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Foreign co-operation of Polish regions: The principal areas

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Europe quo vadis? - Regional Question at the Turn of the Century
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Foreign co-operation of Polish regions: The principal areas

Abstract

The paper presents, on the basis of empirical research, the main areas of activity and foreign partners in international co-operation at the regional level. Analysis and comparison on the survey results show that at present there is a relatively powerful lobby in Polish administrative organs pushing for educational and cultural co-operation, while support for economic co-operation appears rather poor, which is mainly concerned with the small private sector. Apart from some noticeable success in this area, the institutions supporting business and regional development in Poland are still too weak.

According to research carried out, the principal fears surrounding foreign co-operation concern the emergence of a specific monoculture geared mainly towards tourism, culture, environmental protection and trade, which at the same time clearly undervalues the importance of industry, science and technology and transport.

Geopolitical changes in Poland have intensified cross-border and intra-regional co-operation and enabled new forms and directions to develop. Polish economic ties have been fundamentally reoriented - in the place of Poland's former close relations with the USSR and socialist countries new economic relations have begun to emerge. Analysis of regional foreign co-operation carried out by voivodship offices have only partly confirmed this trend - relations with Poland's eastern neighbours, Russia and Ukraine, are still strong at the voivodship level.

Studies carried out show that the choice made in the field of the international co-operation of regions were often accidental. One important factor influencing a decision

to co-operate (with some exceptions) seems to be the attitudes of the individual voivods themselves.

1. INTRODUCTION

Between December 1996 and March 1997 a survey was carried out on the basis of a questionnaire prepared by the author as one of the experts from Working Group of the Task Force for Structural Policy in Poland. The answers, which were gathered from all Poland's voivod offices, provided comprehensive knowledge on the various forms of international co-operation entered into by voivodships since 1990 (without accounting for local scale).

The answers varied with regard to their degree of accuracy. In spite of the efforts taken to ensure that the survey results were presented in the most objective fashion possible, we are inclined to treat them more as the presentation of current trends than as an attempt to rank voivodships.

One important factor in Poland's preparations to join the European Union is the need to bring the conditions and activities of Polish regions more in line with those of territorial units in the EU. The existing benefits, potential and specific instruments of co-operation with regions abroad should also be pointed out. In addition, the results of various analyses should be made accessible and possible recommendations forwarded.

In the present work **a region** is understood as the largest unit in the administrative division of the country, i.e. the present voivodship. According to the definition used in the European Union and its member states, **the region** represents the largest elected administrative unit of the country, which has its own budget and functions as a legal entity. Since the beginning of the nineties a paradoxical situation has existed in Poland, where this definition has only applied to *gminas*, while voivodships themselves have failed to fulfil any of the above mentioned conditions (Szlachta 1996).

2. THE BASIS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF VOIVODS

The basis for voivods' activities, in particular for initiating contacts and signing agreements with foreign partners, are bi- and multilateral international agreements. International agreements regulate the possibilities and forms of co-operation involving voivods (naturally these agreements are not signed by the voivods themselves). These agreements either regulate the entirety of Polish relations with a given country (after which voivods begin co-operating with their partners in that country „within the

framework of the agreement”) or represent a territorially localised aspect of those relations. This is reflected in the references to these agreements made in numerous arrangements on international co-operation entered into by voivods. At present, Poland is involved in such agreements with all its neighbours.

As stated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the international activities of voivods derive from the prerogatives of the government in the field of international co-operation and the obligations of the government under international law. This is a result of the need to meet the obligations assumed by the government in international agreements. Because of his regional prerogatives, the voivod, as a regional government representative, has become an executive organ in relation to agreements pertaining to international co-operation (both bilateral and multilateral) that fall within the scope of his jurisdiction (Working Group... 1997, p.50)

3. THE PRINCIPAL AREAS OF ACTIVITY

The main areas of foreign co-operation do not account fully for the economic sphere. Analysis and comparison on the survey results show that at present there is a relatively powerful lobby in Polish administrative organs pushing for educational and cultural co-operation, while support for economic co-operation appears rather poor (co-operation in industry, construction and the transport infrastructure - see Figure 1), which is mainly concerned with the small private sector. Apart from some noticeable success in this area, the institutions supporting business and regional development in Poland are still too weak.

