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THE ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION AND THE SETTLEMENT  
SYSTEM IN POLAND

1. Preliminary remarks

In 1975, radical changes were introduced in Poland's administrative division, when the model of three subdivisions /gmina - powiat - voivodship/ was substituted by the model of two subdivisions /gmina - voivodship/. Over 300 rural and about 80 urban powiats were eliminated and thus the intermediate administrative division was abolished. The 17 large voivodships and 5 incorporated urban settlements with the status of voivodship /Warsaw, Łódz, Cracow, Poznan, Wrocław/ were replaced by 49 voivodships, spatially and demographically smaller. The aim of this change was to improve the functioning of local administration. The number of rural gminas /also called communes/ remained almost the same at over 2000 units.

The new administrative division was discussed vigorously in the early 1980s; its expedience and the supremacy of the former system of three subdivisions were analysed. Acting on public opinion, the State Council and the then-existing Ministry of Administration, Local Economy, and Environmental Protection commissioned the Polish Academy of Sciences to prepare an expert report on this subject. The task was entrusted to the Academy's Committee for Space Economy and Regional Planning. The study was directed up to 15 October 1984 by Professor Stanislaw Leszczycki and subsequently by the present author. The secretary was Dr Marek Potrykowski.

The expert group carried out extensive enquiries among specialists, undertook a number of studies, and held seminars and discussions. The results obtained served as a basis for the final report prepared by myself as the chairman of the group with the cooperation of Professor Jerzy Kolodziejcki. The materials were published in two bulletins of the Committee including the final report approved by the Academy's Praesidium in the autumn of 1985 /Stasiak 1984, 1986/

Though my paper is based upon the materials mentioned above, the opinions presented here are entirely my own. Since the length of the paper is limited, I was bound to introduce necessary abridgements.

## 2. General problems of the administrative division

In developed communities, the problem of the administrative division of the country was always of great interest to different groups. These include the political and administrative authorities, society, representatives of various scientific disciplines, the legal and social sciences, as well as geography /the factor of space/ in particular, since it refers to the basic relations between state - society as regards the exercise of power on a specific territory. The competence of central authorities and organs on the regional and local scale is largely determined by the administrative division; it outlines the scope of the participation of society in the administration of a concrete geographical space, and thus it establishes foundations for a lesser or greater autonomy of territorial communities on the regional and local scale. Moreover, it sets up the spatial framework of contacts between the community and individual persons with the central and local authorities as well as a number of institutions of an obliga-

tory or general character.

It should be remembered that with the progress of civilization, increased urbanization processes and a transfer from an economy based upon agricultural production to an industrial economy occurs, which finds its reflection, i.e., in a steady increase of non-agricultural population living mostly in towns. Furthermore, the network of necessary contacts between the individual and a social group with the local government weakens and socialized institutions concerned with education, culture, health service, services, and infrastructural equipment become denser and denser in an impressive manner. Thus, the significance of those spatial relations, largely shaped by the country's administrative division into basic units of management and spatial organization that constitute legal links of the hierarchy of administrative and political authorities, cannot be indifferent to individual citizens or to formal and informal social groups or to the state authorities.

Of course, the organization of space cannot, or rather should not, run from the existing realities, that is from the country's settlement system developed throughout the historical process, from the existing links between the elements of the system, nor from the conditions of the geographical environment. Therefore, when analysing proposed changes or transformations in the existing system of the country's administrative division, one should take into consideration; a/ the premises of political nature, and particularly those referring to the relation between authorities - society; b/ questions resulting from the existing settlement system and its links, as well as possible tendencies in

the future development; c/ the influence of the geographical environment.

On the operational scale, three elements or factors should be considered when the basic units of the administrative division are established:

a/ the human factor - that is, the approximate number of inhabitants per given unit; here approximate minimum and maximum values for, i.e., economic existence of a given unit are estimated;

b/ the space factor - that is, the surface in square kilometers; here also marginal parameters are estimated, which depend, i.e., on the size of the given country, the level of communications links, and obstructions caused by the geographical environment;

c/ the organization factor promoting efficient management and the flow of information /upwards and downwards/; this factor limits the number of subordinate units, especially in the system of centralized government characterized by the method of issued commands.

We should realize that those elements - objectivized factors - are supplemented by a whole gamut of additional factors when the administrative division is introduced. They are a consequence of the historical past, cultural or ethnic cooperation, conditions laid down by the geographical environment, the state of investment into the technical and social infrastructure, and above all from political decisions, which I have already mentioned at the very beginning. The political factors may consciously attempt to create certain territorial communities or break-up existing communities. They

may actually make it easy for the territorial and local communities to participate in the management and administration of those units or to make their participation a difficult task.

The survey provided above makes it clear that decisions concerned with the administrative division of the country should be made in all consciousness and awareness of results that they will bring about in the short and long run. This kind of consciousness requires many-sided studies both on a macro scale as well as on regional and local scales. Results gained should come under public discussion and be implemented, in a rational way, but only after a profound analysis of remarks expressed during the discussions.

