

Communities on the frontlines
of a post-coal future in central and eastern Europe

Heroes of Just Transition



Katarína Macháčková
the mayor of Prievidza, Slovakia

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Introduction



Petrița photographed from the nearby hills.

While a phaseout of coal in Europe is inevitable within the next decade, some central and eastern European governments are resisting the trend. The argument is that coal is key to energy security and economic prosperity, and that workers and communities in coal-reliant regions would suffer greatly if phaseouts are implemented.

Yet a closer look at these coal-dependent regions tells a different story. In many cases, local authorities and citizens in the communities themselves have already started building post-coal futures.

In Slovakia, a mayor from Upper Nitra, the country's main coal region, has kicked off a broadly participatory bottom-up process of creating a vision for the region without coal. In Romania, a local artist in Jiu Valley has given a new lease of life to a former mining town by restoring old buildings, organising art festivals, and understanding the heritage value of mining infrastructure.

In Czechia, uniquely in the region, the central government has understood the importance of coordinating and investing in the alternative development of coal regions. The Czech RE:START programme, which includes all three of the country's mining regions and brings together all layers of government and communities, is an example everyone in central and eastern Europe can learn from.

This publication is a collection of stories authored by seven journalists and photographers in coal mining regions across central and eastern Europe. It's a close look at how life really looks like in those areas, acknowledging the massive challenge of reviving the economies of mono-industrial regions.

But the stories carry much hope: in most communities, people are out and about planning for the future, in some cases demonstrating an extraordinary level of cooperation between citizens and local authorities. The mobilisation in these regions shows that a just transition of coal regions in central and eastern Europe is possible, following in the footsteps of other regions around the world where citizens, local and central authorities, trade unions and civil society are working together to build alternative futures. In central and eastern Europe too, our stories show, a just transition has already started.



Polish community takes on the coal industry

Citizens and local authorities in Imielin have created a united front to oppose destructive coal mining in their green town.

Text and photographs: **Jakub Szafranski**

Imielin is different from what most Poles understand by a city in Upper Silesia. “There is not a single apartment block here,” says mayor Jan Chwiędacz in an interview at his office.

Blocks built for miners usually define the landscape and identity of Silesian towns, but not in Imielin. Instead of the overwhelming, decaying architecture inherited from the decades of peak coal production of the last century, Imielin features green landscapes, a panorama of the Western Tatras and recreational water reservoirs.

Almost all of the 9 000 inhabitants of Imielin live in independent houses, some built eagerly not long ago. This, however, does not mean that mining is distant for locals.

“15 years ago, in every second household it was a miner who supported the family,” says the mayor.

Alicja Zdziechiewicz

“Up to 2 000 residents of Imielin were employed in the mine.”

The mayor refers to the Ziemowit coal mine (part of the Piast-Ziemowit complex), which lies under the southern part of the city. The mine is owned by Polska Grupa Górnicza (PGG), the largest coal mining company in Poland and in all of Europe.

While extraction in the mine takes place at a depth of 550 metres, inhabitants of Imielin are very conscious of the underground activities: a shaky ground and other damages from mining have affected an estimated ten per cent of the area of the town.

“The foundations of houses in the south are secured in the event of shocks and subsiding of land,” says Tomasz Lamik, chairman of the city council in Imielin. “For the resulting damage, the mine paid compensations. This is a normal practice here.”



Alicja Zdziechiewicz, Tomasz Lamik, Mayor Jan Chwiędacz.

If mining stopped here, the town could go ahead to plan further investments and attract new residents seeking a break from living in the big cities to the west.

“We had assurances that the mine would not grow outside of its present area so people were not preparing for larger damages,” continues the chairman. “But in October last year, we were informed that the new Imielin Północ (Imielin North) deposit will be exploited. Nearly half of the town lies on its planned surface. The extraction is to begin in two years and will last until 2046. They want to dig at a depth of only 180 metres, the cheapest possible method. The ground is expected to sink by at least 6 metres. It was a shocking news”.

Locals rise up

My trip to Imielin happened exactly one year after the announcement about the new mine.

At the train station, I was greeted by Alicja Zdziechiewicz, a secondary school literature teacher with 17 years of work experience, activist of the Green Imielin association and mother of two.

“I work with my husband for the Green Imielin association,” says Zdziechiewicz. “We did not have to be persuaded in any way. We got involved immediately after the information meeting at which the mayor told the inhabitants about the plans for the mine.”

Zdziechiewicz tells of how several citizen groups were created, sending out newsletters and placing large information banners across the region. I can still see some of the posters in strategic locations like a bus stop in the town’s centre.

Thanks to the determination of the involved residents, up to 350 people applied and became a formal party in the administrative case about the new mine. Another 1200 inhabitants were listed as supporters of these applications.

“The first serious test for me was to organise a protest in May 2018 in front of the Regional Directorate for Environmental Protection,” says

A Save Imielin banner action.



Damaged houses over Imielin South deposit 4.

Zdziechiewicz. “We the inhabitants prepared the protest together, we shared our tasks and made banners. We gathered about one hundred people and went to Katowice. I took the megaphone in my hand and I had to make it work. We made a lot of noise and the protest got covered by the media.”

Zdziechiewicz says that eventually large environmental organisations supported their efforts, and Polish and foreign journalists started coming to Imielin. As representatives of Green Imielin, Zdziechiewicz and her colleagues even went to Brussels this year, to attend a meeting of the European Commission’s Platform for Coal Regions in Transition, during which they told EU politicians and others about Imielin. In 2018, Silesia was one of the pilot regions of the Coal Platform, which is meant to assist European regions transitioning away from coal.

“I had to overcome stage fright before speaking at the European Commission building in a foreign language,” Zdziechiewicz remembers.

Zdziechiewicz accompanied me at the meeting with mayor Jan Chwiędacz at the town hall. When we arrived for the interview, Chwiędacz was holding a paper with the official decision of the Regional Directorate for Environmental Protection

New investments in Imielin.

concerning the Imielin North mine. He had just received it.

The environmental permit is key for the mine to go ahead. Chwiędacz and his colleagues, with the help of geology experts and lawyers, spent a lot of energy persuading the Regional Directorate not to issue it. But the mayor’s expression is unambiguous. The mine received the green light.

“Our law office is already checking the decision,” the mayor said. “We have two weeks from the date of publication to appeal.”

The mayor did not seem dispirited, but rather focused, his mind clearly full of fast thoughts.

“They did not even send this decision to us,” the mayor noticed. “They published it on the internet



yesterday. We have to get to the information ourselves, as if we were denied the role of party in the proceedings. That's how it looked like from the very beginning. They announce their decisions to us without asking people for their opinion."

I spent an hour in the mayor's office listening to the mayor speaking to Zdziechiewicz and Lamik from the city council. It is the close cooperation between residents and officials that seems to me to be the greatest asset of this community.

"While the residents' associations organise a demonstration in Katowice and keep pressure on the management of the mine, the mayor's office looks for legal and administrative solutions," Zdziechiewicz explains of the division of roles. The goal is convergent despite the fact that motivations can seem different.

"People have taken lifelong mortgages to build houses here and now they fear that in a few years the walls will break like it happened in nearby Bytom," says Zdziechiewicz.

"It is impossible to plan for the renovation of sewage systems or roads with the awareness that the ground beneath will slip. We have just built two sports halls in the city. It is not known what

damage they can withstand," says the mayor. Lamik speaks about threats posed by the new mines to the water system, nearby forests and local railways.

The mayor gave me a lot of time from his day so our meeting has to end, but Zdziechiewicz and Lamik want me to see what all the fuss is about. We drive up to the nearby hill which has a clear view of a dozen kilometres in each direction. From here, one can see the distant mountains and a nearby lake. Visible are also many workshops, warehouses and shafts indispensable to the surrounding mines, including those belonging to Piast-Ziemowit.

"So they want to build another one of those somewhere here?" I ask, staring down at the shafts. "Oh no," says Lamik. "They want to dig new tunnels from there to the other side of the city, to avoid building a costly new shaft. As shallow and cheaply as they can, because this coal is anyways bad and sulphated so hard to profit from".

With the help of retired miners, the inhabitants of Imielin have learned a lot about mining techniques. They know that the mining company will try to avoid leaving the intact parts of the

A KWK Bobrek Mine in Karb district, Bytom



deposit as pillars supporting the ground and will not carefully fill up existing excavations with new material in order to prevent slides, as they should. The company will be looking for cost cuts in all possible ways, locals in Imielin expect.

"Here, people are very entrepreneurial, they set up businesses, they deal with small but profitable production of various types. New residents are still arriving and the number of miners has dropped to 200 people. We want to be able to offer people conditions for development, which requires reliable infrastructure and nearby comfortable homes and woods or reservoirs for leisure," Lamik says of his vision for Imielin.

Bytom, a cautionary tale

Located 30 kilometers away from Imielin, on the other side of regional center Katowice, Bytom has always been infamous for stories of "earthquakes" caused by mining and crumbling buildings. I myself heard these stories about Bytom growing up.

