



STRATEGIC FILE

No. 7 (70), April 2015 © PISM

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The Role of Local Governments in National Foreign Policy in Poland

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The international activity of local governments has become part of a larger process that includes the growing significance of non-governmental bodies in international relations, and the expanding role of local administration in the EU. Although cooperation between local governments is still focused on contacts between communities and sharing experience between particular local entities, more and more of their projects assume a broader international dimension. Such “local government diplomacy” has already become part of public diplomacy and can be used as a tool of foreign policy.

According to data from multiple sources,¹ about 70% of Polish local government units (provinces, districts, cities and villages) have had foreign partners in recent years. The level of commitment and intensity of this cooperation depends mostly on the size of these units. For example, all marshals' offices (which are at the head of provincial self-governments), and the majority of cities, maintain international contacts. Another important factor is geographical location. A municipality or province that is located close to the state land border is more likely to conduct joint action with a partner on the other side.

The scope of cooperation, purposefulness, and therefore efficiency are also varied. For a marshal's office or large city, international activity may become an important aspect for local development, including increasing competitiveness. However, for a small local government unit, such as a community (*gmina*) it is not a primary objective but usually an additional element supporting local tourism, promotion or cultural policy. For local governments in the border regions, regardless of their size, contact with the neighbouring country has become commonplace.

Legal Regulations and Local Government Prerogatives

Statutory regulations enforce the requirement of compliance between international activities of local governments and foreign policy priorities. According to the Regional Governments Act of 5 June 1998, a *sejmik* (provincial legislature) adopts priorities for the region's international cooperation, identifies the main objectives and geographical preferences, and plans for future cooperation in international regional associations. All activities must comply with Polish domestic law, as well as the state's foreign policy and its

¹ Polish nationwide study presented in: A. Skorupska (ed.), *Współpraca międzynarodowa samorządu gminnego*, Raport PISM, Warszawa, 2005; J. Taczyńska, *Współpraca polskich jednostek samorządu terytorialnego z władzami regionalnymi i lokalnymi oraz innymi podmiotami z państw objętych inicjatywą Partnerstwa Wschodniego*, Łódź, 2013; A. Fuksiewicz, A. Łada, Ł. Wenerski, *Współpraca zagraniczna polskich samorządów. Wnioski z badań*, Warszawa, 2012; *Studies in Polish Provinces: Samorządowy wymiar polskiej polityki zagranicznej. Diagnoza województwa łódzkiego*, Instytut Europejski, Łódź, 2013; *Współpraca międzynarodowa jednostek samorządu terytorialnego*, Ośrodek Debaty Międzynarodowej, Kraków, 2013.

international commitments, within the competence of the province's authorities. A resolution on a region's international cooperation priorities, and all international initiatives, must be approved by the minister responsible for foreign affairs. The law treats the international activity of the regional government as one of the basic elements of design and implementation of regional development strategy.²

Although other levels of local government are not required to adopt the strategy, the Act of 15 September 2000, on the rules of joining international associations of local and regional communities by local government units, also stress the need to comply with the state's foreign policy and its international obligations.³ Compliance with the priorities relates specifically to projects undertaken by the marshals' offices and by large cities, and applies to fields of cooperation and geographical directions.

With increasing awareness of the benefits of international cooperation and professionalisation of those responsible for international activities in local governments, coincidence, personal contacts or aspirations for relationship with foreign partners for the sake of prestige play a decreasing role. Focus on goals and specific actions begin to dovetail more often with the priorities of state foreign policy, though not always as a result of conscious effort.

New Geographical Directions

The geography of local government activities corresponds with Polish foreign policy priorities. More and more territorial units invest in relations with distant but prospective directions. There are more joint activities with Asian countries, particularly with China, South Korea, Taiwan and Kazakhstan.⁴

The dominant role of China is the result of both the interest of the Chinese authorities and business in closer relations at regional levels, and of Polish foreign policy priorities. Local authorities benefit from the fact that relations between the two countries are now the best that they have been for years, so cooperation between local authorities is gaining the political support of Warsaw and Beijing. China recognises the growing importance of Poland because of its political and economic stability, and its growing position in the European Union. China has more active partnerships with Poland than with many European countries (see table at the end of this paper).

The next prospect, less popular, but still a goal for bigger cities and regions, is Africa. This new direction for cooperation is in line with the government's strategy of "GoAfrica." Cooperation at this level with Eastern European countries, such as Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan, is also becoming more significant.

The primary driver for cooperation between local governments is to establish business contacts. In the case of relations with Asian, African and Eastern European countries, local authorities play a crucial role due to the fact that they legitimise potential business partners. For example, Chinese partners (more and more active in recent years) coming to Polish territorial units both large and small begin their visit with a meeting with representatives of the local authority. Even if cooperation is established between entrepreneurs, it is necessary to formalise relations at the level of local government. The involvement of a marshal or a mayor strengthens relationships, and validates and legitimises business partnerships.