Figure 1
Foreign Co-operation in Branch Structures

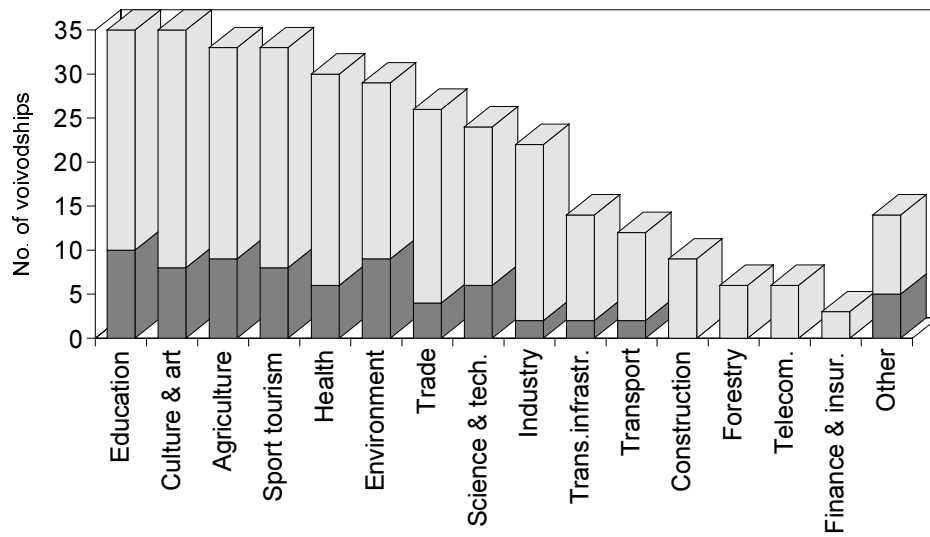


Table 1. The Principal Areas and Aims of Voivodships' Foreign Co-operation

Areas	Aims - examples
1.Education	Co-operation between schools and institutions of general and vocational education, co-operation between employees and exchanging curricula between educational institutions, exchanges involving young people, co-operation between youth organisations, instruction in foreign languages, ecological education, teacher training, exchanges of information on teaching curricula, personnel training
2.Culture and art	Supporting cultural exchange programmes, reciprocal promotion in the field of culture, helping establish direct contacts between people involved in culture and art, participation in cultural events, organising art workshops, exchanges of exhibitions and works of art, organising festivals, co-operation in protecting and conserving historic monuments
3.Agriculture	Agricultural development, exchanging economic offers related to agriculture, providing agricultural advice (on modern cultivation and breeding technologies), preparing joint projects in the field of food storage, exchanging information and experiences on agricultural products, co-operation in veterinary services and fishing
4.Physical education, tourism and leisure	Supporting joint activities in the field of sport and tourism exchange, tourism promotion, helping establish a network of low-budget hotels and catering services, preparing agro-tourist projects
5.Health care and social services	Exchanging experiences in health care and social services, co-operation in the field of hospital administration, joint specialist studies on medicine and the organisation of the health service, exchanging information on health care programmes, exchanging experiences in rehabilitation work and prophylactics, reciprocal training schemes for medical personnel
6.Environmental protection	Improving the condition on the natural environment, providing ecological support, preparing projects establishing landscape parks,

