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Analizy i Opinie

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Polish/German trans-border co-operation?**

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- *The experience of Polish/German trans-border co-operation points to the significant role played by strategic thinking in planning and delivering EU assistance fund programmes in border regions, ensuring that such programs tie in with the wider foreign policy of the State. The Polish government and self-governments of the eastern voivodships should formulate legible objectives of trans-border co-operation with Ukraine and Belarus, consistent with the priorities of Polish policy with respect to these two countries: support for democracy, civic society and market economy. For the time being, Polish government documents, prepared from the perspective of using up the EU Interreg and Tacis assistance funds, are primarily subordinated to European Commission procedures and guidelines and do not express Polish policy. Poland should lobby in favour of simpler and more transparent instruments for managing and financing future EU programs on its eastern border.*
- *Neighbourhood Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine for 2004-2006 has numerous flaws. The declared principal objective of that co-operation – raising competitiveness of the region and ensuring integration of local communities – is not confirmed in the selection of programme priorities and distribution of resources. It is dominated by programmes associated with road improvement and environmental protection, whereas activities aimed at supporting economic co-operation and ensuring the presence of Polish businesses on eastern markets have been totally marginalized. Resources earmarked for co-operation between Euroregions are also low.*
- *Considering the different stage of advancement of bilateral relations and different level of democratization and decentralization in Ukraine and Belarus, amalgamating Poland/Ukraine and Poland/Belarus trans-border programmes into a single tripartite co-operation programme can significantly complicate the execution of trans-border projects.*
- *There is a great need for ensuring independence of Euroregion authorities from the central or regional governments in Belarus and Ukraine. Poland and Germany can share their experience in Euroregion operations on the Polish/German border, particularly as concerns their project selection competencies and relations with State and regional governments.*
- *The Polish/German experience shows the importance and effectiveness of the activities promoting economic co-operation in the border region and economic consulting for businesses looking for partners on the other side of the border. The German side has been very successful in delivering this type of projects within the framework of the Interreg programme.*
- *There is an urgent need for a professional study of spatial management of the eastern border of Poland. While there already are many such detailed scientific studies of the Polish/German border, documentation of the Polish/Ukrainian and Polish/Belarusian border continues to demonstrate many significant shortcomings.*

New challenges for trans-border co-operation on the eastern border of the EU

Inter-regional co-operation, including its trans-border element, has constituted for many years an important element of the European cohesion policy. Central and East European countries which recently joined the EU have been able to take advantage of this type of assistance instruments under the Phare Crossborder Co-operation Programme (Phare CBC) since the mid-nineties. Upon enlargement, they have become beneficiaries of much larger assistance funds under the Interreg Regional Assistance Programme, but were also compelled to adopt an extraordinarily intricate planning and management system inherent to this type of programmes. In addition, trans-border co-operation between the EU and its new neighbours to the East will be forced to find a difficult compromise between security requirements, such as introduction of visas or reinforced passport and customs controls, and the need to support a wide pan-European dialogue and co-operation between local communities. The development of trans-border co-operation on the eastern EU border will have a significant impact in the years to come on the shape of new assistance instruments, the so-called Neighbourhood Instruments, which as of 2007 are expected to constitute an integral part of the EU policy with respect to EU neighbours who will not join the Community in the years to come. Poland should give more weight to its position on the priorities and instruments of that policy. It seems that a study of the experience acquired to date in trans-border co-operation on the Polish/German border would be helpful in formulating the Polish position,

particularly since there seems to be an increasing interest in joint Polish/German/Ukrainian cultural, scientific and economic projects backed by EU assistance funds.

There are many differences between trans-border co-operation on the Polish/German border and its equivalent on the border with Ukraine and Belarus. First and foremost, co-operation conditions in the east are much more difficult owing to the “closed” nature of the border (visa requirement, thorough customs and passport control). Moreover, there exist differences of a historical and social nature, in economic development, in the scale of the EU organizational and financial assistance, and in the organization of community and local-government partners. Nevertheless, a study of the experience acquired in the Polish/German border region and preliminary analysis of first Polish programme documents relating to the neighbourhood policy toward Ukraine and Belarus allow for a formulation of a few important conclusions.

