



# Cracow - the Green Capital of Europe?

**APPLICATION  
VS REALITY**

**MAKE  
CITIZENS  
PROUD**

Dear Sir/Madam,

The inhabitants of Kraków are looking in disbelief as another attempt is made to apply for the title of the European Green Capital. The behaviour of the municipal authorities, the absence of a dialogue, commonplace felling of trees, traffic jams, deficient public transport, construction on each and every available plot, and the lack of space for normal life are all parts of our everyday reality. We are afraid that the present application, containing many misrepresentations, distortions of reality, and contradictions is meant only as a political power play on the part of the city authorities, and it serves as a PR stunt. We decided to intervene in this matter, which is reflected in the letter below. We urge you to read it and we look forward to receiving your response.

Inhabitants of Kraków  
associated in a grassroots, non-partisan initiative  
“Akcja Ratunkowa dla Krakowa”  
 (“Rescue Action for Kraków”)

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## 1. Felling of trees

Since 2015, nearly 47,000 trees have been cut down in the city of Kraków.<sup>1</sup> Trees are cleared in the course of most municipal investment projects, and the city authorities do not include these cuttings in their plans. The so-called “tree resolution” of 2020, which was meant to protect trees during municipal works and construction projects, is not being followed.<sup>2</sup> Municipal agencies were meant to report the current status of tree removals to the Municipal Greenspace Authority (ZZM) every six months, but none of them has done so. Results of the research conducted in 2018 based of satellite images are alarming. Ewa Grabska, a PhD student at the Jagiellonian University, compared the aerial photographs over the course of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/Krakow/wycinka-drzew-w-Krakowie-w-ciagu-szesciu-lat-wycieto-47-tys-drzew/165eqlh>

<sup>2</sup> <https://gazetaKrakowska.pl/miejskie-inwestycje-w-Krakowie-urzednicy-mieli-ocalic-jak-najwiecej-drzew-radny-uchwala-nie-jest-respektowana/ar/c1-15470856>

three years. It turned out that in the central districts of Kraków, the loss of green spaces was as much as 6%. This is equivalent to the area of 275 football pitches.<sup>3</sup>

Revitalization of municipal parks usually begins with the felling of several hundred trees. This was the case of the Zakrzówek Park – a project that the city is eager to show off in its application for the Green Capital status. Similarly in the case of the Bednarski Park, designated for revitalization against residents' wishes, where 300 trees were cut down. Other municipal projects: the Łagiewniki Route entailed the removal of 2600 trees, the tramline to Górka Narodowa – 3500 trees, and the construction of the Future Nowa Huta – 2300 trees. To that we must add the “intervention” cuttings by Municipal Greenspace Authority, which removed 2000 trees within the last year. It was only thanks to pressure from the public that the wildlife refuge in the Liban quarry was saved – where the Municipal Greenspace Authority had earmarked more than 1000 trees for removal. After protests from residents, the project was suspended.

There have also been documented cases of municipal agencies removing trees without the necessary permits.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Cooperation of the Municipal Office with the local residents

Contrary to what the Municipal Office claims in their application, in the “Greenery” chapter – public consultations in Kraków are practically fictitious. They pretend to encourage social participation for appearances sake; the results are not implemented, and the city officials take every opportunity to emphasize that “results of the consultations are not binding”. Nevertheless, in most cases, there are no public consultations whatsoever, and decisions are made unilaterally, in autocratic manner. As a result, the residents' frustration is building up.

The Mayor of Kraków, the Municipal Office, and entities such as the Municipal Greenspace Authority do not enter into dialogue with the residents, but instead they impose their own opinion, which usually differs from the opinion of the people. This has been demonstrated, *inter alia*, in an independent study by the Democratic Society, coordinated by Climate-KIC and supported by the EIT – a body of the European Union, wherein the activities of the Municipal Greenspace Authority are explicitly described as “paternalistic”. There is a plain imbalance between construction projects and the creation of new green areas. Meanwhile, in the unprecedented 7 billion municipal budget for the year 2021, Kraków's authorities allocated only 1 million for the buy-out of green areas.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the biggest let-down is that even when public consultations are held, as they were in the case of the park on Karmelicka, which incidentally is yet to be established, the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.radioKrakow.pl/aktualnosci/Krakow/zielen-znika-z-Krakowa-widac-to-wyraznie-na-zdjeciach-satelitarnych/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://Krakow.wyborcza.pl/Krakow/7,44425,25881849,drwale-cieli-nielegalnie.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://naukadlaprzyrody.pl/2020/12/12/uchwala-rady-naukowej-iop-pan-na-temat-zieleni-miejskiej-Krakowa/>