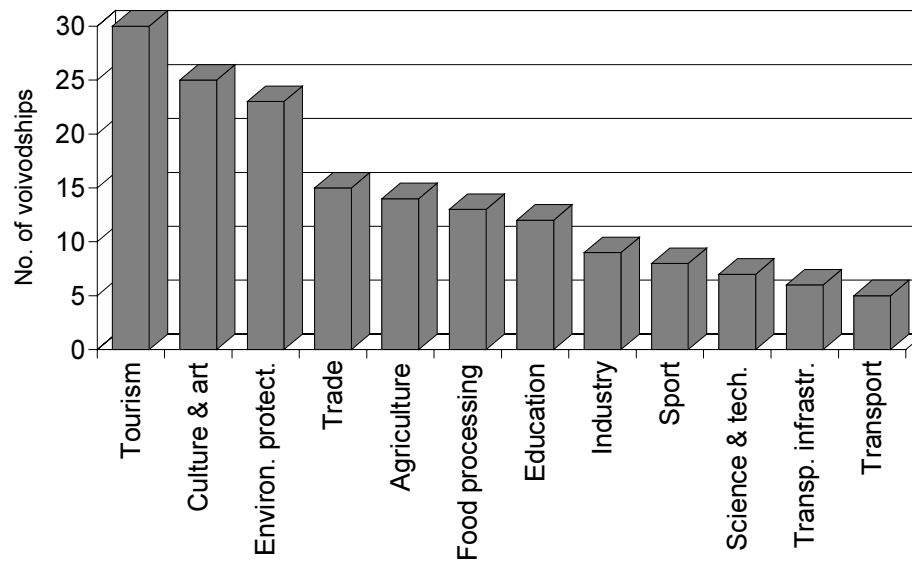
	initiating and supporting state institutions and non-governmental organisations, co-operating in the field of environmental protection through exchanges of experiences and preparing joint pro-ecological projects (e.g. in the field of energy saving), transferring electrical and mechanical equipment to sewage treatment plants
7.Trade	Exchanging goods, promoting bilateral trade, organising trade missions setting up economic and trade agencies, exchanging raw materials and ready-made products, barter exchange, organising the joint export and import of goods for third party countries, exchanging information on goods, demand and trade organisations, organising trade and economic conferences, publishing materials and studies supporting the development of business contacts
8.Science and technical progress	Developing links between scientific institutions, co-operation between universities and research institutes, joint research projects (including co-operation in preparing such projects), exchanging information
9.Industry	Promoting co-operation in manufacturing and industry, initiating, preparing and implementing joint projects in the field of modern technologies and know-how, promoting technology transfer, providing funds and protection for existing industries, promoting co-operation between enterprises, exchanging information on the development of co-operation
10.Transport and transport infrastructure	Implementing joint projects dealing with infrastructure and the communications and transport systems, realising technical and financial projects linked with motorway construction, expanding and opening new border crossings
11.Construction	Co-operation in the field of construction planning and construction projects

Apart from the advantages of foreign co-operation presented in Table 1, voivodships may also expect other benefits linked to the following areas:

- spatial and economic planning;
- the municipal economy;
- the development of local democracies and the functioning of the local-government system;
- co-operation between Polish state administration organs and the administrations of foreign regions and the development of contacts between such units;
- regional promotion.

The following specification was prepared after assessing the potential of different regions and identifying the principal areas of future foreign co-operation (see Figure 2) selected by voivodships.

Figure 2
Areas of Foreign Co-operation with Greatest Development Potential



As many as twenty-nine voivodships view tourism (including hotels and catering) as a promising area of foreign co-operation. However, when the limited demand, facilities and relatively modest tourist offer are taken into account, this number indicates that the chances of realising these aspirations are somewhat limited. Tourism has become something of a panacea of economic growth, regardless of the natural conditions of a given area. It is highly probable that such voivodships as Konin, Włocławek, Ostrołęka and Siedlce would not be able to compete with more naturally and culturally attractive voivodships.

Culture and art are in second place as regards development potential (twenty-five voivodships), while environmental protection lies in third (twenty-two voivodships), particularly in the northern part of the country, where joint activities are planned in the fields of Baltic Sea protection, protecting the bio-diversity of the natural environment, and decreasing cross-border pollution. Trade is ranked fourth (viewed by sixteen voivodships as a potential area of intensive foreign co-operation). The considerable opportunities of trade development are perceived above all in border zone voivodships, particularly those in the east of the country.