Polish/German trans-border co-operation: outcome and new challenges

Since the mid-nineties, EU funds (Phare CBC for Poland and Interreg for Germany) have served as principal tools in supporting Polish/German trans-border co-operation. Most investments executed under these programmes relate to road infrastructure, including construction and refurbishing of border crossings, and environmental protection. An important role is also played by subsidies under the so-called people-to-people programmes executed by Euroregions, which serve the purpose of facilitating acquaintance between Poles and Germans living in the direct proximity of the boarder. The German side earmarked an important part of the resources to supporting economic co-operation and providing consulting services to small- and medium-size enterprises.

These programmes have helped to create in the past 10 years solid foundations of Polish/German trans-border co-operation, especially co-operation at the lowest Euroregion level and between land administration in Germany and government/self-government administration in Poland. The high

level of absorption of assistance funds under the Phare CBC programme has been often given as an example of good practices for EU assistance programmes executed in Poland. Moreover, contacts between regional administration officials have been translated into joint work on structural fund programme documents.

Now that Poland has joined the European Union, Polish/German co-operation should move to a higher level covering an increasing number of so-called partnership or mirror programmes, worked out together and financed by EU resources. First programmes of this type in the area of trans-border environmental protection, major accident and natural disaster countermeasure applications, and better development of urban centres located on both sides of the border began appearing already a few years ago. Their proportion in the overall pool of trans-border programmes should grow significantly in the years to come at the expense of typical infrastructure projects such as road or sewerage upgrading. Indeed, infrastructure projects should be financed mainly with structural funds available since 2004.

Interreg IIIA/Tacis on the Polish/Ukrainian border: a complicated management system

In 2004-2006, the amount of funds earmarked for the support of trans-border co-operation between Polish and Ukrainian regions will for the first time approximate the amount of

funds earmarked for co-operation on the Polish/German border in the 1990s. In 2004-2006, eastern Polish voivodships will receive 40 million Euro in subsidies for programmes with Ukraine and Belarus

under the Interreg fund. Ukraine and Belarus will at the same time access 8 million Euro under the Tacis programme.

The principal document that specifies the main objectives and terms of that assistance is the Neighbourhood Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Interreg III A/Tacis CBC 2004-2006, submitted to the European Commission for approval. The programme was prepared by the Department of Regional Development Programme Implementation, Ministry of Economy on the basis of work done by a tripartite Polish/Belarusian/Ukrainian task team.

An analysis of that document, which presents the terms of dividing EU funds into individual developmental priorities, the terms of selecting projects and the terms of programme management, leads to numerous questions and doubts. They concern primarily the following issues:

- Establishment of a tripartite Polish/Belarusian/Ukrainian programme instead of two separate Polish/Ukrainian and Polish/Belarusian programmes;
- Absence of a division of funds between Ukraine and Belarus under the Tacis programme; establishment of a single fund for both countries, which creates a politically awkward competition;
- Marginal treatment of issues associated with economic co-operation in border regions;
- Absence of a professional analysis of the economic and social situation in the supported region;
- Very complicated system of managing the programme, based on the method of operating Interreg programmes on EU internal borders.

According to European Commission guidelines concerning Interreg programmes along new EU

borders, the Poland/Belarus/Ukraine trans-border co-operation programme will be managed by much more complicated rules than the Phare CBC / Interreg programmes executed in the past years on the Polish/German border. The entire project selection and approval process must be conducted by a Joint Technical Secretariat along the principle of tripartite arrangements or unanimous acceptance – when the given project is financed by both Interreg and Tacis funds. In practice this may impose significant obstacles to an effective absorption of funds reserved for the Polish side, which has at its disposal a sum many times greater than Ukraine or Belarus. Moreover, contacts between Polish, Ukrainian and Belarusian governments are very formal, which further complicates the execution of that ambitious programme better adapted to the specificity of trans-border co-operation in Western European countries.

