed under completely different conditions.

In the Prussian partition (which was richer and more industrialised than the Austrian and Russian ones), an ethos of what is referred to as organic labour, i.e., the economic development initiatives of the Polish population, developed almost from the onset of the 19th century. This was both a way of opposing Germanisation and fighting for a better material and social status. Order, industriousness and austerity began to define the ethos and identity of Wielkopolska.

*Wielkopolska patriotism was positivist rather than romantic – get rich and work for yourself and society. It was additionally boosted through a sense of privileged separateness. It was in the territory of the Prussian partition, in Strzałków, that the Berlin*



*railway ended, which is reflected in the sayings "Europe ends in Strzałków" and "From Konin, Asia begins", as stated by the Adam Mickiewicz University sociologist, Prof. Krzysztof Podemski, in an article for the weekly magazine Polityka.*<sup>7</sup>

This contrasted sharply with the situation in the more oppressive (and far less legalistic) Russian partition, where insurrectionist independence fervour was stronger. Konin and the surrounding area repeatedly became the scene of bloody armed interventions and repression. This was the case, for example, during the January Uprising in 1863, brutally suppressed by the Tsarist regime. This unique genesis is frequently voiced by our interviewees, indicating that the regional ethos is indeed a vibrant aspect of culture and a building block of local identity. The story of the border between "the West and Asia" appeared in several of the interviews conducted.

*Bełchatów was built from scratch by migrants from, for example, Eastern Wielkopolska. Silesia, by contrast, has been a coal epicentre for three hundred years. We are in the middle. Who will find it easier to create a new identity? Before coal appeared, this was an agricultural culture. This was indigenous Wielkopolska. **East of Września, Asia begins. That's what we, people from Poznań, think, because the Russian partition was already there.** Ślesin, for example, was the centre of regional goose trade. Hence, the cultural elements: the harvest festivals (dożynki) in Eastern Wielkopolska, the tradition of Farmers' Wives' Associations, folk traditions. Every village in this or that municipality is represented at the harvest festival. Each village has its own stand. You won't see that near Poznań anymore. These villages live in stagnant cultures, which testifies to the strength of tradition. On the other hand, in Konin and Turek, their urban character is evident; workers were employed here and they had very good access to culture. This is something to build on in terms of identity. We still have [in Konin - editor's note] four cultural centres, and that is a huge resource. People do not live by work alone, but on the basis of a certain reality that sustains them, the resources of tradition. — IDI2\_RDA*

The fate of the region underwent a drastic change with the advent of lignite coal, whose resources in the Konin area were explored and documented as early as in the interwar period. Industrial exploitation of the raw material was started by the Germans during the occupation (1939-1945). Exploitation of these resources was continued after the war. In 1945, Polish crews took over the facilities built by the Nazis during the war and started mining **at the Morzysław open pit**. In 1953, coal mining began with the second **Niesłusz open pit**. The development of the mines gained momentum in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the Konin Power Plant (1958) and, somewhat later, the Pątnów Power Plant (1967-69) were constructed. In order to ensure a constant supply of raw material for these power plants, successive open pits were opened every few years: **Gosławice** (1958), **Pątnów** (1962), **Kazimierz** (1965), **Józwin** (1971), **Lubstów** (1982), **Józwin IIB** (1999), **Drzewce** (2005) and **Tomisławice** (2010), according to the mine's website.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Patrioci, ale po swojemu

<https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/mojemiasto/1583817,1,poznan-pelen-sprzecznosci.read>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.kwbkonin.pl/index.php/odkrywki-2/>

## 1.2. Konin as a Socialist Town

Older employees know the history of the mine inside out. They can remember the dates when new pits were opened or new buildings completed.

*Coal appeared in 1939, when the Germans came, because they noticed in the Glinka area that there was something that could be mined. Mining began in earnest in 1945 in Morzysław. At first, [the coal – editor's note] was transported to Niesłusz. At that time, engineers from the AGH University of Science and Technology had to come in, because there were no people here who knew anything about mining. [When we arrived] in 1965, there were only two housing quarters. Today, what is referred to as "new Konin" consists of five housing districts. I now live in district four. Before my eyes, schools, community centres, nurseries were being built. The mine, ZRB [Zakład Robót Budowlanych, Eng. Construction Work Facility – editor's note] was responsible for the construction. They were building blocks of flats for the miners. We don't have any of that any more. The school, the community centre, the kindergartens have all been handed over to the local government. — IDI5\_TU*

*When I came to Konin in 1965, a new aluminium plant was being built. I remember that Cyrankiewicz [the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Poland Józef Cyrankiewicz – editor's note] was coming to the opening. There was an influx of people from outside. Labour was needed: mechanics, electricians, workers, engineers. Konin was an agricultural area, and it remains so to this day. But when the power plant, steelworks and mine were established, people had to be brought in from all over Poland. [...] I was hired by the mine in 1976 and delegated to recruit people from AGH, graduates and others. There were housing issues everywhere, but not with us, because there were flats already reserved for them. They arrived as married couples or they got married here, and immediately they received housing plus good jobs and salaries, plus the prospect that they would have a job until retirement. It was rare that someone started off at the 'Miner hotel'. People bought houses because they could afford them. Now many have sold off these houses and are returning to their places of origin. To Wrocław, Poznań, Łódź or Cracow. I grew up together with Konin and watched the town change. It was colourful, there were lots of cafés with nowhere to sit, and you had to wait for service everywhere, such were the crowds. We had Hortex and it was really hard to get a table there. The streets were full of young people. Now, in the evenings, you can see how many vacant lots there are. How many people have left, how many have died, young people do not come back after their studies. — IDI5\_TU*

The period of the town's greatest splendour began, according to the interviewees quoted above, after the construction of the "Konin" power plant in 1958 (today the plant is no longer coal-fired and produces municipal heat from biomass) and the "Pątnów" power plant (1967-69). Over the next two decades (1970s and 1980s), the town developed rapidly. During this period, more open pit mines were put into operation. When the Lubstów open pit started in the 1980s, the then Minister of Mines Czesław Piotrowski came to its official launch, as recalled by one of our interviewees.

*They said it was a hen that laid golden eggs because the coal was of such good quality. Piotrowski walked around town making a huge impression. Albeit the quarry itself was causing great excitement. I remember once 20 farmers burst into the plant with pitchforks. They wanted to talk to the director. We stood up for him personally: [telling them] that the director was not there and so on. They said that the chickens wouldn't lay eggs, that we would leave a mess behind. This is not true, because reclamation has always been part of what we do. What's more, maize, oilseed rape, sun root grow much better after land restoration than before, and this is scientifically proven.. — IDI5\_TU*

## 289 **Between 2005 and 2019, the number of employed persons per 1,000 inhabitants in the Konin sub-region increased from 252 to 289 (during this period, the number of employed persons in the country increased from 259 to 317).**

One of the miners working in a local mine, much younger than the previous interviewees, speaks in a similar vein. His father came to Konin in search of work and was employed to build a power station. In his opinion, the mine's impact on the town's development was undeniably huge. It built swimming pools, schools and community centres. It was also the local 'developer'. By the end of the 1990s, it was building flats and reselling them to residents. These were, according to the interviewee, the last 'golden' years for Konin and neighbouring municipalities, such as Kleczew and Ślesin. The situation started to deteriorate after the privatisation of the plant. The entire 2000s are described as a period of decline. "From then on, there was no more investment in the town. Prior to privatisation, a 'small restructuring' was carried out: the transfer of personnel and downsizing."

*Our mine is not like Bełchatow. It's multi-pit. We'll soon be left with one open pit. The last deposit is to be mined by the end of 2024. When the Adamów power plant was closed, we knew we, the Adamów mine, could already expect closure. People said that this was impossible because electricity would always be needed. — IDI13\_TU*

According to the interviewee, there are less than two thousand workers left at the mine, while back in the 1990s, there were more than nine thousand employed. As he points out, the current municipal authorities do not respect the town's heritage.

*There are boisterous announcements here, talk of green energy, transition, but you don't see them taking a serious interest in it. Solorz wanted to invest but was offered no preferential conditions. The town doesn't care about us. They have forgotten how much they owe us. — IDI13\_TU*

They have forgotten or remember things differently. For it turns out that local entrepreneurs and professionals remember the town's history quite differently from the employees of the mines and power plants.







*The change is great compared to the 1970s. In the 1970s, it was a concrete desert. It was a typical socialist town. There were even posters saying "Konin – A Socialist Town". Before the war, it was a district town where nothing happened. After the war, Konin grew on carbon steroids. It came into being quite suddenly, in the middle of nowhere, as a direct result of the launching of coal extraction. Since then, we have had a dual town: old Konin and new Konin lie next to each other. The new one has developed, but the old town was for many years an area for people with a lower material and cultural status. A place where it was better not to visit. A lot has changed since the beginning of the 21st century and the old town is now undergoing gentrification. New Konin, on the other hand, was a dormitory community for big businesses, plus restaurants, community centres, and all that started to change in the early 1990s. Entrepreneurship other than energy and state-owned enterprises was emerging. It was a typical town created by migrant people, specialist cadres or workers. It had not built up organically over the years and there were no small entrepreneurs, or craftsmen. In the 1990s, small-scale entrepreneurship flourished. — IDI4\_entrepreneur*

Today's 'planners' responsible for the regional just transition concept appeared to be aware of this tension, different local historical memories or conflicting assessments. According to one interviewee representing the regional government, Konin is one of the "hottest" places in Poland. It is located at a communication crossroad hub. It also has diverse regional identity resources and great opportunities to become a success story.