Municipal Greenspace Authority aims to distort the ideas of the residents by introducing their own designs and concepts, despite the opposition from the project's originators.<sup>6</sup>

Municipal officials, who are often active politicians as well, introduce censorship to public information channels, "blocking" residents for asking uncomfortable questions (e.g. the director of the Municipal Greenspace Authority – Piotr Kempf) and deleting their own news posts after they receive negative comments.<sup>7</sup>

Officials reached another level of the absurd in August 2021, when the councillors of the Old Town district received a design for the reconstruction of the most important square in their district, with the proviso that they are not allowed to show it to the residents.<sup>8</sup>

Residents are publicly derided both by the Mayor, who refers to the changes they propose as "whims", and by the director of the ZZM, who publically and wrongly accuses them of destroying greenery. Petitions submitted by residents in defence of green areas, or grassroots civic consultations are constantly depreciated, undermined and publicly ridiculed by the ZZM director. The Mayor's most frequent comment on the public consultations is: "at any rate, there will always be someone who is dissatisfied". This is an anti-civic attitude, which undermines the purpose of social dialogue. In the case of the Zakrzówek Park, the Mayor stated that "we consulted our ears off" even though in fact no consultations were held.

ZZM often uses social media to boast about their innovative solutions, such as refraining from mowing the lawns in the city. Unfortunately, this is empty rhetoric, as in fact the grass is cut several times a month to the bare soil; furthermore, this is happening during the period of pollinating insects' activity – residents constantly document these treatments. When mowing with heavy equipment, during rainfall, the lawns and boulevards get damaged, and animals such as hedgehogs, which are protected species, get run over.

Maciej Grzyb, the deputy director of the Social Communication Department of the Municipal Office, responsible for relations with the public, repeatedly referred to the residents in an unacceptable manner, which was widely reported by the local press.<sup>9</sup> Recently, he compared one resident to a Nazi (sic!). The Mayor saw nothing wrong in his subordinate's behaviour.<sup>10</sup>

The Civic Budget, the tool that by definition is meant to strengthen the participation of residents in the activities of the Municipal Office, is fiction. Kraków officials rejected over 47% of all projects submitted this year. 494 out of 1043 submitted projects were thrown away.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://Krakow.wyborcza.pl/Krakow/7,44425,26648246,park-przy-karmelickiej.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://krowoderska.pl/nic-nie-wa-mnie-tak-jak-urzedowa-arogancja/>

<https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/Krakow/Krakow-park-bednarskiego-zarzad-zieleni-usunal-wpis-z-nieprzychylnymi-komentarzami/gd6w7r4>

<sup>8</sup> <https://Krakow.tvp.pl/55601830/nowe-pomysly-na-plac-nowy-tajne?fbclid=IwAR1rSYUC6pJRpsSnZKd-IVdg7iagd188dCOXwuUGwdIDkwAY7Mu0OwtyBnI>

<sup>9</sup> <https://gazetaKrakowska.pl/skandaliczne-slowa-dyrektor-od-komunikacji-atakuje-mieszkancow-komentarz/ar/c1-14671357>

<sup>10</sup> <https://Krakow.wyborcza.pl/Krakow/7,44425,27067855,urzednik-porownal-mieszkanca-do-hitlerowca-majchrowski-to.html>

If we consider only the city-wide projects, the statistic is even worse – almost 60% of all proposed projects were rejected<sup>11</sup> – only about one fifth of those due to formal errors on the part of the residents, and the remaining ones based on the subjective opinion of the officials.

