PISM POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 30 (625), 7 March 2014 © PISM

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Local Government Support for Ukraine

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The victory of Euromaidan and civil society in Ukraine, and the establishment of a new government, offers hope for the preparation and implementation of reforms. The increase in activity among Ukrainian society signals a good moment for the establishment of structures such as citizens' committees, in which public debate would take place on subjects such as local democracy or devolution. This would be an important step for future planning and implementation of devolution reform. Poland can play an important role in supporting the development of cooperation with local authorities in eastern Ukraine with respect to state reform and the rapidly accelerating EU processes.

Local Governments Support Civil Society in Ukraine. For months Polish local authorities have been demonstrating their support for Ukrainian society in a number of ways. Due to the limited resources at their disposal, their acts have predominantly been symbolic in nature or tailored to the financial resources available. In many cities, the administrative offices or other buildings, such as the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, have been illuminated in Ukrainian blue and yellow in a show of solidarity. Under the auspices of the Pomorskie autonomous regional authority, summer camps will be organised for children and young people from Ukraine whose parents were injured during the protests. Another important project was the establishment of a Civic Committee of Solidarity with Ukraine (30 January), which brings together representatives of many groups, including local government officials of both countries. The main objective of the Committee is to support pro-democracy changes in Ukraine, including the preparation of autonomous local authorities to cooperate with Ukraine for the duration of reforms.

Resolutions or statements by representatives of Polish local and regional governments in support of the Ukrainian civil society and its aspirations and condemnation of government aggression were important signals, particularly for Ukrainian local authorities cooperating with partners in Poland. Polkowice city council's resolution supporting the section of Ukrainian society striving for integration with the EU was issued in December 2013. The mayor of Kraków condemned the use of force against protestors, appealed for a peaceful solution to the crisis, and expressed solidarity, especially with Lviv and Kyiv, Kraków's twin cities. In turn, councilors in Wrocław ratified a document declaring sympathy with the participants of peaceful demonstrations, and sent this document to Wrocław's twin city, Lviv, in early December.

Polish local authority contacts with Ukrainian partners have intensified in recent years. Despite the difficult situation in recent months, both sides are trying to implement joint projects. In the new political situation, Ukrainian local authorities wish to expand cooperation even more extensively, sharing Polish experience in terms of both local administration functioning and the fight against corruption at local level.

Collections of food, clothes and medicine, delivered to Ukraine by Polish NGOs, were important elements of Polish support, indicating Polish society's concern about the situation in Ukraine. Important backing also came from hospitals across Poland, which admitted dozens of Ukrainian casualties.

Other forms of support included cultural events, such as Cultural Euromaidan Lubelskie, which took place under the auspices of the mayor of Lublin, or a concert in Szczecin organised in cooperation with the marshal's office and local authorities in Goleniów, Świnoujście and Kołobrzeg. Fundraising, gifts and concerts were announced in the latter case as a gesture of solidarity with the Ukrainian people.

Help for Local Government Reform. Such support and interest in events can provide an important basis for further cooperation between local communities of both countries. Supporting the new Ukrainian government

(assuming its pro-European and reformist approach) in establishing local democracy through changes in regional policy, or, more broadly, in reforming self-government, should become one of the targets in democratising the country. Similar assumptions arise even from the experiences of Georgia and Moldova, which are currently preparing to sign Association Agreements.

An important aspect of self-government partnership is cross-border cooperation. In December 2013, calls for proposals for a Poland–Ukraine–Belarus CBC ended. In 2007–2013, the programme budget amounted to nearly €203 million, and talks on the new financial perspective continue. This is the right time to negotiate more support for the programme. This applies to financial conditions, and to the area covered by the programme. The experience of previous years has shown that, despite strong commitment on the Ukrainian side, not all regions showed equal interest. Among 117 projects with a partner from Ukraine, there is no project in which the lead partner would be Ternopil Oblast. A wider information and training campaign for Ukrainian partners would be significant in this new term.

Development of Cooperation with Eastern Ukraine. It is important that launch programmes for Ukrainian regions further from the Polish border. With the currently available programmes, local governments wishing to implement projects with Ukrainian partners may use funds primarily from Polish development aid and Ministry of Foreign Affairs competitions, under the self-government and civic dimension of foreign policy. However, these programmes have only modest funds. The development aid allocation for projects related to Ukraine in 2014 is nearly PLN 4.3 million. However, only two self-government projects have been allocated funds totalling PLN 600,000. The important thing is that both projects concern cooperation between local governments from Świętokrzyskie and partners from Vinnytsia Oblast. This example shows that projects with more distant regions are possible. Moreover, the former mayor of Vinnitsa, Volodymyr Groysman, who used to work closely with Kielce, was appointed deputy prime minister, with responsibility for regional policy. His experience raises hopes of greater openness to the participation of Ukrainian local governments in international projects.

The strong interest of Polish society in the political situation in the Ukraine, as expressed through support for initiatives and in public opinion polls, is a factor contributing to enhanced cooperation between Polish local communities and local authorities in all regions of Ukraine. Nearly two-thirds of Poles are interested in the current situation, and about the same number sympathise with Euromaidan protestors. Poles expressed high support for Ukraine's European aspirations even before the outbreak of protests in Kyiv and other cities. The Polish role in building self-governance in Ukraine, through sharing experience, was also highlighted by President Bronisław Komorowski after a meeting of the National Security Council on 26 February.

Recommendations. In order to strengthen support for Ukraine, Polish local and regional self-governments should take advantage of their position in international organisations. The strong position of Polish representatives in the Committee of the Regions has been used in the appointment of the Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of the Eastern Partnership. It is important that Polish representatives argued that their partners from other European countries should back new programmes expanding contacts with the local authorities in Ukraine and strengthening local democracy. The Polish success in implementing a growing number of projects with Ukrainian partners should also help persuade other countries in the EU to become more open to Ukrainian local authorities and communities. Local governments should engage actively in the discussion on the abolition of visa requirements for Ukrainian citizens. On the basis of years of experience with joint projects it can be argued that, on the one hand, border regulations are associated with a huge hurdle, while, on the other, the Ukrainian side has made substantial progress with respect to local development and support of local communities in the course of implementing European projects with Polish partners.

Autonomous local governments in both countries should also be encouraged to take advantage of European funds for the support of local democracy. In response to the situation in Ukraine, the European Endowment for Democracy encourages NGOs and autonomous local governments to apply for funding for the development of democracy and reforms.

Long experience of cooperation and the strong support of local communities for protesters in Ukraine show that Polish autonomous local governments have the tools to help their Ukrainian partners. It is important to continue ongoing projects and to plan new ones, particularly in support of the development of local democracy and in preparing local authorities for local government reform in Ukraine.

The important thing now is the information campaign in Poland and Ukraine. Past experience with competitions shows that Poles, despite years of using European funds, are not always capable of coping efficiently with requests for international projects. On the Ukrainian side, international cooperation is very unevenly spread. Western regions are the best performers, so emphasis should now be shifted to other regions. Key here is not just providing information on available programmes, but also persuading partners to join in such forms of cooperation. The civic committees where the discussion on reforms and local democracy could take place provide a platform where the Polish experience of autonomous local government may best be shared.