*"East of Strzałków, Asia begins" – today we do not have to be slaves to this saying. We do not have to be self-guided by stereotypes. The idea we want to attach to these vast resources of tradition is climate neutrality. — IDI2\_RDA*

According to the interviewee, this is a concrete idea and an ambitious task, because the region has to be "something" in order to achieve climate neutrality in 2040. This means that the mining tradition should also be cultivated, but this requires new impetus, new energy.

*What is most important to me is that this idea is stronger than money and the economy. The idea of a new space, a new place, built on the back of the transition, that shows we are modern because we have hydrogen and we are aspiring to be carbon neutral – this creates a certain quality in itself. Transitions will be successful if they have an idea behind them. — IDI2\_RDA*

## Chapter 2.

# Today: The Present in the Respondents' Narratives

### 2.1. People Have Already Stopped Trusting Anyone

The present narratives about Eastern Wielkopolska are equally varied. How is life in the region? It depends on who you talk to. Miners, trade unionists, the young and senior citizens, activists and entrepreneurs, residents of Turek, Konin, Kleczew – everyone has a story. Let's start with the first group. The trade unionists talk about the outplacement process [a support scheme aimed at searching for new job opportunities – editor's note] that ZE PAK is trying to gradually implement. The company has hired an agency to recruit those willing to take part in the process of retraining and finding employment outside the capital group. Once a candidate comes forward, the company takes over and helps guide them, at least in theory, through the process of finding a new job. To what effect?

*A lot of people are not willing to participate because of a general lack of trust. People have already stopped trusting anyone. Turek 2018. Everything was closed, but a few people there found jobs, others went abroad. Fear is once again pervasive. People come to work... their legs may be moving, but their head is already somewhere else. They just think: gee, they will fire me, won't they? And then? They used to have loans, mortgages and job security until retirement. Now there's no salary, and they've got loans, sick wives, the bank will take it all away in no time. — IDI5\_TU*

"For the transition to be just, it must be humane," the trade unionists explain. This human face of transition, in their opinion, should be shown by everyone: the European Commission (EC), the central government, the local authorities, the mine executives. In fact, they hold a grudge against each of these entities. "What Brussels has done to us is a scandal. The conditions have been met, but there is no money," they note. They resent the government for discriminating against miners working in lignite mines and favouring those from Silesia. "We want 75% mining leave, just like them. And the government: here the law would have to be changed, it's not that simple. We live in one country, we breathe the same air and the law should be the same for everyone!," they stress.

They accuse the local government of not attracting investors or not cooperating with ZE PAK. Somewhat surprisingly for trade unionists, they have no resentment towards their employer. "It's hard to blame a private owner for thinking of their own interests," they say. In turn, they are most willing to talk about the fate of individual people: those for whom restructuring is not an abstract process. To be or not to be. On the lists of people 'to be fired', they find the names of colleagues and friends. As the trade unionists emphasise in their interviews, it is not easy to tell someone: tomorrow you will be laid off.

*Once I said something like this: I am very sorry, but your name is on the list of people to be fired. In response I hear, "My God, why me? I have a wife with malignant cancer. I'm selling my house to save her and you're still taking my job away from me? How will I get home, how will I tell this to my wife, how will I look her and the children in the eyes?" We cried together for a long time. In this particular case, it was possible to help, because the person opened up and the situation could be remedied. How many did not tell us anything, because they were ashamed? How many lost their jobs whilst being in a difficult situation? This is a human tragedy. — IDI5\_TU*

The unions stress that some workers are trying to save themselves on their own. Young people leave as soon as they get the chance. Some find a job abroad, others are employed by acquaintances in private companies. Electricians, operators and welders know that they will not be able to work here until retirement. So if there is another job on the horizon, they leave. After the first redundancies in 2020, a photovoltaic assembly centre was set up, enabling the retraining of people. Only a few took up the offer. Most are still counting on being able to work until retirement and hoping they will obtain paid mining leave. *"It's not becoming for such an elderly man to run around the roof,"* explains an interviewee.

*People would like to continue working where they are and feel resentment towards the trade unionists. "You drive around, you talk, and what the f--- do I get out of it? I'm about to be fired, and I have bank loans. What am I going to live on?" — IDI13\_TU*

In turn, what do entrepreneurs, established professionals or senior civil servants say? Some dismiss the stories told by the miners and trade unionists with a shrug of their shoulders, responding with a singular "correct" diagnosis: *homo sovieticus*. According to one interviewee, the owner of several companies in the region, the people of Konin have been 'taught' to be passive.

*"The mine was like a nurturing mother to them. It was not just a workplace, it was an institution that supports you from cradle to grave. Support for new-borns, workplace nurseries, presents from Father Christmas, staff holidays, benefits, allowances. Their entire life revolved around the mine. The mine was the most important source of supplies for the construction of single-family houses. How many houses here were built with materials brought out of the mine by resourceful workers? These were people who put immense effort into doing nothing," the interviewee persuades me. On the other hand, he believes that the mining staff are also competent, skilled labourers, professionals. "They are a minority who somehow needs to be plucked out of the plant. The poor guys who have been incapacitated by the system will have to be pushed on until they reach retirement." — IDI1\_entrepreneur*

A manager from ZE PAK CG repeats the same general sentiment.

*A specific culture has developed in the region. Whole families have worked and sometimes still work in the mine or power station. For them, it is a source of prestige. The respect of those around them, their sense of belonging and the slightly higher salaries mean that people do not want to leave. — IDI7\_ZEPAK*

They also mention the idea of training some of the mine workers and retraining them as installers and service technicians for photovoltaic installations. Without sufficient public funding and with very low worker mobility, the programme cannot succeed. According to his figures, of the two hundred trained today only fourteen are working in the photovoltaic sector.

## 2.2 A Good Place to Live?

According to many interviewees, the worst thing is that the young residents do not feel connected to either the region or the town. "They are running away like rats from a sinking ship," I am told. And it is not just here. I was told the same thing in Rybnik, Bełchatów, and other mining towns. And not only in mining towns. Central Statistical Office data from the last census shows that medium-sized towns in Poland are becoming depopulated. People want to live in the countryside or in a conurbation. How do young people themselves comment on the situation? They feel that no one is interested in them. Facilities for senior citizens are constantly being introduced, but there is no cultural offer for young people. There is also a lack of entertainment and meeting places. In the unanimous opinion of young people, Konin is a city for older people. The Poznań public transport system, labour market and leisure activities are much more appealing. The only local activity facility dedicated to young people in Konin was called RestartLAB. It attracted a lot of people, but is now closing down because the city has taken its premises away. Climate and environmental issues are also visibly important for young people. The region records some of the lowest rainfall in the whole of Poland, and the resulting drought is visible at every turn. This is highlighted by, for example, former activists of the Youth Climate Strike.

*In 2050, we will have a total water deficit plus extreme weather events. On top of this, towns are increasingly becoming concrete jungles, car park cities. — IDI3\_activist*

When the heart of the city, Plac Wolności [Eng. Liberty Square], was full of spaces for cars, young people called it the 'liberty car park'. Trees were being cut down, asphalt was poured out, urban space ended up covered by concrete. The problem is not urban heat islands, but the lack of green islands. An urban climate change adaptation plan has been created, but it is not being implemented. There is also a shortage of housing. According to our interviewees, renting a flat in Konin costs as much as in Poznań. No wonder the young are leaving. "The most important challenge for the region's towns is the ageing population," they claim. By 2050, Konin will have shrunk by half compared to 2000, ending up with a population of 40,000. This is the official forecast of the Central Statistical Office. The city budget, the community and the entire local social organism will suffer.

Not everyone is deterred by this. *"I used to have a distanced attitude towards the city and the region. Now I think it is a good place to live,"* explains a local entrepreneur. He has no fond memories of the great construction projects of the 1970s and 1980s. For him and likeminded



people, Konin has changed for the better since Poland's accession to the European Union (EU). As the interviewee points out, it does not have the advantages of big cities, but it does have its advantages: it is a "15-minute" town, where you can quickly drive from one end to the other. There are also no traffic jams. The location is good from a business point of view: 100 kilometres to Poznań and the same amount to Łódź. It takes 50 minutes to get to Poznań by train. The residents do not suffer the problems of big cities, and they are well connected. There are a lot of lakes in the area, and the River Warta flows through the town.

