

# Urban social movements in a small town: The case of 'Aktywne Giżycko'

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Wojciech Bedynski<sup>1</sup> , Justyna Godz<sup>2</sup>  & Wojciech Łukowski<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University of Warsaw, Center of Migration Research, Pasteura 7, 02-093 Warszawa, Poland. ORCID: [0000-0002-4752-5117](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4752-5117), Email: [w.bedynski@uw.edu.pl](mailto:w.bedynski@uw.edu.pl)

<sup>2</sup> University of Warsaw, Center of Migration Research, Pasteura 7, 02-093 Warszawa, Poland. ORCID: [0000-0002-2630-1413](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2630-1413) Email: [godz.justyna@gmail.com](mailto:godz.justyna@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> University of Warsaw, Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, Department of Political Sociology and Political Marketing, Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 02-927 Warszawa, Poland. ORCID: [0000-0002-4870-3333](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4870-3333), Email: [w.lukowski@uw.edu.pl](mailto:w.lukowski@uw.edu.pl)

**ABSTRACT:** Studies about Poland's urban social movements concentrate on major cities like Warsaw or other significant financial and educational centres. Out of 40 member organisations of the Congress of Urban Movements (as of July 31 2018)<sup>1</sup>, only 2 come from a town of the population under 50 thousand<sup>2</sup>. Small provincial towns experiencing depopulation caused by substantial emigration to metropolises have another notion of their “right to the city” feelings. This article examines Aktywne Giżycko (Active Giżycko) case, an association from a 30 thousand Masurian town. It aims to answer why this “right to the city” organisation emerged in a small town, while in Poland, it is still mainly the domain of big agglomerations. The investigation was based on 3-year long research comprising biographical interviews, participating observations, archive studies and local press surveys.

**KEYWORDS:** right to the city, urban social movements, local politics, depopulation, social networks, generation

## INTRODUCTION

Urban social movements in Poland form a relatively new phenomenon. They are products of both the Polish society's transformation after the collapse of the communist regime and social communication changes – with the Internet being in everyday use among young generations. Paweł Kubicki, in his analysis of the Polish urban social movements (2019: 11) states, that the first impulse for their creation was given by the accession of Poland to the European Union in 2004. An increased amount of

<sup>1</sup> <https://kongresruchowmiejskich.pl/o-nas/czlonkowie-krm/>

<sup>2</sup> We are not counting here Sopot, which is part of Tricity and Łomianki, which is part of Warsaw's agglomeration. In 2019 the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress was organised in Ostróda and Ława to underline the importance and yet underrepresentation of small towns.

capital driven from the EU funds brought an uncontrolled and chaotic construction boom in the cities. Archaic or non-existent urban planning did not prevail wild development, which in turn did not meet social resistance because civil structures were still not prepared. This chaos (Kusiak 2017) and lack of control from the city authorities encouraged activists to react. While first formal or informal movements begun shortly after 2004, the 1<sup>st</sup> Congress of Urban Movements in Poznań was called not sooner than in 2011<sup>5</sup>.

Kubicki's respondents from the Polish Congress of Urban Movements (Kubicki 2019:12) admit that almost all organisations gathered there to represent the young middle class's academic world from big cities. Therefore, why did such a movement develop in a not even 30-thousand Masurian town and relatively early, before many similar organisations in much bigger centres? We argue that the answer could lay in the touristic character of the place. It might not even be a direct result of globalisation that penetrates it faster than many other, less favourably situated provincial towns. However, because of its touristic character, Giżycko has experienced a similar chaos as the one which affected Poland's big cities.

### SMALL TOWN FACING GLOBALISATION

The difference between the big city and the small town is well illustrated by Saskia Sassen's global city concept (1991). According to Sassen, cities became centres of intermediation in finance, law, information, and production in the digitised and globalised operational space. Intermediation processes link local and regional models with global patterns and therefore multiply given solutions in many new places using local skilled workforce and resources. This can only be done in major cities as it requires highly specialised networking that engages a variety of different specialists, absent in smaller urban centres. In contrast, small towns are often associated with society's traditional model, they are considered fusty, and their access to globalisation seems to be limited.

Globalisation also means changes in ownership. Big cities become international and global in their property structure, as corporations buy land or buildings to make offices or simply to invest (Pobłocki 2014:159). Local authorities sell the properties to gain additional resources and patch the budget hole. These concerns metropolises like London, where the Qatari investors have already more land in their hands than the queen of England, but also small places like Giżycko, where the town authorities sell real estates for new hotels, supermarkets and shopping malls. There are many flats and lots that are empty in both cases – people buy properties for investment with no intention to live therein. This concerns tourist places, where their location, environmental advantages, or fashion favour purchasing real estates by upper-middle-class people from big agglomerations. Apartment buildings owned by seasonal residents standing in central places of the towns partly exclude permanent inhabitants from the townscape. This competition over the space is won by representatives of the so-called “metropolitan class” (Główczyński 2017:69), with high financial and cultural capital.

<sup>5</sup> <https://kongresruchowmiejskich.pl/o-nas/i-kongres-ruchow-miejskich/>.

Their radically different needs change the area's economic and social character – for example, formerly loud trading districts could become quiet resting places with only several cafes or services.

Focusing on large, global cities, Sassen does not notice that their development is related to other sites' condition, not necessarily only small ones. The “winner-takes-all” logic works here. In the landscape of late modernity cities, relatively few of them enjoy high recognition and recognised attractiveness. Many other sites - not only cities but also other settlements or entire regions - lose their importance. Their inhabitants, especially those who perceive their lives in terms of social advancement, are forced to emigrate. This triggers a kind of degradation spiral.

However, it is also pointed out that the “winner-takes-all” logic can be at least relativised by the “long tail” logic (Anderson 2006). A small town can “defend itself” against the mass market, advertising itself as a “niche product” – one that is unique, peculiar, unrepeatable. However, even this method of resistance can also be dangerous. In this context, Venice's example is often given, which has become a victim of its attractiveness. Gentrification processes (Lees et al. 2010) that took place caused a drastic decrease in the number of inhabitants, making the city, due to crowds of tourists and high prices, very unfriendly for permanent residents. Similar processes can be observed in Giżycko, although on an incomparably smaller scale. However still, many inhabitants, social environments and town authorities on many occasions emphasise the uniqueness of the town, its still insufficiently exploited touristic potential and the unique qualities that favour living in it. Aktywne Giżycko association, which is primarily the voice of the generation born after 1989/1990, is part of this approach.

