

REGIONAL-LEVEL COOPERATION BETWEEN POLAND, CZECH AND SLOVAK REPUBLICS: NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Katarzyna Szmigiel

Uniwersytet Warszawski, Wydział Geografii i Studiów Regionalnych, Zakład Geografii Społeczno-Ekonomicznej, Warszawa, Poland

Abstract: International relations in Eastern Europe must be reformulated at all their levels in view of the integration of the region's countries with the European Union. Integration considerably changes the context for international relations, including such issues as the formal framework for international cooperation and the mode of its financing. In addition to that, EU integration has forced changes in the organization of the state administrative system in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, which will affect the extent of involvement of local governments in such activity.

The aim of the paper is to present the findings from a study in international cooperation, carried out in Polish regional government units. The paper also presents some of the research findings concerning cooperation between Polish, Slovakian and Czech regions.

Key words: administrative region, international cooperation, local government, regional policy

Worldwide processes which have led to an intensification of international contacts between regional governments include globalization, economic and political integration, changed functions of state borders and changes in the organization of local governments. These processes are naturally interdependent, and most phenomena cannot be explained without referring to them all. In the circumstances of developing international relations between local and regional governments, globalization is seen as an increasing role of the international context for socio-economic development of territorial units as such. As a result of globalization, political and economic effectiveness of territorial units management depends on the ability to gain advantages and neutralize threats caused by the international environment. Although this is not a phenomenon which can be said to have currently dominated the operation of all territorial government units, it is certainly growing in importance. It is still more important in the context of gaining competitive advantages rather than neutralizing threats posed by development, especially in less developed countries.

Political and economic integration is of major importance to regional governments in Europe. It adds an international aspect to the direct environment in which regional

governments operate, institutionally, legally, economically and also politically. Legislation passed by the European Union has a growing, direct influence on its operations (regional policies, environmental protection, industrial relations, protection of competition), and opens the way for a role to be played by international, not only political but also economic, bodies. Economic bodies can be involved because following economic integration foreign entities have a better access to the local markets, and also because small and large international entities are increasingly becoming significant market players.

Changed functions of the borders represent aspects of political and economic integration which should be emphasized in the context of international contacts between local and regional governments. Firstly, it is so because cross-border cooperation is one of the processes underpinning the very idea of European integration; the first Euroregions came into being along with the establishment of the first European integration institutions. Cross-border cooperation is still regarded as one of the first steps in the integration of new countries with the European Union (for example the significance of PHARE Cross Border Cooperation programme in Poland). In addition to that, cross-border cooperation gave rise to the key EU instrument for supporting international cooperation between local and regional governments – the INTERREG Community Initiative, which in turn has produced one of the three EU regional policy objectives for the years 2007 – 2013 (The Cohesion Report).

Secondly, the function of the state border has a distinct and direct effect on the territorial units at the lower level than the state as such. The state border is a barrier which cuts off the spheres of influence of the units situated in its vicinity, and therefore, by diminishing the significance of the border as a barrier, directly affects local and regional governments. It should also be emphasized that not all state borders are diminishing their separating function as a result of European integration. Until now, the tendency at the eastern border of the European Union has been the opposite.

Changes in the organization of the local and regional governments and its operation are related to new approaches to the ways in which it performs an administrative function, and to its political role. In theories concerning contemporary modes of local and regional governments operation: 'power to' (Stone, 1989 after Hambleton, 2002), New Public Management (cf. e.g. Hood, 1991; Dunleavy and Hood, 1994 after Hambleton, 2002), or governance (cf. e.g. Jon, 2001) the role of local and regional government as partners is emphasized, as those institutions (among many) whose task is to coordinate, and not regulate processes occurring in a territorial unit. Such a role of local and regional government units necessitates an openness to local, regional, national and international actors.

Changes in the organization of local and regional government as a system of decentralizing power in individual countries are also pertinent. Since the 1950s, the development of the intermediate level (mezo-level) in the state administration can be observed. This tendency, reinforced in the 1980s, is still gaining in importance (Italy, Spain, France, Denmark, Scandinavia, each with a different intensity of the process). Regional level administration (the first tier below the central level) has more and more independence not only because it is being transformed from elected government into appointed government, but also because as local and regional government administration it is becoming increasingly autonomous (Goldsmith, 2005). This process can also be observed in Eastern Europe.