*OK, the revitalisation processes are rife with mistakes. The concrete Liberty Square is basically like a hot plate. And the young? They always point out the negatives, they have always complained that there is little going on or that public transport is bad. I don't have an opinion on public transport because I don't use it. For my children it is not a problem. The younger one walks, the older one rides a bike. — IDI4\_przedsiębiorca*

Those associated with Turek see the situation in the region differently. Entrepreneurs and professionals there are glad that Turek already has the first stage of transition behind it – the elimination of 'dirty industry and jobs'. It now has a very diversified business environment and is not so exposed to shocks. The local community has a strong entrepreneurial tradition and, according to interviewees, much higher social capital. Repeatedly, you can hear the story of when a third of Profim (one of Poland's largest chair manufacturers) burned down in a fire and the plant had to lay off 300 people, it turned out that local companies, in a gesture of solidarity, volunteered to hire all the employees overnight.

*I have not encountered such a situation before or since. Turek is a unique place and has exceptional entrepreneurs. Most started as family businesses, everyone knows each other and keeps in touch. It is a compact, flexible and well-functioning group. — IDI1\_entrepreneur*

This is not the case in Konin. There, companies have failed to expand or have given up, unable to find employees. For years, the town was a mining monoculture. According to Turek's residents, Konin is not yet ready for the transitional shock.

*Unemployment there is at 7 per cent. That is more than twice as much as in Turek. On top of that, they have about 2,000-3,000 miners on board, so they will have an unemployment rate of a dozen or so per cent when mining operations cease. — IDI1\_entrepreneur*

*At times, one can discern long-standing resentment or animosity between the towns. Perhaps this is because for years Turek has always been the 'whipping boy' and Konin has been the 'big factory', according to the speculations of an entrepreneur familiar with both towns. For years, Konin was favoured as an industrial location and exercised regional hegemony. It competed with Kalisz, grew and showed others their place in the ranks.*

*Turek was a smaller town. However, the power station there had been closed down earlier. In the 1990s, there were protests by miners and power engineers who came from Turek to Konin to protest against the closure. But then they involved themselves in the transition and supported local entrepreneurship. — IDI4\_entrepreneur*







## Part II

# Eastern Poland in Search of New Energy

## Chapter 3. Tomorrow. Visions of the Future

With differing narratives about the region's history and different diagnoses of its current situation, it should be no surprise that its inhabitants envisage its future very differently. The conversations about the future show how different the attitudes towards a just transition can be among the key stakeholders in the region's process: miners, energy workers, local government officials, activists, entrepreneurs and residents. Visions about the future identify key hopes and fears.

### 3.1 Roads With No One to Drive Down Them

It is autumn 2019. A consultation involving unions, activists and local government officials is underway. The conversation focuses on the development of 21 'project fiches' for regional energy and infrastructure. From the perspective of a young activist, the following picture emerges: sad, old men in suits with serious faces are discussing how to invest large amounts of European money in infrastructure and energy development. They are discussing money that is not yet there and the future of those who are absent from the room, the young. The largest funds are to go towards the development of transport infrastructure. Suddenly, Piotr Czerniejewski, a local activist from the Stowarzyszenie Młodzi Lokalsi [Eng. Young Locals Association], takes the floor. "You'll have roads with no one to drive down them, because everyone will leave," he says. For local government officials, and entrepreneurs, it was a shock. They realise that they have completely ignored the voice of the youth. Additionally, the on-spot remark about over-investing in infrastructure also comes as a shock to them.

*We have absurdities, like building a motorway from housing estate to housing estate, this is unnecessary. [...] We could use this money to guarantee better communication within Konin.* — IDI4\_entrepreneur

Since then, concerns about regional depopulation and retaining young people have become topics that often appear in statements about the future. Several statements refer to the specificity of coal regions.

*For the time being, no one speaks about us like about Bełchatów, but people were driven down here, settled into blocks of flats, it was something of a forced migration, and now young people are fleeing again. Why did I leave for Poznań? I didn't want to work in a mine, a power station or a supermarket. Lots of people leave for these reasons. The biggest employer in the town is a supermarket chain. A town of large stores and old people. This is what the future looks like. — IID16\_JST\_government*

What arguments convince those who decide to stay? Young activists point mainly to economic issues. Studying at the State University of Applied Sciences in Konin and living with parents seems easier and cheaper than living in Poznań. Often those who stay have graduated from technical secondary schools and do not want to study further. The rest leave.

*There are students who would like to return, they feel a bond with the town, an attachment to the people, to their families, but what is happening does not encourage them to return. — IDI3\_activist*

The young activist says it is not only among his peers that he sees symptoms of discouragement and disillusionment. Growing pessimism can also be seen among the miners: they are collecting signatures for a law that will give them 'bridging pensions' like the hard coal miners have. They do not seem to believe in the money from the just transition programme and prefer early retirement. Increasingly, apocalyptic visions appear in social media comments. This is being repeated, moreover, not only by miners and power plant workers, but also by people employed in related companies.

The miners and employees of ZE PAK are highly concerned. They are spreading visions of the 1990s mining transition and the collapse of mining towns repeating.

*We are about to become Wałbrzych 2.0. We know what that looked like. Such a region, teeming with life, and to bring it to such a decline? It is happening. Polish companies are collapsing. The steelworks was Polish; now it's Danish. (...) The employer has now announced [a move away from coal - editor's note] in 2024, not 2030, because the power market is ending. I am not surprised by this, because if there are no subsidies related to the marketisation of power, it will not be profitable. (...) Even without these redundancies, it would already be happening. The power station is being decommissioned. More employees are being laid off. People must not be left behind. As long as money appears quickly and assists people, backpay included. These funds have to flow as soon as possible. It's as essential as oxygen. — IDI5\_TU leader*

Pessimism is fuelled by unfulfilled hopes for quick EU money. Trade unionists recall their involvement in the Territorial Just Transition Plan process. They are convinced that all the European Commission's reservations were taken into account. In fact, they remember the compliments from Brussels. However, the money is not there, and there is no alternative.

*I don't see any entrepreneurs here willing to employ miners, and if anyone says otherwise, show me those entrepreneurs. I don't want to break the mood, but I want to know what to tell people. This is not a just transition. On the contrary, it is a very unjust transition. And we wanted to do it properly. Without rioting like in Silesia . (...) What are we supposed to tell these people... how are we supposed to explain the situation to these people. I am not surprised that they are cursing everyone to kingdom come. — IDI5\_TU leader*

*And as for a just transition, it is like the Yeti, everyone talks about it, and no one has seen it yet. The first money could arrive by the middle of next year. Unemployment will increase by half by then. — IDI13\_TU*

The tendency to make gloomy predictions is not only the speciality of 'young malcontents' and 'entitled miners'. Increasingly, pessimism is also spreading to entrepreneurs, professionals, and even local government officials.

*Konin will see a terrible collapse, it will be an incredible decline. Already there is a tendency to accuse businesses of what is yet to happen to workers. The workers' feeling of entitlement is growing in a way typical for miners. They focus on the money, not on whether they will have a job. In general, Piotrek Korytkowski [the mayor of Konin – editor's note] is trying to do right, but the situation is not enviable. People are at a breaking point. The ideas are: pump in some money and then wait for them to spend it on consumption. — IDI1\_entrepreneur*

### **3.2 When In Doubt, Do What the Richest Do**

There are, however, voices expressing hope that Eastern Wielkopolska may embark on a path of dynamic development, and the impulse for this may be precisely the energy transition. As with any crisis situation, this is an opportunity for success. The sub-region's fate is not a foregone conclusion.

*This 1.7 billion from the Just Transition Fund plus funds from other sources are a huge amount. Konin is almost a greenfield when it comes to economic activity. There is hardly anything there that would bode well for the region. However, pumping such money into investments can turn the situation around. — IDI1\_entrepreneur*

According to the entrepreneurs, success depends on whether Konin can be transformed into a dynamic economic centre. The end of the coal monoculture run first by the state and then by Solorz is to become a source of opportunities. Because of this 'coal curse', as they say, entrepreneurship has not developed in the region.

*This is the regional tragedy: the concentration on this one plant, on one industry. They point to the changes that took place in Turek when local entrepreneurs, the SME [small and medium-sized enterprise] sector, came to the forefront after the closure of the power plant. — IDI1\_entrepreneur*



Other entrepreneurs and local government officials have made similar statements.

*Turek has done very well, it is true, and there entrepreneurship has made strong inroads. It is better to start a hundred small companies than one giant company. In our town, something didn't work because we had a monoculture before and we were sitting in a golden cage..* — IDI6\_JST\_self-help

They advise caution about the most catastrophic scenarios. There is a lot of talk now about depopulation. *"There is migration to the vicinity of Konin, not a migration somewhere further away,"* explains another local entrepreneur

*The suburbs and surrounding communities have started to grow. There is a lot of development, investment in construction. Demographically, Konin is changing. Young people, as they reach a certain stage of educational development, leave, but this is natural. The city is not supposed to think about what to do to keep these people there. The important thing is to make it an attractive place to live. And in this respect Konin does not think, act and promote its advantages enough. It should be attracting others in place of those that were 'exported'.* — IDI4\_entrepreneur

5 bn

**The strategy of the Polsat Plus Group, owned by Zygmunt Solorz-Żak, projects, among other things, investments of approximately PLN 5 billion (€1 billion) between 2022 and 2026 to achieve approximately 1 GW of installed clean energy production capacity and approximately PLN 0.5 billion (€100 million) in hydrogen technologies.**

*Success requires three factors. A business-friendly atmosphere, funding and low unemployment. At the moment, the region has these elements and could become a leader not only nationally but also across Europe.* — IDI1\_entrepreneur

*When in doubt, do what the richest do. What is Solorz investing in? Everyone is investing in renewables. We see the direction of EU policy and you have to accept it, prepare for it. The region has always been connected with energy production. (...) We do not have to look at the National Reconstruction Plan and the JTF. If we only want it by 2030, we will be the richest municipality in Poland. Full-blown development has started. It would be good for municipalities to be self-reliant. If there is to be RES, then let me put two turbines in my municipality. Let's expand the possibilities of self-government involvement. Let's increase municipal ownership in energy. I would like to do this, but I will not get permission. If we invested in cheap, green energy, entrepreneurs would come here because they would pay half as much for electricity and heat. I would like my municipality to be energy independent, to be an energy island.* — IDI6\_JST\_government

Local government officials try to think rationally and assess the possibilities. They warn against 'Konin-centrism' (the interests of small towns are not taken into account at all) and against fantasising about attracting investors to develop production.