In fact, struggle against selling or changing the social context of particular places in the cityscape was the cause for many of the Polish urban social movements<sup>4</sup>. Particular groups wanted to mark their presence and take part in these negotiations over the urban landscape. Urban social movements aimed to include public debate in making decisions on the use of city space. It was valid for Warsaw but also relevant for small towns like Giżycko.<sup>5</sup>

Post-socialist towns and cities only started to experience these global processes

<sup>4</sup> In Warsaw Miasto Jest Nasze (The City is Our) association begun in 2013 with the protests against the idea to destroy wooden houses in Jazdów (settlement of about 30 buildings in the centre of Poland's capital constructed just after the war as a contribution of the Finnish government which collaborated with Hitler against the USSR) and transmission of this area to developers. As is written in the association's website, “from the beginning of our activity, we have stigmatised the arrogant and badly done management of Warsaw, such as: conducting chaotic spatial policy, amazing passivity towards the reprivatisation of public buildings, educational establishments and parks...” (<https://miastojestnasze.org/mjn/historia/>). The association was, however, registered in 2015, so two years later than Aktywne Giżycko.

<sup>5</sup> The town experienced at least three major public debates in just first half of 2019 that concerned planned changes in the townscape: the defense of the Town Forest, which the Regional Directorate of State Forests wanted to cut down; the debate on the new massive apartment hotel to be constructed in the very centre of the town; the sale of the former “Fala” cinema and widespread fear, that the lot could be used to set up a yet another shopping mall. Aktywne Giżycko was active only in the last of the mentioned cases. The silence on the other two issues brought critique of the organisation by its opponents.

after the transformation. A centralised and planned economy in the socialist times did not need so much intermediation; the ownership was not quite the subject of negotiations. This is why we have observed the emergence of the “right to the city” movements in Central and Eastern Europe only from around a decade (Pluciński 2018). Economic and political transformation merged with new modes of self-organisation: the common use of the Internet and social media. These tools were of great importance in making the first Polish “right to the city” movements, not only as a social communication method but also as a weapon against the city or town council or mayor. Young people primarily created the message to other young people, for whom the Internet was the first choice in access to information.

Many want to be included in this global network of specialised intermediates. This is the fastest, easiest and very often only way to achieve financial success and get a satisfactory job. This is also a natural consequence of education – which starts in the small town but later has to be continued in a big academic centre. What seems to be of great importance in that new role of global cities is migration. Entering this specialised network is possible only by moving into big agglomerations as it is there where people get proper specialised education, acquire contacts and get concrete work possibilities.

Apart from this pulling factor, there is also at least one major pushing factor: the loss of habitat for the people of the provinces. Polish rapid transformation combined with universal globalisation processes erased much of the local labour market, industry and agriculture, leaving the young people no choice but to emigrate. They went to the big cities, and very often abroad, especially after 2004. The massive loss of habitat that Saskia Sassen (2016) described mainly in the economy and Earth sciences can also have a cultural dimension. It is not limited to dried lands and the transformation of cultivated fields into big plantations with a foreign workforce<sup>6</sup>, but also concerns a change in aspirations, life strategies, social networks expanding outside the town area etc. This loss of habitat notably changed the local middle class.<sup>7</sup> While parents are already settled and have stable and respectful social positions, their children became highly mobile. In their mass they flew outside the provincial towns seeking education, work and more globalised life.

The globalisation of the big cities also brought the question of identity, which is very strongly underlined by the “right to the city” movements. Although they are primarily left-wing organisations (Kubicki 2019: 13) and do not emphasize the national culture in the first place, they care about the specific character of particular places, districts, streets and parks. Their efforts are aimed to save those fragments of a cityscape with their unique character and fight for them against globalisation and unification, for example, the construction of yet another shopping mall. Their care for saving local identities and landscapes derives from the fact that global capital and immigrant workforce<sup>8</sup> create global cultural unity of the global city. As Saskia Sassen

<sup>6</sup> These phenomena are called by Sassen “dead land” or “dead water” (2016: 205).

<sup>7</sup> Out of 31 active members of the Giżycko’s Rotary Club, only a few have children that live in Mazury. Most of the younger generation emigrated and lived a global life, very often abroad.

<sup>8</sup> In the Polish case, mostly intra-state migrations or workers from Ukraine.

wrote, “de-nationalising” of urban space and the formation of new claims by transnational actors raise the question: Whose city is it? (Sassen 2005: 39) Standardisation of architecture, the same logos visible in the streets, and similar solutions in urban transportation make an impression that cities or districts lose their unique character, including national.

In the big cities, protest against these global processes comes from the well-educated leftish youth, who heard about how important identity is at cultural anthropology lectures at universities. The middle class is the main actor of the modern “right to the city” movements – “this change in resource mobilisation can be seen clearly in the case of transformations of contemporary urban social movements, which traditionally had a rather left-wing character and emerged out of a sense of social injustice. Currently, they are starting to take on a different character, emphasise above all cultural issues, and the urban middle class becomes their main actor” (Kubicki 2017:176). In small provincial towns, the case is very much different. The protest is not about the high amount of global culture, but about the lack of it. While big-city activists advise to slow down, concentrate on small things, sacrifice some of the development and wealth in hope for a more balanced, well-settled life, small-town activists seem to be trying to move their town, activate it, open to global culture and make their habitat similar to that of metropolises. They are trying to show that in the small town the same is possible: cultural life, parties, sport, getting a well-paid job.

In this context, the appearance of Aktywne Giżycko, as a fully-developed urban social movement becomes an unusual phenomenon. In many aspects, the organisation is similar to the majority of urban social movements (the age of its founders, the importance of the Internet and social media, critique of local authorities, methods of action) and meanwhile, in many other it is different (contrary to the vast majority, it has a clear right wing shape politically). Its leader, Piotr Andruszkiewicz, said that it was not only one of the very first movements of this kind in Poland<sup>9</sup>, but also according to his knowledge, inspired many similar groups of young people in smaller towns.