Bytom has become a point of reference for Imielin residents, so Zdziechiewicz insisted I should visit. In Bytom, I met local activist Arkadiusz Rusnak, who for many years has helped people seek compensation and repair works from the local mining companies.

Only two mines are still operational in Bytom, from the total of seven that used to be there.

In the last 20 years, the number of residents has fallen by almost 40 000 people, according to the Central Statistical Office of Poland. It is not only the lack of jobs, but also the quality of life in Bytom that made people leave. The destruction caused by mining to homes and infrastructure is the most obvious problem. Additionally, locals suffer from high levels of smog and the waste industry which replaced mining has polluted the environment.

"Get in the car," Rusnak tells me. "You will take pictures and show people in Imielin the fate that awaits them when mining starts."

We only have an hour and a half so I see it all at fast pace: a newly bought and renovated house,

in which one corner is collapsing, walls bursting outside and inside the home despite the steel rim around the building; a pre-war tenement from which, because of the risk of collapse, inhabitants were displaced; a football pitch sunken in the middle; a "Finnish" housing estate where two months ago the chimneys were destroyed because of the shock, leaving people without heating for the upcoming autumn.

Before leaving Silesia, I ask Alicia Zdziechiewicz how the fight for the community changed her life. "I have a strong sense of the meaning of what I do. We are opposing a looting economy, we want to protect the environment and live in peace in our green city," she says, adding that as the campaign advanced, she became more interested in the environment and climate change and that she learned about cooperating with others.

"It turned out that more people have problems like us and that we can and should support one other," the teacher said. "The only thing that I am afraid of is that the decision about the new mine was already made in Warsaw a long time ago and that, despite our protests, the politicians do not really listen to us." |



Cracks in a house located in Bytom's Miechowice district.



‘Islands of culture’ shape the future of the Jiu Valley

A group of social entrepreneurs are breathing new life into a former mining community in Romania.

Text and photographs: **Adrian Cătu**

It was all grey. Grey hills, grey houses, grey forest. Grey silhouettes walking back and forth between the dark skeletons of the mining structures and the sad, greyish apartment buildings. Even the river here was black – waters saturated with thin coal powder.

And, yet, people in the Jiu Valley in south-western Romania remember the times, before 1989, when the coal mines were working as good. As grey as it was, the valley was very much alive.

More than 100 000 people were working around the clock to support an economy based on coal, and they were rewarded with high wages and praised as heroes by the communist propaganda. At a time when others in the country were suffering from food shortages, the miners had everything they could possibly need. The mines even had their own libraries, clubs and cinemas.

People moving in from other regions were hired as soon as they got off the train, directly at the railway station. More than 4 000 people were employed by just one mine, the oldest in the valley: Petrila. When the mine shut down, in 2015, only 400 were still working in the decaying, half-demolished buildings.

When Romania started to shut down mining in the valley in the 1990s, the area seemed to be dying. Everyone repeated the same mantra: “We are just miners, that’s all we know, this is who we are. Without mining, this valley will die”.

It did not happen.

Two decades after most of the mines in the Jiu Valley closed, I am visiting the valley on a golden autumn afternoon. Leaves of the virgin birch forests are colouring the hills in yellow, orange and red. The sun is shining gently, the sky is dark blue. The apartment buildings are freshly painted in warm colors, the water of the river is pristine clear, the streets are crowded with people enjoying the warm day.

Dana Bates, creator of world-class biking trails in Straja, JiuValley

Many left the area after the massive layoffs between 1997 and 1999. Most of them went to work in western Europe and started sending money back to their relatives in the valley. Some even returned to start small businesses of their own in the valley – mostly shops and chalets.

This trickle of money and energy offered some hope, but it was not enough. Meanwhile, the government did very little to support alternatives to mining, in spite of numerous promises. The lack of infrastructure and the isolation of the region made the valley unattractive to investors, despite its abundance of highly skilled workers.

However, a curse might turn into a blessing. Surrounded by hills and virgin forests, and with a few small but ambitious ski resorts in the nearby mountains, the valley has more and more started to place its bets on tourism. It has to face one big challenge though: it is remote from all densely populated areas in the country and the region hasn't been seen to be sufficiently alluring to entice people to make the effort to come here.

That was until a group of determined locals started to challenge the perception that the place has nothing extraordinary to offer.

'The European Periphery of Culture'

Ion Barbu was born and lives in Petrita. Now in his 60s, he is an acclaimed, prolific and internationally awarded artist who combines drawing, painting and graphic writing to produce a variety of work, from installations to murals and urban art. In the early 2000s, as he became aware of the demise of the mining industry, he thought of a way to infuse his community with new life: by using his best weapon, art.

"This town was a cultural desert," Ion Barbu told me during an interview when I visited Petrita in autumn 2018. "So I said to myself: let's create a few islands in this desert. If we want to see a play or hear some music, why not bring them here instead of us going to the city?"

At the beginning, almost everyone saw Barbu as either a crazy eccentric or a dangerous cultural anarchist.

In 2006, as the Romanian city Sibiu was preparing to become the European Capital of Culture, Barbu launched a series of cultural events in Petrita under the brand 'the European Periphery of Culture'. He organised in Petrita a now annual

Ion Barbu speaking during the opening of a photo exhibition inside a Petrita mining building



Architect Mihai Danciu, who works to recontextualise mining heritage

arts and music festival called 'Bad Man', a pun on the name of a well-known national folk festival 'Good Man'.

Together with a few volunteers, he restored the memorial house of I.D. Sarbu, an important Romanian writer born in Petrita who had been imprisoned during the communist regime. The house had been rapidly and severely degrading: it was classified as a monument so no private individuals could restore it, but the Ministry of Culture took no steps to safeguard it either. Ion Barbu eventually found a backdoor out of the deadlock.

"The house had been already rebuilt in the past, so it had kept its original shape but not the original materials. We convinced the legal heir of I.D. Sarbu to declare that this was not really the late writer's house, but just a copy, therefore not really qualifying as a monument," explains Barbu.

The artist and his team could thus restore the building. The next step was to make sure this was not going to be the next memorial house

hopelessly waiting for people to enter. Barbu painted the exterior walls in vivid colours and added some selected quotes from the writer's works. Instead of waiting passively (and in vain) to be embraced by the community, the art was now shouting to people to come in.

Many other urban artworks would follow, often shocking the community. Barbu transformed a pedestrian crossing on the main street in Petrita into a piano keyboard. He painted the grey facade of an apartment building as a pink, giant postal envelope – a reference to the exodus of Romanians to western Europe (around 4 million



Ion Barbu's painting of a giant envelope on a building



International biking contest in Straja

Romanians now live abroad). Gradually, more artists and volunteers began to share Barbu's vision and help him. The local administration was already exasperated, and this was only the beginning.

In 2008, two explosions occurred one after the other one kilometre underground in the Petrila mine, killing 14 people. Rumours about an imminent closure spread quickly. The mine was subsequently transferred to the National Society for Mine Closures (SNIMVJ) which would handle its permanent shutdown.

The closure plan was chilling: every building and headframe would be taken down, every piece of metal and hoist mechanism was to be recycled as scrap metal. This would be not only erasing a place but erasing a history.

The first coal mine in the valley had opened in Petrila in 1858. Its entrance is still visible today next to the building of the mechanical atelier, itself erected 100 years ago. One of the mine's hoists, made in Germany, is still in service and has been perfectly functional since 1942. The imposing metal headframe, rising tens of metres above the ground, dates from the same year. For

Ion Barbu, erasing this history was unacceptable: this mine plant was the one thing that no other town in the country had. Facing authorities who did not recognise the potential of reconverting mining heritage into cultural landscape, Barbu braced himself for a decisive battle to save the plant: without it, the community would be left with nothing.

World-class biking trails

The Straja ski resort is located 30 kilometres from Petrila. Straja is at once modest and ambitious in its chaotic and aggressive development. Buildings are almost overlapping and there are very few parking spaces, but important investments in ski infrastructure have been made: 12 slopes, cable installations, artificial lighting and artificial snow – all with support from the local authorities. Romania has very few ski resorts with respect to its needs, so new ones stand a good chance of becoming popular.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the development of the zone faced an unexpected threat: global warming. The mountains in the area peak at around 1,868 metres, not too high, so there is no snow except during the winter. With winters



The plant of Petrila coal mine, photographed during its last week of functioning, in October 2015

quickly becoming warmer, the ski season is shortening, putting pressure on the area's fragile new businesses.

As skiing's future in the valley has increasingly been put in doubt, it has taken a surprise gift to generate new ideas for the region. Dana Bates is a Texas-born American who has been living in Romania since 1989, and now heads an NGO engaged in youth community projects. A few years ago, he received a present he did not expect: a mountain bike.

Bates loved the present and started to use the bike to explore the surroundings of his adoptive ex-mining town, Lupeni. Biking around the birch-covered hills around Lupeni, Bates realised that the area was perfect for professional bike trails – and that they could attract bikers from around Europe for most of the year.

