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## Polish Paradiplomacy. Current State and Perspectives

**Abstract:** The article presents the results of the research conducted by the author within the framework of the National Science Centre action MINIATURA 4. This was a pilot project aiming to yield a preliminary diagnosis and suggest directions of development for the cooperation between local government units and the central government in the field of paradiplomacy. As part of the study, 11 interviews were conducted with the representatives of the milieus responsible for Polish paradiplomacy: local government officials, civil servants and experts. The results of the preliminary research indicate that approached as an instrument of foreign policy, Polish local diplomacy is experiencing a severe crisis. In order to overcome it, one should consider a model of Polish paradiplomacy that respects the interests of either side, namely the central and the local government.

**Key words:** paradiplomacy, local government diplomacy, Polish foreign policy, local government, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the results of the research carried out within the framework of the National Science Centre action MINIATURA 4, entitled “Towards Framework of Polish Paradiplomacy”.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the text continues with the theoretical deliberation and desk research by this author (Ksenicz, 2020).

The project was a pilot study aiming to yield a preliminary diagnosis and suggest directions for the development of cooperation between local government units (hereinafter as LGUs) with the central government in the domain of local government diplomacy. As part of the preliminary research, 11 interviews were conducted with the representatives of the milieus responsible for Polish paradiplomacy: local government officials, civil servants and experts.<sup>2</sup>

Similar studies to date have focused on local government officials and were conducted by means of surveys (see: *Współpraca*; Fuksiewicz, Łada, Wenerski, 2012; Taczyńska, 2013). It was only Adriana Skorupska’s publication (Skorupska, 2015) which relied on interviews, conducted in all marshal offices and selected governance structures at municipality level.

### Survey methodology

The author selected 14 participants to contribute in the study: seven local government officials, seven civil servants and three experts. The LGUs were to be represented by per-

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<sup>1</sup> No. 2020/04/X/HS5/00122.

<sup>2</sup> Transcripts of the interviews have been deposited with the Qualitative Data Archive of the Social Data Repository (Ksenicz, 2021).

sons involved in the International Affairs Group of the Joint Committee of the Central and Local Government (IAG JCCaLG) and members of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). It was assumed that the sample would be as politically and geographically diverse as possible, including representatives of various political groupings as well as non-partisan activists from all macro-regions. It was also envisaged that all tiers of the administrative division would participate, including different types of municipalities (cities with county [powiat] rights, urban, urban-rural and rural municipalities). The central administration was to be represented by the staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior and Administration, with two civil servants from each. As regards the MFA, officials from the Department for Foreign Policy Strategy (DFPS) and the Department for Public and Cultural Diplomacy (DPCD) were expected to attend, whereas a staff member involved in cross-border and interregional cooperation, and a person delegated to assist the IAG would represent the MIaA. The group of experts included representatives of the Brussels office of one of the regions (*województwo*), a local government corporation and the analytical community. A formal invitation to participate in the study was sent to each of the selected respondents and, in the case of the central administration, requests to have such respondents appointed were addressed to the heads of the respective ministries.

In the course of the research, a number of invitations to be interviewed was declined, whereby the primary reason was the risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection. In such situations, the investigator made efforts to find other respondents who met the requirements adopted for the survey sample. If a replacement could not be found, the interview was conducted remotely using MS Teams. Ultimately, three new participants gave interviews instead of the originally scheduled persons; also three conversations were conducted remotely. One of the latter was an interview with MFA officers, as the ministry superiors selected four DPCD staff to speak, but did not delegate a DFPS representative to take part in the study. The MIaA did not wish to participate in the interviews at all; the author was only informed in a telephone conversation that the issues which under study were within the purview of the MFA.

Finally, 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted between December 2020 and July 2021, using Steinar Kvale’s methodological guidelines (Kvale, 2012). The breakdown of the local government representation by administrative tier they is shown in the table below.

Table 1

**Local government officials participating in the study by administrative tier**

Local government officials	
Rural municipality	1
Urban-rural municipality	1
City with county rights	2
County	1
Region	2

Source: Own elaboration.

All participating LGU representatives are actively involved in paradiplomacy as practitioners as well as members/alternate members of the CoR or the IAG. Geographically, they represent the following macro-regions.



Fig. 1. Local government officials participating in the study by macro-region

Image source: [https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultstronaopisowa/5872/1/1/polska\\_nuts1-2016.png](https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultstronaopisowa/5872/1/1/polska_nuts1-2016.png). Data source: Own elaboration.

The only macro-region not to be represented was the Mazowieckie Region. The table below shows the functions held by the local government officials participating in the study.

