



BULLETIN

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Poland and the Eastern Partnership Countries: Cooperation amongst Local Governments

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The increasing activity of local governments in cooperation with the Eastern Neighbourhood is an important contribution by local and regional authorities to achieving the objectives of the Eastern Partnership. However, there are a lot of restrictions that hinder such cooperation. On the one hand, there is insufficient decentralisation and a consolidation of local autonomy, and connected with this is insufficient financial autonomy on the side of the EaP countries. On the other hand, border infrastructure and visa policies remain underdeveloped, which, despite attempts to assist, remain a barrier to contact at the local level.

The increasing activity of Polish local governments in foreign relations is visible both in their active membership in international organisations and in cooperation with local governments in other countries. Although local government international cooperation data are only estimates and as such are rarely representative, it can be assumed that more than 70% of counties and 50% of municipalities have a foreign partner. The initiation of the Eastern Partnership and EU financial assistance programmes have strengthened further contact with local authorities in Ukraine and Belarus, and has created the opportunity to interact with more distant countries, such as Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. For example, all of the voivodship marshals' offices have declared they cooperate at some level with their Ukrainian counterparts, and half of them with Belarusian ones. In turn, at the municipal level the governments in Ukraine have been the second most-popular partners for cooperation for nearly 10 years.

Problems and Challenges. Despite the increased activity of local governments in Poland, there is still a large group of municipalities and counties that do not cooperate with foreign countries. The main reasons for this are the lack of specialised people, money, and information about available assistance programmes and other ongoing tasks. Many of the initiatives are financed or co-financed by the local government. In larger cities, where counties or regions finance conferences, events, and training, or have financial resources for their own contribution to larger projects, this is not a challenge. For smaller municipalities and rural areas, especially those far from the borders, staff shortages or the need to find funds for the first joint projects are too great an obstacle. In addition, negative public perception of foreign travel by representatives of local authorities, though necessary at the first stage of cooperation, discourages local governments from participating in projects, especially with geographically dispersed partners.

With the development of local councils' international relations, the form they use and areas they focus on are changing. Letters of intent or partnership agreements are no longer relevant if they are not accompanied by the implementation of joint projects. Many of the initiatives, especially of the smaller ones, have concentrated on cultural and sporting events or on youth exchanges. With the development of cooperation, the economic sphere is more and more important. The areas of cooperation have been extended by the financial programmes that are now available. Funding is provided for actions that lead to more sustainable and measurable results of joint projects. In development projects funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is important that the actions are consistent with the priorities of Polish foreign policy. There are areas of cooperation defined for each EaP state that should be implemented in joint projects.

Among the main barriers to cooperation are also some restrictions on partners in the EaP countries. The lack of a decentralised local government and fiscal autonomy limit the possibilities for joint activities. Local authorities often

do not have their own funds to finance large projects. Additionally, in the case of countries such as Belarus, due to the political situation, the scope of potential actions is also limited. Local authorities get approval and financial support for projects only in areas such as culture, tourism, and environmental protection. In addition to the difficult political situation in Armenia and Azerbaijan, cooperation is hampered by geographical distance and the smaller number of available assistance programmes.

Opportunities. In the last two decades, the importance of cities and regions in international relations has increased significantly. Since 2012, they have been able to use instruments from the Polish MFA, which allocated PLN 3.5 million in 2013 to support civil society and local government aspects of Polish foreign policy and clarified the direction of cooperation. The MFA has launched Regional Centers of International Debate (RCID), which is tasked with gathering information on the activities of social partners, including local governments, and the exchange of information both within the region and with the MFA. In addition to debates and conferences, there should also be access to information about available assistance programmes and the possibility of consultation at the preparation and execution stages of projects. Also in 2013, the Polish Standing Conference on the International Cooperation of Local Governments was established as a platform for contact between local authorities and the government. The main subject of the second meeting, held in June, was the Eastern Partnership. The international activity of local governments is an effective tool to promote Poland and support the Eastern Partnership initiative. In 2011, in Poznań, the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership was formed. The conference, which consists of 16 elected representatives of the EU who are also members of the Committee of the Regions, along with 16 representatives of the EaP countries, is a political forum for discussion, consultation, supervision, and monitoring on all issues at the local and regional levels that are connected with the EaP.

The local and regional government dimension also appears in the broader context of international relations. Terms such as globalisation, efficiency, innovation and competition concern not only businesses and governments but also local administration. New financial assistance programmes will be used to purchase new technologies and invest in innovative projects. These kinds of projects are in the interest of the EaP states. They care not only for the exchange of best practices and local government reform experience, but increasingly for the acquisition of knowledge concerning the development of an innovative economy, building the brand in larger cities and regions, and in developing cooperation with local businesses and research centres.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Cooperation at the local and regional levels is an important dimension of foreign policy in which the direct involvement of local communities leads to a better understanding of the concept of integration and an increased sense of participation in important political processes, thereby strengthening support for European integration. An example of this could be Ukraine. Due to the longstanding international operation of cross-border initiatives, the local authorities from western Ukraine have access to a greater number of assistance programmes than the rest of the country. This is undoubtedly one of the factors consolidating strong support for EU among the inhabitants of the western part of the country.

Despite numerous meetings and training sessions for local government, there is still a large number of local authorities who are not convinced of the merits of international activities or who do not feel prepared to organise them. The new aid programmes should have clearly defined selection criteria, a clear definition of rules and regulations, and should articulate the expected effects of the projects. The next step would be to plan a wide information campaign on the benefits of cooperation with companies from abroad and available assistance programmes. Apart from the MFA and RCID, an important role could be played by regional governments, which already have a lot of experience in moving cooperation beyond national borders and that know the specifics of their regions.

While preparing local governments for international cooperation, more attention should be paid to the selection of partners and the areas of cooperation. The end of a project or its funds should not mean the end of joint initiatives. In accordance with the Act of 5 June 1998, the regional assembly, with the approval of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, shall establish priorities for international cooperation in a region. To increase the chances of getting financial assistance, and of the success of the projects, regional governments should monitor the accomplishment of goals of Polish foreign policy in their international activities. They should also discuss the directions of cooperation with local governments.

Furthermore, the inclusion of other local players—NGOs, businesses, and research centres—in international cooperation will encourage the innovation and development of new technologies, and strengthen the region's position in dealing with local authorities of other countries.