"In Spain, an area called Zona Zero, with less infrastructure than Straja and similarly far from any airport, has been able to become a world-class destination," explains Bates. "This encouraged me to bring over some experts to check the potential of this area".

The experts confirmed his intuition. Following their advice, Dana got support from the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) to train in Italy and became one of the first IMBA members in Romania. Importantly, he learned how to build world-class trails. On finishing his training, he rented a small excavator and got to work.

Even the authorities were moderately optimistic about it: Bates received some money from the town hall to build his first trail. With the support of a local lobbyist, he could negotiate a good relationship with Romsilva, the national agency responsible for the forests, which allowed him to build the trail. Opposition, though, came from environmental NGOs which accused him of destroying the forest.

"Our longest trail, Baloo, is around four kilometres," Bates says. "We used a small excavator because we needed to build a 'flow trail', with rose borders in curves to increase the speed. And for this trail we have only chopped down one big tree and a few other baby trees. Cyclists are coming not only for the trails but also for the nature, so I am equally interested in having it protected," he says.

In addition to the world-class trails and the beautiful wild nature, there is one more thing which can attract cyclists from all around Europe.



A cow is eating in front of the Petrița mine plant

“In Austria or Germany, a full day of cycling costs around 150 euros,” says Bates, “but here we can make it happen for 65-75 euros.” He subsequently managed to raise 50 000 euros from donors to complete five trails, each around four kilometres long, and has started to promote the Lupeni trails to the largest European platform for adventure tourism and on a dedicated website.

Bates wishes young people would embrace his vision. He envisages that schools could adopt trails to clean and maintain, and that young people could themselves ride on the trails.

Yet the community in Lupeni is still sceptical, says Bates. “I think it’s a sort of cultural pessimism.”

The first real test of Bates’ vision was organising an international mountain bike competition right here in Lupeni in October 2018. The event was a success. The US Ambassador to Romania, Hans Klemm, was in the audience.

“How did you find the competition?” I ask one of the bikers as they finish the last trail of the competition in Straja. “Kick ass,” he says. “I’ll surely return here.”

A new beginning for the Jiu Valley

In October 2015, the National Society for Mine Closures (SNIMVJ) achieved one of its most important goals: it closed the Petrița mine. The company then got ready to demolish all the mine infrastructure, so Ion Barbu, the artist, knew he had very little time left.

Luckily, he was not alone in his newest venture. “A few architects from Bucharest and Cluj must have liked us somehow,” he jokes, “and found in Petrița a cause worthy of their efforts.”

The architects took upon themselves the important and difficult task of preparing the detailed technical documentation which served as the basis for lobby work at the Ministry of Energy, the owner of SNIMVJ. In 2016, as Barbu and the others were fighting to save the mine, a popular technocratic government agreed to declare the Petrița mine a national monument.

While SNIMVJ could no longer demolish the mine plant, anti-corruption laws prevented the institution from donating the infrastructure to local authorities. Whoever wanted to take care of the mine would have to buy it at the market price.

Initially evaluated at three million euros by the Ministry of Energy, the mine’s value was finally estimated to be 200 000 euros by an independent evaluator commissioned by Barbu and his colleagues. Even this was too much money for an artist and his friends, so the team tried to persuade the Petrița municipality to buy the infrastructure. Their cultural guerilla war was depicted in a 2015 documentary by Andrei Dascalescu called ‘Planeta Petrița’, and the case received national attention. It’s then when Barbu and his colleagues formally founded their NGO which they named after the title of the documentary.

Barbu and his colleagues not only had to lobby the authorities but also had other more mundane tasks: the site needed to be guarded against scrap iron thieves who had started to dismantle the abandoned site. The defence of the site, too, was achieved through culture.

Barbu painted the former pumping station of the mine with colourful graffiti, labelling it ‘Pumpadou Center’, and hosted concerts and theatre events. The NGO organised workshops with architecture students. They included the site in the national catalogue of the ‘Museum Night’ event,

Ion Barbu

attracting around 2 700 visitors – more than the biggest museums in the nearby city, Deva. They eventually teamed up with former union leader Catalin Cenusă, now retired, to organise the events and to guard the site.

After a long battle, which started with Ion Barbu’s first provoking artworks, the town hall officials are finally starting to share his vision.

“Now we just need them to officially request our help to raise the money to buy the plant, and we’ll put all our efforts into that,” says Barbu.

“We can open a ‘mine cuisine’ restaurant. Or advertise ‘dark coal’ tourism in the area.” He talks about residencies and ateliers for artists, interactive workshops to help preserve the site, museums in the existing rehabilitated buildings, attracting investors who can create accommodation, creating jobs and developing the economy...

As he speaks to me, I look outside the window, onto a perfect autumn day. I can see the leaves colouring the hills while the sun is shining gently in the dark blue sky. Somewhere out there, buried deep in the virgin birch forest, there are also Dana Bates’ bike trails.

And I can only think of Bates’ words earlier in the day, quoting Aristotle: “a beginning is more than half of the whole”. **I**





Coal mining leaves Bulgarian regions drained

As the largest underground mine in Bulgaria closes this year in Bobov Dol, the community worries about its future.

Text and photographs: **Jodi Hilton**

Georgi Terziski is clipping bunches of grapes from the arbor which drapes across the terrace of his house in the village of Golemo Selo, Bulgaria, where he's lived for 56 years. He's planning to make homemade wine like he does every autumn.

Just a few hundred metres behind the house looms the coal-fired Bobov Dol electrical plant. Its two chimneys and three cooling towers have been belching out plumes of smoke as long as he can remember.

Built in the seventies, it provided employment for most of the local families in the village, population 480, including both of Terziski's parents. Until recently, the plant relied on "black gold" from nearby underground coal mines, including the Bobov Dol and Babino coalfields.

This summer, it was announced that the Bobov Dol mine would close by the end of 2018, leaving

400 people unemployed. Babino, where 650 people worked, already ended operations last year. Like in many other places across eastern Europe, the mines are closing because production costs far exceed purchase prices: coal does not make economic sense any more.

As the mines close and coal production decreases, owners of the Bobov Dol plant are turning to alternative types of fuel including biomass to keep it running. "They burn everything from hay to coal," Terziiksi gestures toward his chest. "We don't breathe clean air."

On paper, the plant is owned by Vagledobiv Bobov Dol EOOD, but behind the scenes, the mines and plants are run by Hristo Kovachki, a 56-year old energy tycoon. Kovachki owns a vast empire of mines, heating facilities and power plants across Bulgaria and is worth over half a billion dollars (and some estimate significantly more), making him one of the top three wealthiest Bulgarians.

Vasil Vasev, mayor of Golemo Selo



Georgi Terziiski clips grape at his home in Golemo Selo

According to the news outlet BNE, he is the owner of 16 energy companies and 15 other facilities.

The Bobov Dol plant is slated to close by 2020. But in recent months, there have been changes at the power plant. As the last of the Bobov Dol underground mines were sealed, a bitter smell began to waft from the power plant. From a distance, one can see hay bales stacked next to the plant, alongside a large pile of coal.

'The Dusty Place'

At the village playground, Violeta Dashkova monitors her two-year old son Moni, running to catch him when he manages to climb a small wall. "In March, we found white ash covering the playground," she said. Her son is often ill. "I worry that maybe it is due to the electrical plant." Electrical power plants are known to emit sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide; the combination, often carried by wind, can result in acid rain.

Like many locals, Dashkova's husband works at the power plant. She says he earns 650 levs per months (EUR 325) which is supposed to include 100 levs in food coupons. Dashkova says their food coupons arrive up to three months late, and if it were not for their own production (they grow fruits and vegetables and keep animals) they would not have enough to eat. For Dashkova herself, it has been hard to find a job. "I sent my CV to the plant but have been waiting three years for an answer."

In September this year, ecological organisations and citizens groups, including Za Zemiata (part of CEE Bankwatch Network) and Greenpeace, submitted critical assessments of the decision to burn biomass and waste at two of Kovachki's power plants (Bobov Dol and one in the nearby city of Pernik) to the Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water and other agencies.

People have begun referring to their village as Pepelenska, meaning dusty place.

"They used to burn high quality coal," said Vasil Vasev, mayor of two villages Golemo Selo (Big Village) and Malo Selo (Little Village). As the mines close, the towns are beginning to burn biomass, petrol, plastic and rubbish. "We can sense the difference. The smell is very bad," he says and adds that the local crops, including grapes, have suffered.

Vasev has positioned himself as a David in opposition to the Goliath that is Kovachki. He argues that Golemo Selo should be receiving tax revenue from the power plant, instead of the money going directly to the larger municipality of Bobov Dol. Golemo Selo's town hall hasn't been painted for years. Neighborhood roads are unpaved and the local school has been shuttered. "Since the oligarch bought the plant in 2008, we haven't seen any of the revenue we need to help our community," explained Vasev.

