

Chapter 14

Changes in the Local Government System and Regional Policy in Poland: The Impact of Membership in the European Union

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the successive stages to make changes in the Polish development policy after 1989. The national administration reform of 1990 in the Third Commonwealth of Poland restored the local government after 40 years of non-existence during the time of Polish People's Republic (1944–1989) that was a satellite state of the Soviet Union after the Second World War. Another reform took place in 1998 as a part of preparations for the country's membership in the European Union (EU) from 2004. Currently developed strategic documents are suggesting the use of the “polarization and diffusion model of the development.” The authors also discuss the regional policy currently implemented in Poland, which was designed in years 2009–2014. The process of creation of new policy includes plans to reform the policy instruments and to update the strategic framework. Conclusions highlight a need for a clearer division of powers between the center and regional governments and the importance of strengthening the financial basis and institutional capacity building.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in the Polish development policy after 1989 have been one of the most important fields of reforms after the fall of the Communist regime. In 1990, the local government in the Third Commonwealth of Poland was restored after 40 years of non-existence during the time of Polish People's Republic (1944–1989).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0317-0.ch014

This chapter presents the most important stages of the creation of a local government in Poland after 1989. It especially underlines reform that took place in 1998 and further changes related to the country's membership in the European Union (EU) since 2004. The chapter also focuses on the description and critique of the "polarization and diffusion model of the development" that is currently promoted in the strategic documents in Poland. This model is one of the main innovations in the regional policy that is currently implemented in Poland and which was designed in the years 2009–2014.

In the conclusions, a further need for a clearer division of powers between the center and regional governments is highlighted as well as future research directions.

REFORMS BETWEEN 1989–1999

In Poland, after 1989, there have been many changes that were primarily the result of economic reforms. In addition, although these changes covered in principle almost all aspects of the economic life of the country, they were focused mainly on macroeconomic issues (Pietrzyk, 2002, p. 363). Therefore, virtually no action has been taken in the field of regional policy. The government hoped at that time that there would be a spontaneous adjustment of regional economies to the new free market conditions (Węclawowicz, 2002, p. 151).

This approach to local and regional level had an impact on the growth in the following years. Among other things, we can observe that in the years 1990–1993 regional issues were not included in the implementation of measures to combat the spatial concentration of unemployment (Brzozowski, 2005, p. 108). In the government, there were no appropriate organizational structures to deal with the issue of the regional development. However, a part of ongoing post-1989 reforms and implemented activities also contributed, somehow occasionally to the regional development in the subsequent years.

An example is the Act of 8 March 1990 on the Municipal Local Government, under which the local self-government units (municipalities; pol. *gmina*) was established. According to the European statistics (Eurostat), these municipalities are units at the lowest level (5) in the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS). The Polish word *gmina* comes from the German word *Gemeinde*, which means the "community." At the same time, however, the Act disbanded the national councils, which represented the local authorities at the regional level (voivodeships; pol. *województwa*). As a result, the new law created the situation in which there were no strong entities capable of leading an efficient policy in the intra-regional dimension.

The new model of state administration had a dual nature because of government bodies, and local self-government communities (municipalities) exercised power (Kornaś, 2005, p. 140). The government complex administration was maintained only at the provincial (regional) level and subordinated to the province governor (pol. *wojewoda*) as the government representative in the area. In addition, the so-called regional offices of the administration were established and chaired by the managers appointed by the provincial governors. These managers were not elected in the democratic elections. However, the introduction of the local government in Poland was a pioneering action among post-communist countries. Thus, this solution was a reference to the tradition of the Second Commonwealth of Poland (1918–1939).

The powers of the local government are focused to this day on the following matters:

1. Spatial and ecological order;
2. Technical infrastructure;

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