On the one hand, the establishment of a new tier of administration in an era of economic and political integration in Europe makes integration processes more influential in the formation of new units (for example emergence of regions in Poland). On the other hand, their presence on the international scene is defined as one of the functions of the new administration tier. For instance, in Poland the responsibility of the regional government for involvement in international contacts is stipulated in parliamentary legislation; it is also one of the bodies responsible for the implementation of projects co-financed by the EU. There are many indications to believe that its role in this respect will grow (e.g. the National Development Plan 2007 – 2013 for Poland).

On the basis of such processes affecting the development of international cooperation, we can distinguish theories which help to analyse international contacts of regional governments. Broadly speaking, these are theories pertaining to further development and current forms of globalization processes, economic theories discussing the benefits of abolishing barriers in the flow of production factors, and theories of knowledge based economy. Speaking more narrowly, these are theories concerning the development of local and regional governance institutions, such as New Public Management and governance, and, finally, those directly pertaining to the international contacts of local and regional governments, and categorizations of the attitudes of local and regional governments to European integration (cf. e.g. Goldsmith after Swianiewicz, 2000), as well as classifications of contacts between the local and regional governments themselves (cf. e.g. Baldersheim and Stahlberg, 1999).

The tendencies described above are particularly strong in Central Europe. European integration tends to produce results outlined above, related to changed border functions, and exerts an influence on the shaping of regional government as such, on its functions and competences, and frequently on its financial capability.

The factors which have the strong impact include: implementation of EU funds, EU foreign policy (which will be implemented via the European Neighbourhood and Preaccession Assistance Instrument) and INTERREG Community Initiative (after 2007 to be changed into Objective 3 of the cohesion policy and implemented as part of the European Territorial Cooperation).

As mentioned above, establishing new middle-tier administrative units in Central Europe is brought about by European integration processes. This does not mean only general changes in the local and regional government organization in Europe, but also inclusion of most new EU Member States into the group of regions covered by cohesion policy. Organizational arrangements concerning the implementation of European funding, particularly in Poland, the largest country of the region, have recently been considerably improved and have in a sense shaped the process of the evolution of regional administration.

The way of the differentiation of the Central European countries with regard to NUTS statistical units can be considered as a negative phenomenon in the process of the creation of the middle administration tier in those countries. Regions are qualified for individual development promotion programmes on the basis of NUTS units. Funds under Objective 1 of the cohesion policy are allocated according to NUTS 2, while funds under INTERREG – according to NUTS 3. In Poland, administrative regions are NUTS 2 units (appointed and elected administration), while the so-called subregions correspond to NUTS 3 units, and this is a level where there is no administration. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, there is no administration at the NUTS 3 level; which can hamper interregional cooperation concerning information on the implementation of the funding, as well as cross-border cooperation.

The differences in the middle-tier administration systems in Central Europe affect a larger number of issues. Until recently, there was no regional government in the Czech Republic (2001) or Slovakia (2004). In Poland, this administration tier was introduced in 1999. They also differ considerably in terms of their size and population potential, as well as scope of competences. They are still institutions whose institutional form is only in a nascent stage, trying to define its role in the state administration system as such. This, in turn, significantly affects cooperation between the regional governments in those countries.

We can distinguish three major areas of regional government's international activity: bilateral cooperation, European integration and efforts to include the region in global economic integration processes. Bilateral cooperation is the basic form of international contacts between territorial local and regional government units. Contemporarily, we can observe an evolution of this form of cooperation towards multilateral cooperation, that is, initiatives involving many partners from different countries. Such initiatives are launched with a view to solving a common problem (such as cooperation between mining industry regions) or owing to the close proximity of the partners (e.g. regional cooperation between the Baltic Sea countries). The former initiatives are usually aimed to solve a specific, predefined problem using the existing opportunities and strengths, mainly financial, while the latter are more thematically varied and at the same time more lasting. In their case, the geographic proximity is an important aspect.

The involvement of regional governments in European integration includes their participation in the activities of EU institutions and in the implementation of the cohesion policy. In a broader context, it can be understood as an ability to use integration processes to improve the region's competitiveness in Europe and the world at large (for example by participating in EU initiatives aimed to implement the Lisbon strategy, such as RTTS and RIS).