His strategy going forward is to unite the two towns he governs, so that together they would meet the population threshold (500) needed to apply for much needed EU development funds. Meanwhile an initiative to hold a referendum that would allow Golemo Selo to separate from Bobov Dol in favor of the nearby town of Dupnitsa is winding its way through the courts. "It's a good idea," believes Vasev, "but without Golemo Selo and the revenue from the plant, the town of Bobov Dol would collapse financially."

The precarious fate of workers

Mining has existed in the region since 1891. During the late forties and early fifties, the communist regime sent enemies to forced labor camps, including the mines at Bobov Dol. After Stalin's death, Bulgaria began closing the labor camps. But late in the communist regime, the situation

normalised and the mines employed ordinary workers, who were highly valued for their contribution to industry. After the fall of communism in 1989, mines and other industries were privatised, and the new owners, sometimes with mafia ties, acquired companies for a pittance and are known to have exploited workers to turn profits. By early 2010s, workers' earnings averaged 600 leva (EUR 300) a month, and the company often delayed or failed to pay workers' salaries for months on end.

Miners at the adjacent mine Babino made headlines in October 2016 when they went on strike in an attempt to recover unpaid back salaries and food vouchers ahead of massive layoffs.

After three days of protests, during which time more than 100 workers remained underground, the company turned off the ventilators, forcing the protesters out. Two months later, a miner died on the job at Bobov Dol, after being trapped under a machine (The most dramatic accident occurred in 1997, when five died during a methane explosion at Bobov Dol.)

The recent layoffs of more than one thousand mining workers in the last three years have worsened conditions in this already declining area.



Former miners nurse beers in Babino village

In Babino, where nearly everyone was employed at the mines, a half-dozen former miners sit in front of the local store, nursing large glass bottles of Bulgarian beer. Some of them retired as young as 45, while others were laid off before qualifying for retirement. (In Bulgaria, underground miners are class one workers, meaning they are eligible

The Bobov Dol electricity plant



for retirement at 45, whereas other workers must wait to reach 55 or 64.) Yordan Yordanov, 46, who worked on a reclamation crew working underground for 17 years, nurses a Pirinsko beer, named for the scenic mountains that bisect the country. “There’s no future, no work in the whole community.” Without work, he says, no one will stay here, only pensioners.

He was fortunate to qualify for retirement before the mines closed and 260 people were laid off. He’s pleased that his pension, unlike his salary, comes on time. However, the company still owes him back wages; he estimates he is owed between 4 000 and 5 000 levs. (EUR 2000-2500) “Hristo Kovachki doesn’t give a penny,” he said. Another former miner piped in. “If you sign up for his political party, maybe you can get your money.”

Another miner, 43 year-old Rumen Hristov, is unemployed and receiving 70 per cent of his previous salary since the mines closed. He was laid off two years before qualifying for pension. He is looking for a new job, but he may lose the chance to retire as a category one worker; this may mean extra years of work at a job he’d have to commute to, and most likely he’d start at minimum wage, 510 leva (EUR 255). “There are jobs,” he says, “but they aren’t paying.”

Faint hope for coal communities

“We live in a country where politicians have no vision for the development of areas like ours”, the mayor of Bobov Dol municipality, Elsa Velichkova, told just-transition.info in an interview earlier this summer. The mayor wondered why there was no dialogue between the various institutions that should deal with the aftermath of mine closures and the planning for the economic diversification of the coal regions.

So far, there’s little clue about what to do with the unemployed, or with the communities.

Local leaders like Vasev and Anton Iliev, Head of the European Projects Directorate for Bobov Dol, tout selling points for potential investors. Iliev says, “The municipality’s strategic location is a strong advantage for investment attraction: around an hour away from the capital, Sofia, and between Pan-European Corridor 4 in the direction of Thessaloniki and the Pan-European Corridor 8 to Skopje, Tirana and Durres in Albania and Bari, Italy.”

Additionally, there is a ready work force (the population is just under 8 000 for Bobov Dol

Strip mining at Minyor, Bobov Dol



Vasilka Sotirova, retired after working 22 years in the mines

and the surrounding villages) and costs (for land, supplies and worker salaries) are among the lowest in the EU.

But Vasev admits that Golemo Selo is in a hard spot. Many residents are pensioners, so even if a new factory or company set up nearby, it may be too late for the village. Last year, just six babies were born to families from Golemo Selo, and most young people have left.

In the early 2000s, textile factories that produce shoes for Italian companies began operating in Bobov Dol, some of them on the territory of old mines. They employ 300 to 400 local women from Bobov Dol and nearby municipalities.

“The factories play an important role in the local economy,” Anton Iliev from the Bobov Dol municipality said. “While men were working in the mines, in heavy industry, these factories employed many women.”

“It’s good to have an industry that is less damaging to the environment,” he added.

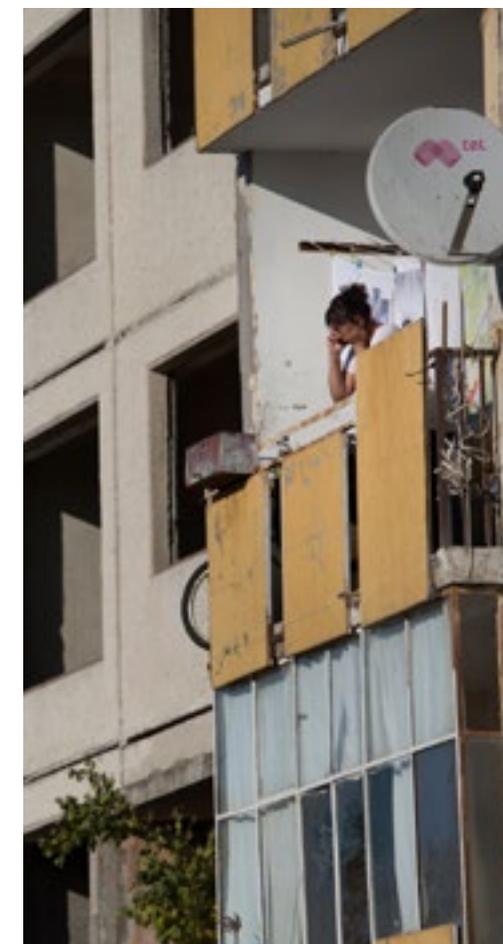
The trouble is, women employed in these factories are paid approximately 400 leva (EUR 200) per month, less than minimum wage. Negative conditions in such Bulgarian factories have been compared to those in Cambodia, Bangladesh and Turkey.

Abandoned buildings in the town of Bobov Dol

More and better quality jobs are needed

At a conference in Sofia in October, stakeholders from Bulgaria, including Bobov Dol, and across the EU met to discuss the future for coal communities and the concept of just transition, meaning how to build alternatives for communities that used to be dependent on coal in such a way that workers and locals are involved in the process and treated fairly.

The municipal mayor Velichkova took her turn at the podium. “After the closing of the mines, I’m not sitting on a chair but on a fire,” she said. “We are on the path to becoming another Northwestern Bulgaria,” she explained, referring to Montana, the poorest region in the EU. She appealed to the NGO sector to come to the aid of the people of Bobov Dol. “The people of Bobov Dol are not lazy.”





Local communities in Slovakia plan a post-coal future

Mayors in Upper Nitra warn that a coal phaseout in the region is inevitable and are already preparing alternatives.

Text: **Zuzana Límová**

Photographs: **Zuzana Límová** and **Michał Burza**

If ever travellers reach Prievidza, the administrative centre of Upper Nitra, usually they pass through to enjoy a holiday in the nearby town of Bojnice with its spa, castle and zoo. Prievidza's tiny main square, strange mix of modern and socialist architecture and unreliable bus connections mean that, at first glance, the town does not seem to have much to offer visitors.

However, local people are proud of their town and its history, especially the hundreds of years of coal mining. Everyone has a grandparent, uncle or friend connected to one of the mines in the region. The nostalgia for the golden era is ever present, especially among the middle-aged and elderly. During communism, being a miner not only meant getting paid up to five times more than the average worker, it also provided various benefits and a prestigious social status.

Jozef Božik, mayor of Partizánske

Sentiment, however, is not of much help when it comes to discussing the future. "Talking about a coal phaseout is difficult here, because the people who would be affected still perceive mining as some form of security. It is hard for them understand that this guarantee will be gone one day," said Katarína Macháčková, the mayor of Prievidza.

In contrast to communist times, when the brown coal mines of Upper Nitra were state-owned and offered the possibility of lifelong employment, nowadays the mines belong to a private owner. The mining company Hornonitrianske bane Prievidza (HBP) employs 3 260 people, of which approximately 2 000 are miners working underground, according to the company's 2017 financial report. The largest portion are from the district of Prievidza, which according to the Slovak statistical office has 135 000 residents.

The mines contain lignite, a brown coal of low quality, which the nearby obsolete power plant



Katarína Macháčková, mayor of Prievidza

Nováky is bound to purchase. Because of the high price of coal, the power plant works at a loss each year, so the government has subsidised the mine with roughly EUR 100 million annually, justifying the handout as in the general economic interest of the country.

