The upcoming election year will not be conducive to a systemic approach to the problems of transport infrastructure in Poland. On the one hand, the narrative about the group of supposed successes of the current ruling team will be reinforced, on the other hand, the opposition will question every action. It is of little importance in all this which grouping is currently in power, and which is hoping to take it over. This was the case before (e.g., criticism of the purchase of Pendolino trains) and is to be expected now as well. Although infrastructure is a policy topic, it has its own peculiarities – long implementation times and multi-year impacts. Transportation infrastructure therefore requires a certain political, and more broadly, social consensus.

The topic generating the most excitement at the moment is the issue of the Central Transportation Port. Although the topic of a joint airport for Warsaw and Łódź has been around since the 1970s, it was only the 2018 law that gave the plan a chance to move forward. The political dispute and public controversy arise mainly on two axes: the location of the airport itself and the rail routes leading to it. On the one hand, the slogan to start flight operations as early as 2027, on the other to completely abandon the project. Both attitudes are extreme and detrimental to Poland's development. Maintaining schedules, which are very tight and already have significant delays at the outset (even the company itself was established almost a year late), will translate into inflated investment costs. Instead, abandoning the project will result in a lack of aviation development opportunities in the region of the capital in the future, possibly with even stronger protests to come.

Looking at the conditions that led to the protests, it was primarily omissions in land use management. Reservation of land, i.e. specific plots of land, for an airport or new railways has never been introduced into the urban planning system. This was not done when the first plans were drawn up during the communist period, nor was it done in 2011, i.e., when the government of the day decided to freeze work on the concept of high-speed rail between Warsaw, Łódź and Poznań and Wrocław (the so-called "Y"). Although at the time the successful designer of the feasibility study worked out the details of the mileage. The plots of land where the new rail lines were to run were not protected from development. Municipalities created spatial

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policy as if the line did not exist. Particularly in areas of urban agglomeration subjected to chaotic suburbanisation, the construction of new rail lines will give rise to protests from owners of newly built homes.

It should be mentioned that urban planning has seen the problem. The central airport was both in the 2011 Concept for Spatial Development of the Country or the 2004 Spatial Development Plan for the Mazovian Voivodeship, but the key operationalisation – i.e., clarifying the location and blocking the development of land parcels lying within the planned port and access routes – did not take place.

Today, having prepared technical-economic-environmental studies that give detailed knowledge of the locations, it is necessary to secure the sites with development plans. This needs to be done quickly, regardless of when the airport itself can be built and when its spokes can be built. Much of the planning work done on the CPK must not be wasted, as happened with the “Y”.

At the same time, the expansion of Radom Airport (Warsaw-Radom) shows that clinging to the 2027 deadline for the CPK makes little sense. Air traffic forecasts contained in the “Policy for the development of civil aviation in Poland until 2030 (with an outlook to 2040)” show that the maximum capacity of the Radom airport – which is to be a legal “duoport” with Warsaw Okęcie – will not be exhausted, and the commissioning of CPK in 2027 will cause the number of passengers to fall to around 650,000 PAX, i.e., below the break-even point of about 1.5 million PAX per year. Planned to be operational in spring 2023, the airport could only exceed this threshold after four years, according to the above projections. In subsequent years, it would be a burden on the Radom local government. This is another economic argument, in addition to the risk of overpricing by contractors forced to meet tight deadlines, for revising the CPK schedule and building a public consensus around the new date.

A pillar of consensus around the CPK should also be verification of the viability of the more distant parts of the spokes. For example, what real rail traffic will be carried by the high-speed rail route Nakło nad Notecią – Okonek, allowing residents of Koszalin, Kołobrzeg and Szczecinek to get to the airport faster, bypassing Piła, and consequently what will be the cost of getting passengers there? Consensus also needs to be reached on how to develop the post-Okęcie land. This is a great opportunity for the creation of a modern residential neighbourhood that can partially meet the needs of the less affluent, as the Housing Plus programme aimed to do.

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There is less public controversy over the construction of expressways and highways, both those to the CPK and others. This is not surprising, as provincial residents who have long experienced traffic exclusion have managed to shift to the automobile. And expressways that have junctions every dozen kilometres or so on average offer the promise of improved travel conditions greater than high-speed rail lines with stations no more often than every few tens of kilometres. However, the highway construction programme requires consensus on something else – its alignment with real demand. Expressways planned (in particular S10, S16 and S19) in places where, according to the General Traffic Measurement of 2021 (carried out by the General Directorate for National Roads and Motorways) the average daily traffic volume is 4,000 – 6,000 vehicles, which corresponds more to a county road than a national one. The cost of building and then maintaining them is not defensible by social, economic or environmental benefits, nor by geopolitics (e.g., the Via Carpatia). Limiting plans is politically difficult, but politicians should be expected to be responsible for the long-term effects. The consensus should be built around numbers – traffic volume values. Construction of dual carriageways should only take place where traffic approaches 20,000 vehicles per day.

Also to be reviewed are plans to widen the A4 to three lanes each way, with traffic management tools (so-called intelligent transportation systems) to increase the capacity of the existing network first, such as reducing the maximum speed in peak traffic situations. The three-lane road stimulates the imagination of voters, while the dynamic speed limit of 100 km/h, for example, irritates them. But nationally, there are many more important social challenges, such as the ongoing decline of regional buses (PKS).

Another issue, more pertinent to local elections, is the question of the Vistula Spit dredging. In the whole project, the viability of which was in doubt from the very beginning, the dredging of the last 800 metres of the track on the Elbląg River was forgotten. The situation, on the one hand, demonstrates the weakness of government planning for transportation systems, and on the other, creates a conflict between the government administration responsible for waterways and the local government that owns the port. The conflict may be electoral fuel, but it is embarrassing for the decision-makers who made the decision to cross the spit, and it raises the economic consequences of having to keep the canal navigable when the ships that use it will not be able to reach the port.

The above examples cover the most talked-about transportation topics in recent years. They all demonstrate the need for cross-political, substantive cooperation in

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this area. Decisions to make investments are easy. Measuring up to their effects will be difficult. Without building a political consensus, or preferably a social consensus, it is easy to make mistakes that hit public finances even harder than construction itself.



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