The characteristic feature of Polish economy in the 1990s, was its decentralisation and the growing importance of non-hierarchic connections. The issue is also connected with local governments (gminas). In comparison with West European democracies, voluntary cooperation between local self-governments in Poland does not have a long tradition. Although, before WWII, there were inter-gmina relations, after WWII, the administration was dominated for 45 years by the communist central governing system. In 1990, local self-governments were re-established, and voluntary cooperation between gminas was possible. Also, gminas could start presenting their common interests. Currently, according to the law, local self-governing bodies can establish inter-gmina (communal) associations, they can sign legal (civil) agreements between each other, and both establish and join international associations.

Over the ten years of cooperation between formal gmina associations, and the influence of the process on local and regional economy, should be the subject of detailed analysis. Spatial research is not typical for political and administrational sciences, and the analysts who are interested in the subject of self-governments cooperation, concentrate on legal aspects of that cooperation, and on the organisation and competence of governing bodies (for example: Enyedi 1994, Regulska 1998, Bennett 1997a).

In this research, I showed the relationship between the spatial character of the associations, their environment and results of their activity. In view of this goal, polls were conducted which included all registered inter-gmina (communal) associations registered in Poland. The list of associations was obtained from the REGON system via the Main Statistics Bureau, and the
register held by the Department of Public Administration at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration. In the middle of 2002, the polls were sent to 226 communal associations, and 30 associations (excluding Euro-regions and country-wide associations).

In the polls, the subjects were asked what elements of their environment supported cooperation, what the results were of their cooperation (both material and non-material), if they were successful in obtaining outside financial support for their common projects, what other institutions were their external partners, what the main obstacles were, and what their future goals are. The effects of cooperation were the subjects of the inquiry, and not the range of the cooperation, because I wanted to avoid declarative answers. The subjects were divided in local and regional groups, independently of their legal status. In calculations, the groups which included more than 17 units were considered as regional. The results were analysed in percentage terms. The subjects were able to give more than one answer to each question.

Table 1. Sample regional and local associations based on different legal formulas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Association’s character and legal form</th>
<th>Regional associations</th>
<th>Local associations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Association</td>
<td>Wielkopolska Association of Gminas and Poviats</td>
<td>Ślęża Gminas’ Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal Association</td>
<td>Opole-Silesian Gminas’ Association</td>
<td>Zgorzelec Gminas’ Associations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own research.

**Theoretical effects of the cooperation**

Organisations are established in order to reach the goals which exceed organisational abilities of a single unit. Organisations can achieve more because together they demonstrate many abilities (Hatch 1997). Thanks to advanced cooperation, local governments can reach “critical mass” in specialised activities (van der Wusten 1995, European Commission 2000). The
term is used in the context of achieve some level of cooperation potential, e.g. capital or other resources, which is the basis for certain types of activity, e.g. the Phare-ISPA support program requires a high minimal own investment that could not be contributed by single gminas. The concentration of resources makes it easier for a group to overcome economic, physical, psychological and historic obstacles, which individual units couldn’t deal with (European Commission 2000).

The cooperation results in economies of scale, which is based on the idea of profit growth according to the growth of numbers of collaborating units, and according to resources concentration. The phenomenon appears only to a certain limit, beyond the growth of cooperative structure might not bring any profits and even limit the profit. The phenomenon is also connected with local territorial governments, because of the limitations of the exploitation of ecological systems. Taylor wrote (1994) that, starting from a certain limit, individual gains based on public resources would decrease, while the size of a group would increase.

The synergy effect might be a significant result of cooperation. The phenomenon can be seen when group results are better than the results of the single most efficient unit. It is indicated local government’s higher effectiveness in association activities, and in solving local/regional problems which government agencies had tried to solve for many years (Sobczyński 1996).

An important element of cooperation is associated with information exchange. This element includes the avoidance of copying the same efforts (or the same mistakes). The cooperation is undertaken in order to reach common results, a better credibility, discovering of new talents, discovering new information sources, and in order to find new ways to solve problems (European Commission 2000). Cooperation is commonly considered as reducing the danger of competition between associated units, but also it is an answer to competition on the domestic and international scale with other local communities (for example, competing in order to obtain financial resources, and in order to find new investors).