### **MOBILITY OF PEOPLE, MOBILITY OF THE TOWN**

Project “Territorial and social mobility in the biographical and generational experience of the inhabitants of a small town - analysis on the example of Giżycko” (2017-2020), realised with support from Polish National Science Centre, was an anthropological examination of 4 generations of town’s high school alumni. The total amount of over 80 interviews with people who finished schools in the 76-77’, 86-87’, 96-97’ and 2006-7’ plus some more talks with “specialists” (such as teachers, town councillors, the mayor, local elite, businessmen etc.) together with participant observation for 3 years and analysis of written sources helped us to understand the logics standing behind town’s social landscape.

Observations that we managed to take as a team led us to conclude that mobility is essential for a small provincial town that faces the globalising reality. It is the mobility

<sup>9</sup> Registered as an NGO in 2013, the association from Giżycko anticipated major Polish urban movements, such as Miasto Jest Nasze, which begun in 2015.

of people, capital, information and goods, and the mobility of the town itself in both physical and sociological dimensions. Migration, being an obvious necessity in a place with no higher educational institutions, marks an experience of the whole generation.<sup>10</sup> - often whole classes leave the town just after their A-level departing to closest academic centres (Olsztyn, Białystok), big metropolises or abroad:

I count people who stayed in Giżycko. Moreover, just like the class had twenty-five people, and now maybe four people live here. I think so; this is my state of knowledge. Very little. And within these four, I am counting myself, who came back to Giżycko only recently. [Male, 42 y. o.]

As a result of this outflow, a long-term observer could point, that during spring, autumn and winter months, the town is, to a certain degree lacking people in their 20-ies. They appear for the season and on occasions like Christmas when they travel back to their families. Only then they can be encountered in cafes and the streets. Often these meetings are significant to them, as they gather in packs of old school friends. Nevertheless, when Christmas or holidays end, they go back to Warsaw, Gdańsk or abroad and Giżycko again seems less vivid.

Aktywne Giżycko is one of the apparent signs and products of at least one of the generations that have been points of interest during the research. The association challenges the situation described above, trying to convince that it is possible to live an active, young life even in Giżycko and that it does not necessarily mean being a tourist in one's town. Activation of the younger generation, the introduction of new information technologies to the public discourse, activity through happenings, an invention of many new circular events from sport to disco parties, involvement in the most controversial public debates, finally entering the world of local politics – all that proves that Aktywne Giżycko is a phenomenon well worth a description similar to “right to the city” movements from bigger centres. The organisation tries to show that inhabitants of a small town want to have the right to it.

The right to the city, in this case, is formulated primarily as a postulate of the generation whose whole life has already taken place in free Poland and who experiences a frustration of having life chances blocked – especially for those young people who, for various reasons, decided to stay in their hometown or, in the event of migration, maintain close ties with it. They do not consider migration to be a satisfactory solution because they still find Giżycko an attractive place to live. A significant obstacle to them is the passivity of the inhabitants they had observed and that of the local political elite. Hence the name Aktywne Giżycko because they wanted to sow ferment to activate the town.

This generational character of the movement can be contrasted with the relevant organisation set up by the previous generation – Wspólnota Mazurska (Masurian

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, there has always been an outflow of inhabitants from the provinces, but never before it has reached such numbers to become an experience shared by the whole generation. During the communist era, different were also reasons to migrate – the interviews show that in the first place, people mentioned accommodation (it was hard to get their own flat). In contrast, nowadays young people move seeking education and a better job.

Community), which was registered in 1991, just after the great geopolitical change in Poland. It seems not a coincidence that the new generation did not just join their older fellow citizens but decided to create a new NGO. The two groups are very different in their areas of interest and methods of action. Wspólnota Mazurska is oriented towards the past, tries to understand and promote the region's identity, correct the glitches of the communist propaganda and is focused on locality. Aktywne Giżycko, in contrast, is concentrated on today and tomorrow, does not put too much attention to the past nor to identity issues, puts Giżycko in the middle of a broader global structure, seeing not only regional ties, but finds inspirations worldwide. Even the means of social communication remain very different in the case of both associations. While Wspólnota Mazurska uses longer forms – like books, live debates with the presence of experts or open discussions<sup>11</sup>, Aktywne Giżycko focuses on short forms – happenings, internet TV, Facebook, sports competitions. Even the political positioning of their members goes along with the main division on the Polish political scene. There will be more place to compare the two organisation later in the article.

### GIŻYCKO AS A TOURISTIC TOWN

Giżycko might be kind of a unique small town in Poland, as it is a touristic town. This means more connection with the outer world than average. Assuming that globalisation means the process of a more rapid flow of patterns, capital, technologies and ideas (Łukowski & Koryś 2018:128), then Giżycko receives a higher dose of it than many other places of similar size.

In the list of 856 Polish towns with a population of less than 50.000<sup>12</sup>, Giżycko belongs to very few widely recognised as the country's water sports and sailing capital<sup>13</sup>. The number of tourists coming to the town every year by far exceeds the number of inhabitants.<sup>14</sup> The inflow of tourists exposes the place to globalisation much more than most other provincial settlements. Inhabitants experience multiculturalism similar to that in metropolises and significant financial capital well visible in yachts, cars, and infrastructure *in situ*: hotels, marinas, restaurants. They receive guests from the Polish cultural and political elite: actors, singers, politicians, who not only are coming to spend their holidays on Masurian lakes but sometimes buy holiday homes in the area or keep their yachts in the marinas<sup>15</sup>. Among people coming to Giżycko there are

<sup>11</sup> From May 1992 to its destruction fire in 2011, Wspólnota Mazurska ran a place in Giżycko called “Jazz Club Galeria”, where many concerts, exhibitions, debates, author's meetings took place.

<sup>12</sup> Data by the Polish Central Statistical Office (<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/ludnosc/powierzchnia-i-ludnosc-w-przekroju-terytorialnym-w-2019-roku,7,16.html>).

<sup>13</sup> Which is an official trading mark of the town: “Giżycko – żeglarska stolica Polski” (*Giżycko – sailing capital of Poland*).

