

# Metropolitan Areas in Poland: In Search of a New Form of Local Government after a Decade of Reform

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**Abstract:** *The boundaries of functional areas (especially metropolitan ones) crossed the administrative divisions of central cities a long time ago. Twenty years after the collapse of the communist regime, ten years since the beginning of an administrative reform and five years of EU membership, a problem of governance in these areas has become an absorbing issue on the Polish political scene. In the 1990s building a system of local and regional government was a crucial part of democratization process. Nowadays effective local authorities, especially in the biggest cities, constitute a basis of economic growth. The article dwells on the role of metropolitan areas in the development of Polish regions. It reveals a crucial role of effective metropolitan management in regional and national development Poland (especially under the conditions of innovative economy) and the effects of the position of metropolitan areas' authorities on public administration in Poland.*

**Keywords:** *Metropolitan areas, Poland, city, local and regional government, development*

## From People's Republic to civic society

For the 'Solidarity' in the 1980s the principles of self-management and self-government were the expression of the collective desire to control the process of production and redistribution in the best interest of all. A self-governing republic was proclaimed by the 'Solidarity' in 1981 in the Program of its First Congress. According to it, the self-management company was to be the foundation upon which the self-government state would be based (Cirtautas, Mokrzycki 1995: 127). Eight years later, during a meeting of the Round Table, it was a crucial problem, especially for the opposition, because the power at the lowest level could

guarantee the basic rights. Without decentralization it is impossible to build a civil society. It is also not possible to define the role of the central government and its regional organs. During the negotiations in 1989 the communist authorities did not want to share the power at the local level. The government side approved of semi-independent local bodies that would at the same time serve as the organs of the state administration at the local level. Reforming the state division system used to be a typical implementation of controlling the system. For instance, in 1975 the First Secretary of The Central Committee of The Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) Edward Gierek, in order to make his position more secure, increased the number of provinces from 17 to 49. He also eliminated *powiats* — a middle level of administrative division. This allowed for strengthening the position of the central organs with regard to the territorial units (Kamiński 2001: 320–322) and both the opposition and the communists were conscious of this.

In July 1989 the newly-restored Senate prepared an initiative on local self-government. On 19 February 1990 the draft of a new Act was ready to be sent to the Sejm. Before that the Constitution had been changed (29 December 1989) and the new Article 5 proclaimed the Republic of Poland (the state was renamed from People's Republic of Poland) guaranteed the participation of the local self-government in exercising power. On 8<sup>th</sup> March 1990 the *Sejm* passed the Local Self-government Act and changed the Constitution by adding the part about the local self-government. In the following months, acts of municipal clerks, local elections, dividing competence between state and local units and City of Warsaw Act were passed (Dudek 2007: 80–81). Unfortunately, the reform was incomplete, in particular, concerning the issue of financing, because of the opposition in segments of T. Mazowiecki's government. Consequently, self-government was established only at the commune (*gmina*) level.

On 27 May 1990 free local elections in communes were held. The results of citizens' participation were not impressive (the turnout was only 42,27 percent). But it must be emphasized that the Polish society had a very bad experience with forced election participation. Before 1989 the citizens of the People's Republic of Poland were forced to participate in the political life and 'elections'. The authorities 'encouraged' people to take part, for instance, by refusing to give them a passport. After such a significant shift, in the new situation the citizens could decide for themselves (Kurczewska, Bojar 2005: 156). Moreover, a relatively low level of participation is typical for post-communist states, whereas the weakness of civil society does not pose any serious danger for the young democracy (Howard 2002: 157–158). Therefore, that situation was the evidence not only of new problems, but also of democratic success.

## The Reform

After the election of 1997, the new Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek, supported by 'Solidarity' and several other anti-communist opposition forces, managed to launch a reform. In 1998, a new three-level administrative and local self-government systems were established. Apart

from being divided into communes, Poland was also divided into 364 *powiats* (counties and municipalities with county status), and 16 voivodships (provinces). The second goal of the reform was to establish self-government at new levels and divide the responsibilities between the local and government administration. The county bodies of self-government became the only form of local administration. Thus, the county has a self-governmental character, but at the same time it performs specific tasks commissioned by the central government or province (Wiatr 2002: 11). Units of local and regional government do not form a hierarchic structure of power, voivodship do not control *powiat*, which, in turn, do not supervise *gmina*. Only the state government (directly or through the agency of voivod), Regional Financial Chambers, and independent courts oversee local authorities.