The considerable opportunities associated with co-operation in agriculture are noted in voivodships with favourable natural conditions and a long tradition in this area

(fifteen voivodships). These include the voivodships of Olsztyn, Elbląg, Koszalin, Poznań, Skierniewice and Lublin, and also to a lesser extent Rzeszów and Nowy Sącz. Opportunities for developing food processing and agricultural products are also linked to a high standard of agriculture. Thirteen voivodships (e.g. Olsztyn, Kalisz, Płock, Skierniewice and Leszno) perceive this as a possible area of regional activation.

Industry was only ranked seventh as an important area of development in foreign co-operation. Only ten voivodships note the opportunities for developing foreign contacts in various branches of manufacturing industry (Szczecin, Elbląg, Konin, Kalisz, Sieradz, Łódź, Bielsko-Biała, Tarnów, Rzeszów, Wałbrzych).

The principal fears surrounding foreign co-operation concern the emergence of a specific monoculture geared mainly towards tourism, culture, environmental protection and trade, which at the same time clearly undervalues the importance of industry (production functions, industrial co-operation), science and technology (know-how) and transport.

Studies carried out show that the main priorities of international co-operation entered into by voivodships are education and culture, followed by agriculture, tourism, health care and environmental protection. Such a policy can be effective in the medium- and long-term, as it will help increase intellectual potential and social mobility.

However, one trend observed in the international co-operation of West European regions has not yet become evident in the activities of Polish regions, namely measures stimulating short-term regional development. This mainly concerns the development of the transport system and small and medium-sized enterprises. Such a regional policy activates potential factors of regional development, develops co-operative system, triggers innovation diffusion, etc. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that in Polish conditions transport and its infrastructure are areas where authority at the regional level is limited and where both financing and decision-making are the prerogatives at the central level. On the other hand, the weaknesses of small and medium-sized enterprises are mainly a product of the limitations of economic self-government and its failure to engage in appropriate activities which would help develop this sector of the economy.

4. THE MOST IMPORTANT PARTNERS IN FOREIGN CO-OPERATION

Geopolitical changes in Poland have intensified cross-border and intra-regional co-operation and enabled new forms and directions to develop. Polish economic ties

have been fundamentally reoriented - in the place of Poland's former close relations with the USSR and socialist countries new economic relations have begun to emerge (or relations initiated earlier have begun to intensify) with Germany and other European Union member states. Analysis of regional foreign co-operation carried out by voivodship offices have only partly confirmed this trend - relations with Poland's eastern neighbours, Russia and Ukraine, are still strong at the voivodship level.

Taking as a criterion the number of voivodships co-operating with any given country, we arrive at the following results:

- the principal partner of foreign co-operation for voivods and voivodship offices is Russia (twenty-seven voivodships) followed by Italy (twenty-six voivodships), Germany (twenty-three voivodships) and France (twenty-two voivodships);

- lower positions are occupied by Ukraine (eighteen voivodships), China (nine voivodships) and Hungary (nine voivodships);

- if we apply the same criterion to Poland's neighbours then Germany would be in first position, Ukraine in second and Belorussia in third (eight voivodships);