*Development through investment? As of today, I won't attract an investor because our land is sinking and we have a moonscape. This is a good place for photovoltaic panels and wind turbines. If I don't invest in this, I'll be laying off workers soon. If I have access to cheap energy, then I am able to attract companies despite the unstable landscape. An entrepreneur that makes wood products will come to me. He has to dry it and needs a lot of cheap heat and electricity. The same for greenhouses, for which you need a lot of electricity. — IDI6\_JST\_government*

# 1,7 bn

**The funds attributed to Eastern Wielkopolska under the JTF are approximately PLN 1.7 billion (EUR 350 million).**

According to local government officials, the atmosphere has been ruined due to lingering uncertainty, which, unlike risk, cannot be estimated and cannot be managed. They lack information on who can be beneficiaries of JTF-funded projects. Interviewees do not know which industries can count on support. "Tourism has been conditionally attached – what does this mean? Can I invest in it?" Doubts are multiplying. They lack a roadmap that will show the most important directions and, most importantly, be implemented. On top of this, there is a growing fear that political gamesmanship will result in the fund being treated like political loot.

*Everyone will want to throw themselves at these funds. And what if Poznań decides to truncate the regional funds directed to transition funds beneficiaries? — IDI6\_JST\_government*

## Chapter 4.

### How to Create a Vision

#### – The Consultation Process

The above-described variety of attitudes, opinions, emotions, fears and hopes regarding the region's past, present and future shows the challenge faced by those whose ambition it was to carry out a participatory just transition process. But the mere expression of so many opinions is already a huge success. It was possible to collect them, because in 2022, the participants of a process that had lasted several years were interviewed. In 2018, the situation was different. Many emotions were in limbo, many concerns unexpressed. Dialogue between individual actors perceiving themselves as opponents standing on opposite sides of the barricade seemed as much desirable as it was impossible. The catalysts for the process turned out to be the 2018 events: the closure of the Adamów power plant, the first "Climate Camp" in Świętno on Lake Wilczyn, and the accompanying protest in Konin, COP 24 in Katowice, the 2018 UN Climate Summit, and the local elections.

#### 4.1 It's a Tough Love – Early Beginnings

The high costs of complying with emission standards and the depletion of the coal deposits of the Turek Lignite Mine had determined the fate of the Adamów power plant. At the beginning of 2018, a decision was made to decommission one of Poland's most emission-intensive coal-fired power plants. This event brought wind in the sails of climate activists and shocked the trade unions and the overall community of miners and ZE PAK employees. Under these conditions, the issue of moving away from coal became an important campaign topic in the Konin region ahead of the local elections scheduled for autumn 2018.

*Some candidates, such as Mariusz Musiałowski, who was running for mayor of Kleczew, based their campaign on the narrative that the closure of the power station is the final wake-up call for the region to begin the energy transition process. Kleczew, according to people looking at Musiałowski's campaign, was one of the municipalities that built its wealth on coal resources and was unprepared for the decline in revenue resulting from the reduction in mine operations. Commentators said that coal funds were squandered and the municipality was governed by a system of interlocking businessmen and local government officials based on nepotism, corruption and wastefulness. The system had seemed untouchable for many years. However, 2018 changed the playing field and a new candidate from outside the existing clique won in the first round.*

— IDI6\_JST\_government

The change in prosperity was also noticed by the provincial government. During the protests in Konin accompanying the first "Climate Camp", organised in August 2018 by the Coalition "Development Yes – Open Pit Mine No", Maciej Sytek – then a member

of the Wielkopolskie Voivodeship Board – unexpectedly appeared. Both parties, i.e., both those representing the provincial government and the RDA, as well as interviewed activists of pro-climate NGOs, point to this moment as a turning point in the region's preparations for the transition.

*"It was a very inclusive event about moving away from coal,"* recalls one participant. There were more than 200 people protesting. Maciej Sytek arrived wearing a suit and in a car with a chauffeur. He met such people as Monika Sadkowska – a climate activist and co-organisier of the 'Climate Camp ,' as well as other people from NGOs, such as the Polish Green Network and WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature), Miłka Stępień and Magda Bartecka. At the time, Sytek also appeared in Brussels for meetings on just transition as part of the country team dedicated to preparing projects that could be funded in Poland. At that time, there was still no talk of a Just Transition Fund, but activities to prepare the programme were well underway. The provincial government recognised that the new realities could not be ignored and that transition was one of the key challenges for the province. Sytek became Plenipotentiary of the Wielkopolska Voivodeship Board for the Restructuring of Eastern Wielkopolska and President of the Regional Development Agency (RDA), with the intent to make it an instrument of change. From the beginning, the RDA was oriented towards cooperation with NGOs.

*The transition here is not the result of the RDA's work, but the work of NGOs from Konin and nationwide. The provincial board was only invited later on. Sytek took part in the Climate Camp when he was still a deputy marshal, and he was the first politician of this rank to visit the camp. Then, the NGOs started to cooperate with the provincial government. Next, the coal platform was formed. [The Platform for Coal Regions in Transition – an initiative of the European Commission to support those EU regions whose economies are heavily dependent on coal and lignite-based industries]. The first one was only attended by NGOs, but the provincial board participated in the second one. Everyone from Wielkopolska came together, i.e.: the Voivodeship Board, trade unions, ZE PAK (the employer), as well as local NGOs and the Polish Green Network. It was a shock to Europe that it was possible to get along. — IDI12\_RDA*

As Magda Bartecka and Miłka Stępień – participants in the "Platform for Coal Regions in Transition" meetings – recall. At the European level, the search for a different development path for the region was initially discussed with the participation of activists from climate organisations and with representatives of coal regions from Europe designated by member state governments. The Polish government sent representatives from Silesia. Eastern Wielkopolska was missing in the first outing. In Konin, no one had heard of it. Besides, at the time the provincial authorities were not interested in the process. It was only when they met Maciej Sytek, who saw the transition as a development opportunity for the region, that representatives of NGOs and the provincial government started to cooperate and persuade the European Commission (EC) to include Konin – as the poorest region in Wielkopolska – in the just transition







process. Wielkopolska and Lower Silesia officially joined as pilot regions on 28 March 2019. In March 2019, a Transition Memorandum was established, which included trade unions, NGOs, entrepreneurs.

*These actions resulted in us being seen as a team in Brussels. This bore fruit in March 2020 when the EC, at its annual yearly meeting, announced that three regions had been approved to benefit [from the funds - editor's note]: Eastern Wielkopolska, Lower Silesia and Silesia. We had become a leader in the process. NGOs, including Polish Green Network (PGN), played an integral role in this. We do not always agree with PGN on everything; from the beginning it has been a tough love. However, without them, it would not have been possible to achieve this much. — IDI2\_RDA*

## 4.2 Transition as an Identity Choice

After taking up the post of Plenipotentiary of the Voivodeship Board for Restructuring and being given the RDA as a tool for action, Maciej Sytek adopted the following reasoning: we are facing the challenge of building a new identity for the region. We need to redefine something that has been defined for decades: the mining tradition, leisure activities, regional pride based on the logic: mine and power plant in Konin = energy in Poland + work in the region.

*By creating a plan, we are in fact creating a new identity. So let us create it on the basis of an energy source that people already know, but which is also modern. We will have an energy valley, and people can learn from something they are already familiar with. It could be hydrogen, nuclear power, economic diversification. Let it not be a second ZE PAK. No more monocultures. It will be a success if we can diversify regional economic activity. The Just Transition Fund is only supposed to be a part of the process. Turek is a worthy example, which is doing very well despite not having EU funds. We need to bring about an economic change in which residents, business, small and medium-sized enterprises participate in the creation of new energy. — Maciej Sytek, President of the RDA*

In Sytek's view, the region's biggest problem is pessimism: the belief among trade unionists and employees that this cannot succeed. The question is what can be considered a success: maintaining the large company, thus buying a few years of peace or creating a diversified self-sustaining system. "There are cities like Turek and Konin with its old plants, but the region has a high rate of transition. It is not true that Konin has no chance of succeeding. Between 2020 and 2022, several thousand people left ZE PAK, but they were absorbed by the market," Sytek notes.