<sup>14</sup> According to the Giżycko Development Strategy for 2015-2025 (p. 64), the town is visited by approximately 50,000 tourists every year ([http://mojegizycko.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Strategia-Rozwoju-Gi%C5%BCycka-na-lata-2015-2025\\_06.04.2016.pdf](http://mojegizycko.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Strategia-Rozwoju-Gi%C5%BCycka-na-lata-2015-2025_06.04.2016.pdf)).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Lewandowski, international soccer star and the richest Polish sportsman, is one of the investors to build a new restaurant on water – “Wodny Świat”. To many, this project is highly controversial as it changes the shapes of the lake board.

foreigners, some of them of distant cultural backgrounds or different races. This again is hard to imagine in a visible scale in many other places.

The touristic season is not long in Masuria; it mainly concerns the summer - also very short and not predictable at the Polish "cold pole". According to data from the Tourism Promotion and Information Center in Giżycko, the number of registered tourists in July and August is over 7,000 people per month, while in the winter period it does not exceed 500 people per month<sup>16</sup>.

The season changes the image of the town completely. From a sleepy, empty "ghost town" that Giżycko appears to be in the winter months, it transforms into a noisy and sometimes even jammed (on land and water) resort. This can be seen especially on the shores of Lake Niegocin, wherein the season many shops, stalls, or small catering facilities grow, restaurants open, and the town beach operates. Tourism also determines the rhythm of the town's cultural life - most of the events are squeezed from May 1 (Grand Opening of the Season) to the end of September, culminating in Mazury Air Show the first weekend of August.

Tourism brings some benefits to the permanent inhabitants but also means many challenges. Only a tiny part of the population lives on tourists or have companies that operate on the touristic market. To most, this is just a seasonal possibility to earn some extra money. Priority given to tourism by local authorities visible in new investments and special care towards chosen representative areas of the town cause social resistance as many permanent inhabitants have a feeling that they are less important than wealthy tourists who come only for a couple of days and then go back to their big cities or abroad. This impression of dealing with double standards was one of the crucial elements in the creation of Aktywne Giżycko as a social movement and has been repeatedly stated by its leader:

The current local authorities have been repeating all the time that tourists should live better in Giżycko. Furthermore, such an example: when I walked around the housing estate on Moniuszki Street, the residents complained that there was no proper road there. That it is full of dirt, full of last year's leaves. To make the contrast, the area around the drawbridge is cleaned daily. This again shows that a tourist, a person who comes to Giżycko for two days only, maybe a little longer, will have a clean town to look well in the selfie photo. But literally 200 meters away, permanent residents do not deserve the same, according to the authorities. We want to reverse this thinking pattern. We want to reverse the slogan that has been promoted over the last ten years - Course for Giżycko<sup>17</sup> - addressed to tourists that they choose Giżycko, have a good time here and leave smiling and happy. And all the investments of recent years have been oriented towards tourists. We want to show that the inhabitants are more important.

[Piotr Andruszkiewicz, as a candidate for mayor, a quotation from the conven-

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<sup>16</sup> Data by the Center of Promotion and Tourist Information in Giżycko (<http://www.gizycko.turystyka.pl/pl/index.php?Menu=54&Next=57>).

<sup>17</sup> „Kurs na Giżycko” - Giżycko, as Poland's leading sailing destination.



tion on October 2, 2018]

This feeling of being less important than tourists is reinforced by the character of the rhythm of cultural life in Giżycko, which is also highly subject to the touristic season:

But here, there is a lack of some continuity [...] that there would be something year-round, that something would happen out of season. [male, 42 y. o.]

On the other hand, permanent inhabitants have an impression that the high-season town is something artificial, and to experience a normal situation one should travel outside the summer months when the landscape is quiet, nostalgic, romantic:

If you want to see the real Masuria, come in September or October. [male, 56 y.o.]

The area's touristic character makes life in Giżycko divided to at least two visible seasons: two summer months plus several weekends in spring and early autumn inject an additional portion of dopamine, while a long out-of-season period is characterised by stagnation, emptiness and – to many – boredom. These feelings were particularly a burden to young people who had to wait until another summer to live a more active life. According to Piotr Andruszkiewicz, this was the reason to change the name “Młodzi dla Miasta” (*Youth for Giżycko* - that was the initial name of the organisation, before registration in 2013) to “Aktywne Giżycko”.

### MIGRATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

This uniqueness of Giżycko, coming from its favourable position as the main town of the Great Masurian Lakes, positively correlates with the local middle class's status. Its representatives, having houses often outside the city or near lakes, having their yachts and motorboats, can enjoy the region's natural values in the same way as newcomers from the “big world” and tourists. The awareness of “being from here” can contribute to the feeling of having unique symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984): “we are from here, where others must come from a distance.” Besides, it is strengthened by the fact that middle-class children who emigrated to large cities in Poland and abroad usually achieved success, which not differs from successes of their colleagues from metropolises. However, this success would not have been possible without the unidirectional spatial mobility in search for education and better employment opportunities.

The symbolic status of this generation of young middle-class people coming from Giżycko can be strengthened by the awareness of having a prosperous home and satisfied parents in a beautiful region in Poland. It creates a sense of what could be called a fourfold success. The parents' success, today fifty- and sixty-year-olds, is duplicated by the often “global” success of their children, and vice versa, the “global” success of children, is duplicated by the success of parents living a quiet and comfortable life in one of the beautiful places in this world. In the end, from the global perspective of children, the place of origin does not matter too much.

From the point of view of the town's social cohesion and sustainable intergenerational reproduction, these processes can mean in the long run such changes in the

social structure, where the local middle class weakens, having in their ethos not only a good, comfortable life but also a high level of identification with the region, awareness that its uniqueness is its most valuable resource. The outflow of educated middle-class people from the younger generation cannot be replaced, as too few come back. They keep connection with their place of origin but live outside; they do not support the economic, social or political life of the town, taking an observer's position, not that of a player. This is, among other issues, what Aktywne Giżycko wanted to challenge – including the voice of an absent younger generation in the town's social life.