In contacts with partners from Western or Southern Europe, entrepreneurs rarely use local government as an intermediary. The stable economy, good political and social relations facilitate business cooperation. There is no longer any need for the state or local government to support representatives of local companies.

² Dz.U. 1998, nr 9, poz. 576.

³ Dz.U. 2000, nr 91, poz. 1009.

⁴ The information used in this report was collected during in-depth interviews with representatives of Polish local governments. Interviews were carried out in the framework of a study for expertise on international cooperation of local government that is being prepared by PISM at the request of the Foreign Ministry.

Supporting the State's International Initiatives

Using international contacts, local governments, within the limits of their abilities, support the Polish government in important international initiatives. Intense cross-border cooperation with the Czech Republic and Slovakia correspond with another Polish foreign policy priority, which is the Visegrad Group (comprising Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia). Cross-border programmes covering the southern Polish border areas are among those most positively evaluated in the EU. Local governments from the south of Poland are also the first in the country to establish a new form of cooperation—European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC TRITIA and EGTC TATRY).

International cooperation by local governments has already served as an important tool of Polish foreign policy towards Ukraine. Poland supports process of decentralisation in Ukraine, where the Polish system of local governance is treated as an exemplary model. Local government reform is treated in Ukraine as an important element in the modernisation of the state and the political response to the security crisis caused by Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Polish local governments, which have many years of experience in dealing with local authorities in Ukraine, are eager to help with the reform. Despite the difficult situation there, and the need to suspend some joint initiatives, especially in eastern Ukraine, there are still numerous initiatives to support local communities, such as internships in Polish local government for Ukrainian officials, organised with the support of Polish Aid. Cultural and sport events have also been organised, and both sides are interested in joint trade fairs and business missions. Representatives of Polish territorial units share knowledge about local government organisations and other specialised fields connected with local governance. Polish local governments also try to strengthen their participation in initiatives related to the Council of the Baltic Sea States. Local government associations, such as the informal Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation and the Baltic Cities Union, provide opportunities to develop relationships with Scandinavian partners. Moreover, the latter has observer status in the Council of Baltic Sea States. Although cooperation with local partners from Scandinavian countries still seems to be underrated, environmental protection, sustainable development, innovation, renewable energy sources and functioning of local government offer significant potential for establishing closer, working relations.

Relationships with Partners from Politically Difficult Countries

Developing contacts at the level of societies is particularly important when intergovernmental relations are difficult. For example, relations at the local level have become for Poland an important channel for reaching out to Belarusian society. Local societies from Belarus are willing to engage in joint projects and enjoy the opportunity to become familiar with solutions of local governance. They also have a chance to form independent judgments and opinions about their western neighbours. Exchange visits for young people, and cultural events, offer Belarusians the opportunity to come to Poland, and learn about the Polish experience of European integration and economic development.

Local government cooperation with Russia has also served as an important tool for strengthening relations and developing trust. However, the current security situation has had a negative impact on developing new and maintaining existing relationships with partners from Russia. Numerous previous contacts are now non-active. At the same time, many representatives of Polish local government have shown an interest in maintaining and even developing cooperation with Russian partners from the Kaliningrad region, which shares a land border with Poland. The introduction of small border traffic law has had a very positive impact on socio-economic relations, and both sides are interested in maintaining these benefits, even extending them to the whole area of Warmia and Masuria (together, a province that borders the Kaliningrad oblast), despite the difficult political environment.

Stimulation of Local Economy

The increasing focus on economic cooperation in international local government relations stems both from pressure from above (the economy is now one of the key elements of Polish foreign policy) and from grassroots level (councillors and communities expect the development of business and investments).

The scope of local business support and efforts to pull investors into partnership units are dependent on local government funding. Marshals' offices and big cities, with significant budgets, can afford to organise trade missions, participation in trade fairs, or business promotion. Smaller units have limited capacity to co-finance promotional events, advertise them, transfer contacts and promote regional products. Supporting their business relationships is generally not so much a part of explicit cooperation strategy, but rather an additional element of other activities.

Local governments collaborate with various regional and national institutions in order to better support local business. The most commonly cited and positively rated entity is the Polish Information and Foreign Investment Agency.⁵ Embassies, especially the Department of Trade and Investment Promotion, and consulates, also play special roles, and local governments work closely with regional development agencies to implement various programmes geared towards the internationalisation of activities of operators. These agencies are also included in activities connected in particular with membership of regions in international associations of local governments.

The increasing importance of the cooperation of the business representatives is indicated by all marshals' offices and by a number of representatives of other levels of government. In the case of marshals' offices, supporting business relationships is an important part of regional development, and a way of building their own brand and improving the innovation performance in their regions. A large group of representatives of the lower level of territorial administration recognises that, although this is an important direction, not every local government has the capacity to support local business, and nor is this the role of local authorities. The last group is convinced that companies do not need an intermediary, especially since cooperation between business and local governments may give cause for concern about transparency or corruption.