As he points out, there are currently only two thousand miners and more than 430,000 residents in the region. The problem only arises in places where workers from the sector are predominant within the population. The formulation of two dates are significant to his plan: 2030 – the move away from coal and 2040 – achieving

climate neutrality. The combination of these elements means that the region can count on success. *"This is a message we can go out into the world with,"* he argues.

The deliberation process in the creation of the TJTP, the consultations on the development strategy, the work of the coal platform in the EC are constant reminders that Eastern Wielkopolska has a chance to succeed. From talking to participants in these processes, one gets the impression that the activities have been successful.

*I have the impression that only a few people can imagine what the region might look like someday. It took me a long time to learn to think with such a long time horizon. People live from day to day. Short-term concerns dominate. We know that ZE PAK has laid off 2,500 employees. We know it will still lay off more. We don't know what it will produce. We know that the CHP plant already produces energy from biomass, no longer burns coal; there is talk of nuclear. In my opinion, there should be three directions, not just green energy. No attention is being paid to its location, that is, the development of logistics, because Konin lies on an important transport route. Similarly, the tourist potential is not being utilised. (...) Those in power have certain ideas. Some are more realistic, others less so. This has been articulated in the development strategy. The authorities have a vision and they communicate it. — IDI4\_entrepreneur*

# 73%

**The ratio of the average GDP per capita in the Konin sub-region to the national average is 73 per cent.**

*For today it is perhaps utopia, but such an enticing one. Nobody calculates climate neutrality at the regional level, so it is easy to make declarations. However, a project called 'Life After Coal' is being launched in which the implementation of the goal of achieving climate neutrality in 2040 is to be included. This may seem like an illusion, but sometimes it needs to be used to motivate. A utopia is provided not as the ultimate goal, but to motivate, to give direction, to give tools to criticise the status quo.— IDI8\_NGO*

## **4.3 It Was Something Amazing – Cooperation**

The agreement regarding a just energy transition in Eastern Wielkopolska was signed on 3 April 2019. The signatories consisted in total of 100 entities, including the provincial government, RDA, ZE PAK, and the local governments of Konin, Brudzew, Kleczew and several smaller municipalities. The agreement was preceded by lengthy consultations on the establishment of the Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP). NGO representatives played an active role here. According to one representative of the Regional Development Agency, employees from the Polish Green Network and from

the Green Future Institute, a foundation established in 2018 to support the Eastern Wielkopolska region in designing a 'post-coal' future and to carry out social innovation activities, participated very intensively in the process from the very beginning.

*We created a transition concept presented in a 150-page book and asked partners for comments. Everyone received it: NGOs, unions, business, etc. Mostly, there were comments like: why isn't our project there. The Polish Green Network, on the other hand, did something... it was something amazing. It collected comments from other NGOs and entities, they reviewed it all, edited it and sent us 60 pages of comments. — IDI12\_RDA*

According to RDA staff, PGN's comments contained valuable insights, significantly increasing the value of the document.

*It helped us a lot. The Polish Green Network was the only organisation that seriously read the document and responded to it. So the sensitivity of NGOs, including PGN, is very important. The Eastern Wielkopolska Partnership Forum, but also the activities with WWF and the Green Future Institute are very important for us. There are not too many such organisations. The lack of such entities is felt by us. (...) They do it because they have obtained funds for such activities, without which it would not be easy for them to become involved. They bring in various institutions, e.g.: neglected municipalities whose voice has not been heard. It is good that such organisations exist, because they have a lot of expertise and can offer a broader, comparative picture. This exchange of information is much needed. There is no downside. Well, maybe only that we would like to see them in person more often and not online. Nonetheless these people are from outside the sub-region, and for us it is crucial to mobilize organisations from the sub-region itself to be active. — IDI12\_RDA*

#### **4.4 Our Expectations Diverged from Reality – The Start of the Project**

According to official timetable at that time, initial drafts of the Just Transition Plans were to be produced by the end of 2020. After that, work was to continue on further versions emerging after comments from the Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy and the European Commission. As the project application call of the EUKI programme (European Climate Initiative, a programme funded by the German government) was to be decided in the summer of 2020 and the project itself was to start in October 2020, it was planned that one of the main objectives of the project would be to participate in the programming of the TJTP. Another objective was to include a network of organisations cooperating with PGN, so that these organisations, building on their previous experience, would take on the task of networking and involving various actors from the region in the process of planning for a just transition and the subsequent absorption of funds. This was intended to overlap with the period when the JTF funds would already be available, thus enabling the support of stakeholders from the region in raising and using funds.



Unfortunately, in autumn of 2020, it already became known that the process would be prolonged. Realising that they had no influence on the timing of TJTP programming, the project implementers focused on supporting the region, especially local partners on two levels. The first was active participation in programming, i.e. preparing ideas and project fiches. The second was to educate local partners about what a just transition is, how the Just Transition Fund works and, above all, what a 'green transition' might look like in practice, i.e. what activities and, by extension, projects might become part of it. In short: it is not about traditional pavement or town square renovations, but about energy efficiency in buildings, setting up energy cooperatives, creating new jobs, vocational training, restoring degraded land, combating drought or restoring rivers. The effect was to prepare potential partners to participate in JTF project calls as soon as funds were released.

For some of those involved in the project, the delay in activating the fund proved frustrating. What helped the project, despite the changing external circumstances, was the concrete plan of activities, trainings, workshops with employees, entrepreneurs, local government officials, representatives of the cultural sector, young people, and many others. According to interviewees from the Polish Green Network, the flexibility of the organisation was also beneficial.

*We did continuous feedback surveys and tried to reach the key groups, prepare meaningful workshops to make good use of the time available before the fund is activated. If the unions closed their doors, we went to the farmers. This is something I am mega proud of. Within the available conditions, we did more than the project envisaged. Not every initiative worked out perfectly, we learned from action to action, but I consider the project as a whole to be very sensible and a job well done. — IDI9\_NGO*







## Chapter 5.

# Citizen Participation in the Energy Transition and Conditions for Popularisation of the Model

Starting the project at a time when the release of JTF funds was being delayed, the PGN team and its partners found themselves in a new and unexpected situation. However, experience and a flexible project plan enabled the organisation to adapt activities to the situation. When the importance of training to apply for EU funds became apparent, PGN decided to continue, as such opportunities were planned and written into the project. Although the JTF did not take off, it was and is clear that municipalities need to be substantively prepared to use these funds.

*I know that the workshop on how to write a project was a huge success. This workshop was attended by a dozen or so people, mainly female officials responsible for project writing and fundraising. It was about how to fill in the project fiche, what should be included, what should be emphasised. It turns out that the people in the offices had never had such training and they really enjoyed it. This is the kind of technical assistance we are counting on. We hope that the technical assistance funds will not only support the marshal offices, because this support is needed in every small coal municipality. Today we are the ones doing the work that the state should be responsible for. At the beginning, not knowing how this process would evolve, I thought that the most important thing would be for municipalities to prepare nice projects and get money for them. Now I know that technical assistance and expert support is needed. — IDI17\_NGO*

Another challenge faced by the PGN team turned out to be an overflowing crisis of confidence in the success of the region's transition. **The bold vision of development through an extensive consultation process promoted by provincial authorities was too strongly tied to the launch of the JTF.** This meant that the greatest threat to the process was again a stalemate and pessimism.

### 5.1 Breaking the Stalemate. The PGN Operating Model and Partner Response

Pandemic fatigue, remote work and a prolonged wait for EU funds overlapped with each other. In addition, ZE PAK withdrew from projects that were to be implemented in the region (such as the production of hydrogen buses).

*There are a few ideas and many question marks: what specifically and when. What if the region is a leader only in terms of social participation? However, being a leader is a bitter-sweet experience. It involves accepting a sense of anxiety and the risk of failure. — IDI9\_NGO*



*Pessimism and doubt have taken a strong foothold. It is difficult to make promises because we are not the government, and we often step into the shoes of a partner who take on a quasi-state role. This is not the optimal direction, because it risks disappointing ourselves and our partners, who start to think that we will write their project proposals. We cannot do that, because that is the job of the state. — IDI8\_NGO*

According to some interviewees, this stalemate is the result of putting too much faith in the JTF. This is why the province has not sought other funds that could finance projects to develop the region.

*This is not the only fund that could change this region's fate. We need to do more in terms of improving the quality of life in our region. Energy transition is a technical change in energy generation. And a just transition is a change in life conditions, where and how you live and how you make a living. A profound cultural, social, economic change. I don't feel that I'm getting through with this message. — IDI10\_NGO*

With such underlying conditions, PGN and its partners moved again to support the state and regional authorities. NGOs arranged meetings, debates, discussions, workshops and public hearings. They calmed excessive emotions and nurtured the belief that a green future was possible.