Nunn and Rosentraub (1997) identified four types of improvement associated with cooperation:

- economic development (e.g. improved business climate, “the capture” of wandering business companies, more entrepreneurial activity);
- municipal service (e.g. appropriate economic scale for providing or es-
establishing public services, improved cost effectiveness, better services);

- physical environment (e.g. improved environmental quality);
- social and political aspects (e.g. higher citizen participation in public
decision making, more inclusive representation).

It is difficult to separate different results. Often, they influence one
another. For example, increased citizens’ participation and involvement in
solving social problems can influence the quality of services in a gmina.
The higher quality service may contribute to improving local resources
management, and it may contribute to improving the quality of the
environment.

I believe that it is practical to limit the effects of cooperation to non-
material ones (gaining knowledge and information), and material ones
(purchase of equipment, common investment). Finding financial resources
would be classified according to the goals which they could be used for,
e.g. if the resources are used for spatial planning or development strategy,
they would be placed in the first category. If they are used to finance
building and equipping offices, schools, and cultural centres, they would be
classified as material effects.

The results of investigation

79 communal associations and 13 other associations responded to the
poll, i.e. 36% of mailed polls were answered. The data collected from the
poll included information on 81 local and 11 regional associations.

Answering the question about the factors which positively influenced
establishing of associations, local associations usually listed such factors as
“the natural environment”, “the use of existing infrastructure and distribu-
tion of waste”, “mutual investment”. Those factors are connected with the
conditions and material character of physical environment, and with the
economy of local resources. Regional associations often listed such factors
as “administrative regions” (mainly representing gminas’ interests from the
region), “functional regions and others” (including agglomerations, indu-
trial regions, problem areas), and “historic regions”. The factors can be
associated with the structures of political, economic and cultural character.
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Fig. 1. The factors which positively influenced the establishing of local and regional associations.
Source: own research.

Except for one, newly established local association, all other investigated units reported effects in at least one category. In the group of non-material effects (Fig. 2), local associations listed collecting information and obtaining knowledge on ecology (57%), tourist promotion (40%), investment promotion (31%), education, sport, and recreation (28%), the use and construction of utility infrastructure, such as water, gas, and electricity networks (26%). Education, sport, and recreation category included services provided to local gminas’ community, and the education of office workers from participating gminas. Ten local associations (12%) did not report any non-material results of cooperation. They were task-oriented and connected with the use and construction of infrastructure such as water and gas pipelines.

All regional associations listed different non-material effects. They considered mainly such effect as lobbying on regional and central governments and other institutions (72%), tourist promotion (64%), ecology (55%) and investment promotion (45%).
With respect to material effects, 21 local associations (26%) and 5 regional associations (45%) did not show any of them (Fig. 3). Local associations listed primarily ecology (42%). The effects were associated with the construction of sewage systems and sewage treatment plants, waste storage and segregation facilities. Other effect included utility companies (26%) (water and gas pipe-lines, electricity and telecommunication networks), and transport (10%) (construction and road maintenance, creation and maintenance of inter-gmina public transportation systems). Material effects, such as tourist promotion (14%), were connected with the creation of central bureau and/or bureau network for tourist information.

Fig. 2. Non-material results (connected with obtaining information and knowledge) of local and regional cooperation.

Source: own research.
Regional associations showed fewer material results. Only one association in some categories (in this small sample, it was 9%) listed such effects as ecology, utilities, transportation and tourist promotion.

In the period of 3 years (from 1999 to 2001), 9 (82%) of regional associations submitted requests for financial support to supporting institutions, and 6 out of those 9 associations (66%) received money for at least 3 projects in the categories. Among all the projects, 11 (94%) projects were connected with so called “soft” projects (publications, events, training, etc). Only two associations reported the existence of mutual investment funds.

In the same period of time, 40 local associations (49%) submitted grant requests, and 29 associations (72%) of them were granted funds for at least one project. Only 14 out of 84 listed projects (16%) were connected with infrastructure growth, but their value was much higher.

Four regional associations (36%) co-operated with foreign partners,
mainly other associations (2 German partners, 1 from France, and 1 from the Great Britain). 10 local associations (12%) collaborated with foreign partners (mainly partners from Germany and France).

Fig. 4. Obstacles to cooperation between self-governing Polish gminas in associations on local and regional levels.
Source: own research.

