



BULLETIN

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International Networks of Local Governments as an Effective Tool of Influence

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When the significance of local structures grows in international relations, the nature and objectives of networks of local governments change. Their lobbying and promotional role increases. Networks join discussions on current events, for example, Juncker's Investment Plan. Thematic networks are growing in importance, as each focuses on achieving a specific goal, such as the reduction of CO₂ emissions, or promoting innovation. Polish membership of various types of local government associations may become an important development factor, reinforce the promotion of Poland, and fit in with the priorities of Polish foreign policy.

It is difficult to estimate the exact number of the international networks of local government units. Many of them have a long history and strong positions, while others, though established many years ago, are no longer very active. Still others are created to achieve a specific goal, and then are dissolved. In view of the increasing role of lobbying, the majority of active players register with the Transparency Register, operated jointly by the European Parliament and the European Commission. There are currently about 50 registered international associations active in the fields of "regional policy" and "trans-European networks." However, with the rise in activity of different new organisations, their number can be estimated at more than 150 networks, including those that are registered.

Diversity of Local Networks in Europe. Many different typologies of networks can be created, depending on the criteria adopted. One indicator can be the type of associated entities: a network in which members are only local governments (for example the Peri-Urban Regions Platform Europe—PURPLE), or a network in which local governments are accompanied by NGOs, universities, and private entities (such as the Association of Cities and Regions for Recycling and Sustainable Resource Management—ACR+). Another criterion is the geographical factor: organisations focusing on a particular region (for example, Baltic Sea States Subregional Co-operation), border (The Association of European Border Regions) or global organisations (Cittaslow).

There are also associations that coordinate the actions of national organisations, such as the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, of which the Association of Polish Cities is a member.

The largest associations administer budgets of several million euro, but for most organisations their budgets range from a few tens to a few hundred thousand euro. The primary sources of budgets source are membership fees (from several thousand to several hundred euro per year, depending on the size and wealth of the local government), followed by EU subsidies and internal income. In recent years, due to high dues and the great importance of the financial crisis that began in 2008, governments have withdrawn from the most costly and inefficient networks.

Polish Local Governments in International Networks. The promotion of local governments, lobbying in the EU, prestige, exchange of experiences, new contacts and the chance to participate in international projects are the main reasons behind the Polish local governments' membership of international networks. Among 50 networks included in the Transparency Register are more than 20 in which Polish units are members. Together, according to *Monitor Polski* (the Official Gazette of the Polish Government) and a survey about the international activity of local governments, Polish entities are members of more than 50 international networks.

Among the largest networks that have Polish partners are the Assembly of European Regions (AER) and The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR). Regarding large cities, one of the most influential networks is

Eurocities, which has six Polish members and whose secretary general in 2012–2014 was the mayor of Warsaw. Other active organisations uniting smaller Polish local government units are the Covenant of Mayors and Cittaslow.

There are also numerous small-scale networks that are much less beneficial for local governments. In the 1990s, and at the beginning of the 21st century, membership of networks was associated with prestige and an opportunity to exchange experiences. Nowadays, because of high fees and scarce benefits, local governments tend to leave these associations. Nevertheless, some of the governments, despite the lack of advantages, decide to stay, counting on future gains such as new partners for cooperation or more effective ways of promotion.

Different Ways of Interaction. Despite the fact that large networks strictly political in nature tend to dominate the landscape, there is a growing number of associations devoted to specific issues such as health, food, energy, tourism, the environment, or a specific branch of industry.

Politics and lobbying. Single cities or regions are not able to influence the decisions made by the European Union, but their representatives in the European Committee of Regions and international networks are starting to play an increasing role in the decision making processes. At the end of January 2015, the representatives of the five global networks of local governments and the European Commission signed, for the first time, a strategic partnership regarding joint efforts towards tackling poverty and inequality, promotion of democracy, and sustained development. The EU funds for 2015–2017 destined for the associations amounted to €20.3 million.

One of the best examples of effective lobbying is the Basque Country. One of the region's priorities was the enhancement of transit, especially moving transport from roads to railways and sea (through "sea highways"). In 2005 the Basque Country, using CPMR funding, prepared a study devoted to short-distance sea transport, which was the basis of a joint Spanish and French project presented to the European Commission in 2007.

Promotion. Membership of various associations is a promotional tool for a region or city, but it is also an opportunity for a local government to present its position in the international context. The Polish Podlaskie region, as a CPMR member, uses this network as a forum for the presentation of the Polish position towards the countries of the Eastern Partnership. There are also networks with the main aim of promoting local governments in a particular area. In this category are some associations established to promote regional products and culinary collaboration, such as the Association of European Regions for Products of Origin (AREPO) and the European Network of Regional Culinary Heritage. Products meeting the criteria of the "locality" and healthy foods, are placed on the European map of products promoted extensively throughout Europe. The activity of the network is carried out in cooperation with local producers and entrepreneurs.

Energy and climate. The role of thematic networks, aimed at achieving particular goals, is growing. If a city wants to become a signatory to the Covenant of Mayors it should make a public statement of commitment to reduce CO₂ emissions (there are currently 34 Polish signatories). The objectives of these organisations are part of the Polish and EU strategies. Examples include associations engaged in energy projects, the environment, and sustainable development. Among the most active are the Climate Alliance, the Covenant of Mayors, the Energy Cities network, and the Regions and Renewable Energy Network. Their activities can enter modern solutions at the local level, increase energy efficiency, and implement elements of climate policy. The European Commission, in view of the effectiveness and attractiveness of the activities of the Covenant of Mayors, has expressed the wish to help this organisation to flourish all over the world so the EU will remain a leading example in the field of climate protection and an innovative approach to energy.

Economy, innovation. Networks oriented towards supporting sectoral cooperation of local businesses (clusters) are of increasing importance. Networks have been becoming the platform for debates, and exchanges of information, know-how, services and training. The European Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN), with seven local units from Poland, is an active network supporting important tasks for the EU, Poland and local governments. The organisation is working to strengthen the exchange of knowledge and innovation in Europe. Among the members are universities as well as regions. Among the narrow thematic associations can also be included the Network of European Regions Using Space Technologies (NEREUS), for regions active in the aerospace industry, and the European Chemical Regions Network (ECRN). Mazovia, a member of the latter, uses the network to improve its competitiveness, to integrate the whole sector, and to construct the Mazovian Chemical Cluster.

Summary. Polish local governments do not fully exploit the potential benefits of membership of the most active and prestigious networks. They also maintain an unnecessary presence in associations that do not require active performances or provide measurable benefits. Regions and large cities are concentrating on promotion and the exchange of experiences, while they do not involve themselves in lobbying activities. There is still little knowledge among local governments on effecting lobbying and image building. The example of effective lobbying by the Basque Country shows how important it is to place a local problem in the international context.

A local government that joins a particular association should treat the network as part of local development, have clear goals, and plan its activities related to participation. Adding local participants and entities to cooperation with networks may provide a beneficial outcome. It is important to integrate the objectives pursued by network membership with local development objectives, local needs and specificity, the development strategy of the region, the priorities of Polish foreign policy, and the position of these objectives in EU policies.