The third area of activity is related to the role regional governments play in the promotion and coordination of economic development; to the perception of regional government as an institution coordinating the activities of other regional actors, aimed to develop information and cooperation networks. This area can also include actions intended to improve regional competitiveness, such as attracting inward capital or broadly understood promotion of the region abroad.

The findings from two researches were used to describe the relations between Polish, Czech and Slovak regions; Internet interviews, conducted in the Polish voivodships (regions) in the first quarter of 2004 and a survey carried out in the Polish voivodships in January 2005. The interviews were addressed to Marshal's offices (regional administration) and were aimed to identify all documents concerning international cooperation which were signed by the regional governments. In addition to that, Marshal's offices (heads of departments or other units responsible for international cooperation) were asked to list three regions cooperation with which, in their opinion, was most enhanced. Second was also addressed to the Marshal's offices and was intended to examine their activity in the sphere of international cooperation, to identify most serious barriers in this respect and the major regional partners. The findings presented here represent only a fraction of the overall results. The survey questionnaire did not deal directly with the issue of cooperation between Czech, Polish and Slovak regions, but international cooperation of the Polish regions as such.

The linkages identified on the basis of agreements declared as signed with partners in the analysed area of Europe are definitely more numerous in Poland's southern

regions. In the case of Polish-Czech relations, most such linkages can be classified as border relations. There seem to be many different linkages; all Poland's southern regions declare they have established some kind of international cooperation. According to Polish regional governments, all the northern, border regions of the Czech Republic and nearly all the regions of the Slovak Republic are engaged in such cooperation. In addition to that, also some Polish regions situated at a considerable distance from the southern border – Lubuskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Zachodniopomorskie – can also pride themselves on such relations (Map 1).



Map 1 Linkages declared by Polish regions (signed documents on cooperation) with regions in the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic. Source: prepared by the author

We will obtain a completely different picture if, of all the linkages, we isolate the relations which the regional governments consider to be the most intense. Of the nearly 50 agreements listed by Polish governments as being systematically implemented, only five were those signed with Czech or Slovak partners. It is a very modest number if we take into account the fact that these regions are situated in countries which are direct neighbours. In addition to that, only border relations were listed (Map 2). However, the fact that the border relations were those considered to be most intense should not be

surprising, for example due to the fact that the effects of such linkages are much more easier to measure because of the nature of such cooperation (development of infrastructure or water relations). The only thing that can be regarded as surprising is the large number of signed document on cross-border cooperation which are not being implemented at all. No relations with the Slovak Republic were listed.



Map 2 Most intensive linkages declared by Polish regions (signed documents on cooperation) with regions in the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic. Source: prepared by the author

The most important reasons for cooperation with Czech and Slovak regions include the following:

- ♦ cooperation as part of European Union cross-border programmes;
- ♦ cooperation as part of general European Union programmes;
- ♦ joint lobbying in European Union institutions;
- ♦ exchange of experiences related to the implementation of European Union regulations;
- ♦ willingness to establish multilateral relations (establishing cooperation with a region is treated as acquiring a possibility for coming into contact with the region's foreign partners).

More general reasons, underlying the ones quoted above, include similar historical experiences and similar socio-economic background.

The major topics of cooperation listed by the Dolnośląskie and Opolskie voivodships, that is those which consider this kind of cooperation very intensive, include: promotion, tourism, implementation of EU funds, education, spatial planning and infrastructure, while the most popular forms of cooperation include seminars, workshops, training, exhibitions and jointly prepared promotion materials.

The key partners in this cooperation of the two voivodships include local governments, universities, educational and training institutions, the Rhineland-Palatinate and Burgundy regions (which can be seen as a confirmation of the significance of establishing multilateral relations), as well as the Centre for Regional Development of the Czech Republic, the Glacensis Euroregion, the Danube-Oder-Elbe Association, Polish-Swedish Association and the General Consulate of the Czech Republic in Wrocław.

The most serious barriers hindering cooperation listed by the respondents include a shortage of funds for the financing of cooperation and staff shortages in the Marshal's offices.