**PGN's work model was a success, its key elements were: engaging and empowering different actors, inclusion, networking with transitional ambassadors, raising awareness and promoting a broader understanding of just transition.**

*The most important thing is to **involve the local community**, its various actors, in the preparation of the plan. We reached out to chambers of commerce, specific entrepreneurs, local government officials. — IDI9\_NGO*

*People need to be engaged and their **awareness raised** so that they can influence the transition's direction. Thus, those who will be influenced by JT are given the tools to shape it. Representatives from various institutions come to the meetings and should have the power to shape the local reality on the ground. — IDI9\_NGO*

*"Nothing about us without us" is also about **involving residents and groups who are most disgruntled**. We have reached out to trade unions, made contact with the chairwoman, as well as with others. This gives them the opportunity to be at the centre of events with other representatives.— IDI9\_NGO*

*We act as an umbrella organisation, i.e. connecting **smaller local NGOs** or civic groups **under larger umbrella organisations**, and bringing different parties together. We are not caught up in local dependencies, sympathies and antipathies. — IDI9\_NGO*

***We try not to be an 'invading force from Warsaw'**. For us, the model of looking for local ambassadors is very important, we focus on elevating specific local organisations, but there should be more of them. We involve organisations that don't necessarily know about the JTF. They could be organisations that know how to support people with disabilities or deficits, for example, and teach them to fit in with the scope of Just Transition. — IDI8\_NGO*

***We promote a broader understanding of the just transition*** that includes demographics, GDP, environmental remediation, investment in public services, social and cultural development of the region. Politicians do not understand that this is about the quality of life in the region and preventing depopulation. — IDI8\_NGO

What is the key aspect of the model? ***Working on relationships and personal contacts.*** We work like this because we don't function within strict procedures and administrative models. There is no law here that says how to prepare a plan. We mould it ourselves on an ongoing basis. And it all depends on what the relationship is with a given official; it depends on whether we get along. (...) The boom in Eastern Wielkopolska is due to the fact that there were good partners on all sides. That the local government is willing to listen to NGOs and to try to implement their proposals.

It is very important that this model is considered by all partners to be effective. The following are examples of statements made by representatives of ZE PAK, RDA, entrepreneurs participating in project activities carried out by PGN during project implementation.

*Although they [PGN personnel] were seen as opposition to the trade unions, there is mutual respect. They overcame the resentment from the unions that they were blocking the quarries, that they were sticking with Greenpeace. It is difficult, but the first forum, with everyone present, was a success. They made sure that the process was socially inclusive. (...) In terms of drafting the document, it is 100% the result of the work of the RDA, but in terms of getting the perception that the document has not only content but also soul, this is 80% the result of NGO work. And the organisations have guaranteed good PR at their events. Considering how many people they have and their area of operation, they are performing beyond their capacity.* — IDI 7 ZEPAK

*I liked this project and the fact that it was continuously adapted to the situation. They didn't make assumptions about what we were going to talk about, but adapted to the needs raised by the stakeholders, and the topics of the meetings were the aftermath of consultation meetings with different partners. The involvement of local organisations, the partnership approach, are a boon, no one exalts themselves, sometimes we argue and it becomes heated, but in the end we work out a common position. It is crucial that these organisations involve local partners.* — IDI12\_RDA

One of the activities organised by PGN during the project was a public hearing, prepared jointly with RDA, the National Federation of NGOs and the Green Future Institute. The Civic Public Hearing, on the future development of Eastern Wielkopolska in the face of energy, social and economic transition, was an online event where residents and representatives of various social groups could express their opinions, recommendations and concerns about the future of the region. It was also attended by representatives of government and local authorities responsible for the just transition process and the creation of a multi-year development strategy for the sub-region. The event was often cited by interviewees as an example of a successful element of the participatory planning process for the region's future.







*The public hearing was excellent. It was well organised. Sure, there was a time limit and there was no discussion, but it was well organised..* — IDI13\_TU

*The example of the public hearing shows that this is a success. It garnered huge interest and had engaging discussions.* — IDI2\_RDA

*A major achievement was the appearance of people who had not previously taken part in the consultation (e.g.: trade unions, ZE PAK, there were more people present from different departments; more from small and medium-sized business). I wrote a text about these consultations.* — IDI11\_NGO

The process conducted by PGN within the project has made a great impression on the community organisations. Some participants in these meetings even believe that at some point it was the activities conducted by PGN that became more visible than the formal meetings that are part of the RDA activities.

*It was PGN with its partners that set the tone of discussions, which caused all groups, including the environmental organisations and the public, to be included. Without them, there would have been no wider consultation. Without them, it would simply not have happened. They reached out to politicians and the RDA. I also represent a local NGO, so we worked together and had a good understanding of each other. Thanks to the fact that we formed one united front it was successful. (...) PGN and the Green Future Institute did a tremendous job here. The Eastern Wielkopolska Partnership Forum was something amazing. It was not Warsaw-centric.* — IDI3\_activist

In summary: at a crucial point in the process, when EU funding and state energy ran out, community organisations again took on the task of managing the process and protecting the vision of change from growing pessimism. Project implementers took on the thankless task of sustaining the process despite declining public commitment.

*At a certain point, there were voices saying that there were too many meetings. Because we kept talking about the same thing for two years. Two years of saying: let's prepare for something that is not inbound. This was evident from the change in attendance. In the beginning we had large groups of participants, and as time went by there were fewer of them and it became more and more difficult to even force people to attend. I called one, two, three people and asked: Are you coming? And they responded: But what for? It got boring, it doesn't lead to anything.* — IDI10\_NGO

## **5.2 The Pros and Cons of Participation. Critical Voices**

It is impossible to conduct a participatory process in such a way that all the participants are satisfied. Some critical comments made by the participants are noted below. Significantly, in principle, none of them negate the adopted model. They mostly reflect on whether the model was implemented well enough.

**Lack of a strong local partner.** They have stuck too much with the Green Future Institute. It would be good to broaden the partnership to include organisations that deal with people with disabilities, etc., from which quite a lot of people could have gotten involved (the elderly, third-age universities, etc.). More NGOs need to be included, not just the people that have been involved from the beginning. They need to be brought into the conversation, because this is a conversation about their future. — IDI11\_NGO

These consultations **were frustrating because there were many people who wanted to speak.** For example, a 4-hour consultation where you can only speak for 5 minutes, and you have to listen to many contributions of varying value. — IDI4\_entrepreneur

Instead of copying the solutions that the authorities had used beforehand, i.e. organising meetings in the same format as RDA, PGN could have done **more meetings with school children, miners, or bigger public meetings aimed at ordinary people**, just so all those people that criticize how everything is terrible are up to date with the process. Such educational activities. That was a bit lacking.. — IDI3\_activist

I very much appreciate our cooperation with PGN. There are very competent people working there, **dealing with problems that should not be their job at all.** They should be overlooking the decision-makers who are preparing for the JTF at not only regional, but also national level. And here the role is reversed. The Partnership Forum should have a supportive role, and here the whole coordination, organisation has been taken over by the NGOs. — (ZE PAK)

I'm a fan of public hearings, but this one wasn't entirely successful. Doing meetings during work days in places like Konin means that many organisations won't be present. We have always done consultations in the afternoons and officials do them during work hours. PGN did it out of habit, because most of the meetings they organise are for government officials and profiled NGOs. I really didn't like that the VIPs had more time than the ordinary citizens (5 minutes which they usually exceeded versus 2 minutes for citizens). This is not how public hearings should be held. — IDI11\_NGO

Some of the meetings were so academic with professors and so on, and they didn't talk about what ordinary people were interested in. Ordinary people will also be interested in what can be built with EU money. There were too many video conferences which means there is no face-to-face contact. — IDI13\_TU

PGN representatives are aware of the critical voices and usually try to learn from them for the future and to adapt relevant elements of the model. This was the case, for example, with the public hearing format. As Magda Bartecka explains:

There is a dilemma associated with public hearings that cannot be easily resolved. If you do the hearing in the afternoon, then the decision-makers will not turn up and the residents' voice will not be heard by the relevant institutions. On top of that, many residents take care of their children after work, etc., so it's not ideal. We have discussed this many times. As for the speaking time, we have now evened it out, and in the Silesian and

*Bełchatów hearings everyone has about 4 minutes. In fact, in Wielkopolska we were not able to attract unaffiliated residents to the hearing. We have learnt our lesson and during the Silesian hearing there were already more so-called ordinary citizens.*

One of the controversial elements of the PGN model appeared to be operating in very close cooperation with the RDA. As a result of this proximity, most participants did not distinguish between meetings organised by PGN and those by the RDA. Thus, many PGN activities were attributed to the provincial government institutions. On the part of ZE PAK, there were also claims that PGN thus ceases to be an independent institution and represents the interests of certain political forces. However, interviews with PGN representatives indicate that the organisation had consciously decided to apply this way of exerting influence. The idea was to disengage from the role of the 'balcony guys' and take co-responsibility for shaping reality through partnership.

A number of respondents from NGOs not associated with PGN noted that while such a close relationship with a public administration agency can be dangerous, it is not unusual and can be conducive to success.