The above-presented situation concerns the middle class only, people having substantial cultural capital brought from home. Migration from places like Giżycko, especially for young people with lower cultural capital and coming from lower social status families, means not only migration to large cities in Poland or other more affluent and more developed countries, but also a lower labour market sector in these places (Piore 1975; Boje 1986). Therefore it means permanent exclusion from their aspirations to enter the middle class. It goes along with a phenomenon described above and clearly visible in Giżycko, that local middle-class children are having possession of some cultural capital, if they decide to migrate, they at least reproduce the social position of their parents, often in the same professions, e.g. legal or medical and fairly freely aspire to the global middle class (Reckwitz 2016). Therefore, one can formulate a hypothesis confirmed by observations of graduates' fate from Giżycko's high schools, that the appearance of Aktywne Giżycko has legitimacy in the broader socio-class transformations. It might be an emanation of frustration of this part of the generation for which promises heard from major liberal and leftist parties to catch up with the West fairly quickly have proved to be a kind of neoliberal deception. Because of that, it is less surprising that Aktywne Giżycko is looking for support on the political scene's right side. Its leaders identify themselves with Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (*Law and Justice*), the party whose primary goal is to create a Polish version of the welfare state-related to the attachment to national values, not to the global liberal world.

How an important issue migration is becoming for the small town may be illustrated by the fact that more than half of the active members of Aktywne Giżycko do not live there anymore. Meanwhile, it is proof that emigration does not necessarily mean cutting ties. Again, the Internet seems to play a crucial role in connecting the young generation of Giżycko that live in almost every corner of the world, as our research showed. To an extent, the cultural landscape of the town, social networks, friendships and social activity<sup>18</sup> moved online. This process is used and, to a large scale, was created by Aktywne Giżycko's members as they were local promoters of the Internet and pioneers on Facebook.

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<sup>18</sup> In 2019 we experienced a substantial charity action organised on Facebook to help a ten y. o. girl from Giżycko who suffers from brain tumour. There were many happenings, runs, sports events, banquets, meetings and auctions organised in the town, with support from the local government and many local organisations, including Aktywne Giżycko. But the most significant part of the activity was taking place online, and it by far outreached Giżycko. While reading hundreds of comments under each post appearing on Facebook, it was pretty obvious to observe that very many of them were written by Giżycko's diaspora in Poland and abroad.

## AKTYWNE GIŻYCKO

The association Aktywne Giżycko, when it was formed, consisted of 15 members (the minimum number of people required to register an association in Poland). The current formal composition remained unchanged with 11 active members. These are people who pay contributions, participate in the association's events, and take part in the creative and conceptual part (ideas, inspirations, speeches). All people come from Giżycko, but not all of them live in the town. Only four are permanently based in Giżycko; the other four live in Warsaw and one in Gdańsk. In addition, one person lives between Giżycko and Warsaw (social activities and being a councilman in Giżycko, work and family in Warsaw). People who belong to the association are mainly around the age of 30 years. Aktywne Giżycko has never recruited additional members but has a group of friends and supporters connected with the association – those people help with events but are not formally affiliated.

The idea came from Andruszkiewicz brothers (Piotr and Paweł), who invited to co-operation some of their friends, mainly from the neighbourhood in Wilanów, a district of tiny houses outskirts of the town. The NGO was registered on April 30, 2013. Both brothers independently admitted that the reason for activity was simply their need for action to change their reality. Piotr said that “if somebody does not feel this idea of voluntary work, they would never understand why it began”. In the beginning, Aktywne Giżycko had little to do with politics, although Piotr admits that politics was always part of his interests. Political activity was, however, a consequence of the popularity and success of the organisation. It is possible to track how Aktywne Giżycko evolved from the form of happenings, sports events and concerts to a local political party (now connected with Prawo i Sprawiedliwość<sup>19</sup>).

The group organised events even before the official registration. They, for example, reactivated after ten years a street tournament of basketball. But the impulse to register a new NGO begun with the idea to repaint the transformer in the Park of Roger Goemaere in Giżycko. It was in a horrible condition, full of vulgar graffiti. The brothers pointed that out while walking along with a procession to the St. Bruno cross. They started with a letter to the energy company to which the transformer belonged, and the company very positively replied and even sponsored the paint. Andruszkiewicz brothers painted the transformer with some friends. All of them were born in the years from 1985 to 1988. This group has remained active within the organisation until now.

First events mainly were oriented towards sport, because as Piotr Andruszkiewicz said – *sport is that thing around which it is easiest to gather young people*. Then some cultural actions joined – both organisation of events and the possibility to perform at the main town scene on the Lake Niegocin beach. Aktywne Giżycko organized concerts of small, local, debuting bands. The process of organisation, of course, included also promoting the concerts and negotiations with local authorities to get allowance or support from sponsors.

One of the repetitive events initiated by Aktywne Giżycko is the Walrus Club “Zimny Ptak” (Cold Bird). Every Sunday of the winter season at noon, a group of sometimes

<sup>19</sup> Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice), a right-wing coalition now in power in Poland since 2015.

nearly 100 people gather at the town's main beach of Lake Niegocin. They first warm up with music coming from battery-powered speakers and then jump into the cold water. Usually, it is necessary to chop a hole in the ice as the lake is frozen. These events permanently inscribed in the town's landscape. But not only this one. Aktywne Giżycko organises many other happenings, like breaking record in eating doughnuts every year on Fat Thursday<sup>20</sup>. There is also a regular basketball tournament, "Streetbal nad Niegocinem", and from 2015 there is a yearly held charity run.

The association also started to challenge political decisions by civic pressure – for example, they managed to collect more than 1000 signatures under the petition to introduce the civic budget in Giżycko. Piotr Andruszkiewicz said that when the organisation started to act, they began to ask the people about their needs and realise these thoughts. Using the Internet, happenings and street actions, members of the association took the roles of commentators of town's reality and promoters of changes. First actions were voluntary, where ideas and most of the work came mainly from the Andruszkiewicz brothers, but they received a lot of help from the others:

Two ideas stood behind it. The first was to create a website that would put together all information about Giżycko. Myself when I was in Gdańsk, and then in Warsaw, I watched with longing photos from my town that were appearing on the web, that people posted on different forums and websites, so I wanted to create one common platform; the second was that I observed how mass events are made in the big cities and I discovered that many of them don't need practically any money and they can easily be done also in Giżycko. To organise a run, you only need 40 letters, 39 approvals, 20 volunteers and one brave enough to do it. [Piotr Andruszkiewicz].