There are several reasons for the apparently low interest in cooperation within the region. One of them is most probably the recently introduced administrative structure, which has not had enough time to develop this kind of linkages. Secondly, it can be a shortage of funding, which is a reason pointed out by the regions themselves. The European Union has allocated significantly less funding to Polish-Czech or Polish-Slovak border programmes than to programmes at the Polish-German border. At the same time, regional governments in all the three countries do not have their own sources of funding, and their financial resources are limited.

One of such reasons can also be the overriding goal of regional cooperation, which is to learn, gain new experiences, seek best practices and models of socio-economic development. In this regard, Western European regions are probably considered as more attractive partners.

The role of Polish-Slovak, Polish-Czech and Polish-Slovak-Czech border cooperation should be emphasized owing to a similarity of historical and systemic experiences, the geographical location and belonging to one family of languages. This seems to serve as an advantage in expanding international cooperation. The examples of most successful initiatives in the sphere of international cooperation quoted in the Third Report on Economic and Social Cohesion are derived from Swedish-Norwegian and Swedish-Danish cooperation. These projects led to the development of clusters of new industries, including biotechnology (Medicon Valley) and food processing. In all, 41 projects were completed, which altogether generated 300 new jobs. At the Swedish-Norwegian border, these activities covered over a thousand companies in different enterprise promotion networks. It seems that neighbourly cooperation at the Polish-Czech and Polish-Slovak border could justifiably draw on such examples.

References

- BALDERSHEIM, H., STAHLBERG, K. 1999. *Nordic Region-Building in a European Perspective*. Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Hants, Vermont.
- GOLDSMITH, M. 2005. *A New Intergovernmentalism?* in: Denters B. and Rose L. E. (eds) *Comparing Local Governance. Trends and Developments*, Palgrave Macmillan.

- HAMBLETON, R. 2002. *The new city management*. In Hamblcton R., Savitch H. V. and Stewart M. (eds) *Globalism and local democracy*, London, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- JOHN, P. 2001. *Local Governance in Western Europe*. SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.
- SWIANIEWICZ, P. 2000. *Przedmowa*. In Sauer A., Kawecka-Wyrzykowska E. and Kulesza M., *Polityka regionalna Unii Europejskiej a instrumenty wspierania rozwoju regionalnego w Polsce*, ELIPSA, Warszawa, 7-11.

Úroveň regionální spolupráce mezi Polskom, Českou a Slovenskou republikou

Resume

Nawiązywanie współpracy zagranicznej jest jednym z działań instytucji samorządowych. Nie jest ono jednak postrzegane jako należące do najważniejszych zadań samorządu terytorialnego. Uczestniczenie w stosunkach międzynarodowych jest raczej uważane za jedno z wielu narzędzi stymulowania rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego. Współcześnie jednak staje się coraz bardziej istotne ze względu na wzrost znaczenia uczestnictwa jednostek terytorialnych w społeczno-gospodarczych sieciach powiązań międzynarodowych. Uczestnictwo w sieciach, jest uznawane za warunek rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego oraz skutecznego konkurowania na rynku, a tym samym jest warunkiem efektywności działań samorządu.

W dotychczasowej historii Europy najważniejszym podmiotem stosunków międzynarodowych pozostawało państwo. Współcześnie, między innymi ze względu na rewolucję w rozwoju technologii komunikacji międzyludzkiej, państwo utraciło monopol jedynej instytucji administracyjnej uczestniczącej w stosunkach międzynarodowych. Coraz istotniejszym podmiotem tych stosunków stają się instytucje samorządu terytorialnego, w szczególności regionów i dużych miast.

Zmiany te dotyczą również systemów samorządowych w Europie Środkowej. Co więcej w tym regionie Europy zmiany te zachodzą szybciej, a tym samym są bardziej intensywne. W takich warunkach, niejako od początku, kształtowane są stosunki pomiędzy samorządami pośredniego szczebla Czech, Polski i Słowacji. Niejako od początku, gdyż wielu przypadkach są to kontakty nawiązane poprzez wcześniejsze jednostki administracyjne lub przez innych aktorów w regionie.

Obecnie samorządy nie wykorzystują jeszcze możliwości współpracy w regionie. Przy czym, krytyczna ocena może nie być uprawniona ze względu na krótki czas funkcjonowania instytucji szczebla pośredniego w regionie.