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Cooperation between Local Governments in Poland and MENA

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The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is not only a promising market for Polish entrepreneurs but also an interesting direction for cities and provinces. Federal states (the United Arab Emirates) and decentralised ones (Tunisia) in the region deserve the special attention of Polish local governments. Expo 2020 in Dubai will be an opportunity to involve local governments in the promotion of Poland in the MENA region, and to establish contacts with local authorities in Arab countries. Local government cooperation can supplement bilateral relations at the central level.

Selected Characteristics of the MENA Region. Most countries of the Middle East and North Africa (excluding Israel) are characterised by a high degree of de facto centralisation. In Egypt, the largest country in the region, the last local elections took place in 2008 and the next ones are planned for 2019. Provincial governors are elected and appointed by the president, while the prime minister appoints other high-level local officials. Even in countries where provincial councils, districts and municipalities are directly elected, in practice these offices depend on central authorities (Algeria) or have limited competences (Lebanon). The exceptions are the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is a federation, and those countries that have reformed territorial administration (Oman and Tunisia). Tunisia held its first local elections since 1957 in May 2018.

Local government cooperation with MENA countries may be easier than with other non-European partners, because many countries of the region are covered by the EU neighbourhood policy. This gives access to EU cooperation instruments, supports economic exchange owing to lower customs rates, and facilitates travel. Thanks to the EU aviation agreement with Jordan and Morocco, Poland has cheap and direct connections with these countries. The EU is negotiating further aviation agreements with Tunisia and Lebanon.

The MENA region is diverse in terms of wealth and local needs. There is economic complementarity at the level of local governments only in selected sectors. For example, in the rich UAE, Qatar and Kuwait, healthcare services are sought after, so health tourism will be one area in which cooperation with Polish local governments may be possible and useful. Direct flights from Warsaw to Doha and Dubai facilitate such cooperation. Because MENA is a young region (over 60% of the population is under 30 years old), educational cooperation will also be promising.

Past Experience and Challenges. Voivodship initiatives related to the MENA region focus on the organisation of expert seminars for local entrepreneurs in Poland, economic missions and participation in fairs. For example, the 2017 Polish-Egyptian economic seminar was organised by the Mazowieckie Voivodeship with the participation of Egyptian businessmen on the occasion of the visit to Poland by the Egyptian minister of trade and industry. Łódź is also interested in the MENA region. In October 2018, the Marshal's Office invited representatives of start-ups from Łódź to participate in the 38th Gitex Technology Week in Dubai.

Following the lifting of sanctions on Iran, economic missions and seminars for local entrepreneurs were organised in 2016. Organisers included the Dolnośląskie Voivodeship with the local chamber of commerce. Contacts developed well, thanks to the good image that Poland had established in Iran since the 1970s. In

February 2018, Tehran mayor Mohammad Ali Najafi visited Warsaw and encouraged Polish companies to invest in smart cities solutions in his city.

Several initiatives supported the decentralisation processes, such as those in Tunisia. In October 2014, a delegation of the authorities of Tunis observed the activities of the local government in Płońsk. In 2017, the mayor of Tunis got to know local city solutions in Warsaw, with special focus on the city's participatory budget. However, local governments do not have a financial instrument that would be appropriate for initiating larger projects related to the transfer of experience in decentralisation. Such tools are at the disposal of NGOs. For example, the Szczecin Foundation for the Development of Local Democracy conducts civic activism workshops for Tunisians.

Partnerships with Palestinian cities are an important cooperation tool. Palestine is a priority recipient of Polish Aid, which gives additional impetus to cooperation on the local level. Out of the three partnerships, between Lublin and Ramallah, Częstochowa and Bethlehem, and Poznań and Nablus, the first is most dynamic. The Lublin Andersen Theatre has cooperated with the Palestinian Yes and Al-Harah theatres, staging joint performances, workshops and festivals, since 2015. Lublin representatives visited Ramallah in April 2018 to seek opportunities for cooperation in the fields of environmental protection, culture, IT and tourism. The last sector is particularly important, as more than 100,000 Poles visit Israel and Palestine, including Bethlehem (Częstochowa's partner) annually. Cities organise concerts and workshops for music school students. However, taking into account the intense tourist traffic to Bethlehem, this partnership is falling short of its full potential.

An agreement between Kraków's and Moroccan Fez was signed in 1986 and renewed in 2010. This included cooperation in science and the conservation of monuments. Małopolska and Wielkopolska regions have been cooperating with Iraqi Kurdistan for several years. This has resulted in companies from Wielkopolska having a greater presence in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole (including the construction and food industries).

In addition to challenges resulting from cultural and geographical distance (such as travel costs and poorer knowledge of partners), political uncertainty also affects relations (for example around Iran, where there are many prospects for cooperation). So does social perception, with opinion polls showing that Poles have a low opinion of MENA residents.

Possible Forums and Cooperation Instruments. Local governments can already take advantage of the Dubai 2020 Expo. All voivodships have confirmed their willingness to participate in regional days at the event. Podlasie, as part of their promotion, hosted journalists from the UAE in October 2018. The exhibition will also be an opportunity for universities and polytechnics to send students for professional internships during the construction of the Polish Expo pavilion. Well-known architectural companies have headquarters in the UAE, which may facilitate closer contacts with Polish educational establishments. The UAE is looking for partners to implement its Centenary 2071 development plan, and Poland's presence among the six priority countries in this respect gives Polish local governments further opportunities.

EU and international associations are important forums for discussion and cooperation. The Dolnośląskie and Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodships, the cities of Gdańsk and Bydgoszcz, and partners from North Africa, are members of ALDA (the European Association for Local Democracy). Zachodniopomorskie Marshal Olgierd Geblewicz is chairman of the Commission for Sustainable Territorial Development at the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM), set up by the Committee of the Regions of the EU. Foreign Trade Offices of PAIH in Algeria, Morocco, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are also important instruments.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Local government cooperation with MENA countries is still limited in comparison with, for example, China. However, the region's steady development (about 3% annually), international events (Expo) and the search for new markets for Polish entrepreneurs may translate into greater interest from local authorities and more opportunities to promote Poland. In the longer term, it can also improve the trade balance. Of particular importance in this regard is that Polish regional offers are well-adjusted to the target state and partners, and that specific needs and niches for Polish know-how and products are identified. Offers and the promotional work by Polish companies should be limited to specific industries, including food, design, furniture, medical tourism and education. Polish tourist resorts, especially at the seaside, should examine the possibility of partnerships with their MENA counterparts, for example, in Egypt's Sharm el-Sheikh and Hurghada, more than 100,000 Poles spent their holidays between January and August 2018.

Ongoing cooperation between local governments in Poland and the MENA region may also serve to strengthen Poland's bilateral relations in a situation where more intense contacts with a given state face obstacles at the central government level (for example, Iran). In the case of Palestine, it would be a bold move to increase Poland's visibility in the region by setting up a partnership between a Polish town and the city of Gaza (Gaza's European partners include Dunkerque, Turin, Tromsø and Barcelona). A joint initiative of European partner cities for Gaza could help improve the humanitarian situation in that city.