We might say that the meaningless activities of the ZZM, in addition to “beautifying” wild places, are best exemplified in creating schemes that pretend to be social projects. One such instance is the “community” garden at the City Hall. Residents wished to eliminate the parking lot for the officials in favour of a community garden. Instead, the parking lot for officials and councillors remained intact, and a “garden” was developed inside the City Hall’s courtyard – not through volunteer community service as had been intended, but by the ZZM staff, without the participation of residents, as a top-down initiative of the officials. The “garden” is inaccessible to residents with disabilities, people in wheelchairs or with prams; the access is blocked with parking cars; the garden is closed at weekends, and it features barrels for rainwater that pretend to support water retention – but they don’t, as they have not been connected for over 6 months.<sup>12</sup>

Questions and queries formulated by activists and journalists regarding the transparency of municipal offices and agencies remain unanswered to this day. For example, it is not yet known how Piotr Kempf, a politician of the PSL party sympathetic to the Mayor, became the director of the ZZM.<sup>13</sup>

For years, residents have been protesting against harmful actions taken by the Municipal Office on many levels, and it is really hard to speak of cooperation in this context.

### 3. Municipal transport

In official documents on the city’s development, we read about sustainable transport, while the most money is spent on expanding old roads and building new ones. This trend is supported by official statistics: from 2013 to 2018, car traffic increased (+ 5.8%), and walking decreased (-5.6%), as did the use of public transport (-6.6%). The reaction of the Municipal Office is to restrict the number of journeys on some routes, and to significantly increase ticket prices, further discouraging residents from using public transport. The only positive trend is the increase in bicycle travel (+ 5.7%), but instead of supporting this trend, the Municipal Office is eliminating popular bicycle lanes in the city centre in favour of car traffic.

The excessive development of road infrastructure shows the real priorities of the Municipal Office. The more road investments there are, the more cars in the system.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <https://glos24.pl/Krakow-to-prawdziwa-rzez-urzednicy-odrzucl-prawie-polowe-projektow-zgloszonych-do-bo>

<sup>12</sup> <https://gazetaKrakowska.pl/Krakow-ogrod-spoleczny-na-dziedzincu-magistratu-a-przed-palacem-wielopolskich-nadal-parking/ar/c1-15651598>

<sup>13</sup> <https://dziennikpolski24.pl/mieszkancy-pytaja-jak-piotr-kempf-zostal-dyrektorem-zarzadu-zieleni-miejskiej-dokumentacja-mogla-ulec-zniszczeniu-w-pozarze/ar/c1-15709760>

<sup>14</sup> <https://akcjaratunkowadlaKrakowa.pl/transport/w-jakim-kierunku-zmierza-transport-zbiorowy-w-Krakowie/>

## 4. Greenwashing by the city authorities

Submitting Kraków's application for the European Green Capital Award is hypocrisy on the part of the city authorities. We wish to emphasize that in their application, city officials included information that is false, taking advantage of the fact that no one can verify it.

The inhabitants of Kraków loudly protest against the falsehoods contained in the application.<sup>15</sup> Investment projects submitted by the city authorities are described as “ghost projects”.<sup>16</sup> For years, residents have requested their implementation in vain, but whenever they try to submit these ideas under the Civic Budget, the Mayor rejects them.

Officials boast that they have introduced an innovative solution for the promotion of bicycle transport in the centre of Kraków, giving one lane to cyclists, and thus limiting car traffic. Research has shown that this action was indeed effective. The Municipal Office did not fail to brag about it – as well as the 14th rank in the New York Times list of cities worth visiting.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, Kraków's authorities withdrew their decision under pressure from drivers, without providing a reasonable explanation for the reversal, which is due before the announcement of the 2023 Green Capital Award.<sup>18</sup> Again, pedestrians and cyclists use the same lanes, increasing the risk of accidents, among other things. Residents even prepared their own signs similar to the official city plaques. They read: “Cyclists, note that we are closing the bicycles lane from September onwards. More information on how to efficiently switch to driving can be obtained from the Municipal Office hotline”.<sup>19</sup>

The Civic Dialogue Commission for the Environment is a body composed of environmental organizations, NGOs and scientists. Its intended purpose was to provide opinions on projects, investments and activities of the municipal authorities. Unfortunately, despite the fact that it consists of over 20 entities, city officials and the Mayor choose to ignore the Commission's opinion. The Civic Dialogue Commission for the Environment frequently criticizes the municipal actions and does not agree with the officials' decisions. Including the information about the Civic Dialogue Commission in the application for the Green Capital status in the “Greenery” chapter is taking credit for the organisation whose actions the officials depreciate.