### 3. Short description of Poland's settlement system

Poland's settlement system is a product of history; it is characterized by strong subdivision, both in villages as in towns. The estimated number of villages in Poland is about 43 thousand; their inhabitants number about 15 million people, that is, about 40% of the total population. The average size is about 360 people per village, which means that villages are generally small. Villages described in Poland as medium sized - 200 to 500 people - dominate /about 40%/; they contain over one-third of Poland's rural population. Large villages /1-2 thous. people/ and very large villages /2 thous. and over people/ total merely about 2.4 thous. or slightly over 5% of the total number of villages in Poland; they are inhabited by about one-fourth of the rural population, and are potential or actual local centres. However, regional differences in

their distribution are striking. Large and very large villages are mainly situated in the southern voivodships or near large towns. In northeastern and central Poland, the centres of gminas /communes/ are of necessity medium villages with a population of 200-500 inhabitants, as there are no larger ones. We may therefore speak of a so-called "deficit" of large and very large villages. Altogether in 1984 there were 1439 gmina villages in Poland, that is, site centres of gminas; as many as 242 centres of gminas were situated in villages with a population of under 500 inhabitants.

/Polish Town Planning Association 1986/

In principle, only the numerous small towns - up to 10 thous. inhabitants - have close links with the rural areas.

The current number of towns in Poland is 812, of which 440, over half, are small towns with a population of under 10 thousand. Altogether, they total about 2.1 million people, about 5.5% of Poland's population. Most of the small towns date from the Middle Ages; at the end of the 16th century on the territory of present-day Poland there were about 950 towns. Many of them were affected by a socio-economic crisis in the 19th century when - due to the development of capitalist industry - they lost their traditional economic basis. Similarly, in the years following World War II under socialist economy, it has not been easy to determine their economic function. In 1970-78 in many of them - about 100 - there was a tendency for a decrease in the number of their inhabitants, which points to some disturbances in socio-economic development. Now, many of those small towns constitute an important link in

the local settlement system while numerous services rendered in common to the rural and small town population are localized there. In 1984, out of 2119 gminas, 551 had a joint People's Council and a chief executive officer /naczelnik/ for the town and the gmina; a further 126 centres of gminas were localized in the town but had separate People's Councils and offices for the town and the rural gminas. However, as I have already mentioned, two-thirds of gminas centres over 1400 are localized in the villages. Regional differences are also great here. Most gmina's centres localized in towns are in a part of western Poland, which is closely connected with the history of the development of Poland's settlement network since the majority of small towns in the Middle Ages /up to the 16th century/ were set up in those parts of our country. Thus, where there is a shortage of small towns, centres of gminas are out of necessity located in villages, which often are not prepared to fulfil such functions

The urban network. As I have pointed out in connection with the links of the rural settlement with small towns, in Poland there are relatively many /over 800/ towns, half of which are small with a population of under 10 thousand inhabitants. However, we should remember that some essential changes have taken place in the distribution of the population in towns and villages following 1945. These can be summarized in the following table:

Population in Poland as well as in towns and  
 villages

Years:			Changes in the years
	1946	1985	1946-85
	in millions		in millions
Poland, total	23.6	37.3	+ 13.7
Towns	8.0	22.4	+ 14.4
Villages	15.6	14.9	- 0.7

The whole increase in the number of inhabitants, that is, about 13.7 million people, was absorbed by the towns; the rural population oscillated at an almost unchanged level, amounting to about 15 million people. Moreover, the process of the concentration of urban population in large towns /with over 100 thous. inhabitants, and particularly with over 200 thous. inhabitants/ started to develop then. For example, in 1970 Poland's total urban population amounted to about 52%, with about 22.6% of the total and about 43% of the urban population inhabiting large towns /with a population of 100 thousand inhabitants and over/. In 1985, about 60% of the population lived in towns, and about 30% - that is about half of the urban population - inhabited larger towns.

Detailed data for 1985 can be found in Table 1.



Table 1  
Population in Polish towns in 1985

Size of towns	Number of towns	Population in towns		
		in thous.	the total population	the urban population
		in thous.	in percentages of:	
Towns, total	812	22,486	100,0	60,2
up to 5 thous.inh.	256	766	3,4	2,0
5 thous.- 10 thous.	184	1,302	5,8	3,5
10 thous.- 20 thous.	164	2,338	10,4	6,3
20 thous.- 50 thous.	125	3,883	17,3	10,4
50 thous.-100 thous.	43	2,952	13,1	7,9
100 thous.-200 thous.	22	2,996	13,3	8,0
200 thous. inh. and over	18	8,249	36,7	22,1

Concise Statistical Yearbook 1986, Central Statistical Office,  
 Warsaw 1986

Table 1 shows that about one-fourth of the total number of towns /208/ had a relatively high population /over 20 thous./ though part of them were included in the groups of urban agglomerations, which means that in principle they could not play an independent role in the hierarchy of the settlement system.

