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The Local Government Dimension of Relations between Poland and Latin America

Adriana Skorupska, Bartłomiej Znojek

Poland's interest in Latin America has been increasing in recent years, mainly in economic terms. Yet local government remains an underestimated tool in advancing these relations. Greater activity by Polish local authorities could help in developing business and academic ties with the region, and allow the exchange of experience in fields such as urban development and revitalisation. Geographical distance, lack of knowledge and financial constraints are the main reasons for Polish local authorities' low interest in Latin America so far.

International engagement by local governments is a useful foreign policy tool and adds a significant dimension to international contacts. This has been confirmed by the institutionalisation of ties between the EU and Latin America (especially since the 1999 Agreement on Strategic Partnership), which resulted in closer relations on sub-national level. Spain, Italy, and France were among the most involved. Although these ties were mainly connected with development aid, they facilitated contact in other spheres, economic in particular. So far, Polish local governments have not considered Latin America to be an attractive partner, and neither was the region significant in Polish foreign policy until a few years ago. Since then, Latin America has become more important to Poland, with countries from that region having shown mutual interest. For example, in March 2017 the ambassador of Peru visited the Śląskie voivodship and for discussions on cooperation in mining. In August, the Mexican ambassador visited Dolnośląskie voivodship, where he discussed prospects for economic and academic ties with Mexican regions. Polish local authorities could play an important role in strengthening links with Latin America by fostering ties with their counterparts in the region. They could contribute to the internationalisation of local companies, universities, and cultural institutions by using knowledge about their potential.

Polish Experience. The first city partnership agreements (for example, between Kraków and Curitiba) were signed in the 1990s. The documents included the exchange of experience and involvement of local participants (such as performances by artistic groups). These agreements used to be based on the municipal or regional specifics, as was the case of the link between Częstochowa and the Mexican city of Zapopan, both being centres for pilgrim tourism. Further, Wielkopolska and Dolny Śląsk regions have been cooperating with the Brazilian state of Paraná, mainly because of the Polish diaspora there. Yet, in most cases, the accords have not developed into regular interactions, which may be explained by geographical distance, restricted budgets, and lack of knowledge about opportunities for engagement.

Prospective Partners. Foreign policy guidelines are natural reference points for local authorities. Poland's main partners in Latin America are Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, these being the principal markets for Polish trade. Of these, Brazil and Argentina stand out because of their large Polish diasporas (some estimates put the number of Polish descendants in Brazil at more than 2 million, and at a few hundred thousand in Argentina). Poland's relations with Mexico were elevated by the visit of Polish President Andrzej Duda in April 2017.

Economic potential and perceived cultural affinities are reasons for the Polish government's increased interest in the Pacific Alliance, an economic integration bloc established by Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru in 2011. Poland has been an observer in the bloc since 2015, and this status has allowed the government to propose common initiatives such as support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) or the exchange of experience in urban regeneration.¹ An interesting example is Panama, where Poland opened an embassy in 2017. The country will host World Youth Day in 2019, and has already sought advice from the authorities in Kraków—the event's previous host city.

Other attractive partners include the biggest metropolis and economic centres such as São Paulo (Brazil), Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Mexico City. Brazil's southern states (Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná) and the Misiones Province in Argentina are of special interest, due their large Polish diasporas.

Cooperation Instruments. Currently, there are no government instruments that support cooperation between Polish and Latin American local authorities, like the programmes fostering contact with local governments in the EU, neighbouring countries (cross-border programmes) and selected Eastern Partnership states. Moreover, there is no coordinated system of collaboration between central and local governments, or any means of sharing the latest information on potential partners, as in case of initiatives run by the Polish Investment and Trade Agency (PAIH) that help to boost Poland's presence in remote directions (for example, the Go China and Go Iran initiatives).

Promoting local business and attracting foreign investors could happen via PAIH's network of foreign trade offices currently being developed. The first such office in Latin America was opened in Mexico City in April 2017. The next one is planned in Buenos Aires by the end of this year.

Polish local governments should also take advantage of the opportunities offered by broader cooperation between the EU and Latin America. Although there are currently no EU programmes dedicated to supporting links at that level, local authorities could play an important role in encouraging business links by, for example, providing information on funding programmes such as ElanBiz and AL-INVEST. ElanBiz supports European SMEs on seven Latin American markets (including Argentina and Brazil), while AL-INVEST is addressed to Latin American SMEs, but EU project partners can participate.

International networks also might be helpful for local governments in developing contacts and exchanging experience. One such example is the Global Network of Cities, Local and Regional Authorities (UCLG), to which several European self-government associations belong, including Polish municipal and county unions.

Recommendations. Latin America's increasing importance in Polish foreign policy provides a good opportunity to begin a debate on how a model of local government international activity, support and coordination should look.

Close cooperation and regular dialogue between local and central governments, including engagement plans and the exchange of experience, are essential. This would make it easier for both sides to ensure a match between government moves to accomplish foreign policy goals and international engagement by local authorities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs could coordinate these efforts, which could result in a system of incentives and current knowledge including information on national and EU funding sources, and potential partners (their prerogatives, ability to foster contacts and cultural specifics). It is worth considering supporting local government representatives financially and with expertise, to allow them to join trade missions to promote their own territories and local business offers.

Polish diasporas should become special partners for local governments willing to engage in Latin America. These authorities should gain access to programmes aimed at activating the diasporas because of their experience in executing projects and already formal (though not always active) contacts with Latin American partners. To this end, the Polish Senat (the upper chamber of parliament), which manages funds for cooperation with Polish communities abroad, could broaden the group eligible to apply for grants.²

Developing new international cooperation links is also a way to build local or regional branding and to project a positive image of Poland. For example, Poland's aspirations to host EXPO 2022 could be an opportunity not only to promote the city of Łódź but also to share Poland's successful experience with urban revitalisation with its Latin American partners.

¹ B. Znojek, "12th Summit of the Pacific Alliance," *PISM Spotlight*, no. 33/2017, 29 June 2017.

² A. Skorupska, "Role of Local Governments in Development Cooperation Projects and Contact with the Polish Diaspora," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 79 (929), 28 November 2016.