*This is the way WWF operates. More like lobbying, close personal relationships, etc., and less criticism. It could be that PGN works with them [with RDA], and there is someone else whose role it is to criticise. They might be playing good cop, bad cop. — IDI11\_NG*

The consensus, however, was that an element that needs to be replicated is the focus on meetings aimed at all possible parties. Organising discussions, familiarising participants with topics and networking. All interviewees appreciated that the core of the PGN operating model is creating a platform, allowing all stakeholders to talk and see that they share each other's concerns. The international dimension of the project was mentioned in this section, which included the exchange of experiences between the regions of Eastern Wielkopolska and Lusatia. The interviewees appreciated the study visits organised as part of the project, which both provided inspiration and allowed them to look at their own situation from a different perspective.



## **Chapter 6.**

### **The Mirror from across the Oder.**

### **The international dimension of the project**

#### **6.1 Context: A different model for moving away from coal**

The Lusatian region of Germany underwent its first phase of mining activities reduction in the early 1990s. By 1995, the number of jobs in the coal sector in the Lusatian and Central German regions had fallen by 112,000 (from 138,000). In order to carry out the decommissioning and land reclamation activities, the German government established an entity called Lausitzer und Mitteldeutsche Bergbau und Verwaltungsgesellschaft (LMBV, Eng. Lusitanian und Middle German Mining Administration Company). It was equipped with funding from federal and local sources, although the company also operated on a market basis. The mines were nationalised and incorporated into the LMBV. The Federal Ministry of Finance remains the owner of the company. Operations are financed through a local-federal agreement, with the government covering about three-quarters of the costs.

#### **6.2 Mythical Germany and the Transition**

The participation of the German side in the project was incomparably smaller than that of its Polish partners, due to the breadth and diversity of activities carried out by PGN with its partners in Poland. Nevertheless, in the opinion of the interviewees, the importance of the German side's participation was high. The exchange of knowledge between partners was extremely significant. The two study visits, organised in Germany and Poland in 2022, proved particularly important. In the words of the interviewees, the meetings in an international setting answered the question of what a just transition looks like in 'mythical Germany'. Two transition journalists (including a journalist from the Poznań-based "Gazeta Wyborcza"), representatives of PGN and their partners (including the Green Future Institute), miners and a representative of the Konin Chamber of Commerce travelled to Lausitz. Meanwhile, representatives of German local authorities from the Lusatia region and social organisations, above all the non-profit association Lausitzer Perspektiven (Lusatian Perspectives), came to Poland.

The most interesting comparative conclusion at the international level is also the least obvious one. The juxtaposition of the experiences of NGOs from Eastern Wielkopolska and Lusatia indicates that it was the Polish social activists who had a much greater sense of participatory impact on the process of preparing a plan and then implementing a just transition. German activists emphasised that their local administration showed resistance in its dealings with them and treated them as





institutions running a parallel process with no overlap with state-led activities. The situation there was not even close to the one described in the earlier chapters of this report, in which the regional public administration opened up to cooperation, which enabled a cross-sectoral flow of ideas, experiences and concepts.

As far as other aspects of the transition in both countries are concerned, the situation in Germany was clearly assessed positively. The interviewees were very impressed by the high level of activity of the German federal government in the area of just transition, and not only at the level of financial resources allocated for implementation, but also their involvement in developing methods of action.

Interviewees also acknowledged the similarity of problems arising from being a coal region (specific water regimes, damaged landscape) and being a local government undergoing an energy transition. However, the scale of the state's financial involvement was the main topic of comments on the differences between Poland and Germany.

*Lusatia is an example that money is not everything. 40 billion of government support doesn't mean people won't move away, doesn't make everything work. They have the same problems: roads are broken, not everything works. We should learn how the German government safeguards the interests of the working people (miners and their holidays, families, etc.). We should look at Lusatia as proof that certain things can be resolved properly (support for workers, because there the government invests and partners with businesses to do everything possible to employ people). (...) A recent meeting with partners from Germany showed that the federal government knows it has problems and is committed financially and substantively to solving them. This is the biggest difference. There, the authorities are aware that something needs to be done and are mobilising resources and instruments. As I listened to everything, I felt envy that the central government intervened, while we have to come up with a grassroots initiative ourselves. — IDI4\_entrepreneur*

For Eastern Wielkopolska, which is dependent on money from the EU's Just Transition Fund, the scale of German federal funding involved in supporting the process was impressive. The aid has been so large that Germany can afford to treat JTF funds as reserve funding. The EU funds are so modest in relation to the federal funds that even when Germany uses them, they will not affect the shape and direction of the ongoing transition process in any significant way.

Meetings with local German government officials also resulted in comparing different models for finding investors, which is an extremely important part of the strategy for economic security for transitioning regions. The examples given by the German partners made clear the level of tension between large investments and a more sustainable model that includes many small local companies.

In summary, while the Polish side may have impressed the Germans with the greater openness of the Wielkopolska voivodship authorities to cooperate with NGOs, the German side provided more examples of good practices to follow. Sometimes it was about very concrete and practical solutions.



*There is also a dream of an energy valley in Wielkopolska, but the region is not only ZE PAK, but a lot of small companies. Maybe the region is already outgrowing this and is more ready to use local resources. It could be a serious investment in energy efficiency or a serious approach to energy poverty. — IDI8\_NGO*

*Perhaps we benefited most from visiting and seeing some things with our own eyes. A group of enthusiasts had formed and set themselves the goal of completing one of their projects. We were at the F60 facility, which is a museum made out of a mining machine. There were miners who, when they saw what could be done with an old machine, became jealous and wanted to create something similar, i.e. to create a machine park: to take machines out of one of the mines that is being closed down and make an amusement, educational and cultural park. — IDI10\_NGO*



## Conclusion: Radical Hope

Creating a captivating vision for regional development, which brought Eastern Wielkopolska to the attention of Poland and the EU, was undoubtedly where the voivodship authorities and the NGOs supporting them (including the Polish Green Network) succeeded. They are the ones who have been waging a long struggle to introduce development once open pit mines close, suggesting a vision of a green leap into the future. When the authorities were ready to adopt this narrative as their own, the organisations were willing to step aside and support the process of making this vision a reality by coordinating the participatory process of creating a transition plan. In the words of the activists themselves, *"in an ideal world it should be irrelevant who is behind the vision, just that it is done. Perhaps it is gender-related that we do not initiate narcissism and the attempt to prove that this is ours and that is yours. It's a good thing that all this has come together."*

The second success was the implementation of **an exemplary participatory process** that involved all actors and brought together organisations as distant as trade unions and climate organisations. On the side of the climate organisations, there was a shift from: "our main opponent is the trade unions", to "we see mistakes in their actions, but we have pro-union views". On the trade union side, there has been a corresponding shift from: "I cannot forgive them that their actions resulted in the Ościsłowo open pit not being launched", to "we are not prejudiced against them and are willing to talk". — IDI5\_TU\_leader

*It is possible to cooperate, but it is difficult. They think we want to take their jobs away, and colleagues in the climate movement see them as delayers.* — IDI8\_NGO

Not everyone is convinced that the motivating vision and multidimensional collaboration are a success.

*RDA's focus has been to demonstrate a model approach of community engagement in order to have a territorial just transition plan that is positively perceived by external parties. It was about impressing organisations that get excited about the goals of delivering the New Deal. It was about impact, not efficiency.* — IDI7\_ZEPAK

In their view, what has been created is not a grand vision, but a grand illusion that is about to burst.

*People, especially young citizens with an idea for themselves, will leave Konin and the surrounding area. We are standing still because we've agreed on a good plan, but there are no initiatives. The region will be a bit nicer, services will be a bit better implemented, the grass will be greener, there will be more bike paths, maybe some tourist infrastructure will be improved. I don't know if there will be a business support network and a network of public institutions working together. Business will develop but this will all be baby steps. There will certainly be more thermo-modernised, energy-positive buildings, but the level of economic development will be low. Eastern Wielkopolska will*



*not jump over its civilisational limitations. Maybe socially, but not economically. The young will not stay. It will be like Portugal, which once bet on building motorways that no one used. — IDI7\_ZEPAK*

*The self-satisfactory illusion will crumble and panic is about to set in: oh boy, I think something has gone wrong! Other regions have stopped believing or they have stopped waiting for the Just Transition Fund and are taking funds from wherever they can and moving forward. We are standing still. Is this like standing at the bus stop and not noticing your bus arriving because you've been thinking? My fear is that the local elections will come around and the moment for the fund to start has already passed, and if the money was released now it would be treated like an election fund. (...) Paradoxically, it would now be better for the fund to not exist than to be delayed even further. — IDI10\_NGO*

As can be seen, the delay in the release of JT funds seriously threatens the implementation of the development vision for Eastern Wielkopolska and increases the risk of stagnation. It can of course be pointed out that Eastern Wielkopolska is no exception. Other regions in Europe have not yet benefitted from the Just Transition Fund either. All Territorial Just Transition Plans are elements of the same new budget perspective and therefore part of the machinery of the European Funds 2021-2027. The logic of the Brussels institutions is long negotiations between the government and the Commission. This time the negotiations are a year longer as compared to the previous seven-year period (2014-2020). This is not only due to the pandemic, but also a result of the actions of the Polish government. However, public anger is not only directed against the government. Interviews with trade unionists and miners quoted in previous chapters show clearly that they place the responsibility equally on the shoulders of the European Commission, the government and the local government. Above all, they point to the RDA, whose only fault is supposed to be that it provoked an atmosphere of high hopes. Some may state that there are other funds from which it is possible to finance activities in line with the TJTP and the region's strategy. However, in the case of Eastern Wielkopolska, the JTF has a symbolic dimension and is associated with the promise of a blossoming energy valley. Eastern Wielkopolska's uniqueness also lies in the fact that the mines will close in 2024 and it is here that the delay will affect the region most severely.