Considering the current political situation in Belarus and Ukraine, and the extremely critical reaction of the Polish public opinion to the activities of the governments in Kiev and Minsk, it can be assumed that the complicated tripartite project selection process will be prone to cause conflicts, particularly with respect to trans-border projects supporting grassroots initiatives and contacts between non-governmental organizations and scientific institutions. Indeed, Ukrainian or Belarusian officials may consider such projects politically inconvenient and their execution may be hindered in various ways within project appraisal and selection committees. Information obtained from the Economy Ministry indicates that all projects under the Tacis programme for Belarus will need to be first accepted by President Aleksandr Lukashenka.

Neighbourhood Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2004-2006 – vague and passive

The Neighbourhood Programme currently under preparation by the Polish/Ukrainian/Belarusian task team, which constitutes a basis needed to apply for funds under Interreg IIIA and Tacis, is very vague and devoid of a professionally conducted analysis of the economic situation in bordering Polish, Ukrainian and Belarusian regions. One gets the impression when reading the document that the main objective of its authors was to reach the most politically correct compromise in the name of good relations with the governments of Ukraine and Belarus. It is understandable that, owing to a higher level of Poland's economic development, the economic and social situation on the Polish side of the border is much better identified than on the Belarusian or Ukrainian side, where the relevant information is not compiled or is compiled in a manner incompatible with Polish statistical standards. However, the absence of economic data relative to our eastern neighbours is not an excuse for leaving out in this important programme document easily available economic analyses of Polish border regions in the Podlaskie, Mazowieckie, Lubelskie and Podkarpackie Voivodships. Economy Ministry officials responsible for preparing the programme document excuse that shortcoming by citing European Commission instructions recommending the shortest possible treatment of this type of programme documents. However, different conclusions come to mind when one has read equivalent documents relating to the Interreg programme on the Polish/German border and studied the Neighbourhood Programme

Hungary-Slovakia-Ukraine. These documents contain an extremely detailed description of the economic and social situation focused on co-operation possibilities for small- and medium-size businesses, and a thorough list of strong and weak points of the local industry divided into sectors and branches. Considering the great deal of interest paid by entrepreneurs in eastern Poland to economic co-operation with Ukraine and Belarus, a marginal treatment of these issues in the primary programme document is indeed astonishing. The absence of any analysis whatsoever of the historical and cultural background of the Polish/Ukrainian and Polish/Belarusian border region is also a serious failure. As stressed by Rafał Sadowski from Centre for Eastern Studies in Warsaw (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich), in social terms, the role played by the eastern border of the EU is much more significant than that of the EU southern border due to strong social, cultural, ethnic and historical ties of the local population. This constitutes a very important starting point for supporting co-operation between increasingly active Euroregions and NGOs on both sides of the eastern border.

Above-cited shortcomings in the preparation of a document specifying trans-border co-operation between Poland, Ukraine and Belarus result to a large extent from the system of work and professional profile of Economy Ministry officials responsible for execution of this type of "sensitive" tasks. Preparing trans-border assistance fund programmes to be delivered on Poland's eastern border is undoubtedly such a task. These officials

constitute a group of very well educated young people, proficient in languages and technical aspects of their work, and having an outstanding knowledge of EU procedures indispensable in preparing project applications. However, they lack experience in terms of the knowledge of extraordinarily complex political, social and historical background of the relations on the border between Poland, Ukraine and Belarus, and of the actual economic needs of the region. Consequently, the Neighbourhood Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine has been prepared primarily from the angle of compatibility with European Commission procedures and formal guidelines and not from the angle of the priorities of Polish foreign and economic policy with respect to our eastern neighbours, which aims at supporting authentic civic and economic co-operation unhindered by the border. There has been an evident absence of consultations with experts and institutions formally engaged in Polish eastern policy, including consultations with business communities and Self-