The second pillar on which the organisation was built was the Internet. As in the case of other "right to the city" movements that emerged in a similar time in other Polish cities, without Facebook and YouTube Aktywne Giżycko would not probably be created (or if it were, it would be very different). The organisation's profile was among the first to be made in the town:

We were the first to use Facebook in Giżycko. It was still not widely known yet. You know, we felt it and we used it. When no one knew how to use it. We developed it very quickly. And these YouTube channels, that's all. With such a fresh approach and we think that's why it worked so well. Because if you have Facebook, it is part of your life; you do not have a day without it. Who had a fan page in Giżycko before? There were no such. We were the first. [Paweł Andruszkiewicz, president of Aktywne Giżycko].

Andruszkiewicz brothers not only made a vivid Facebook profile and YouTube channel but also used forms not known up to date in the town: street probes, memes, drone images, promotional movies, selfie sticks etc. – all these new forms that are now widely used, were pretty innovative in 2013 and 2014. Aktywne Giżycko created catchy short YouTube movies, for example, "what the Giżycko inhabitants do NOT say about

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<sup>20</sup>There is a tradition of eating doughnuts and other sweets on the last Thursday before Lent in Poland.

their town”, “What do you know about Giżycko?” or two town’s promotional movies showing the most beautiful and most visited sites in Giżycko. All movies accompanied by nicely chosen music reveal good film processing skills and show that it is possible to make a good movie with almost no budget. They reached very high viewership as for a town of this scale.

To have in a town of 25-28 thousand a Facebook profile with the number of likes reaching  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the town’s population is something unique and exceptional. I know it because I follow it as a big fan of Facebook and social media. [Piotr Andruszkiewicz]

It is worth explaining that the astonishingly big number of “likes” of the profile does not mean that these people all live in Giżycko or even were born there. Our interviews proved that to many, particularly from the Giżycko’s diaspora in Poland and abroad, this is simply the best Internet profile where they find good movies, photos and texts about their town. They follow it, not necessarily identifying with the ideology of the organisation. The possibility to comment on the posts appearing on the profile becomes one way to keep contact with the town and its inhabitants. Very often, posts that appeared on the profile comprised open questions and provoked hundreds of comments. They sometimes concerned new solutions to be implemented in the town that were invented elsewhere (as civic budget) or simply gave room for polemics with what the authorities proposed. Some of the posts were controversial and showed an absurdity of some aspects of the town’s reality. Members of Aktywne Giżycko, particularly the Andruszkiewicz brothers, had a good sense of the Internet and social media; therefore, they usually hit home with what they posted.

I created my Facebook account when the Polish version was not yet available. I had a girlfriend in the USA, and she asked me to make an account. I remember Facebook that was so simple that it served only as a communication facility. [Piotr Andruszkiewicz]

The use of Facebook and YouTube in the way members of Aktywne Giżycko use it was a clear sign of a generational shift. Oficjalne Forum Giżycka (Official Giżycko Forum), still an active Internet forum to exchange thoughts about the town, was made in 2003 by the people born in the 70-ties. According to Piotr Andruszkiewicz, his generation and younger people do not use it because this form of anonymous text-only comments seems already archaic and tedious.

The idea of activation, especially of the young generation, was close to Aktywne Giżycko from the very beginning. Their slogan is “something more”, that is according to the words of Piotr Andruszkiewicz – “do what you do every day, and do something more for the others. Maybe half an hour per day. Something more in your life than you have been doing so far. This was our idea”. The town seemed to need such activation, as many people joined the actions of the new association.

There is a visible shift from happenings and Internet activity towards politics that one can point out by observing campaigns and increasing political engagement of the leaders, but even in the rising number of politically oriented movies and posts appear-

ing on the organisation's Facebook profile since 2014. According to Piotr Andruszkiewicz the decision to start in 2014 was an effect of the will of the people themselves, and not all of the organisation members agreed with it. The elections appeared to be fairly successful – in 2014, Aktywne Giżycko<sup>21</sup> introduced one councillor to the City Council. A second, Piotr Andruszkiewicz, was elected in the by-elections in March 2015. This, according to the words of Piotr, might have been a result of the “wind of change” already blowing in Poland and confirmed by the change on the national scale in 2015. The leader of the association, Piotr Andruszkiewicz was also a candidate for mayor and received an outstanding result of 21,43% of votes. Aktywne Giżycko became an uncompromising opposition to the majority of the Giżycko's Council and the newly chosen mayor, Wojciech Iwaszkiewicz. In local and regional elections of 2018, the association made a decision to start as a committee of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość. Piotr Andruszkiewicz said that it was not an easy decision, and up to date, only two councilmen of their committee decided to subscribe to PiS (including Piotr himself). These elections were even more successful – the committee has six councillors. Piotr nearly repeated his result from 2014, gaining 19,10% in the voting for the town's mayor.

The link between the NGO and the national party structures remains relatively weak. PiS does not represent the majority of Aktywne Giżycko's members' political beliefs - who support, inter alia, Konfederacja (Confederation Liberty and Independence) and KUKIZ'15 (a political movement that arose after the success of Paweł Kukiz in presidential elections of 2015). The decision to join PiS structures was, therefore, more tactical than ideological. Becoming one of the main political powers on the local political scene required integration with the national-scale central political division. It had its disadvantages, but success counted in the number of councillors that entered the Town Council in 2018 seems to prove its strategic value.

In the current Giżycko council (2018-2022), but also in the previous (2014-2018) activity of town councillors from the Aktywne Giżycko (currently as councillors of the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość committee, six councillors out of 21 in the town council), is manifested in permanent conflict with other councillors (Giżyckie Porozumienie Obywatelskie<sup>22</sup>, Obywatelska Koalicja Giżycko<sup>23</sup>) representing left-wing and liberal views, currently associated or identified in the past with the Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej<sup>24</sup> or the Platforma Obywatelska<sup>25</sup>. A generational difference marks this. The average age of councillors associated with Aktywne Giżycko is 38 years (with one councillor of 61 years old, giving 34 as the average age of the remaining five). The average age of the rest in the Council is 56 years. The analysis of tax declarations, which also contain information about performed professions, shows that councillors associated with Aktywne Giżycko are primarily young entrepreneurs.