Table 2

**Local government officials participating in the study by function**

Local government officials	
Executive body of municipality/head of county ( <i>starosta</i> )/marshal	5
Councillor	1
Head of foreign cooperation department <sup>3</sup>	1

Source: Own elaboration.

<sup>3</sup> This respondent was instructed to participate in the interview by his superior. Given the former’s experience in civil service and the non-government sector, an interview with that person proved to be highly valuable.

The political affiliation of the LGUs representatives is shown in Tab. 3.

Table 3

**Political affiliation of local government officials participating in the survey**

Local government officials	
Civic Platform	3
Democratic Left Alliance	1
Non-partisan	1
Non-partisan, leaning towards Law and Justice	1
Non-partisan, with Civic Platform member as a superior	1

Source: Own elaboration.

The interviews were recorded<sup>4</sup> and then transcribed. Respondents had the opportunity to authorize the interview transcript.

The hypothesis which the interviewer intended to preliminarily verify in the study presumed that the abandonment of the Local Government and Civic Dimension (LGaCD) mechanism negatively affects the development of Polish paradiplomacy and the pursuit of Polish foreign policy in general (see: Ksenicz, 2020). The following research questions were posed:

- 1) How do LGUs, civil servants and experts assess the LGaCD mechanism?
- 2) How do the groups concerned assess paradiplomacy-related cooperation between the LGUs and the government after 2015?
- 3) What are the strengths and weaknesses of Polish paradiplomacy?
- 4) What are the respondents' expectations with regard to cooperation between LGUs and the government in the field of paradiplomacy?

The interview scenario was divided into four parts corresponding to the above questions. Depending on the respondent, certain questions were omitted or modified; alternatively, more specific questions were asked.<sup>5</sup> The transcribed statements subsequently underwent content analysis.<sup>6</sup>

**How do LGUs, civil servants and experts assess the LGaCD mechanism?**

As many as four of the seven local government officials could not recall when the LGaCD was launched. While one of the respondents did not hold his current position in 2012, the three others were active in foreign affairs at the time as local government officials, whether in international bodies or as part of partnership corporations. The three who remembered the start of the initiative were in fact involved in its preparation and implementation.

<sup>4</sup> Only MFA representatives did not consent to the recording of the interview.

<sup>5</sup> A number of interviewees were not involved in local government diplomacy during the initial of implementation of the LGaCD mechanism (2012–2015). Thus, asking their assessment of the LGaCD by 2015 would have been pointless.

<sup>6</sup> When citing the respondents throughout the article, the following symbols will be used: RM – rural municipality representative, URM – urban-rural municipality, CCR1 – city with county rights 1, CCR2 – city with county rights 2, C – county, R1 – region 1, R2 – region 2, MFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, E1 – expert 1, E2 – expert 2, E3 – expert 3.

Local government officials familiar with the LGaCD had high expectations of it: “local governments in general were going at full throttle and this programme was a response to the fact that local governments were expecting the government to support them.” The same respondents rated the cooperation with the MFA up to 2015 to have been good.

“I rate it a B, yes? A strong B. The MFA also wanted, wanted and were afraid. I mean, on the one hand they were aware that in the long run we were going at such a pace that it would probably be difficult to stop it, right? And that we sort of demand a certain autonomy in this foreign policy being responsible people.” (R1)

These positive assessments by no means indicate that all problems in the relations between LGUs and the government have disappeared. Among other things, the local government side called for a stronger foundation of foreign cooperation in local government laws, primarily in the regional self-governance act.<sup>7</sup> The idea was to have the MFA interpret the concept of the region’s foreign initiative more liberally. Lack of trust on the part of the government remained quite evident, for instance when Polish local governments joined the relief effort for the victims of the clashes in Kyiv’s Independence Square in 2014. Instead of support from the MFA and other ministries, cities and regions faced difficulties in the shape of audits by regional chambers of account, which questioned the legitimacy of spending on the medical treatment of foreigners. The failure of the engagement of the regions in Kazakhstan offered another example. The Kazakhstan side was interested in the Polish local governance model and – at least on the declarative level – wanted to apply it in their country. Cooperation in this regard was blocked by President Bronisław Komorowski, whose assistance was successfully solicited by the Open Dialogue Foundation, an organization financed by an oligarch who had fled Kazakhstan.

Communication still called for substantial improvement. One local government official cited an example from Polish-Russian relations. Shortly after the annexation of Crimea and Russian aggression in the Donbass, a Polish LGU was invited to attend an international event in which a Russian delegation – headed by the chair of the Federation Council, Valentina Matviyenko – was to participate alongside representatives of the European Union. The Polish local government body turned to the MFA to be advised how they should act in the situation. The MFA was unable to formulate a clear position on the matter, leaving local government officials to their own devices.