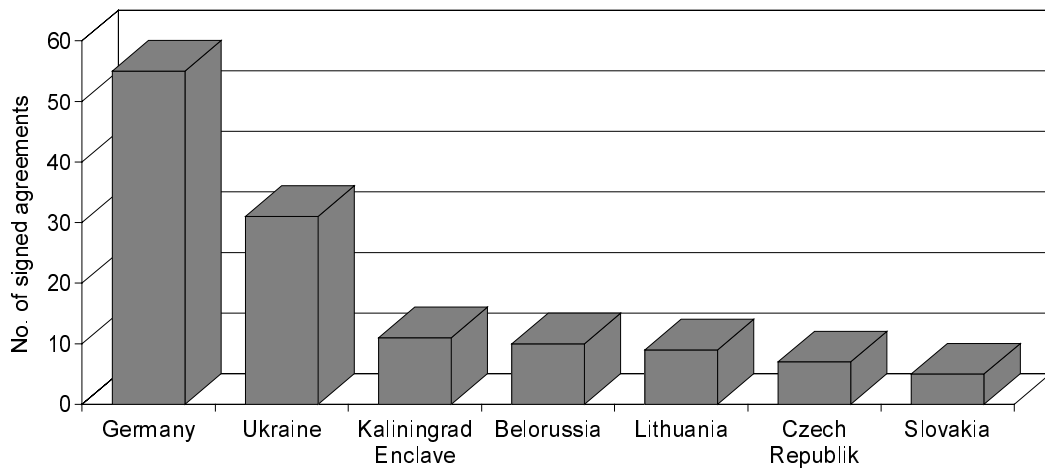
- the main partners in the European Union are Germany, Italy and France.

Another criterion for classifying the foreign partners of Polish regions is the number of agreements signed between a given country and those regions:

- voivods signed the most agreements with Germany (fifty-five), Russia (thirty-six), Ukraine (thirty-one), France (thirty-one), Italy (thirty) and Denmark (twelve);

- as far as Poland's neighbours are concerned (see Figure 3) first position is still occupied by Germany, with Ukraine in second place and the Kaliningrad Enclave in third (eleven agreements);

Figure 3
Foreign Co-operation with Neighbouring Countries

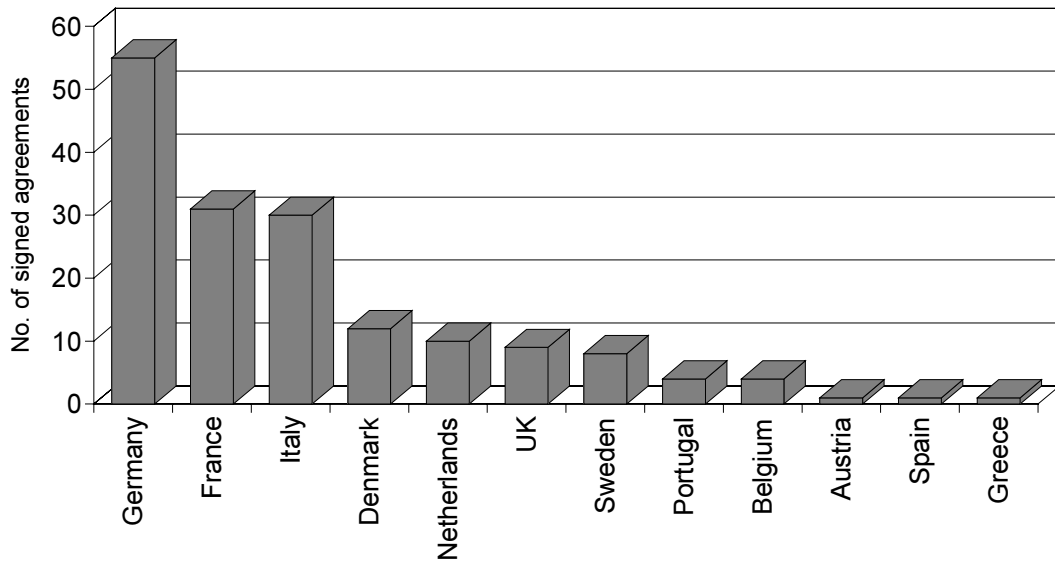


- the European Union member states which have the strongest links with Poland's voivodship offices are Germany, France and Italy (see Figure 4).

Analysis of foreign co-operation involving voivodships based on both of the above-mentioned criteria (1 - number of partners, 2 - number of signed agreements) enables us to see which voivodships have the most wide-ranging contacts and the most developed forms of co-operation. These are: Szczecin, Olsztyn, Kraków, Katowice, Suwałki, Częstochowa, Łódź, Poznań and Gdańsk.