The Slovak government committed to subsidising the mine until 2030 to maintain the jobs of the miners and contribute to energy supplies. However, when the minister of economy mentioned last year that subsidies might end sooner, the region's inhabitants started to worry about their livelihoods – now nobody is sure when the financial assistance will end.

'Let's mine out of insecurity'

Under this headline, Macháčková and her team launched a series of public debates and workshops, with the goal of creating an action plan for the municipality once the coal era is over.

Macháčková and her team invited the Prime Minister, representatives of the European Commission, mayors, local entrepreneurs, environmental activists and various experts to take part in the broad participative discussion about the future of Prievidza.

Although no representatives of the central government or the mining company accepted the invitation, 50 local stakeholders took part in the

process. Eventually, the Association of Towns and Municipalities of Upper Nitra also got engaged, which meant that under discussion now was the entire region's post-coal development.

"We created four working groups on economy, transportation, tourism, and social infrastructure, including education, healthcare, and social services at the local level," said Alojz Vlčko, who heads the mayor's office in Prievidza. "We asked ourselves 'what resources we have in the region, what could we have here, and what barriers do we have to overcome?' Based on these questions, we determined strategic priorities in individual areas."

The preparation of the action plan, however, is complicated by the fact that the state has not yet specified when and how the lignite mining in Upper Nitra will decline.

"Sooner or later, the mining activity will gradually terminate. If we prepare for the transformation, we will be able to handle it," said Macháčková, who now faces public criticism and a smear campaign for her initiative.

Unsurprisingly, the closure of the mines is most strongly opposed by its employees, even though it is their health that mining endangers most. With or without plans, they worry about the future.

According to HBP, there are 11 000 employees linked to mining in the region, while the

European Commission estimates this figure to be 7 000.

"Certainly, it is necessary to create conditions so that these people do not stay unemployed," says Macháčková. She sees solutions in multiple areas. "The improvement of transportation is a priority for us. Even if it itself does not solve the employment problem, improving the accessibility of our region will help create conditions for the emergence of new jobs."

After retraining, the former miners could get jobs from new investors or the municipality itself. "We have filed a project idea to set up a municipal service company that would repair and renovate roads for the entire district," explains Macháčková.

The gradual creation of new jobs, whether in the industrial zone, the nearby spa or directly with the local government, should follow the gradual decline in mining, argues the mayor.

According to data from the Slovak statistical office, unemployment is currently 4.6 per cent in the Prievidza district, which is less than the national average of 5.4 per cent and the European average of 8.1 per cent. The market actually lacks skilled labour while people are kept employed in loss-making mines.

"At present, we have the lowest unemployment rate since 1990, and that is why it is a good time

to address the situation in the region. If we were in crisis, it would be much more complicated," says Macháčková.

The action plan created for Upper Nitra on Macháčková's initiative has become part of a national strategy for the Upper Nitra region coordinated by the Deputy Prime Minister's Office for Investments and Informatisation.

Upper Nitra has also been chosen as one of four pilot areas for the EU's programme supporting the transition of European coal mining regions, announced by Energy Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič at the end of 2017.

The first draft of the National Strategy for Upper Nitra is to be published in mid-October 2018 and open for comments from the public and experts from the European Commission, and local governments are eager for it.

"The question of whether to continue using lignite extracted in Upper Nitra for electricity is very complex and it is not within our scope to suggest any alternatives," says Alojz Vlčko. "With no information about when and how the government wants to phase out mining, we can only philosophise about the future potential of the region," he adds.

Old coal mining infrastructure in Upper Nitra





Coal and shoes

Jozef Božik, the mayor of Partizánske, a town 30 kilometres from Prievidza, knows a great deal about how a region can suffer if the transformation is not prepared.

Partizánske was once called Baťovany – after Tomáš Baťa, the founder of the famous shoe company. After communists took power in Czechoslovakia and nationalised the Baťa enterprise, both the town and the factory were renamed. At the time, the “Závody 29. Augusta” enterprise (ZDA) was one of the biggest players in the European shoe-making industry.

“At the time of its greatest glory, 32 million pairs of shoes were produced each year and about 11 000 people worked for the company, which was the main employer in the region,” explains Božik.

Basically everything in Partizánske and its surroundings used to depend on the shoemaking industry. The fall of communism in 1989, however, caught the factory unprepared. Overstaffed and with high labour costs, it was unable to compete with cheap footwear from Asia or adapt to the free market, collapsing at the beginning of 2000.

Božik, who has been active in regional politics since 1994 as a member of the Municipal Council of Partizánske at the age of 18, has vivid memories of this period, “In 2000 and 2001, the unemployment rates in Partizánske rose to highest levels ever. Every fifth adult in the district was without work.”

Old coal mining infrastructure in Upper Nitra

Today, only the empty factory next to the railway station and a big shoe made of flowers in the city centre commemorate the shoe industry’s golden age. Several smaller shoemaking companies still operate in the region.

Similarly to Prievidza, unemployment rates in Partizánske today are lower than the European average, and the labour market lacks skilled labour. Božik hopes that the lessons learned from the decline of the shoemaking industry will help the community better prepare for the coal phase-out. Like the mayor of Prievidza, Božik too is an advocate of early planning.

Burning the unburnable

In both Partizánske and Prievidza regions, people suffer because of mining and the burning of low quality brown coal in the Nováky plant. The consequences of air pollution include higher incidences of premature deaths, oncological diseases and asthma.

The owner of the Nováky power plant – Slovenské elektrárne – acknowledges that it will need major investments to be able to operate after 2023, when new European pollution standards come into play. “The durability of some crucial parts of the power plant Nováky is coming close to the end,” spokesperson Miroslav Šarišský told vEnergetike.sk. “Without tens of millions euros in

Old coal mining infrastructure in Upper Nitra

investments it won’t be able to operate in a safe manner, fulfilling all the technical and environmental requirements.”

The outdated power plant technology was on full display two years ago, when the decommissioned third boiler was started again to increase the volume of incinerated coal. According to the law, operational experiments could happen and had only to be announced to the local authorities i.e. no government authority approved or reviewed such decisions.

The Mayor of Partizánske was the one to start a fight against this practice. “My duty is to protect the citizens of the town and the region,” says Božik, who is also a Vice-Chairman of the Self-Governing Region of Trenčín, which includes both towns of Prievidza and Partizánske. He called on all regional stakeholders to take action.

“We asked the competent authorities to carry out an audit of the sulfur dioxide released into the air. The Ministry of the Environment confirmed that during the four months of the operational experiments, the emission limits were exceeded by ten times.”

After pressure from local governments, an important legislative change forbid operational experiments.

The quality of the extracted coal is best illustrated by a local joke: “A wagon filled with lignite was delivered to the Nováky plant. It started to

burn. The container burnt to dust and the lignite lasted.”

Although burning coal has been considered the largest anthropogenic contributor to climate change, the Slovak state pays an annual EUR 100 million subsidy to the Nováky plant. The subsidy is paid by all citizens of Slovakia in the form of energy charges, but only the private owner of the mines profits.

According to 2014 data from the European Commission, Slovak households pay the largest portion of their income of all EU countries for energy. For families living on the poverty line, this may mean that every fifth euro they earn must be spent to pay for electricity.

“I appreciate the work of miners and I acknowledge the mining history of Upper Nitra,” says Božik. “But mining has a grim future in Slovakia.”

He thinks that state subsidies should be used to support the retraining of miners and the development of the region, adding that Slovakia could phase out coal by 2023.

“Within five years, it is possible to create a social security mechanism for all the employees who would not be employed on the labour market after the closure of mines,” he says, adding that this will require political will.

Citizens will decide whether mayors like Katarína Macháčková and Jozef Božik will be the ones to manage their towns throughout the phasing out of coal. Municipal elections are scheduled for November 2018. |



Can Borsod county escape the coal mine curse?

A former Hungarian mining region struggling to recover is threatened by the opening of new mines.

Text and photographs: **László Pusztai, Alexa Botar**

A significant part of Borsod, the coal-rich part of BAZ county in northeast Hungary, is classified as an industrial crisis area, according to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, meaning that the restructuring of the region from mining and heavy industry has not been completed.

With less than half of the population active, the area suffers from unemployment and mass emigration. Most of the closed plant and factory buildings have not been remediated and recycled. EU funds are hardly absorbed in the region and air pollution, especially in the heating season, is regularly bad. All these factors indicate a sense of urgency for Borsod to reinvent itself in the post-coal era, a challenge that still lies ahead.

Zuzanna F. Nagy, activist
for just transition in Borsod

Lessons from an unmanaged transition

The Borsod basin is rich in hard coal and lignite, and dozens of underground and opencast mines have operated here since the 1800s. The forced industrialisation of the communist era, taking place mainly between 1950 and 1970, resulted in bloated industrial cities and the fading away of traditional village communities as thousands of villagers commuted to work in the cities.

Between the 1980s and the 2000s, mines and the associated heavy industry were shut down, leaving mostly destruction behind. At the time, there was no experience or money for a well-managed restructuring. The Szuha Valley Mining Villages Association is one of the few groups that has been trying to revive the area since.