When asked about the effects of the LGaCD until 2015, local government officials gave different answers. Representatives of smaller municipalities (RM, URM) referred on the one hand to alignment with European priorities, and the benefits for Polish-Ukrainian cooperation on the other. The region representative felt that the three years in which the mechanism operated was too short to speak of significant achievements. Nevertheless,

“[...] firstly, it was somehow systematized, secondly, it was clearly noted, or externalized in some way that local governments carry out some activity which enhances Poland’s communication outside, build some kind of relationship after all at local or regional level, which complements that policy at the central or ministerial level, because it seems to me that this is the main idea.” (R2)

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<sup>7</sup> Article 77(1), Act of 5 June 1998 on the Self-Government of the Regions (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 1668, as amended).

The respondents were also asked whether the goals set for the LGaCD had been achieved by 2015 (see: Ksenicz, 2020, p. 243). Only two local government officials responded to this question. The representative of a rural municipality stated that “it improves civic competence”, and simultaneously drew attention to the dangers of the divergence between the directions of state foreign policy and the foreign cooperation of the LGUs. The representative of the regional government felt that it was the MFA which should answer this question. At the same time, he underlined the differences in how the central and local governments approach the LGaCD.

“We tended to see these objectives otherwise, that is, what we wanted to achieve above all was precisely a synergistic effect, so that the actions taken in Warsaw and complemented by the actions of the local government may translate into greater external rather than internal efficacy of that foreign policy.” (R2)

The implementation of the LGaCD until 2015 was favourably assessed by two of the three experts.<sup>8</sup> One of them spoke of his positive surprise at being informed of the launch of the mechanism. The working meetings with the representatives of marshal offices and local government corporations organized by the LGaCD Support Unit at the MFA, also attended by the staff from the ministry’s territorial or substantive departments, were seen as an opportunity to overcome the distrust between the parties. As for the effects of LGaCD by 2015, the expert shared the view of the local government officials. The period was too short to name any major achievements, but it was certainly a step towards institutionalizing Polish paradiplomacy, which was expected to translate into foreign policy in the longer term. One expert pointed out that local government diplomacy could have been used in relations with the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia to promote local democracy there. Another mentioned two achievements of the LGaCD in the initial period. First, it succeeded in generating interest among the local government community in the priorities of Polish foreign policy, whereas in terms of Polish-Ukrainian cooperation, recommendations were developed to support decentralization reform in Ukraine.

Referring to the goals of the LGaCD, one expert stated that a success was indeed in evidence when one considers the relatively low financial and personnel commitment on the part of the MFA. The expert also stressed the inability of reach local governments with information about the LGaCD on a mass scale, especially in large cities, which feel somewhat autonomous. The experts’ statements demonstrate a perceptible discrepancy where they concern the dissemination of LGaCD.

### **How do the groups concerned assess paradiplomacy-related cooperation between the LGUs and the government after 2015?**

Previously involved in LGaCD, the local government community expected it to be continued by the United Right government. However, it soon became apparent that the MFA headed by Law and Justice politicians had a different vision of cooperation with LGUs than their predecessors.

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<sup>8</sup> The third expert was not involved in the LGaCD prior to 2015.

“Well, it very soon turned out that this is actually a completely different way of looking at the issues of cooperation, and you felt that prevailing, I think, view that, in the opinion of those currently in power, local government should be a tool of the central government to deliver certain programmes, plans, and not an independent entity, whose role is not necessarily to fit in with the government programmes only, but also has some initiatives and ideas of its own.” (R2)

Initially, at least at the official level, efforts were made to maintain a correct relationship, with signals of goodwill coming from the MFA. There were even specific initiatives of cooperation between the central and the local government, such as involvement in the exchange of experience in the Balkans, the local-government dimension of the Three Seas region, preparation of a joint presentation for the EXPO 2020 in Dubai, or the promotion of major events in Polish history on the international arena. However, these projects were not subsequently continued.