The authorities boast that, according to the HUGSI ranking, Kraków ranks 5th in the world and 3rd in Europe as a metropolis with the largest share of green areas in the city (i.e. claiming that 57% of Kraków's area is green spaces). The survey was made on the basis of satellite images, including, among other things, cemeteries and adjacent areas such as arable fields or greenery within road lanes, whereas all plants over 1 meter high were classified as trees. Meanwhile, according to the Central Statistical Office of Poland, Kraków is the least

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<sup>15</sup> <https://krowoderska.pl/Krakow-przylapany-na-dopingu-czy-miasto-przeprosi-innych-uczestnikow-konkursu-na-zielona-stolice/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.radioKrakow.pl/aktualnosci/Krakow/Krakow-stara-sie-o-tytul-zielonej-stolicy-europy-inwestycje-widma-we-wniosku-konkursowym>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/travel/places-to-visit.html?smid=rd>

<sup>18</sup> <https://kmr.org.pl/stanowisko-kmr-ws-planowanej-likwidacji-ddr-wzdłuż-ul-grzegorzeckiej/>  
<https://krknews.pl/znika-droga-dla-rowerow-na-grzegorzeckiej-jej-obroncy-sie-mobilizuja/>

<sup>19</sup> [https://loveKrakow.pl/aktualnosci/ta-sciezka-bedzie-zlikwidowana-bo-sie-sprawdzila-zdjecia\\_42477.html](https://loveKrakow.pl/aktualnosci/ta-sciezka-bedzie-zlikwidowana-bo-sie-sprawdzila-zdjecia_42477.html)

“green” metropolis, with the total share of forests, parks, lawns and green areas within housing estates amounting to only 10%.<sup>20</sup> The Municipal Office does not mention this latter study in its application, thereby concealing the actual results.

The Municipal Office takes credit for the activists’ successes, which constitutes a misrepresentation. One example is the success in the battle for clean air, led by Krakowski Alarm Smogowy (the Kraków Smog Alert). The struggle against air pollution is a great success for Kraków – however, it is not due to the city authorities, but to the residents, and to social pressure that was exerted on officials by activists and inhabitants of Kraków who took to the streets, fighting for clean air. In official publications, the Municipal Office often ignores the role of residents, claiming the success as their own.

9 years ago, the Mayor of Kraków criticized the anti-smog campaign, suggesting that it would scare the tourists away. On his official profile, he wrote: *With all due respect for the activities of the Kraków Smog Alert and my appreciation for their commitment to improving air quality, I received this information with very mixed feelings. I don’t even mean to argue whether it is true or not. (Although I would question this particular information, considering that the situation is similarly bad in the whole of southern Poland, while it is only in Kraków that data is taken from the air monitoring station located on the Aleje thoroughfare, while in other cities these stations are located in more neutral places.) My doubts concern whether it is in the interest of the city’s inhabitants to publicise such information in English on posters when we are a city that largely makes a living from tourism.*<sup>21</sup>

In the competition application, the Kraków Smog Alert is mentioned only twice, including once in a footnote.

## 5. ‘Plan for Adapting the City to Climate Change by 2030’

The document is a vague plan that contains virtually no details. In its content, there is no mention of the notion that we need to take care of what we already have – for instance, ancient trees that should be treated, and not cut down. Instead, we find information about the construction of bypass roads, which in practice take the shape of an urban highway and are widely criticized by the scientific community as exaggerated, supersized investments burdened with enormous costs<sup>22</sup> with a grim side-effect of the felling of thousands of trees.

The document contains a chapter entitled “Opportunities related to climate change”.<sup>23</sup> Among the opportunities, extreme temperatures are quoted as a factor that would enhance the sports and recreational season and stimulate interest in cycling races, as well as the development of construction. Additionally, torrential rains were listed among the opportunities, supposedly as a source of relatively clean water. In such an important

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<sup>20</sup> <https://rynekpierwotny.pl/wiadomosci-mieszkaniove/ktore-z-naszyc-miast-jest-najbardziej-zielone/7869/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/jacek.majchrowski/posts/394682937293681>

<sup>22</sup> <https://naukadlaprzyrody.pl/2019/07/10/20-pytan-o-trase-lagiewnicka/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://ngo.Krakow.pl/zalacznik/319113>

document, the search for opportunities related to climate change is nothing more than downplaying the greatest global challenge of mankind.