In the regions the power is divided between the government and the self-government administration. The head of the state administration in province, a voivod (*wojewoda*) has to co-operate with self-government bodies at this level: a provincial assembly (*Sejmik*) and its executive — The Board — with a Marshal of Voivodship (*marszałek województwa*). Regional self-government has full responsibility for strategic and spatial (physical) planning at this level of administrative division. The role of counties in the public administration is limited, with no specific planning responsibilities. These changes were crucial from the point of view of the future Polish membership in the European Union. Large self-reliant regions could be an advantage as they ensure a more efficient access to structural funds (Wiatr 2002: 11–12). Thus, the new structure was adapted to NUTS (Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics) — the system of European Statistical Office (Lubiatowski et al. 1999):

- NUTS 1 – 6 groups of voivodships
- NUTS 2 – voivodships
- NUTS 3 – sub-regions (66 groups of counties)
- NUTS 4 – counties and towns/cities with county status (*miasto na prawach powiatu*),
- NUTS 5 – communes (including towns/cities with county status)

## Large cities and Surroundings

Unfortunately, no solutions for metropolitan areas were envisaged in the new administrative system. In Poland there are no traditions of cities having special metropolitan status. The only exception is the capital City of Warsaw, but in this case it is difficult to claim a conscious solution (Nizolek 2008: 46). The uniformity of management structure in the administrative system is closely connected with the tradition of a unitary state in twentieth-century Poland. Meanwhile, building metropolitan areas is an objective process, accelerated by the shift of 1989, free market economy and globalization.

‘The metropolis in the twentieth century is not just a larger city, but a qualitatively new form of human settlement. It is larger, more complex and plays a more commanding central role — economic, political and cultural — than the industrial city and town that preceded it.’ (Agnotti 1993: 1). There are several groups of metropolitan functions:

- administrative

- decision
- transport
- knowledge
- tourism

The growth of the metropolitan areas is not just a simple change of cities' boundaries. It is a process of taking over the same executive functions in the postindustrial economy by the largest cities. Depending on a scale of the process, we distinguish global, continental and regional metropolitan cities. To create such potential, a core city should have, depending on various criteria, at least half a million inhabitants (however, in order to create 'a standard metropolitan statistical area' in the USA a core /city town should have only 50 000 inhabitants. This is explained by the fact that a metropolitan status in the US is different from its European counterpart) (Jałowiecki 2002: 36–39).

In Poland the legal status of a small rural commune is very similar to the one of a large city. Though there are about sixty towns and cities area communes with county status, among them are small towns from 50 000 people to the cities having the population of over half a million. What is more, as mentioned above, *powiat* rights are limited and rather inappropriate for big cities.

The most crucial challenges for the metropolitan management in Poland are (Pankau 2005: 135):

- the lack of a coherent plan for planning and growth of public services
- the inefficient system of public transport (internal and external)
- disorderly suburbanization, posing danger for cultural heritage and the environment
- the need to revitalize devastated housing estates, post-industrial and post-military areas (e.g. abandoned Soviet Army's garrisons)
- the absence of an official body responsible for planning and development
- limitation (or lack of goodwill) in cooperation between local government units

## Management in metropolitan areas

Co-operation in the metropolitan areas is a necessity, since many public services have network nature. The process of suburbanization leads to the fact that people live at the outskirts of cities, but work, study, shop etc. in the city centre, or core. A lot of public facilities cross administrative borders (e.g. specialized health care, higher education, environmental protection), many are too expensive to be conducted by a small commune alone. New relations between the city and its surroundings create a 'space of flows', an interrelation between a core city and its suburbs.

In the contemporary innovative economy only the strong core city with its surroundings is able to supply proper conditions for research-intensive industries and knowledge-intensive services. This is crucial for building a competition advantage in modern economy (Kaczmarek, Mikula 2007: 23–25).

In general, there are 3 types of metropolitan co-operations (Kaczmarek, Mikuła 2007: 29–31):

- territorial units of higher level
- co-operation in the legal form: associations (voluntary or compulsory), corporations (e.g. Ltd. Companies)
- co-operation without legal frames — informal relations, conferences, forums etc.

Nowadays in Poland we can find only the third type of co-operation and some examples of the second one. Municipality with county status is not a territorial unit of higher level, since it has the same territory as a town/city commune, thus there is no co-operation.