“What happens here is a mental clash between these two worlds, and I believe that that very quickly translated into a definite deterioration of those relations and a complete suppression of such activities, which was evident both in the fates of that permanent conference,<sup>9</sup> which had already ceased to exist, and also in incomplete understanding of the mutual attitudes in the International Affairs Group of the Joint Committee. [...] Although some promising declarations were made, the execution was inconsistent with those declarations and here, in a number of these dimensions, it has practically expired by today...” (R2)

A local government official associated with the Law and Justice party expressed a different view of the cooperation with the government in 2015–2020. He noted an improvement manifesting in the fact that he would receive diplomatic memoranda as a member of an international body. Representatives of LGUs who sit on various types of international institutions did observe that obtaining the official position of the Polish government on the issues with which such institutions were concerned often proved problematic.<sup>10</sup>

In a situation of divergence or even conflict regarding paradiplomacy, one can hardly speak of any effects LGaCD or achievement of its goals after 2015. It would be fair to say that LGUs pursue foreign cooperation despite or even against the government’s position.

“It bears more on international politics and the functioning of local government than it is recognized by the state and official diplomacy. And it seems that the crucial things, on the one hand, include these direct local-government benefits concerning the development of the city, the place of the city, but on the other hand, we are trying through such international policy to influence the broader diplomatic situation, or in general political situation in this part of the world. [...] It’s an at-

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<sup>9</sup> Permanent National Conference on International Cooperation of Local Governments, held between 2012 and 2015.

<sup>10</sup> The representative of a Polish regional office in Brussels observed in an interview that despite less frequent contacts with the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the EU after 2015, officers of the kind received the so-called 2021–2027 cohesion package from Polish diplomats faster than the relevant departments in marshal offices. However, that was the sole example of such cooperation after 2015.



tempt by local government actors, government actors, or individuals, to influence big foreign policy by constructing a certain narrative.” (CCR2)

The dangers of diplomacy and paradiplomacy diverging were noted by a representative of a rural municipality.

“It is even with some concern that I look at some of those attempts of some local governments to disregard or even go against government policy, state policy on diplomacy. [...] The picture I have in my mind is my negative assessment of this divergence of priorities of the policy of the state and some local governments – some, mind you.” (RM)

As for the experts, their milieu also expected the LGaCD to continue after 2015. It did not escape their notice that the MFA’s approach to paradiplomacy had changed. The staffer from the regional office in Brussels was the most cautious in his assessments, saying that mutual contacts were less frequent than before 2015. When power was held by the coalition of the Civic Platform and the Polish People’s Party, the exchange of information between the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the EU and the regional offices was, in his opinion, much prompter and more transparent. Another expert initially mentioned that relations became somewhat loose, only to say later that the MFA withdrew from the LGaCD. The last expert expressed the opinion that everything had changed, “and cooperation had basically ceased to exist”.

“Because the conference is gone, the meetings at the MFA were no longer, above all the whole unit was gone<sup>11</sup>, and the call for proposals. The [...] MFA evidently withdrew from it, the RCIDs<sup>12</sup> were left, right? [...] the MFA [...] left themselves the bare minimum, authorizing [interregional] agreements, well because there is no way to pull out from that.” (E2)

In the eyes of the representatives of the MFA, cooperation with local governments between 2012 and 2020 deserves a diametrically different assessment. First, they disagreed with the division into periods of 2012–2015 and 2015–2020.

“This cooperation is continual and developing. It cannot be said that it used to be better at one time and worse at another. This cooperation is developing, it does bring results for both sides.” (MFA)

Responding to the question about the effects of the activities pursued under the LGaCD, the representatives of the ministry also saw only positive sides of the cooperation.

“[Paradiplomacy] constitutes an added value to the interests of the state, which are accomplished through local governments. These activities are undertaken at various levels to bring people and societies closer together and enable mutual understanding, both in Europe and on other continents, despite the differences that divide them. This is an added value for Polish foreign policy in the short and long term. The most important thing is to achieve a synergy between the activities of the classical and local government diplomacy. [...] These relations are enduring, influence the climate of mutual approaches and strengthen Poland’s image through

<sup>11</sup> LGaCD Support Unit at the MFA.

<sup>12</sup> Regional Centres for International Debate.



public diplomacy that local governments engage in. These activities are perceived as advantages from the standpoint of Polish foreign policy, which is why the MFA supports them.” (MFA)

According to the ministry, the period after 2015 saw progress in terms of achieving the goals set for the LGaCD. Representatives of the MFA explained that the local-government dimension is an external one, since it is associated primarily with the foreign initiatives of the regions. Supervising that dimensions is the task of the legal division at the DPCD. The civic dimension, on the other hand, is oriented internally: “it is about inspiring, preparing for the debate and therefore about education, the activities are aimed at universities, local government units, NGOs”. The civic dimension is implemented by the Regional Centres for International Debate, which receive funding from the MFA and are run by NGOs in all regional capitals. Although the representatives of the ministry had previously hinted at the benefits of paradiplomacy, only a few fairly marginal instances of MFA support for foreign cooperation of the LGUs were mentioned throughout the interview.<sup>13</sup> However, no reference was made to the instruments used in the 2012–2015 period, such as the permanent conference or working meetings. When asked why the IAG remained inactive since 2017, the ministry staff did not know the reasons why its work had been discontinued.