Tibor Nagy, former mayor who tried to revive the region

„By the end of the 1980s, there was a shrinking interest in coal, many large plants closed down, and people were happy to install gas in their village homes,” Tibor Nagy, a former mayor and leader of the Association reminisces.

“After the change of regime in 1989, mining losses become unbearable, so no private actors wanted to buy the mines in the new regime. When the largest mines – Feketelyuk, Putnok, Lyukóháza – were shut down, around the year 2000, approximately 4 500 people were fired. The people with diplomas have long moved away, most of the population went into retirement, and real estate prices dropped to the floor – and stayed there.”

The Association tried various tactics to ensure the transition away from coal was more socially just. They directed miners to the mines which were still operating and helped skilled workers get work permits abroad. They also advocated for some structural changes to benefit the locals.

„We worked hard to minimize the losses,” explains Nagy. “In the beginning, we tried to ensure that the assets of the closed mines would go to the local governments so they could manage them. But what happened? They sold everything. This led to the rise of economic criminals in the 1990s, who

bought the properties cheap, sank it in debt and then disappeared with the money.”

“We tried to persuade the Hungarian government that, to alleviate some problems in this area, they should at least renovate public roads and public utilities. We requested that the closed rail routes would not be destroyed so that we could, for example, make bicycle roads there to attract tourists, but it did not happen.”

“We participated in many applications and local plans that resulted only in partial, isolated improvements. One thing that we did manage to operate successfully are some good retirement clubs,” concludes Nagy.

Dreams of coal

Desolate landscapes and socially devastated villages are still a part of Borsod today. This void, however, could be filled if locals and regional decision-makers were motivated to debate and plan their future without coal. But even then, many decisions concerning Borsod would still be made centrally – so a vision is needed on that level too.

Instead, politicians are choosing to exploit the nostalgia for the more prosperous mining days. In 2014, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said that “modern mining is a (national) goal”, while speaking in

Ózd city, the heart of the old mining region Borsod. Former industry leaders, retired workers and even some local decision-makers listened very carefully.

Conditions for opening mines have since been made more favourable and, in the past few years, half a dozen opencast mines were opened or are being slated for opening, some of them on locations close to where old mines used to be.

Among these, there are Sajókaza I and II and Felsőnyárad lignite mines (owned by Ormoszén company, total 50 000 tonnes of lignite/year, 25 employees) and Sajókápolna lignite mine (owned by Szuha2000 Ltd., total 25 000 t lignite/year, 10 employees).

There are plans to further open four other mines.

Many things can be said about these lignite mines, but not that they are „modern”, as the Prime Minister had suggested.

The outdated national energy strategy – under review in 2018 – promotes a mix of coal, nuclear and green energy and describes Hungarian coal and other fossil fuels as crucial to the country’s energy security. The coal lobby is strong in Hungary, but the resurgence of low quality coal seems to only benefit a few influential businessmen and not trickle down to the Borsod community.

Istvanne Kiraly, who opposes the new mine in Sajókápolna

The big dirty secret of small mines

As they get opened across the region, these small lignite mines bring profits to their owners but numerous losses to the communities in their vicinity: low quality lignite for heating, badly polluted air, cracked houses, falling real estate prices, deterioration of health and environmental damage. The Sajókápolna mine is a case in point.

The plan to have an opencast lignite mine next to Sajókápolna village first emerged during a village meeting in 2008. Almost all locals were against the mine, so the plan seemed to be shelved for a while. Then in 2011, the company suddenly got all the necessary permits following appeals, despite concerns from the environmental authority.

“For the impact assessment study, experts worked with maps from the 1960s, on which many houses are not yet displayed. This is a tragicomedy! This pit is actually much closer to houses,” says Istvánne Király, whose yard in Sajókápolna is 100-150 meters from the mining site.

Király has since mobilised her neighbours against the mine and has been representing the interests of local people in forums or in discussions with the local government.

Over time, the concerns of the locals proved warranted. The mine emitted dust and noise and



caused the lowering of groundwater levels and cracking of houses. Heavy lignite-loaded trucks are ruining local roads. Real estate prices are naturally decreasing. While the local mayor tried to reassure locals by claiming that the business tax from mining would help the community, locals are unconvinced.

“Actually, many people were appeased by the donated coal distributed by the municipality to the energy poor every year”, says Király. “However, the effects of the promised tax revenue are not visible and, to my knowledge, nobody from the village or its vicinity works in the mine. Everything is mechanized, operated by subcontractors. Most villagers are simply tired of fighting but I am not giving up.”

In 2016, the mining company even used explosives, but when locals warned that this was not legal, the company stopped.

Sajókápolna is also a typical example of how the mines in Borsod damage the environment. Borsod is full of natural treasures, such as forest habitats and lakes, some of them protected under the Natura2000 programme. The Békás lake, the last remaining natural lake in the area, is in the immediate vicinity of the Sajókápolna mine. Even the mining permit wrote that damage to the lake and protected areas was expected, but this

did not stop the mine plans from going ahead: environmental authorities have been weakened in Hungary in the last years. Alas, there remains hardly any water in the lake now.

What’s worse: there seems to be no end in sight for the destruction.

While originally the Sajókápolna mine was supposed to operate for a few years and then shut down, plans have now emerged of a second mine, Sajókápolna II, set to open not far from the existing pits.

Moreover, the lignite in Borsod pollutes twice: it first pollutes the villages and their surroundings when extracted, and then secondly, when lignite is burnt by locals in their boilers. According to WWF Hungary’s accredited measurements, the sulfur and arsenic content of the local lignite is high. Thus the flue gas and the residual ash from the household lignite combustion cause health problems and damage the environment. According to the Hungarian Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, one of the main causes of pollution in Hungary is households increasingly burning low quality wet wood, lignite and waste. On the valley of the Sajó river, in Borsod, air pollution often exceeds the recommended threshold.

Sajókápolna mine



Istvanne Kirali, who opposes the new mine in Sajókápolna

Timid efforts toward a just transition in Borsod

Even in this unfavourable environment, some people are trying to think in the direction of a just transition away from coal. Zsuzsanna F.Nagy is the leader of the Green Connection Association (GCA), dealing with environmental awareness raising across BAZ county.

“We try to act against plans which damage the environment and health and advocate for the interests of locals,” Nagy explains. “Local residents and local governments are asking us for help in a number of cases – since the Association can be a client in environmental and legal cases, and we often give ‘just’ advice.”

In Tereszténye, the affected municipality in the vicinity managed to stop the mine plans by declaring the area environmentally protected. In Sajókápolna, small achievements were made as a result of pressure by locals, such as changes in the location of the site and stopping detonations.

The Association is now intervening in another case, concerning the planned lignite mine at Múcsony meadows: here, mining activity could threaten the nearby BorsodChem tailings and heavy metal pools, leading potentially to the contamination of the huge drinking water base of the Sajó river, which supplies hundreds of thousands of inhabitants of the area. In addition, part of the future mining site is a protected wetland habitat.

Nagy also takes part in the program “Redevelopment of Borsod (just transition)” in order to promote the coal-free restructuring of the region.

“To achieve this, we raise public awareness on available local energy efficiency and renewable energy solutions, advise on energy poverty reduction and on non-polluting residential heating,” explains Nagy. “The production and marketing of low-quality coal and coal-based household heating should be phased out. These can be replaced by clean, cheap, efficient heating technologies if the support is there.”

GCA criticises the lack of consultation with environmental and health professionals when regional development plans are proposed. The climate strategy of the BAZ county has been completed, but for the time being it seems that it has not brought any positive environmental or social changes in the local communities.

GCA and partners are promoting the development of bottom-up regional and micro-regional restructuring plans and processes, with adequate local community and stakeholder involvement.

“I have seen good examples of these just transition plans and processes in the Czech Republic during my visit the Ustí region, which faces similar challenges to Borsod”, remembers Nagy.

GCA also draws the attention of Borsod decision-makers to the good practices of regions in neighbouring countries with similar just transition challenges. The aim is to induce regional dialogue about just transition.

If only decision-makers would listen and act progressively, just transition could gradually gain momentum in Borsod. |



Government programme gives hope to Czech mining regions

The Czech RE:START programme is a unique attempt by a government in central and eastern Europe to help coal regions develop in alternative ways.

Text and photographs: **Raul Cazan**

The town of Most in the north-west of the Czech Republic is a black spot in the country's contemporary history. Books exploring the ecological disaster in central and eastern Europe in communist times tend to illustrate what happened with images from Most. Old lead prints from the early 1970s show the beautiful narrow buildings of a coquette Mitteleuropa burg collapsing under assault from bulldozers. In front of them, a lignite pit was opening its wide black mouth – and it would go on to swallow the identity of this Bohemian settlement.

Many places in the Ústí nad Labem region (Ústecký kraj) shared the fate of Most: a partial or complete vanishing into the abyss, as they

were swallowed by the open-cast mines which fuelled the planned economy of communist Czechoslovakia.