According to Polish spatial thought /i.e., K. Dziewonski, A. Wróbel, J. Kolodziejcki/, towns able to fulfil the role of a regional centre should have a minimum of 50 thousand inhabitants. /KPZK PAN Bulletin 1982/ Taking this point of view into consideration, we can see that in Poland there is an advantageous phenomenon of a polycentric settlement system. Contrary to the situation in, for example, Hungary or Austria, there is no single big centre /Budapest, Vienna/ bearing influence upon the country's whole settlement system.

Besides the largest agglomerations - Upper-Silesian and Warsaw - there are also large urban centres like Łódź, Cracow, Wrocław, Poznan, Gdansk-Gdynia, Bydgoszcz, and Szczecin. However, an evident lack of large and medium towns is felt - using a simplified definition - eastwards of the Vistula, where there are only two towns with 250-300 thousand inhabitants /Lublin and Białystok/ and two towns with up to 150 thousand inhabitants /Olsztyn and Rzeszów/. Medium towns with a population of over 50 thousand people are also rare; therefore, the new administrative division of 1975 has played a positive role in the transformation of the network of urban settlement in eastern Poland. New voivodship capitals have been given an evident impulse to develop. Their new functions have made it necessary to build infrastructural facilities of the type commensurate with their regional significance /e.g., hospitals, administration

offices, cultural and educational centres/ and also of the type of urban infrastructure /urban engineering, housing constructions, services, etc./. These processes were partly curbed by the crisis of the 1980's, but not in all centres. Another feature is also the increased number of inhabitants in those towns. Therefore, we may now give some thought to whether or not their number is too great when we take into consideration the proper distribution of voivodship centres in space and chances of getting investment outlays for them. In principle, however, I believe that the conception of the two subdivisions has passed the examination quite successfully and contributed to a proper development of Poland's settlement system. Differences in the sizes of voivodship capitals are shown in Table 2.

Still in 1985 there were 7 voivodship capitals with populations under 50 thousand inhabitants. But we should remember that in 1975, that is, in the year of the introduction of the new division, such capitals amounted to 16. Out of those 7 relatively small voivodship capitals, two towns - Sieradz and Skierniewice - are in the shadow of large cities - Łódź and Warsaw - and their chances to develop are poor. The remaining, however, bridge in principle the gaps in the existing settlement system.

#### 4. Final remarks

I, personally, am in favour of the present model of the administrative division with two subdivisions, though a few modifications seem to be advisable. This opinion, which I share with Professor J. Kolodziejcki, is described broadly in our

publication /Kolodziejski-Stasiak 1986/.

Moreover, our views comply with the 1983 Act on the system of People's Councils and the territorial self-government. Our motivation is as follows:

a/ the polycentric settlement system and a moderate concentration of population, which is associated with it, are advantageous and provide easy access to infrastructural facilities at the regional level;

b/ there is an evident tendency for nodal regions to crystallize;

c/ there is a strong tendency to a greater decentralization of political and economic powers and to the development of territorial self-government;

d/ following the development of mass transport means, the powiat /district/ becomes an unnecessary link in the country's administrative system. Chances to reach the voivodship capital and return home in the same day by mass transport means are nowadays much greater. Thus, what was earlier the basis for contacts of the powiat capital with its area, today is a feature of links between the voivodship capital and its hinterland.

What are our suggestions for changes? On the basis of our studies, we have come to the conclusion that the network of gminas /communes/ should be stabilized at the level of about 2000 units. In Poland's situation of the dispersion of the settlement pattern a tendency towards an excessive concentration of local centres would make it difficult for the popula-

tion to make use of basic services and for local self-government to develop. Of course, no change covering a few scores of units would spoil the basic model. As regards the number of voivodships, we suggest that they be reduced to about 40 on the basis of analysis of the nodal systems and natural conditions. For example, it seems advisable, even on the basis of these first premises, to liquidate inter alia the Sieradz and the Skierniewice voivodships, situated in the shadow of the large agglomerations of Łódź and Warsaw. Furthermore, to incorporate, for example, most of the territory of the voivodship of Biała Podlaska into the Siedlce voivodship; thus, this weak center would disappear. Because of the natural conditions, we suggest merging the whole Vistula Delta, which will bring about the liquidation of the Elbląg voivodship, and to carry out the unification of the Sudety region, which will again require certain changes in the division /Fig. 1/. Of course, here as well as in our expert opinion, I express the concern that it is necessary to carry out broad public discussion and make some supplementary studies before making the final decision. Decisions lie in the hands of politicians.

At the end of my paper I would like to emphasize that we are slightly handicapped now as regards the solution of the problem how to administer big urban agglomerations. This settlement system is subdivisions, and requires further profound detailed studies.

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- 1 = boundary of State
- 2 = proposed voivodships boundaries
- ..... 3 = present voivodships boundaries

FIGURE 1 The model of two-levels administrative state's division. Basic version.