### **What are the strengths and weaknesses of Polish paradiplomacy?**

Respondents were asked to assess the strengths and weaknesses of local government diplomacy. The most frequently cited directions for foreign cooperation were Germany (7 mentions), Ukraine (6), France (5), Italy (4), USA (3), Israel (2), Palestine (2), Croatia (2) and Sweden (2); other countries were also indicated, though only as single instances.<sup>14</sup> Several interesting regularities emerge from the interviews. The two respondents who mentioned cooperation with Italy added that it had ceased when the composition of the respective Italian authority had changed.<sup>15</sup> Also, cooperation was discontinued following local elections in Ukraine. The LGUs which establish cooperation with Israeli local governments, also tend to look for a Palestinian partner for balance.<sup>16</sup> Partnerships with cities and regions from more remote parts of the world, especially in the North<sup>17</sup> and South America, have not stood the test of time. Having indicated China as a partner, the respondent representing a city with county rights observed that those relations are

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<sup>13</sup> The following were discussed: support for the establishment of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation “Muskau Arch”, assistance for a Polish municipality which was helped to launch cooperation with a Ukrainian partner, and a joint project of the Wielkopolska Region and German partners on post-COVID solutions.

<sup>14</sup> Argentina, Belarus, Brazil, China, Denmark, Finland, Canada, Mexico, Moldova, Norway, Russia, Slovakia and the United Kingdom.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that mayors in Italy can serve a maximum of two terms.

<sup>16</sup> The representative of a city with county rights described a situation he encountered in his LGU. A Middle Eastern partner requested a Polish city to take a position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The respondent forwarded the appeal to the MFA, but received no response on the matter.

<sup>17</sup> The urban-rural municipality participating in the study represents an exception, as it continues to work with its US partner in the field of education.

sporadic. The interviewees who listed Sweden express distinct opinions: one found that cooperation with the Swedish counterparts was active, whereas another described it as dormant, and oriented exclusively towards very specific projects.

The thematic areas of Polish paradiplomacy referred to in the interviews corroborate the findings from previous research. The most popular domains of cooperation may be categorized in the broadly defined sphere of people-to-people contacts: youth exchange, education and science, culture, sport and tourism, though economic cooperation was mentioned as well. The exchange of experience was very frequently indicated, whereby a change in its direction is repeatedly observed: previously, Polish local government officials learned from their colleagues in the West, while now it is the former who pass on their experience in terms of decentralization to their partners in the East and the Balkans. Areas of cooperation such as environmental protection and renewable energy sources, collaboration between senior groups or study visits for journalists were among the least mentioned. One Polish region made efforts to engage in foreign cooperation concerning power industry but the attempt failed, a respondent reported. It may also be worthwhile to note that courtesy cooperation, which is largely confined to the exchange of delegations, is dying down. The experience of decentralization is, according to local government officials, a Polish “export commodity”. LGUs share their know-how on building administrative structures, establishing national local government organizations, as well as on social participation tools, municipal services, education, and intercultural dialogue.

Paradiplomacy benefits both local governments and the state. Local government officials continue to gain experience from their foreign partners, e.g. in the field of environmental protection. International cooperation improves the qualifications of the staff at the offices and increases the quality of public services, as well as provides opportunities to learn foreign languages, especially for children and young people. It also broadens the horizons of local government officials and makes them more proficient in international contacts. Paradiplomacy can be taken advantage of by lobbying for local governments, notably within the CoR. Membership in the CoR also enables information to be obtained at an early stage of EU policy formulation. By means of foreign cooperation, Polish LGUs promote both themselves and Poland. The representative of a city with county rights drew attention to the resilience resulting paradiplomacy, specifically the “resilience of the society in the field of international politics”, which translates into sustained communication between states when intergovernmental channels are blocked.

Local government officials participating in the study had no doubt that LGUs participate in the implementation of Polish foreign policy, but differed in their estimations of the autonomy that local governments have in the international arena. A local government official close to the Law and Justice party observed that Poland is a unitary state, “which means a need for consultation, [...] opting for actions that do not provoke conflicts [...]. And ideally, these activities of the state and local governments should mutually support and assist each other.” The representative of a city with county rights expressed the conviction that local governments even “co-create foreign policy. Sometimes the central government accepts it, sometimes they endorse it, sometimes they don’t know it.” The representative of a region was doubtful “whether Poland has any strategy at all in foreign cooperation and my impression is that the local governments have a better one.” Another representative of the regional tier stated that “we are salvaging the achievements of the last three decades

in terms of Polish-German relations, [...] we affirm that Poland is a country committed to democracy, to European values, to that code enacted in the European Union”.