In contrast, the other two committees' councillors are teachers, local government

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<sup>21</sup> As the committee “Aktywne Giżycko. Lubię to” (*Active Giżycko. I like it*).

<sup>22</sup> Giżycko's Citizen Agreement.

<sup>23</sup> Giżycko's Citizen Coalition.

<sup>24</sup> Democratic Left Alliance.

<sup>25</sup> Civic Platform.

employees, and retirees with an established position in the town (<http://www.bip.gizycko.pl/oswiadczenia>). From the perspective of these data, we can see that we are dealing with a more complex phenomenon than just a more or less typical intergenerational conflict. It is both a generational and a class conflict. It might be a contribution not only to explain what is happening in one of many small towns in Poland but also sheds light on Poland's "shift" to the right after the 2015 elections, confirmed by the national elections in 2019. It might show that the town's future may rely more on Aktywne Giżycko, than the rest of the town Council would like to assume. It also shows that this association's political nature, which began its activity in the convention of street happenings, is determined not only by its leaders' ambitions but by the logic of the generational-class plexus.

There is one very striking question. Why is there no other organisation in the town that would represent other political and world view ideas? Why there is room for only one association of this kind in each generation? One possible answer is that most young people, alumni of Giżycko's high schools that had initiative, emigrated after their A-level. According to interviews, it is quite possible: sometimes from each class, only 3 or 4 people remained. But another possible explanation might be that the niche was already taken and that there is simply no reason for the existence of more than one "right to the city" organisation in the small town<sup>26</sup>.

### **AKTYWNE GIŻYCKO IN GENERATIONAL CONTEXT**

The appearance of Aktywne Giżycko, created by people born in the late 80-ies or early 90-ies could be placed in a broader historical context as a voice of the whole generation. This generation is very different from the previous one in at least two significant aspects: 1) it does not remember communism and 2) it was the first generation to be raised in the world of new technologies, including the common use of the Internet. Both have real consequences that, in our opinion, lead to profound intergenerational misunderstanding.

From 1991, when Wspólnota Mazurska (Masurian Community) was created to 2013, when Aktywne Giżycko emerged, there was no other big organisation with the ambition to activate the local community on the town's scale. Each NGO is very characteristic for the generation that formed it. Each remained somehow inaccessible (or unattractive) to representatives of other generations. This is an opinion on Aktywne Giżycko by one of the founding fathers of Wspólnota Mazurska:

With great joy, I welcomed the emergence of Aktywne Giżycko for several reasons. Thanks to its actions - at the beginning, usually in the form of happenings, but with a prosocial vector - many young people got activated who had not been participating in the town's social life so far. I liked (and like) the activity of the Andruszkiewicz brothers, who - young people themselves - inspired many of their peers. This movement seemed such a refreshing force against all the Universities of the Third Age and the ageing Wspólnota Mazurska, so I hoped that

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<sup>26</sup> In most of the towns of similar size in Poland, there is none.

the young would wake up and slowly begin to take matters into their own hands. Of course this also went further into local politics... And here I started to like it a little less because I have been stating that Aktywne Giżycko is becoming less a movement activating the legitimate affairs of young town inhabitants and more a base for the political careers of its leaders. One of them – Piotr Andruszkiewicz - joined the PiS and since then has been a very loyal member of this party, which resulted, for example, in what started to appear on Aktywne Giżycko’s profiles. I like it less also because in the event of a collision of local interest with the party interest (PiS), which, e.g. happened in the City Forest issue.<sup>27</sup>, Aktywne Giżycko... well, you simply can’t count on them. However, I still hope that the creative ferment among the Giżycko youth, which was caused and still characterises Aktywne Giżycko, has a very positive dimension.[Male, 61 y. o.]

And this is an opinion on Wspólnota Mazurska by one of the founding fathers of Aktywne Giżycko:

Wspólnota Mazurska invited people that they perceived as attractive. Not for the town, not for the people, but for them. And we thought – “let’s make a street probe, who Giżycko people really want to invite”? And apparently, they wanted to have people sometimes controversial, like Korwin-Mikke<sup>28</sup>. And we had a whole room of people [...] We also wanted to invite Jurek Owsiak<sup>29</sup>, but his calendar did not allow him to come. [Male, 33 y. o.]

Aktywne Giżycko’s members belong to the widely described Generation Y, otherwise called the “millennials” (Ashlock and Atay 2019, Levenson 2010). People born in the late 80-ties and early 90-ties very much differ from their parents, and both sociologists and economists observe this. Their main life goal is to be, rather than to possess, they are more flexible in their work, less obedient to authorities, more self-confident, always connected to the Internet choosing this form of communication more willingly than face-to-face meetings. Generation X’s previous group’s representatives work was more critical than Generation Y, which focused on exciting experiences and enjoying life. They are also more consumers than intellectuals, more individuals than community-builders, and rather multitaskers than specialists (Ashlock and Atay 2019:viii). Generation Y prefers short forms of communication because they encounter them on the Internet. They read fewer books or newspapers; instead, they browse and watch short movies.

Having that generational change in mind, it is easier to understand the difference between the generation of Wspólnota Mazurska and the generation of Aktywne Giżycko. The first grew up as children of migrants from many regions of pre-war Poland

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<sup>27</sup> State Forests decided to cut down some parts of the giant forest of nearly 318 hectares neighboring the town, which caused large protests, including the engagement of many members of the Wspólnota Mazurska.

<sup>28</sup> Leader of many right-wing parties: Real Politics Union, the Congress of New Right, KORWiN, Confederation Liberty and Independence. Presidential candidate, member of the European Parliament.

<sup>29</sup> Activist, leader of the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity, creator of the Woodstock Festival Poland (Currently Pol’n’Rock Festival).



