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Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

Anna Maria Dwyer • Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal  
Justyna Szczudlik • Jolanta Szymańska • Marcin Terlikowski • Tomasz Żornaczuk

## Cooperation between Polish and Israeli Local Governments

Michał Wojnarowicz

*The local-government dimension of relations between Poland and Israel, mainly twin cities, remains limited by the small number of active partnerships. The existing cooperation initiatives, often very intensive, remain focused on historical and cultural issues. However, there is also visible potential for widening the scope to include startups and sustainable development programmes. The actions of local governments, appropriately supported by the central authorities, can strengthen the interpersonal dimension of relations. This is particularly important in the context of the Polish-Israeli dialogue on difficult matters.*

**Scope and Conditions of Cooperation.** The number of formal partnerships (mainly twin cities) between Polish and Israeli local governments exceeds 20. Since the 1990s, these agreements include both large cities (Warsaw and Tel Aviv) and medium-sized cities (Radomsko and Kiryat Bialik). Various administrative units (Radzyński County and Kiryat Motzkin) also cooperate and there are three-way formats with German cities (Gołdap–Stade–Givat Shmuel). The origins of the relations are often the outcome of the cities' specificity (Płońsk is the birthplace of David Ben-Gurion, who later was associated with the Ramat ha-Negev region of Israel). Geographically, most of the Polish partner cities are in the central and eastern part of the country and in Israel, in highly urbanised central districts.

In most cases, historical ties or personal relations serve as the starting point for establishing cooperation between Polish and Israeli local governments (e.g., the partnership between Białystok with Yehud, where one of that city's boroughs was established by emigrants from Poland in the 1950s). Very often, the grassroots initiators are former Jewish residents from a given city or region, gathered in a *ziomkostwa* (association). However, generational change means that these associations—being natural links between communities—limit their activities. NGOs and local leaders who deal with local Jewish heritage play a very important role in maintaining relations. Diplomatic missions are the traditional intermediary while in large city centres an auxiliary role is served by local Jewish communities (e.g., in Poznań). An additional network of contacts—much wider in scale and often conducted without the institutional involvement of local authorities—involves direct relations between schools, universities, and other local organisations.

Financial issues are an important factor in the cooperation of Polish-Israeli local governments. Many Polish cities, especially those with partnerships established in the 1990s, have suspended or significantly reduced the level of cooperation due to high costs (e.g., for organising visits), preferring partners closer geographically. The situation has improved somewhat in recent years with added flight connections. Flights to Israel operate from seven airports in Poland (including Rzeszów, Wrocław, Lublin). This has had a positive impact on interpersonal contacts, including the development of tourism. Some of the difficulties in the cooperation are administrative differences, including a lack of symmetrical partners on the Israeli side to match very active Polish voivodships, as well as personnel changes (e.g., after elections) among the city authorities, as well as cultural differences.

**Areas of Cooperation.** The partnerships between Polish and Israeli local governments are characterised by varying degrees of activity. While partnerships established in recent years remain intensive (e.g., Kiryat Motzkin and Włodawa, established in 2016), older relationships are often only a formal, inactive agreement or limited to courtesy contacts at the municipal authority level (e.g., participation in official city ceremonies). The shared Polish-Jewish history and memory is usually the main foundation of the cooperation. It includes commemorating the victims of World War II and the Holocaust as well as commemorating Jewish heritage in Poland. Some activities include contemporary Israel (e.g., celebrations of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Israel's independence, held in Płońsk). Thus, the majority of working partnerships (regardless of when they were established) focus on educational and cultural activities. One of the most common forms is cooperation between schools and youth exchange programmes, with a strong emphasis on the personal dimension (e.g., hosting by local residents). Activities from artistic and sports spheres (e.g., performances by local bands, exhibitions) complement these programmes.

In recent years, the role of the economy and innovation has been growing in the cooperation between local governments. However, this mainly concerns large cities with sufficient infrastructural and technological potential, which is often missing at the level of small and medium-sized cities, where the economic dimension of relations remains less visible. Israel is an attractive partner because of specialisation in high tech. Polish cities are interested in exchanging experience and establishing contacts, especially regarding startups (e.g., the participation of Polish companies in the DLD Innovation Festival in Tel Aviv) or promotion (e.g., consultations with Tel Aviv conducted by Łódź as a candidate for Expo 2022). Agencies for regional development and voivodships are also active in these areas, helping to organise economic missions and marketing activities in both countries. Tourism promotion is one of the main elements of cooperation. Sustainable development and the concept of “smart cities” is also included. The Polish and Israeli partners exchange experience with modern urban policy in the field of renewable energy, transport, water and spatial management, and solutions in environmental protection (e.g., air pollution).

**Possible Cooperation Instruments.** European and global cooperation platforms in which Polish and Israeli entities are present (e.g., European programs such as Intercultural Cities and Civitas) can be used to develop local government diplomacy. International cooperation networks (e.g., United Cities and Local Governments, or UCLG, Council of European Municipalities and Regions, or CEMR) also offer opportunities for deepening cooperation, as well as [European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation](#) in the future. The current intensification of Israel's relations with Central Europe might facilitate undertaking tripartite partnerships with Polish-Israeli partners and local governments from V4 countries and other countries in the region (e.g., Romania).

At the national level, the deepening of cooperation and securing financing for it will be supported with the inclusion Polish-Jewish cooperation as a component of a public diplomacy grant (available for local governments) organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A conference of partner cities from Poland and Israel could serve as a valuable initiative for intensifying official relations. It would allow for an assessment and update (or reactivation) of existing partnerships, as well as the exchange of experience and good practices in the cooperation.

**Perspective.** Partnerships between Polish and Israeli local governments—including non-institutionalised contacts—can be an important complement to bilateral relations, especially in the social dimension. With the permanence of historical and identity issues in Polish-Israeli relations, the potential is high for provoking negative emotions or presenting false information among the public, as seen recently in relation to the debate over Poland's amendment to the Institute of National Remembrance Act. The cooperation—not only in World War II remembrance—between local communities, with its apolitical and bottom-up character, is an effective tool for combating harmful stereotypes, relieving tensions in future crises, and in creating a positive image of both partners. The activation of local governments can allow, for example, an increase in the scale of youth meetings during traditional Israeli trips to places of remembrance in Poland (currently only about one in three trips includes a meeting with Polish peers). Investing in youth relations, as well as expanding the cooperation to include other areas (e.g., development and economic issues, also attractive for smaller partners) will secure the existing partnerships from weakening through generational change and will help maintain the continuity of contacts.