Local government diplomacy is constrained by a number of barriers, whereby certain obstacles are more noticeable among LGUs with less potential (rural, urban-rural municipalities), while local governments with more substantial human and financial resources (cities with county rights, regions) face other difficulties. For the smaller municipalities, language remains a palpable barrier, as it appears that a command of English is still not widespread. Speaking of major constraints, the representatives of cities and regions cited legal underpinning and institutional obstacles – i.e. absence of consultation mechanisms. In principle, the financial aspect is not a problem, as LGUs raise their own funds for cooperation, although respondents unanimously admitted that any additional support would broaden the scope of their activities. An interesting obstacle was pointed out by the representative of a city with county rights. In his opinion, “there’s still a tendency to place international cooperation somewhere in the offices of mayors or marshals”, as a result of which the contacts are reduced to the matters of protocol, whereas the section designated to deal with foreign cooperation should support the entire office in that respect.

Members of the CoR were also asked about their functions on the Committee, namely whether they represent local governments or Poland. They all consider themselves representatives of local governments, both their own as well as the corporations by which they had been delegated. One respondent did not feel to be Poland’s representative, since in his opinion local governments “have been left to their own devices and have to decide on their own what is in the interest of Poland or Polish local governments and what is not.” Three other CoR members expressed the belief that they do represent Poland; moreover, one of those highlighted their membership in political factions.

Experts and representatives of the MFA were also asked to assess Polish paradiplomacy. One expert noted that Western Europe (Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain) was the primary direction of cooperation at the earliest stages. Later, Ukraine became a strategic state although, as the expert added, that orientation had become somewhat wearisome. As far as the Eastern Partnership was concerned, cooperation with Georgia and Moldova yielded better results than with Ukraine, the respondent observed. There was a brief period (prior to 2014) when it seemed that contacts with Russia might develop further. However, intergovernmental relations stood in the way. The cooperation between LGUs and Chinese counterparts is also considerably affected by the top-level relations. Furthermore, cooperation with Scandinavia was described as unsuccessful by one of the experts. An interesting viewpoint was shared by the employee of a regional office in Brussels, who stated that at EU level, the geographical directions of cooperation are not that important. Instead, the subject matter of a project is decidedly more important than entering into an agreement with a specific foreign partner.

While experts concurred with regard to LGUs’ participation in foreign policy, one respondent underlined that “[they] absolutely should not pursue it. [...] [T]hey should be an instrument, a supporting tool, they should have their initiatives, but precisely within these limits so that, so that they don’t overstep this boundary.” The Brussels expert found that regions should have even more freedom in their foreign cooperation, subject to all statutory requirements. The participation of LGUs in external policy was also confirmed by MFA representatives.

“Local governments participate in the implementation of foreign policy through their activities. [...] It may be said that the foreign activity of local governments, carried out in accordance with and for the sake of Polish foreign policy, is a kind of complement to the undertakings of the government institutions.” (MFA)

The Ministry does recognize the advantages of paradiplomacy.

“Foreign cooperation of local governments strengthens Polish foreign policy. It is a dimension of bringing societies closer together. It affects the promotion of Polish interests, Polish reason of state. [...] This cooperation creates a network of contacts, it strengthens the relations between nations and fosters learning about their cultural code. [...] The local-government dimension has a positive impact on the mechanisms of promotion, both of local interests and the state as a whole. Thanks to such cooperation, better use is made of subsidies when it comes to infrastructure, for example.” (MFA)

In the context of cooperation with Israel, it was noted that local government diplomacy is meant to complement what happens at the intergovernmental level.

The experts added their share to the catalogue of barriers to paradiplomacy. It is hampered by the human factor, as the COVID pandemic had demonstrated: lack of direct interaction has an adverse effect on cooperation. Given Polish circumstances, the participation of LGUs in the European groupings of territorial cooperation should be considered a failure, which should be attributed to the reluctance of the government (i.e. the previous coalition government) towards EGTCs and the complicated procedures. According to an expert, the current government shows little willingness to cooperate with LGUs as well. The public perception of local government diplomacy and its internal communication among local and regional communities remains an issue. The interviewee remarked that the idea of local government diplomacy had become exhausted in general, whereas long-term thinking is lacking at the central and local government level alike. Furthermore, the conventional division between eastern and western Poland is apparent. Entities in the latter have more foreign contacts and typically adopt a more pragmatic approach, while eastern Poland, the expert asserts, do not make full use of its border location. Local government officials from central Poland still do not feel the need for international cooperation. A representative of a local government corporation pointed out that in view of other duties foreign relations rank very low in the hierarchy of LGUs' priorities; simply put, one may have no time to attend to such activities. An interesting opinion was shared by the expert from Brussels, in whose opinion the need to exchange experiences at European level is seldom felt among the staff in the relevant departments of marshal offices.