Government Authorities (Urzędy Marszałkowskie), Euroregions and regional development agencies, which have been active for many years on behalf of trans-border co-operation on the border between Poland and Germany. Regional Administration Bureaus in Poland's eastern voivodships accepted the Neighbourly Co-operation Programme treating it as a welcome supplement to assistance funds for road and sewerage repair received under the Integrated Regional Development Operational Programme (ZPORR). Meanwhile, Poland could use EU assistance funds and at the same time play the role of an animator and initiator of novel forms of trans-border co-operation. The more so since under the Interreg programme it has at its disposal a sum five times higher than Ukraine and Belarus have under the Tacis programme. This type of leadership role in creating trans-border co-operation has been played in the past by German borderline land authorities with respect to their Polish neighbours.

How to use the experience of Polish/German trans-border co-operation on the Polish/Ukrainian border

Considering the above-cited flaws in the very structure of the Neighbourhood Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine, all suggestions for taking advantage of the Polish/German experience on the Polish/Ukrainian border are nothing more than wishful thinking. Nevertheless, in view of the current discussion on the shape of the EU regional policy and neighbourhood policy after 2007, such recommendations undoubtedly ought to

be formulated. Poland should lobby for simpler and more transparent tools of managing and financing future trans-border programmes on its eastern border. Experience could be shared in the following fields:

Assist Euroregions

The Polish/German trans-border co-operation experience testifies to an important role played by Euroregions in revitalizing contacts at the local level. Euroregions have been and continue to be not only active participants in the selection of projects backed by EU assistance funds but also animators of numerous grassroots initiatives in the Polish/German border region. The independence of Euroregion authorities from central and regional governments and the grassroots, local-community sponsored nature of Euroregional initiatives are important elements of co-operation between Euroregions. As shown by the

studies of the Community Study Centre in Leipzig, collaborators of many Euroregion offices in Belarus or Ukraine also hold positions in local governments and that creates the threat of their dependence on political elites. It is symptomatic that the European Commission guidelines on implementation of the Interreg/Tacis programme only recommend – rather than require – the inclusion of Euroregion representatives in committees responsible for project selection. It seems that in this respect it would be very important to share the experience of Euroregion operations on the Polish/German border, particularly as concerns their project-selection competencies.

Support economic projects

Another area where it would be worth sharing the Polish/German trans-border co-operation experience with partners from the Polish/Ukrainian and Polish/Belarusian border region is in supporting economic co-

operation and providing economic consulting for businesses looking for partners on the other side of the border. The German side has been executing this type of projects under the Interreg programme with a great deal of success.

Elaborate a spatial management study of Poland's eastern border

Owing to the vague description of the starting-point situation on the Polish/Ukrainian/Belarusian border in the Neighbourhood Programme there is an urgent need for commissioning a professional study of spatial

management of Poland's eastern border. While there are numerous detailed scientific studies of the Polish/German border, documentation of the Polish/Ukrainian and Polish/Belarusian border still demonstrates many significant shortcomings. A

reliable analysis of the economic and social situation in the eastern border region, one devoid of political rhetoric, constitutes a fundamental condition for an

effective absorption of European assistance funds in that area.

Formulate political objectives

First and foremost, there is a need to view regional and trans-border policy in the context of the overall Polish foreign, social and economic policy. A study of actions undertaken by German land governments in the Polish/German border region points to a strong connection of trans-border assistance programmes and the foreign and economic policy toward the Polish partner. European

Commission directives have been treated only as auxiliary tools and did not restrict the execution of the programme's fundamental objectives. It seems that this type of operating formula - focusing on the substance of trans-border co-operation rather than its procedures – should be also adopted by Polish government institutions.

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