Comparison of the above analysis with the results of research carried out by the Central Office of Planning (CUP) on differences in the level of regional development reveals no clear relation between the two voivodship groups. The most developed group of voivodships consists of five voivodships associated with urban agglomerations - Warsaw, Poznań, Kraków, Katowice and Łódź. The level of foreign co-operation entered into by the above-mentioned voivodships should be considered high or very high (Kraków, Katowice, Łódź, Poznań). At the same time, however, certain less developed regions reveal a high level of foreign co-operation (Suwałki, Olsztyn, Legnica, Rzeszów). The conclusion to be drawn from the above analysis is that a region's development level has no decisive impact on foreign co-operation conducted at the voivodship level.

Figure 4
European Union Partners



5. CONCLUSIONS

The prevalent forms of foreign co-operation initiated by voivods in the branch system have been in education, culture, health care and social assistance. On the other hand, the economy, communications, finances, insurance and construction have been very much neglected. For voivods, the greatest opportunities for co-operation lie in tourism, culture, art and environmental protection. The questionnaires hardly ever mentioned small and medium-sized enterprises, which are so important for transforming and diversifying the economic tissue of Polish voivodships. We might even argue that the foreign co-operation involving voivods in the branch dimension derives from the departmental structure of voivodship offices. The interest of office structures in this area appears very strong and is helping to minimise what is one of the major problems of structural policy. This must make it difficult for Polish regions to perform their principal strategic function: reconverting the regional production base and at the same time restructuring large industrial sectors. Our analysis of the directions of co-operation confirm this conclusion.

One fact of increasing importance is that international co-operation in voivodships remains isolated from the main trends of regional strategic development. The system steering this development seldom seems to perceive co-operation as a tool

of endogenic regional development, as if Polish regions did not have to compete with foreign regions. This fact is confirmed - apart from in the branch structure - by the lack of correlation between the level of socio-economic development in voivodships and the intensity of their international co-operation.

The choices made in the field of the international co-operation of regions were often accidental. One important factor influencing a decision to co-operate seems to be the attitudes of the individual voivods themselves. The only exception to these rules is co-operation along Polish and German border, which is determined by powerful political and economic support from the Germans and assistance funds. We should also take some notice of the low level of regional co-operation with Great Britain, Belgium and Sweden, which remains far behind countries such as Italy or even China. In the case of the first two countries this may be explained in terms of the lack of adequate regional structures. The question however arises of to what extent is the international co-operation of Polish regions the consequence of a conscious decision to develop and to what extent does it result from the incentives offered by foreign partners and favourable circumstances? Where there are no mutual benefits to be had such co-operation usually becomes hollow or dies a gradual death.

At a first glance the high level of regional co-operation with Russia would appear difficult to explain, especially when we consider the reorientation of Polish foreign trade towards the West, Poland's overwhelming desire to participate in the European Union and the precarious economic and political situation existing in Russia. Closer analysis of this problem seems to dispel all doubts in this area. First, Russia is still an important market place for many voivodships and regional co-operation with this strongly institutionalised country has often successfully paved the way for co-operation between economic entities. Such problems do not appear with the same severity in Poland's co-operation with West European countries. Secondly, Poland's good relations with Russia will place it in an advantageous position in the European Union, including at the regional level. From this point of view it seems beneficial for Polish voivodships to consolidate co-operation with Russian districts. Doubts must be raised, however, over the idea of Polish voivodships co-operating exclusively with our eastern neighbour, as in such a case they will not gain any experience in European standards of regional co-operation and will not have access to modern know-how in this area. This will make it

difficult for them - after Poland's accession to the European Union - to gain aid resources linked to EU structural policy and regional co-operation programmes.

There is also cause for concern over the low level of co-operation with Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The principal barrier in this case is the lack of adequate structures on the part of our partners in this area and their lack of preparation for co-operation with Polish regions. This picture puts into question the degree and progress of integration with the countries of the Visegrad group. As far as the future of Polish regional co-operation with East European countries is concerned, an important role will be played by the combined impact of the PHARE and TACIS regional programmes.

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