Promoting and Combating Stereotypes

International cooperation of local governments is not only a good way to promote the municipality and region, but also Poland itself. The majority of local government representatives admit that promotion is an important element of their activities in foreign contacts. Cultural events, youth exchanges and cooperation of other social groups offer the opportunity to present the most important places, icons and local culture, and to tell the story of prominent historical people.

Most of the activities focused on supporting entrepreneurs also support the promotion of the local area, Polish products, and as a result the whole country. All business missions, trade fairs, and information sessions for potential investors are organised mainly to present what Poland has to offer. Through such activities, local governments are beginning to become integrated into the national campaign to promote the brand "Polska," which is supposed to integrate the activities of central and local governments in shaping the image of Poland abroad.

These activities also facilitate the promotion of some Polish solutions introduced after the democratic change of 1989. Reform of local government is now regarded as our export "product," especially to the Eastern Partnership countries. Additionally, local cooperation, direct contacts and personal experience are very effective ways to combat stereotypes and prejudices.

The efficiency of such activities and the level of their integration in the overall state strategy will depend on the ability of local governments to use their resources. It is especially important in the case of smaller units, which have limited instruments for influencing cooperation at their level. Nevertheless, by exploiting the

⁵ Cf. footnote 4.

possibilities offered by the new media, they can assure the cost effective promotion of both domestic and foreign events.

More activities are possible in larger units, equipped with greater financial and human resources capabilities. The marshals' offices can invite institutions such as regional tourist organisations to cooperate with them, and they can also prepare brochures and videos. Representatives of local authorities, however, point out the need to increase funding for promotion, and to focus on long-term campaigns that will present a specific image of the region. They are aware that Poland, as a whole, and Polish regions, are not well promoted.

Recommendations

It is necessary to bring local governments to wider debates and activities related to the promotion of Poland. The local government dimension in foreign policy as conducted by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the promotion of the role of local structures in creating the brand "Polska," suggest that a process in which there is room for cooperation and discussion has started. It is important to determine the technical issues, such as where to place the Polish and regional or city logos on promotional material. Better coordination of promotional activities and the exchange of promotional know-how could translate into greater efficiency.

The crucial issue is communication between the centre and the regions. Events beyond Poland's eastern border have shown the strength of the impact of the political situation at the local level. Local authorities cooperating with partners from Ukraine and Russia should receive clear messages from the Polish government about how to develop such relationships, what kind of initiatives should be suspended and which may be continued. Despite significant and improved communication with the MFA, large municipalities have declared the need to receive information (for example, in the form of a regular newsletter) on current trends and events, which would help conduct and plan activities in international cooperation. This would also ensure the synergy of foreign policy and the foreign activities of local governments.

Creation of a better communication channel between local governments and Polish missions abroad should be a way to improve the efficiency of the international activities of local governments. At present, the intensity of cooperation between these two sides varies, and is strongly determined by the personal involvement of employees of embassies and consulates in the activities of local governments. The Department of Trade and Investment sections at embassies should play a special role here. They are important for strengthening economic diplomacy in selected markets. If they were informed of the wider local government activity, they would be more effective in their actions.

The increasing role of local governments in public diplomacy could be better used by the Ministry of Economy in planning activities related to economic diplomacy. This should again encourage closer cooperation with the Department of Trade and Investment sections at Polish embassies, but also with the recently established Network of Investors' and Exporters' Service Centres (COIE). The goal of working together should be to support local entrepreneurs in countries where local governments already have their partners, but also to help in establishing new contacts in the countries in which the Polish local governments do not have too many partners, and which, such as, for example, India, Malaysia, Vietnam and South Africa, have become important economic partners.

EU financial assistance could play an important role in enhancing the impact of regional cooperation on the process of decentralisation in Ukraine and other EaP countries. The current discussion about a new form of Eastern Partnership is a good opportunity to create a special instrument to aid countries that have started the process of decentralisation. If directed at local governments (not only in Poland), this should subsidise projects focused on training officials and transferring knowledge and experience on local governance reform.

Countries with which Polish local governments have the most relationships, by level of activity (N)

Country	Very active	Active	Beginning	Not active	Ended	Total
Germany	28	60	2	2	2	94
Ukraine	9	42		23	2	76
Italy	1	16		16	9	42
France	7	20	1	5	2	35
Russia	2	13	2	15		32
Sweden	2	15	1	5	3	26
Czech Rep.	3	15	1	4		23
China		18	3	2		23
Lithuania	2	16		2	3	23
Slovakia	1	18		2		21
Belarus	4	9	1	2	3	19
Hungary	7	6		5		18
Total	66	248	11	83	24	432