Kamila Bláhová, the mayor of Litvinov, a small town in the vicinity of Most encircled by mines, says that this coal history ought to end "in our lifetime".

"I was born in Most in 1976, the worst time in our contemporary history from an environmental perspective," Bláhová says. "A lot of towns were disappearing from the map in those years, it was just horrible."

Her fellow citizen and contemporary, Gabriela Nekořová, remembers how during her childhood every child had to wear masks on their way to school because of the pollution. Today Nekořová is the vice-director of the central governmental programme RE:START, which focuses on the economic revival of Czech mining regions.

Gabriela Nekořová, vice-director of the governmental programme RE:START



Kamila Blahova, mayor of Litvinov

Nekolová remembers the shock in her community when the church was moved, one of the last buildings that remained standing. The rest of the old city is now rubble at the bottom of an artificial lake, as the old open mine was filled with water as part of a long process of revitalisation in the area.

Coal fuelled the economy and brought profits, Nekolová says, but “the Ústecký region paid heavily for national development.”

She thinks that the national government should be responsible for supporting the alternative development of mining regions, because the economy as a whole profited from the mines. The Ústecký region is now infamous for environmental damage, high unemployment and internal migration – the region has seen an exodus of people in the post-communist period.

RE:START mining regions

“It took twenty years to convince the government to do RE:START,” Nekolová says with a sigh.

RE:START is a national programme, launched by the Czech government in 2015, which aims to support the economic and social transformation of the country’s three mining regions (Ústecký, Karlovarský and Silesia). Under the framework

No trespassing! Litvinov

of this programme, the government assists local businesses, promotes innovation, research and development (R&D) and higher education, invests in housing and transport, the restoration and revitalisation of polluted sites, as well as spurring job creation.

RE:START is a programme which is unique in the central and eastern European region due to the fact that it is an initiative of the central government dedicated to the transformation of mining regions and has remained untouched despite



changes to the ruling party (originally it was an initiative of the Czech Social Democrats, launched in 2015).

“RE:START is a sign that the government is taking the shutdown of mines seriously,” says Bláhová, adding that it would have been better to have had the programme already in the early 1990s when the restructuring of the economy began. Currently, if mines close, the job losses entailed are far fewer than in the 1990s, because there are now a lot less people employed in the mining sector.

When RE:START was launched, Nekolová reminisces, those in charge quickly noted that their job was much more complex than they had initially thought: managing the phase-out of mining means dealing with the structural social problems which are characteristic of the region, and therefore involves sophisticated approaches to local development.

Before proposing measures, those in charge of RE:START gathered inputs from the relevant communities and experts. The budget of the programme is around EUR 2 billion, up to 2030. This is not only money coming from the state budget, but also funds channelled from other sources of financing (and, sometimes, this is new money that would not have come to the regions in the absence of RE:START): the EU Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, the European Investment Bank, the Europe Facility and the Cohesion Fund.

Public participation is key

“We need structural change,” says Bláhová, the mayor, pointing out that both new and sophisticated industries as well as old ones can be part of the new economic mix of Litvinov and the surrounding region.

“The chemical industry, a clean one, is what we should still hang on to,” says Bláhová. Litvinov is home to one of the Czech Republic’s main refineries.

Nonetheless, Bláhová would like to see tourism and services developing more – Litvinov lies in a mountainous region.

“We were always perceived as an unattractive region, but this is not true! We were always

attractive, we have beautiful mountains and pollution is a thing of the past,” Bláhová says. “We are enjoying the cleanest air in decades.”

She thinks RE:START can help to bring in subsidies for the restructuring of brownfields and their revitalisation and reuse.

A just transition for the Ústecký region would require the involvement of local communities, who could contribute to the vision of socio-economic development. So far, however, public participation in future planning has been relatively low.

People are quite active in commenting online and bringing their (virtual) contributions to RE:START, but there is still a need for deeper involvement and engagement.

“Only recently, we received over 200 suggestions on how things can improve with our local strategy in Most,” says Nekolová. “We are also trying to get non-governmental organisations and unions involved in committees that deal with the region’s transition.” There are around 500 active organisations all over the Ústecký region, according to the RE:START vice-director.

Irena Moudra Wunschova, senior activist with the Green Party in Usti



“Participation gives hope. I am not saying that people are happy, but definitely hopeful,” comments Nekolová.

As Mayor Bláhová views it, many communities in the Czech Republic are not used to public participation: the communist state imposed the development of the mines quite brutally and with utter contempt for the environment or any sort of democratic practice.

Irena Moudra Wunschova, a senior activist with the Green Party in Ústí, believes that more communication and involvement from civil society is needed. “There is simply no future for mines and we have to replace them.”

According to the Green Party activist, mines not only cause pollution and deep social problems but they also restrict participation. “These mining enterprises are all currently connected to issues of nepotism and political mafia,” she says.

Her son in law, Petr Globocnik, was recently elected as a local councilor in Litvinov from the coalition that includes the Greens.

“For me, RE:START is still a mystery because it just started,” Globocnik says. “Of course the program has not changed anything so far, but the expectations are high. So far it has sounded like propaganda, but we have been receiving more valuable information about it recently. The good thing is that it connects organisations from different areas in a network, and this can only help with closing the mines.”

“People are extremely frightened about losing their jobs, so the government has to get into the conversation and take care of these fears,” Bláhová says, adding that the development of the region starts from closure of the mines and that most people in the Ústecký region are in favour of this happening.

And, the mayor concludes, “There will be a coal shutdown all over Europe, this is clear. For Romania and Poland, the sooner they assess the issue and look for alternatives, the sooner they will overcome their social problems.”

Church in Most, old center of coal mining in Usti region





Everything will dry out when the mines come

In the Wielkopolska region in Poland, coal mining has dried up lands, hitting agriculture and tourism hard.

Text: **Jaś Kapela**

Photographs: **Jakub Szafrński**

Translation from Polish: **Michał Augustyn**

During our conversation with Piotr Krygier we laugh a lot, although the situation is serious. Retired after working for many years as a black coal miner in one of Silesia's mines, Mr. Krygier has returned to his hometown of Galczyce. His children suffered from poor health so the doctor ordered the family to move to a friendlier environment. The land of Wielkopolska (Greater Poland), with its many lakes, seemed like a good choice to recover as well as to engage in agriculture. Most people in the region depend on agriculture for their living, and many of them earn money from tourism. The most powerful business entity in the area, however, is the corporate group which owns mines and power plants, and provides about four per cent of the national electric energy supply. When we finally managed to find the small

farm in Galczyce, the host invited us home and offered coffee. We start talking about the problems related to open-pit mines, and there are so many of them that we hardly know where to start.

Mr. Krygier says that they moved to Galczyce in 1997, and his wife, Małgorzata Krygier, adds: "If we had known there was a mine here, we would not have come". His home is three hundred meters away, and his wife's hometown is Kryszkowice, a village in the same municipality. The Tomisławice open-pit mine is located five hundred meters from their farm, and from the yard they can see a gigantic heap of soil, which theoretically should have been remediated, but the owners of the corporate group Pątnów-Adamów-Konin Power Plants Complex (ZE PAK) apparently skimp on it. The group has not been able to profit from its operations for a long time, so it cuts costs where it can.

Piotr Krygier's farm.



Abandoned house in an area where a new pit is about to be developed.

The environmental permit enabling the formation of the pit in Tomistawice was issued in 2007, the concession was granted in 2008, and the overburden began to be removed on 10 April 2010, a memorable day. A friend called Mr. Krygier, who at that time was staying in a sanatorium, and told him that the miners were filling up fishponds with dirt. The farmers were trying to catch carp before they were buried alive. The mine had the right to do so because it owned the land, but this approach illustrates the attitude of the mine's managers to living and non-living creatures.

In order to mine coal, it is necessary to get rid of people and nature from the area where the mine is to be located. Houses, farm buildings, even churches or firehouses (often funded by locals) need to be destroyed. The mine has no mercy. It must devour everything. ZE PAK representatives supposedly claim that they buy land for three times the market value, but Mr. Krygier thinks this is rarely the case. Buying out begins with land where the soil is degraded. "The sixth soil valuation class, dry sand", as described by Mr. Krygier, and there they pay more. Then the rumors spread about how generous the mine is. "And once they nest in a given area, all they say is 'get lost!'", the former miner says. The value of the surrounding

land drops and in the end people prefer to sell it as soon as possible, while it still has any value.

Mr. Krygier warned the villagers of the threats posed by open-pit mining. According to company figures, the Tomistawice mine pumps out 60 million cubic meters of water a year, but the former miner suspects that it may be much more. Tomistawice is a small operation too, the size of a large gravel pit. Mr. Krygier says that when his neighbor was drilling a deep well eight years ago, water was found at a depth of five meters, and now it is thirty-nine metres deep. This means that the level of groundwater has fallen by thirty-four meters, just one and a half kilometers from the pit.