The experts confirmed the opinions of local government officials concerning the membership of international bodies. The dual role of Polish delegates there was noticed by the MFA representatives.

“Such a distinction [representing either local governments or Poland] is incorrect. As far as the Committee of the Regions is concerned, the Polish members represent local government and Poland. The activity of the Polish local government officials in the Committee of the Regions means a strengthening of Poland's position.” (MFA)

### **What are the respondents' expectations with regard to cooperation between LGUs and the government in the field of paradiplomacy?**

The final part of the interview was devoted to the future of local government diplomacy. Here, the first question looked at how paradiplomacy is currently coordinated, i.e. whether local government officials feel that this is the case at all. As many as six out of seven representatives responded that no such coordination is exercised. The only respondent to answer to the contrary (having no knowledge of the current state of affairs) was a local government official close to the Law and Justice party. In his view, such coordination on the part of the government is justified, whereas if the state were to relinquish that influence, it would amount to a harmful action. The interviewee described the desired MFA – LGU relationship a “partnership with superiority”.

Not all participants in the study found the MFA to be the right authority to coordinate local government diplomacy. A number of responses indicated the JCCaLG and a competent IAG dedicated to foreign affairs. An interesting suggestion was a senate of self-governance, one of the items on the “Decentralized Republic of Poland” agenda, which envisions transforming the Polish Senate into a local government chamber. According to one respondent, the foreign affairs committee of such a chamber would constitute a natural forum for coordinating foreign cooperation undertaken by LGUs. The region representative felt that “from the standpoint of the local government, it is perhaps less important who the partner will be. What is important is the will to cooperate.”

All local government officials expect more government contribution to local government diplomacy, and advance various proposals in this respect: shifting a part of the burden of central diplomacy onto the local governments, with adequate financial instruments allocated for that purpose; creating a contact desk for LGUs at the MFA, which would run a database of foreign partners that may readily cooperate with Polish local governments. The representative of a city with county rights drew attention to the fact that the potential of LGUs' participation in various types of international bodies was not being exploited. One of the practical consequences is that the MFA is unaware of the networks that Polish local government officials are involved in. On several occasions, it was alleged that local government diplomacy in general tended not to be employed to further the interests of the state, and yet, as the interviewees argued, there were many competent persons in local government while the volume of sound foreign relations established by LGUs was enormous. In this context, one respondent cited the crisis in Polish-Israeli relations caused by the amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance. In his opinion, the government utterly ignored the available local government channels to minimize the damage Poland incurred as a result, while Polish and Israeli cities are linked by at least a dozen partnerships.

However, what the local government officials expect the most from the government with respect to paradiplomacy is a willingness to cooperate and a space for discussion. In situations which require prompt exchange of information between LGUs and the MFA, local government officials rely on their personal contacts at the ministry, “having no space where we could meaningfully address this otherwise than by simply writing, like almost every citizen, to the minister to get some kind of answer.” The communication blockage between the MFA and LGUs is aptly described in the following statement:

“generally, the dialogue, the debate is not there, so, so it’s hard to even argue about anything.”

The last question concerned the proposal of the National Institute of Local Government, according to which the state representative (*wojewoda*) would coordinate local government diplomacy at the regional level (Szewczak, Ganczar, Jaszczuk, 2016, p. 25). All local government officials considered the idea to be misguided or even absurd. If anyone were to be in charge of that matter, the interviewees gave preference to marshal of the region.

Regarding the future of Polish paradiplomacy, more diverse answers were provided by the expert milieu. They were unanimous that the government exercises no coordination, but were uncertain as to whether such coordination was at all justified. According to the representative of a regional office in Brussels, there is no such need and LGUs manage perfectly fine on their own at EU level. Another expert doubted whether local government diplomacy should be coordinated in any case, and asserted further that good communication and the inclusion of LGUs in government initiatives as partners was crucial. As regards a coordinating body, it was put forward that all local government corporations be invited to work together, which theoretically is taking place currently within the IAG. Only the Brussels expert felt that a greater degree of government involvement in local government diplomacy is rather unnecessary.