(mainly the Vilnius area<sup>30</sup>, Mazowsze, Podlasie, some Ukrainian and Lemko population resettled there by force in 1947-1950<sup>31</sup>). They were first to be born in Polish Masuria. Feeling the falsehood of official communist narration of the so-called “Recovered Territories.”<sup>32</sup>, they discovered the multicultural past of the place where their parents came due to the consequences of war. They felt obliged to change that narration for the sake of truth and create a new identity of the region based on all cultural landscape elements. Thus historical debates, art exhibitions, writing work, live meetings between old and new inhabitants were forms which they mainly used, especially in the world still missing the Internet. In a way, these forms were exclusive; they concerned a minimal group of local cultural elite members. Even if some events were able to attire the media’s attention and gather some people interested in these topics, the academic world from inside and outside, they were never massive. Members of Wspólnota Mazurska used local and regional press, they were themselves or cooperated with authors and poets, wrote books and guidebooks, initiated the erection of monuments<sup>33</sup>, restoration of historical buildings, preservation of town’s and region’s landscape<sup>34</sup>. Wspólnota reacted more vigorously to these ideas of the local government that concerned identity issues.

Aktywne Giżycko, from the very beginning, had a very different strategy and mode of action. The organisation used brief forms of social media: mems, blogs, posts, YouTube movies - being present almost uniquely on the Internet and in the streets. They were trying to react to an average inhabitant’s needs, not necessarily a member of the cultural elite. Thus they were closer to the massive recipient of culture, of course, on the local and regional scale. Piotr Andruszkiewicz, leader and founder of the association, declared that members of Aktywne Giżycko are always trying to interpret social needs and ask what people want – concerts, sports events, charity, daily life. The issues that acquire the attention of Aktywne Giżycko are single and concrete problems of which people talk every day or that resonate in emotions, rather than abstract ideas like pre-war German literature. The discussion was moved to Facebook – almost every single post on their profile gains hundreds of “likes” and comments. They also have a perfect sense of social media – as Piotr Andruszkiewicz said: *I can feel it, I know which post will gain more attention and more reaction*. Comparing to their 16.954 Facebook followers<sup>35</sup> of Aktywne Giżycko’s profile, just 394 persons<sup>36</sup> that “liked” Wspólnota Mazurska’s profile proof that the older association is nearly non-existent in social media. Aktywne Giżycko’s Facebook profile shares or publishes several posts a day, each attiring wide attention.

In public discourse, especially in recent years, locality started to play an important role. In many places, particularly big cities, a better understanding of the local identity replaces national narration about Polish culture’s unity. Aktywne Giżycko seems to go around this topic by not focusing on identity issues, omit to mention the German past of the town, con-

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<sup>30</sup> The city was part of the Republic of Poland in the years 1920-1939.

<sup>31</sup> Operation “Vistula”.

<sup>32</sup> In the Polish United Workers Party (PZPR) official propaganda, German territories granted to Poland after World War II were originally Polish or Slavic lands conquered and for long centuries illegally occupied by Germany. Their return to Poland was interpreted as an act of historical justice.

<sup>33</sup> For example, the one which stands now in the Grunwaldzki Square, close to evangelical church with all historical names of the town – from German Lötzen to Polish Lec, Łuczany and finally Giżycko.

<sup>34</sup> They were recently very involved in the protest against the new hotel’s planned construction, which is supposed to stand on partly protected area of the former Kurhaus (spa).

<sup>35</sup> As of December 10, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> As of December 10, 2019.

centrating on the present and the future. This is the first generation's voice freed from the constant discussions about the historical problems (to some, it may be a sign of ignorance).

The difference between the two organisations can have yet another dimension, that is a difference in incompetence. While Wspólnota Mazurska is composed of intellectuals with a stable and recognised position in the town: a poet and journalist, an academic professor, a graphic designer, a bookseller, a historian; Aktywne Giżycko consists of young independent entrepreneurs, mainly self-employed in the construction industry, or people working in banks or law firms. This reinforces the focus on culture and identity on one side and business and development on the other. It also goes along with political choices.

Analysing the methods of social communication and the target groups of both organisations that originated in Giżycko in very different generational contexts, one can assume that while Wspólnota Mazurska as a phenomenon was an emanation of local cultural elite's need to change the existing order of the town's cultural landscape, Aktywne Giżycko aimed to give a more modern vibe of the everyday life therein. Both can be in a way called "right to the city" movements – Wspólnota Mazurska understood it as a need to reverse identity narration and in effect regain their true town, freed from politically controlled propaganda; Aktywne Giżycko, in a very different historical era, wants to activate people not present up to date in the social life and that means reaching another group than the town's cultural elite.

## CONCLUSIONS

In our opinion, the phenomenon of Aktywne Giżycko correlates both with the generational experience of the people born and raised in the provincial town of post-transformational Poland and the touristic character of the capital of the Great Masurian Lake District. The emergence of a "right to the city" movement in the province is a sign of globalisation, as it would not be possible without inspiration from outside and without the new methods of social communication. This allowed reversing the vector of social activity in the town. It was not organised from the top by the local cultural elite, as it used to be before, but thanks to Facebook and Internet forums, it has begun to be created from the bottom by the people themselves.<sup>37</sup> Therefore it helped to activate many more inhabitants.

This phenomenon is then an outcome of two factors: the everyday use of the Internet, especially Facebook and YouTube, and the form of happenings, nearly non-existent before, i.e. mass events that meet expectations of an average inhabitant. Both factors put the town in the global context, showing that everything is possible even in a deep province. Emigration is not necessarily the only solution to live an active life and realise big projects and ideas.

From the very beginning, these actions were oriented towards the local authorities' critique, using social media, Aktywne Giżycko, closer to the "right to the city" move-

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<sup>37</sup> Aktywne Giżycko was the organisation that proposed to introduce a civic budget to Giżycko. Piotr Andruszkiewicz admitted that the inspiration went from the big cities that already had this solution.

ments from big agglomerations. What remains different is the political orientation of the organisation, which in the case of Giżycko placed itself on the right edge of the politics, which is partly a result of individual political beliefs of the leaders and partly is an effect of the general shift to the right observed in Poland, especially among the young generation, after 2015.

In the end, the leaders' political involvement and political interests, particularly the decision to start in 2014 local elections, caused the association from a local NGO run by the local youth to a substantial political force that changed the town's political scene. This decision brought a lot of hate on the leaders and helped to promote the association even more that it became widely recognised. The evolution from happenings and street activity joined with the critique of local politics to political involvement also characterises a lot of other "right to the city" movements<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> In Warsaw, Miasto Jest Nasze association also decided to start in local elections in 2014 and then in 2018.

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