## 6. The lack of a comprehensive information system on tree removals and the size of green areas

The website mentioned by municipal officials in the application is a bureaucratic, illegible tool. Additionally, it does not show exactly which tree is to be cut down, but only indicates the number of the land plot where that tree is located. This information is impractical and useless from the point of view of the residents. Since the establishment of the Municipal Greenspace Authority 6 years ago, residents have been calling for the creation of a transparent system of information about tree removals and procedures to prevent them. Such a system has not been created. Instead, residents are often acting on their own to publicize instances of tree removals.<sup>24</sup>

In response, the director of the ZZM insults them in public, whereas the Municipal Office claims that “many residents will never even notice the difference” when a tree is cut down. In 2020, the director called the residents who publicized the removal of an ancient tree on the boulevard along the Wisła river the “vile people”.<sup>25</sup>

What residents want is new, publically accessible city parks in their districts, which – according to the submitted competition application – have not even been planned. The remaining green areas in respective districts are earmarked for intensive development, despite protests from residents. This was the case with local plans for areas such as ulica Kobierzyńska, osiedle Podwawelskie or osiedle Kliny, where the Mayor rejected almost all the demands voiced by the residents regarding greenery, while accommodating the demands of investors, leading to a more dense development.

In February this year, the Mayor of the city – Jacek Majchrowski – argued that green areas constitute 52% of the city. A month later, his office claimed instead that the figure was 64%. Then, in May, the Mayor announced that it was as much as 72%.<sup>26</sup>

The veritable mine of information about the condition of urban nature is found in the official document entitled *Directions of Development and Management of Green Areas in Kraków for the 2019-2030 period*. It shows that 25% of Kraków’s inhabitants live outside the 300 meters access zone to green areas. This is a quarter of the population.

Another official document is a map of deficit areas in terms of public green spaces. It tells us that in the vast areas of Kraków, not only is there a deficit in access to such areas

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<sup>24</sup> <https://smoglab.pl/wycieli-drzewa-nad-wisla-w-Krakowie-urzed-czesc-mieszkanow-nawet-nie-zauwazy-ze-ich-nie-ma/>

<https://Krakow.wyborcza.pl/Krakow/7,44425,25881849,drwale-cieli-nielegalnie.html>

<sup>25</sup> <https://krowoderska.pl/maciej-fajak-twierdzisz-ze-jestem-podlym-czlowiekiem/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://krowoderska.pl/juz-64-proc-powierzchni-Krakowa-to-tereny-zielone/>

today, but also an increase of this deficit is anticipated. In addition, a dozen or so places have been marked even more emphatically – as areas of particular concentration of residents without access to public greenery. The city authorities are doing absolutely nothing about it; instead, they allow further intensive development of almost every available plot of land.

The director of ZZM suggested that old trees should be cut down preventively when they reach an age of 60 years, and replaced with new ones. When the residents were defending several hundred-year-old trees in the Kleszczów Forest, director Kempf took the side of the notorious state institution – the State Forests – which is infamous for conducting mass-scale logging.

## 7. Noise pollution

Noise is another problem faced by the inhabitants of Kraków, who continue to appeal to city officials and the Mayor for their right to silence to be respected, to no avail. Permits for fireworks displays, for open-air concerts in parks and sports fields with sound reinforcement systems, approvals for café and restaurant terraces, where guests make noise until the early hours – all these seem to be given out rather freely in our city. For years, residents have been requesting for music events not to take place in the city centre, in parks, on by the river.

To this day, Kraków hosts fireworks displays supported by the Municipal Office, which justifies it as tradition, even though these events generate noise at the level of 120 decibels. Residents believe that noise has a destructive effect on both wild and domestic animals that often run away in panic and perish.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> <https://glos24.pl/Krakow-koncerty-w-Krakowskich-parkach>  
<https://glos24.pl/Krakow-wypoczynek-czy-glosne-koncerty-w-Krakowskich-parkach-na-pewno-bedzie-tu-wiecej-osob>  
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2332432300364290>