Among the main obstacles to cooperation, both local and regional associations listed the lack of financial resources (70 to 73%). Low activity of the members was a bigger problem for local associations (23%) than for regional ones (9%). Big regional associations reported more conflicts between members than local associations (18% and 15%, respectively), the same refers to the lack of competence, and legal problems (18% and 10%, respectively). Similarly, the respondents complained about prioritizing
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individual interests over group interest (nearly 18%). Regional associations did not have problems with changes in governments (personal changes) and they did not fear common investment risk (local associations listed that as their problem).

Discussion and conclusions

For the local associations, physical structures (such as their natural environment and infrastructure) were more significant, which is closely connected with the local communal economy. Whereas for regional associations, administrative, cultural and economic structures were more significant.

We should remember, though, that the main factor which influences the formalisation of group cooperation is the mutual interest of the group members, and their environment only indirectly influences their activity through forming social needs. Thus, one cannot assume that the existence of a lake or historic landmarks directly influenced establishing of an association, but it could have influenced common goals of local governments, thus making it easier to establish formal organisations. Theoretically speaking, such elements could be considered by group members as secondary self-identification factors, but they are not connected with their real goals, which are the very reason for formalisation of association framework. Regardless of certain reasonable doubt, this research suggests rather that environmental structures significantly influence the formation of associations.

Non-material effects of cooperation are connected with obtaining information and knowledge, and are typical for both categories of associations. According to P. Drewe (after Cabus 2001), the exchange of information is the basic factor which influences the functioning of an organisation, especially, within a network, where membership is voluntary.

The effects differ in respect to their scope and quality between local and regional association. Regional associations more often showed the effects of influencing other units, whose activity was significant for social and economic development of the units. They referred to such categories as lobbying, tourist and investment promotion. Also, there was a higher percentage of effects in the category of typical social activities, such as in culture, health care and rescue missions and social problem-solving. Local
associations more often referred to the effects with respect to construction and maintenance of utilities. The percentage of both types of associations which reached their goals concerning ecology was on a similar level.

Regional associations concentrated on information and knowledge exchange. It was often connected with the projects for which those associations obtained financing. The projects belonged to “the soft category”, and included planning and strategy formation, training, education, promotion, etc.

In general terms, the number of effects which are connected with economies of scale, and/or the phenomenon of synergy, is small. The most of projects which were implemented were not expensive. Individual gminas often work on bigger projects. It is most likely connected with the lack of traditional cooperation between local self-governing bodies in Poland, and the still-too-small potential of the gminas which cannot reach the “critical mass” in their economic and social activities. Social and cultural factors clearly influence the effects of cooperation in Poland.

Local organisations are significantly influenced by their physical environment. It is connected with the fact that administrative and functional areas are inter-related. The structures which reach beyond administrative space enhance cooperation because they cannot be influenced by an individual gmina (Bennett 1997b, Fürst 1999). Natural environment has bigger influence on local associations than bigger organisations when speaking about setting group goals.

Referring to the divisions of social needs established by Parysek (1996), it is possible to say that local citizen groups mostly concentrate on satisfying their bio-physical needs, and only later they are ready to consider their psycho-physical and technical-productive needs. Local associations in Poland most often collaborate on the construction of utility infrastructure (e.g. water and sewage systems), and they are primarily concerned with this problem. Of course that need will be gradually satisfied, therefore the priorities of local associations might change in the future. In comparison with the Polish gminas, local governments in Zurich canton in Switzerland more often cooperate to satisfy psycho-physical needs, e.g. they support schools, hospitals and cemetery maintenance, and anti-alcohol actions (Meylan 1987).

The factors which influence establishing associations and the effects of their work are different for regional and local associations. The features of
this type of organisations described in this paper, which exist in Poland, can be only tentatively compared with the features of organisations which exist abroad. For example, Fürst (1999) showed how the conditions of local governments cooperation in Great Britain and Germany differed. Organisation theoreticians believe that the degree of variables which refer to organisations (such as their structure and effectiveness) changes as other properties of the organisations change (such as technology and the environment) (Hatch 1997). Nunn and Rosentraub (1997), similarly, wrote that the effects and gains connected with cooperation within organisations are difficult to evaluate even in the same legal/political conditions. The same effects compared with different goals and unit potential, can be an example of both failure and success.

For the use of the data regarding the effects of cooperation, it would be important to carefully analyse the activity of associations which have the best results. One should remember that our knowledge of their success does not guarantee that the success will occur in different conditions. In Poland there aren’t many studies of that type, therefore they should be promoted in the future, especially the studies regarding the space, which is more and more limited, and therefore its value increases.

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