A disaster for agriculture

According to Mr. Krygier, the mining sink-hole for a pit of this size can reach ten kilometers for surface water, and several dozen metres for deep water. While some technologies can stop the loss of water, these are still costly and so would eat into profits. It is cheaper to transfer the costs to the community. According to estimates, the value of coal extracted from ever expanding open-pit

mining operations is already significantly lower than environmental and agricultural activity losses.

"The loss of revenue from agriculture and the agricultural processing industry resulting from the planned area of the excavation and the area covered by the mining sink-hole of the Ościstowo open-pit mine will amount to approximately 100 million zloty (23 million EUR) annually. These losses will be borne by the local economy for about 50 years (about 20 years during the open-pit operation time and about 30 years of restoration of the underground aquifer), which amounts to 5 billion zloty (1 billion EUR) – as much as the projected income of the PAK KWB Konin from coal mined in Ościstów", according to a paper from Dr. Benedykt Pepliński.

There are also environmental losses. For example, "open-pit mining in the Noteć river drainage basin has caused disturbance of water flows in the river. We want to counteract this situation", said Dr. Jan Szyszko when he was still the Polish Minister of Environment. Szyszko announced that the cost of a rescue project for Noteć (which had dried up on a stretch of 40 kilometers) would amount to 130 million zloty (30 million EUR).

However, the biggest losses are borne by local farmers. Mr. Krygier believes that the mine should

offer them compensation annually. Instead, the mine claims that it does not drain the area, and it is not the mine that should be blamed for farmers' losses, only drought and global warming in general. At the same time, the mining company has willingly signed settlements with farmers which state that for fifteen years, farmers will not make any claims against the company (regarding a loss of water, crop losses and the like). As part of such settlements, farmers are paid several thousand zloty (less than 1000 EUR). For four years, Krygier fought a legal battle with the mine, finally proving in court that the mine is responsible for the drainage of the land.

Mr. Krygier had been irrigating his crops with water from two ponds on his lot. He was unlucky, because apparently, he says, the mine hit a water vein that passed through his plot. A year after mining operations started, the ponds began to dry out. After two years, in 2012, the water disappeared within two weeks, 'as if you pulled a drain stopper in a bathtub,' he says. All that remains now from the old ponds is a basin overgrown with bushes. Małgorzata Krygier adds that the mine claimed it was because of a drought, but the

An excavator used to remove the overburden at the lignite mine.



neighbors' ponds have not dried out. "Is it just a drought? This is laughable", she says. Along with the Krygiers' ponds, the well has also dried out, and the trees and crops have started to wither. Without irrigation it is virtually impossible to sell vegetables, because people expect high quality products.

Mr. Krygier had to give up farming, like most of his neighbors whose ponds and wells finally dried out. Mr. Krygier filled in his well, lamenting that within his lifetime, it will no longer provide water. I ask if it is possible to calculate how big his losses are. It turns out that for the purpose of the trial, Mr. Krygier has hired an expert who estimated his losses at more than forty thousand zloty annually (10 000 EUR). However, the judge rejected these estimates and hired another expert who found that the losses were half of that.

Finding an expert was not easy. When he asked agricultural experts from the area if they would estimate his losses for the purpose of the lawsuit against the mine, everyone was reluctant. For that reason Mr. Krygier had to hire a specialist from a town near Włocławek, 50 kilometres away. "It seems that in this region the courts and the

mine formed a coterie", he says. "That's why if the government was really willing to do something about the courts, it should have done something long ago."

The coal company is king

The story of the local residents' legal battle – which, after eleven years, finally ended with a supreme administrative court verdict upholding an earlier ruling that the environmental permit allowing the construction of the Tomistawice open-pit mine was issued in violation of the law – is outrageous. During all those years that the justice system needed to recognise the fact that the environmental permit was issued without proper examination of the impact of the mine on the environment, including habitats and areas covered by the Natura 2000 programme, all community members already experienced the negative impacts of the mine on their lives and the environment.

It is understandable that many people are frustrated and support the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) in an attempt to demolish the Polish judiciary. It is easy to believe that the courts are more concerned with maintaining good relations with the mine than the law.



[[[caption missing here]]]

Nevertheless, its rulings have been favorable to the farmers, and the case will most likely end with the mine being shut down as soon as the environmental permit is canceled. This may be too little, too late, as farmers will not be able to work the land for decades to come, and ZE PAK continues to avoid paying any compensation. "The energy-coal lobby is a clique," says Mr. Krygier. "This is why they want to keep things as they are".

I argue that the new government does little to modernise the Polish energy system, and that it actually plans to develop new open-pit mines. In the Konin region, for instance, the Ościstowo open-pit mine is planned, though its fate is uncertain. In the middle of the planned pit area, archaeologists have discovered a complex of two ancient cemeteries, including the burial mounds of Lusatian culture and Neolithic chamberless tombs. The cemetery was built five and a half thousand years ago, which means that it is older than the Egyptian pyramids, and this year it was included in the register of cultural heritage. The archaeologists' discovery seems so valuable that even a powerful energy lobby is helpless. However, it is paradoxical that the existence of these Neolithic tombs, and not the well being of the present environment or the Polish people, is able to stop the mining industry from expanding.

I ask how many local residents had to give up farming. Mr. Krygier's estimates all of those who do not have deep water wells. He himself wanted to buy another one, but then he also would have had to invest in agricultural machinery and other equipment. He didn't have enough money to build

a deep well, which would have cost at least seventy thousand zloty (16 000 EUR).

"For me, a former coal miner, this mine should not be called a mine, only an open-pit peat mine, because it is not coal, it is peat", says Mr. Krygier. He adds, "Even before the excavation started I said, 'You'll see what will happen with the water and the tree. Everything will dry out'. But hardly anyone believed me. As the mining started and the water in the ponds began to disappear, they said, 'I think Piotrek was right'. But it wasn't until the trees began to wither that the farmers really understood their situation, 'Damn, Piotrek sure was right. Fuck them, they should close the mine and go to hell.'"

Why didn't the farmers oppose the mine when it was still possible? Mr. Krygier does not have an answer to this. He himself has traveled the world and still receives a relatively high miner's pension, so he is willing to continue the battle against the mines. He drives around the region and tells people what they will face if they allow for the expansion of the mine.

Yet the reactions are similar everywhere. No wonder the mines still prevail. Although many scientists, including Michał Wilczyński, Poland's former Chief National Geologist, agree that lignite mining has no future, there are still companies trying to profit from it. Mr. Krygier explains that it probably made sense right after the second world war, when the country needed energy quickly, as lignite mining is relatively easy. Today this is no longer justified, since new technologies are available. "There is water, there is sun, there is wind. You can get much more energy from solar panels and wind, and the soil remains soil. It doesn't require pumping out millions of liters of water that later goes into the sea as waste", he adds.

Resistance growing

After our conversation, we seek out the dried ponds and trees. The air is so dry that it makes my throat sore. We've been awake since six in the morning, and I feel drowsy from the heat but I cannot stop myself from listening to the tragic stories: the harvest of maize that withers before the eyes of farmers; harassment by the police;

Dried trees in Wierzbiniek.





Dried up lake in Wielkopolska

the inaction of the head of the municipality who sold out the people to the mine; and about scams related to buying out farms.

Locals I spoke to say mine representatives visit farmers to buy their land for forty thousand zloty (10 000 EUR), and a year or two later they sell it to the mine for three hundred thousand zloty (70 000 EUR). It is hard for me to believe because it sounds like a mafia movie script. On the other hand, if any of the employees know about the planned pits, he or she may want to use this information to earn money, so it cannot be ruled out that this is what is happening. There is also a story about a neighbor, the farmer Jan Kwiatkowski, who evicted in an abusive way (it has been recorded on a video locals show me).

When I later meet Mr. Kwiatkowski, I learn that the eviction was, according to locals, carried out in violation of the law. He tells me that in order to fight legal battles with the mine, he had to learn how to use a computer, and he had to educate himself in law. The latter was necessary because he had already worked with seven lawyers since he started his fight with the mine, some of whom later

started working for the mine. Mr. Kwiatkowski's brother could not bear the tension of fighting the local coal lobby and suffered a heart attack. However, Jan does not give up. I've admired his steadfastness since I saw a bailiff throw him off his farm. Given that the house was pulled down before his eyes, and his property was loaded on trucks by miners, it is hard not to consider this as a spectacle staged to discourage others from resisting.

Yet the resistance is visibly growing. Ultimately, we all pay for climate change and environmental destruction, and only a small clique profits from it. Mr. Solorz-Żak bought his majority stake in ZE PAK for 67.3 million zloty (15.5 million EUR). From the beginning, the privatisation raised many doubts. The scrap value of the mine's equipment alone was reportedly much higher. Today, Mr. Solorz-Żak wants to sell the power plants because the EU's carbon dioxide emissions allowances are being terminated. The question of who will buy the plants and whether or not the Polish taxpayers will again have to pay for the elites' unwavering faith in the future of extracting black gold remains open. **I**



Mayor Vasil Vasev, of Golemo Selo and Malo Selo, on a hill overlooking the Bobov Dol Electrical Power Plant.

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