This is why the delay in releasing funds in this region has potentially the most disastrous consequences, stirs up the strongest emotions and overshadows even the greatest achievements and successes. Undoubtedly, the success of assigning the right to manage funds from the Just Transition Fund to the provincial government, contrary to the government's position, would have been more impressive had the funds been available immediately. Maciej Sytek has bet everything on a single card – the JTF card.

When it was decided that just transition was to be about a radical redefinition of identity, the right direction was chosen that might be termed 'radical hope' as understood by Jonathan Lear.<sup>9</sup> However, 'radical hope' is one that is born in circumstances where we expect a happy ending but do not know where it will originate from. Radical hope

is an undirected hope. It is the social equivalent of what psychologists refer to as life optimism. It is therefore a condition for ordinary hope to become a possibility (linked to specific scenarios, technologies, policies). The presence of such hope can be understood as a key element of social resilience. Strengthening such an attitude requires appealing to sources of identity deeper than mining culture. It is a search for a new myth in line with the emerging belief that "the myth of big industry and the industrial region should be replaced by something – creating a new myth, a new vision". The vision of basing the region's development on the energy transition implemented thanks to the use of the Just Transition Fund was too narrow. It enabled reasoning in which no JTF money = no opportunity. The moment its take-off was delayed, the greatest dangers came back to the forefront: pessimism, apathy and defeatism. Today, the prerequisite for success is to actively face these fears and to show that, despite operating under difficult conditions, much has been achieved.

*There will be attempts to appropriate that money, but the scenario I'm in at the moment is still better than anything else that could have happened. The lignite coal would have disappeared anyway, and so now we have some sort of safety net. We could have none and there would now be a repeat of the 1990s, i.e. a shock transition. The Germans have been planning this for 20 years, but we are civilisationally in a different place, there is no continuation of government agenda between PiS and PO [the two largest governing parties in Poland], there is no state as a coherent functioning entity. — IDI11\_NGO*

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Nadzieja radykalna. Etyka w obliczu spustoszenia kulturowego*, Wa-wa 2013.







## Recommendations

The process of participatory planning for just transition in the Eastern Wielkopolska region carried out as cooperation between the provincial government (RDA) and various social partners (primarily the organisations centred around PGN) is in many respects a model to be replicated and successfully used in other regions. The key features of this model are as follows:

- **Serious treatment of the just transition issue by the provincial government.** Establishing a Plenipotentiary equipped with an institution dedicated to planning and managing the transition process (RDA).
- **The existence of a large non-governmental organisation equipped with enough experience, competence and resources** to network and strengthen smaller actors (the big sister in the transition) in the form of the Polish Green Network and its partner local organisations.
- **Management of the region's future** based on sound consideration of possible scenarios, estimation of possible costs and implementation probability, for which, however, simulations and foresight studies are indispensable.
- **Good use of strategic thinking and communication tools** among all stakeholders, especially local government and NGOs. As a result, strategic documents at local and regional level build an accessible and enticing vision of the future. Future thinking is also comprehensively present in the activities of NGOs, which gives rise to the use of Future Literacy in raising stakeholder awareness.
- **Open, honest dialogue** using reality-based narratives (i.e. recognising the complexity of the situation) to discuss proposed solutions. The process is inclusive and brings in all stakeholders through appropriately formatted discussions (e.g., public hearing tools). An element of such a deliberative process has proven to be the development and introduction of tools to identify key needs, concerns, etc.
- **A broad understanding of just transition.** Quality of life emerged as one of the key areas for action alongside energy transition. As the planning process has continued, it has emerged more and more strongly as a central area of the potentially most inclusive narrative. Quality of life is also one of the factors influencing the influx of investors and employees into the town (and limiting the outward migration of youth). The development of the town and the region depends on it, which indirectly influences their willingness to socially engage with the community.
- Utilisation of the "Wielkopolska Energy Valley" programme, **to make Konin itself and parts of the region a living laboratory for social and technological energy transition**, serving to develop socially acceptable, economically efficient and innovative solutions in terms of the applied tools.

**However, when implementing the model, the shortcomings observed in the case of the Eastern Wielkopolska measures must be taken into account. The continuation of the process in the Konin region, as well as its implementation in other regions, requires appropriate lessons to be learned.**

— **In the energy transition process, it is crucial that the move away from mining does not happen abruptly and chaotically.** Entering the transition without a plan would risk leading to a dramatic shortage of investment and high unemployment in the region. To prevent this, the process of transitioning away from coal needs to be planned wisely but urgently. Acting with a perspective as short as 2024 requires that special emphasis be placed on cooperation between the employer (ZE PAK) and labour market institutions (the Provincial Labour Office) and that time be used to create new jobs, building sustainable employment and investing in innovative solutions instead of old structures. Solutions should be implemented to facilitate intermediation between mining experts and companies that need workers with similar skills. Creating programmes to facilitate the retraining of mine workers and having an open dialogue with employees and mine management about existing opportunities. Collaborating with ZE PAK HR to further and explore employee qualifications. Combining policy opportunities to support the development of qualifications (using the employment situation and wage incentives to diagnose and support the best individual choices).

— **Combating pessimism, which is the greatest threat to the process of a successful transition, requires that we move from expert consultation to participatory planning involving miners and ordinary residents.** The effect of the activities should accentuate the historical significance of the region and of the individual mines. Perhaps the creation, with the participation of local residents, of a "living memorial" on what mining was and is for them (a machinery park). This will also make it possible to appeal to a narrative of pride and to manage the sentiment of the residents.

— **The technical assistance mechanism needs to be strengthened,** in particular in terms of increasing the awareness of stakeholders (local governments, entrepreneurs), concerning what the transition process is and how to practically benefit from available funds. This type of capacity-building should be provided by the public administration, not by NGOs that are "bailing out the state".


— **'Social resilience' in particular needs to be strengthened by working on local identity to inspire 'radical hope'.** As mentioned in the report, radical hope is undirected hope and the equivalent of lifelong optimism or social resilience. Strengthening such an attitude requires appealing to sources of identity deeper than mining culture (e.g., Wielkopolska). The seeds of radical hope can be seen in the attitudes of entrepreneurs, specialists and in the search for a new idea, according to the emerging conviction that the myth of big industry and of the industrial region should be replaced by something – the creation a new myth, a new vision (Wielkopolska Energy Valley). It was a mistake to link the vision of the future with the JTF measures. The transition plan should be detached from the fund itself and should have branched out into other measures.





## Eastern Wielkopolska and Konin

### – Important Dates:



1793	●	Second Partition of Poland. <b>Konin becomes part of the Prussian partition.</b>
1815	●	Congress of Vienna. <b>Konin becomes part of the Congress Kingdom of Poland (Russian partition).</b>
1918	●	<b>Poland regains its independence after 123 years of partition.</b>
1939	●	The outbreak of the Second World War. <b>Konin finds itself under German occupation.</b>
1940	●	<b>The Germans begin mining lignite in the vicinity of Konin.</b>
1945	●	The end of the Second World War. <b>Poles begin mining from the Morzysław opencast.</b>
1958	●	<b>Commissioning of the Konin power station.</b>
1967-1969	●	<b>Commissioning of the Pątnów power station.</b>
1958-2010	●	<b>Operation of the open pits: Gosławice, Pątnów, Kazimierz, Józwin, Lubstów, Józwin IIB, Drzewce and Tomisławice.</b>

1999	●	<b>Privatisation of ZE PAK.</b>
2000	●	Record figures from the Central Statistical Office (CSO). <b>Konin has a population of 83,517.</b>
2012	●	<b>The first biomass unit at ZE PAK SA is commissioned at the Konin power station.</b>
2017	●	<b>Decommissioning of the Adamów Power Plant.</b>
2021	●	<b>Presentation of the Territorial Just Transition Plan of Eastern Wielkopolska.</b>
2024	●	<b>ZE PAK CG assumes completion of coal mines and power plants in Eastern Wielkopolska.</b>
2030	●	CSO forecast. <b>Konin's population will fall to 64,331 inhabitants.</b>
2040	●	<b>Eastern Wielkopolska to achieve full climate neutrality.</b>
2050	●	CSO forecast. <b>Konin's population will fall to 45,623 inhabitants.</b>

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## **Glossary**

**RDA** — Regional Development Agency

**EUKI** — European Climate Initiative

**JTF** — Just Transition Fund

**KPO** — Krajowy Program Odbudowy, eng. National Reconstruction Plan

**LMBV** — Lusatian and Central German Mining Administration Ltd.

**PZS** — Polish Green Network

**TJTP** — Territorial Just Transition Plan

**WWF** — World Wide Fund for Nature

**ZE PAK** — Zespół Elektrowni Pątnów Adamów Konin SA [eng. Pątnów Adamów Konin Power Plant Complex]



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