## Metropolitan areas in Poland

In the current section we will identify the metropolitan areas in the Polish cities. Depending on various criteria, there are at least several metropolitan areas. For instance, according to OECD's (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) determinants (based on a number of inhabitants, population density, time of commuting etc.), metropolitan areas can be identified around the following cities:

- Warsaw
- Krakow
- Poznań
- Wrocław
- Gdańsk (the so-called Tricity: Gdańsk–Gdynia–Sopot)
- Katowice (Upper Silesia Conurbation)

OECD is preparing a list of metropolitan areas, taking under consideration NUTS 3 classification to delimit their boundaries.

Another proposal comes from ESPON (European Spatial Planning Observation Network) and, apart from the six above-mentioned areas, recognizes also the cities of Łódź and Szczecin. ESPON divides metropolitan areas into five classes: 'global nodes, European engines, strong MEGA, potential MEGA, weak MEGA'. Among eight Polish cities only Warsaw is recognized as 'potential MEGA', the rest fall into the 'weak' category.

The guidelines of METREX (The Network of Metropolitan Regions and Areas) allow us to add a bipolar structure of Bydgoszcz and Toruń to the list of metropolitan areas in Poland. According to The National Spatial Arrangement Policy (*Koncepcja Przestrzennego Zagospodarowania Kraju*), The Union of Polish Metropolises (*Unia Metropolii Polskich*) singles out about twelve areas including Białystok, Lublin and Rzeszów (as potential ones). Among the proposals of metropolitan areas' scope one can also enumerate 24 statistical areas (based on the US conception) or 27 metropolises (according to International Metropolitan Observatory) (Kaczmarek, Mikuła 2007: 121–126; Lubiatowski et al. 1999).

Most of the largest cities in Poland are experimenting with different models of cooperation, but they are limited by their legal status. One possible solution is to establish a

single-purpose association e.g. for planning investment on a scale exceeding one commune. 'Another way of cooperation undertaken by largest cities are attempts to establish the body that would coordinate the governing of the whole metro area in a comprehensive way' (Lackowska 2007: 140–141). Unfortunately, the efficiency of such cooperation in the present legal environment is low. But, 'it is still better and more beneficial for the metropolis to undertake such an action than to leave the scene deprived of cooperation' (Lackowska 2007: 153). What is more, any kind of bottom-up cooperation of local authorities could be a useful experience for the central government preparing a new reform.

## Conclusion

The crucial issue in governing the metropolitan area is the engagement of numerous groups of partners, which could lead to the fragmentation of public administration, since the partners are the administrative units with different potential.

Another issue is tensions between different groups in the metropolitan area, since 'The city is an arena in which different groups are always seeking to advance their interests and protect their position' (Short 2004: 57). Among these groups are inhabitants who are taxpayers in one commune and users of public services in another one, outer (especially multinational enterprises) and domestic (family business) investors, local politicians (including members of nationwide political parties).

Nowadays the crucial dispute in Poland is over a model of regional policy. The advocates of a centralist and compensatory system still have a strong position and hinder the implementation of pro-competitive and decentralist reforms. Unfortunately, in spite of the negative experience from many centralized states (e.g. Italy), that model of regional policy was deeply rooted in Poland during the two decades of transformation, when the structure of lobbies was formed (Hausner 2001: 8–10). In the official reports, like the one of the National Spatial Arrangement Policy (Government Centre For Strategic Studies 2001), this problem was addressed in the following way: 'Due to a general and considerable civilisational distance between Poland and developed countries, in the Polish reality it is necessary to give priority to efficiency over equality to liquidate this distance. There is a need to accept tendencies to polarize areas for development that are so natural in the case of a market economy as the shortest way to attain efficiency through the concentration of socio-economic activity in places that are most favorable for capital. This, however, does not mean unconditional agreement to the permanent polarization of geographical areas in Poland, i.e. the concentration of socio-economic activity in metropolitan regions and leaving their support on peripheries' (p. 11). Still, the degree of implementation of this proposal is still insufficient.

The Polish government is preparing a new legal regulation for metropolitan areas. However, as long as short-term issues are dominating public debate and political factors are deemed more important than the objective ones, the final result, a new 'Metropolitan Areas Act', cannot be seen as a bringing real change for the regional (and local) development. What is more, metropolitan reforms must be complemented by general reform of the administra-

tive structure and the self-government institutions. The model implemented in 1999 proved that local and regional government could be an efficient part of public administration. That's why it should be further developed and the creation of metropolitan areas should become the primary target of the reform.

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