Thinking about the future, the experts shared several advisable solutions. For instance, local government diplomacy requires incentives, including new funding opportunities for various projects which in turn will be contingent on multilateral partnerships. A propitious though now abandoned idea was to involve LGUs in government programmes to promote Polish economy worldwide. Moreover, local governments should consider specializing, i.e. finding niches in their foreign cooperation undertakings. Having other actors – universities, entrepreneurs and the like – engaged in cooperation remains a relevant task for the LGUs.

When asked about the coordination of local government diplomacy, MFA representatives identified the lack of dialogue as its only weakness. Besides.

“[a]t this stage, the formats for cooperation with local governments are sufficient. Modifications may arise as time and new challenges require. [...] We do not think there are any shortcomings, though we are ready for improvements due to the dynamics of life. [...] Cooperation with local governments requires mutual trust and understanding, then it will be effective and productive.” (MFA)

Concerning a coordinating authority, the ministry representatives only observed that “foreign initiatives must be evaluated at the MFA.” They stressed the need for effective utilization of available resources and human potential. According to the ministry, dialogue and mutual exchange of information are the key to the future.

“We always encourage contact, always provide information, we explain. [...] It’s about efficiency, so there’s no to-and-fro of arguments between the central and local government. Our actions must not lead to a loss of trust. Consultation mechanisms are required between our institutions. We see a great strength in that.” (MFA)

When asked about the National Institute of Local Government proposal on the role of the state representative in local government diplomacy, MFA officials replied that the ministry had not conducted pertinent analyses.



## Conclusions

The results of the pilot study demonstrate that Polish local government diplomacy, approached as an instrument of foreign policy, is undergoing a severe crisis. The multifaceted dispute between the government and local government after 2015 (see: Lackowska, Matczak, 2023) has affected a domain which more than any other requires alignment between the central and sub-state authorities. Given the absence of separatist tendencies in Poland – as the Silesian efforts for autonomy can hardly be regarded as such – the fact that the government and the LGUs follow diverging paths in terms of foreign cooperation should not be seen as a prelude to the fragmentation of the state. Paradiplomacy, therefore, cannot be construed as a factor that significantly weakens Poland on the international stage. At the same time, the failure to exploit its potential is a major loss to external policy.

In a situation where channels of communication have been blocked and there is no will – on either side, incidentally – to overcome the impasse, the government's return to institutionalized cooperation with local government in the domain of international policy can hardly be expected in the short term (i.e. until the upcoming parliamentary and local government elections in 2023).<sup>18</sup> Possibly, the regions where Law and Justice hold power may become involved to some, albeit limited extent. Local government officials from the opposition are likely wait for the government to change, provided of course that they themselves do not lose their seats.

If the divide between the right-wing government and the opposition-held local government persists after 2023, one should consider a model of Polish paradiplomacy in which the interests of both sides are respected: the constitutional power of the Council of Ministers to conduct foreign policy and the international ambitions of LGUs. In addition to an in-depth diagnosis of Polish local government diplomacy, that prospective model should also take the experience of other countries into account.

## Author Contributions

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<sup>18</sup> According to the local government respondents, communication with the MFA ceased after 2018. It might have seemed that the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Technology is keen on pursuing coordination of cooperation with LGUs, having organized the Local Government and Economic Diplomacy Summit in September 2019. However, one can hardly resist the impression that the summit mainly served the immediate political goals of its organizer, Deputy Minister Marcin Ociepa, who was seeking re-election to the Sejm. Afterwards, the initiative saw no continuation.



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## Polska paradyplomacja. Stan i perspektywy

### Summary

Artykuł prezentuje wyniki badań przeprowadzonych przez autora w ramach działania naukowego MINIATURA 4 Narodowego Centrum Nauki. Projekt miał charakter pilotażu, którego celem było opracowanie wstępnej diagnozy i kierunków rozwoju współpracy jednostek samorządu terytorialnego z rządem w zakresie dyplomacji samorządowej. W ramach badania zostało przeprowadzonych 11 wywiadów z przedstawicielami środowisk odpowiedzialnych za kreowanie polskiej paradyplomacji: samorządowcami, pracownikami administracji rządowej oraz ekspertami. Wyniki badań wstępnych wskazują, że polska dyplomacja samorządowa, postrzegana jako instrument polityki zagranicznej, przeżywa poważny kryzys. W celu jego przezwyciężenia należy zastanowić się nad modelem polskiej paradyplomacji szanującym interesy obu stron: rządu i samorządu terytorialnego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** paradyplomacja, dyplomacja samorządowa, polska polityka zagraniczna, samorząd terytorialny, ministerstwo spraw zagranicznych