

We have saved Poland

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Poland used to be one of Europe's most heavily polluted countries. As much as 30% of its population lived in ecologically threatened areas, where pollution norms were exceeded many times over. 20% of the population lived in areas affected by acid smog in the winter.

As Professor Maciej Nowicki, Poland's Minister of the Environment, takes a look back, he says with satisfaction that over the past 20 years Poland has managed to cope with the basic threats. But now that the local problems have been dealt with, it is not easy to get ecological issues across – he observes in these exclusive remarks for Polish Market.

Twenty year ago Poland joined the family of democratic, independent states. It fills us with joy that our generation has been able to live through this major change, which once seemed quite impossible to achieve. In 1999 Poland joined NATO. In 2004 it became a member state of the European Union, the world's biggest economy. Poland is now part of this huge organism.

But you could easily ask in what way environment protection has benefited from it. Polish people vividly remember what life under communism was like. After all, Poland used to be one of Europe's most heavily polluted countries, next to the USSR and East Germany. 30% of Poland's population lived in ecologically threatened regions, where pollution norms were frequently exceeded. 20% of Poles lived in areas which experienced acid smog in the winter. Before 1989 Polish power plants did not have a single desulphuring installation. Denitration was just a pipe dream.

Waters were badly polluted. A third of the effluent flowing into rivers and lakes was left untreated. Another third was merely subjected to mechanical treatment. As a result, as much as two thirds of waters ended up in rivers and the Baltic Sea in an untreated state.

There were many other examples of how bad things were. According to estimates by Polish economists made in the 1980s, 5-10% of the country's GDP was wasted due to pollution. Just a fraction of the state budget, which centrally financed all installations at the time, a mere 0.2-0.5% of GDP was earmarked for environment

protection. The destruction of the environment was a steady process. Things could not be more different now. In terms of environment protection Poland is now worlds apart from those dismal years. Significantly, the issue is no longer in the limelight of public debate. At the turn of the 1980s, environment protection was one of the hottest topics of conversation. Now it attracts little attention. Little is said about how much progress has been made.

The fact remains that environment protection is one of the areas that have benefited the most as a result of change that has occurred in Poland in the past 20 years. Now is a very good time to take stock of what has been achieved. To successfully protect the environment you need three things: a good law, monitoring of its observance and, last but not least, money.

When it comes to the law on environment protection, its foundations were laid already in the early 1990s. The legislation was later fine-tuned, with much of the effort focusing on the EU pre-accession period. Work is now nearing completion on this legislative effort as part of which the vast EU environment protection heritage needed to be transposed to Polish law.

Environmental protection inspection is another key point. This form of inspection was introduced at the very outset of the Polish transformation. It seems it was designed correctly right from the start. It was envisaged as being immune to pressure from local interest groups. Another important institution: the General Directorate for Environment Protection was established last year. Its aim is to speed up procedures concerning environmental impact assessments and the Natura 2000 programme. That is another of the tools used by the Ministry of the Environment to streamline procedures and improve quality.

As far as funding is concerned, it has been available since May 1989 when the law was adopted on the National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management. The mechanism was later developed when province-level funds were set up. The national and province-level funds have provided the financing for environment protection which stimulated investment projects that Poland so badly needed.

All the three features have been present in Poland from the very beginning of the transformation process. They have been gradually modified and improved ever since.

Right now the main challenge for Poland is to modernise its energy system. In the past 10-15 there has been virtually no investment in new power generating capacity, because the main drift of investment has been toward installations protecting the environment. Harmful emissions have been reduced, but no new power stations were built. Poland is thus facing a tough period in power generation in the coming years. It must focus on renewable energy sources, clean

coal technologies and energy saving. All this should allow Poland to further reduce power industry emissions in line with EU standards and directives that provide for a 50% decrease compared to present levels. If Poland does make an effort comparable to what has been done in the past two decades of transformation, I can rest assured that the environment will be cared for and that Poland will continue to meet its international obligations.

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