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**THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION  
IN INITIATING AND SUPPORTING INTERREGIONAL  
ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION  
BETWEEN THE EU COUNTRIES AND CANDIDATE  
COUNTRIES IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION  
- THE CASE OF SWEDEN AND POLAND**

**1. Local and regional authorities in the Baltic Sea  
countries going international – before the sea  
becomes a concern of the Union**

Nowadays both municipalities and counties are no longer only agents subordinate to some national centre and acting within the country. Despite many legal and administrative constraints, those bodies possess both the resources, their own decision-making system and political legitimacy to work for their own needs and goals outside the borders of one country as well. Even in the countries of the Baltic Sea Region, local and regional authorities have been recently showing an increasing interest in international issues and cooperation with corresponding bodies in other countries.

The environment is definitely one of those areas where international cooperation, not only between countries, but also regions or municipalities, is very important and effective. Different regions and towns in different countries are facing similar problems, and by exchanging experiences with each other, optimal solutions to those problems can sometimes be developed in a much more efficient way than through contacts between national authorities. Some of the environmental problems

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must also be treated as common because they are shared by different countries. This is apparent in the Baltic Sea Region where e.g. all the countries with a coast are affected by the state of its water and only together are they capable of reversing the negative trend. Interregional cooperation can in this case complement international cooperation, as each region knows best its resources and specific difficulties, and is most anxious to "tidy things up" in its own area.

As far as the Baltic Sea Region is concerned, decentralised interregional cooperation was at the beginning limited to the Scandinavian countries. They were among the first to discover the potential of partnerships between communities or regions in different countries (so called twinnings). An overwhelming majority of these partnerships were though arrangements within the Nordic countries. Cooperation on environmental issues with participation of all the countries of the region was at that time confined to official contacts between the governments. Until 1989 the local and regional authorities in East Germany, Poland and the Soviet Union had had a very limited possibility of developing international ties on their own.

The situation changed at the beginning of the 1990s, after the radical political change in Poland and other countries in central Europe. When the possibility to act freely across all the borders suddenly appeared, it was their closest "western" neighbours that were first to offer help and advice, not least in the field of environmental protection. Numerous new partnerships between regions and communities in the Baltic Sea Area were created in the 1990s, mainly between Denmark, Sweden and Finland on the one side, and Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and later on also the north-western part of Russia on the other side. They have been a clear form of Western assistance to Poland and new Baltic countries. Twinnings between Sweden and Poland can be taken as an example of those new arrangements. For Poland it was Sweden and Denmark, and only afterwards Germany, that showed themselves to be "the closest" western neighbours.

Swedish environmental assistance to Poland at the beginning of the 1990s had nothing to do with the European Union – Sweden was not yet a member of the Union. The Swedish government set aside special measures to aid Poland and the Baltic countries during their transformation and part of these measures had been earmarked for cooperation between Swedish counties and municipalities and their counterparts on the other side of the Baltic Sea. From the very beginning the "environment" was among the major areas where common Swedish-Polish projects could receive a governmental grant. It was believed to be an effective means of assistance as the Swedish authorities possessed both the competence

and experience in the field of environmental protection and management, whereas the Polish authorities were only taking their first steps. Over 60 per cent of the twinning arrangements between Polish and Swedish communities or counties have reported that the environment is one of the main areas of cooperation!

When Sweden joined the Union in January 1995 and consequently got access to various funds supporting interregional contacts across borders, there already existed a well-developed net of contacts between Swedish and Polish local and regional authorities. It is thus possible to evaluate what has changed in this field, since contacts between Poland and Sweden became contacts between an EU-country and a candidate country, and compare the aid given to Poland independently by the Swedish government through decentralised cooperation with similar cooperation arrangements supported within the framework of the EU. Especially since both have been continued in parallel for the last five years.

## **2. Support of decentralised cooperation with the candidate countries as an element of the Union's policy**

The idea of town-twinning, Euroregions and other forms of decentralised partnership at the local and regional level are thoroughly in line with the general ideological principles of the European Union. Reports of the European Council point out that contacts between local and regional authorities in Europe support and facilitate solidarity between the citizens of the member states, and increase mutual understanding and cooperation, which is a crucial factor in building a united Europe. It is also generally believed that the implementation of community programmes can be accelerated and improved by placing them within the framework of interregional and "inter-local" cooperation.

As early as 1957 the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe was set up within the framework of the European Council, discussing such fields as protection of local and regional autonomy, spatial planning, protection of the environment or cultural and social problems. The Steering Committee for Regional and Municipal Matters was created in 1970 for studying the evolution of regional structures in Europe and seeking means of promoting a better balance between the different regions. Finally the Treaty on the European Union (Maastricht Treaty, which came into force in 1993) established the Committee of the Regions as a means given to regions and local authorities to influence the development of European Policies of direct interest to them. The

Union also cooperates with a number of international organisations when developing its programmes supporting decentralised cooperation (like the Association of the European Border Regions and the Assembly of the European Regions).

Municipalities and counties can receive financial support for developing cooperation from a number of different funds within the EU. The EU has always given special concern to border regions, areas situated on the opposite sides of national borders. A common name for such arrangements is nowadays 'Euroregion' or 'Euregion', and a frequent argument for their establishment is that border regions had historically been underdeveloped, as during a certain time period or periods they constituted buffer areas between hostile nations. The Union officially encourages and supports cooperation within Euroregions, aiming at reversing these trends and taking advantage of the diversity of the cooperating areas. International cooperation of regions that have no shared borders is usually limited, due to the form of EU subsidy programmes. Such arrangements cannot receive larger grants from EU funds unless they adjust their needs to meet specific subsidy criteria of the EU. On the other hand, the Union supports twinnings between communities and towns situated at a large distance from each other.

The politics of supporting regions and communities and encouraging cooperation between them within the Union has been recently widened to the countries that are applying for membership of the Union. The areas that are to become parts of a united Europe are being taught in advance the opportunities that exist in the Union and how the Union supports their development – not least through decentralised assistance arrangements, when some region or community in a member country offers its experience and helps to solve problems of its Central European partner, and the Union pays for it. Here, the environment is one of the prioritised areas, as the future members of the Union are supposed to catch up with the EU countries with regard to the way the environment is protected and managed, and because the environmental problems in the neighbouring countries directly affect the state of the environment on the territory of the Union.

The most important instrument of the Union's pre-accession assistance to Poland (and the other candidate countries) is the Phare fund, and a part is officially devoted to decentralised cooperation between the candidate countries and the neighbouring EU countries. Cooperation arrangements between the member countries and the candidate countries can also receive grants from some traditional EU funds, originally designed exclusively for the EU countries, but widened on the one side to the applicant countries and on the other side to the areas bordering the

Union. As the only common border between Poland and Sweden is a maritime one, not all of the Union's support facilities apply to the contacts between Poland and Sweden to their full extent. Still, the Union has granted support to a number of common projects between Polish and Swedish communities and regions (although, depending on the programme, the number of participants required differs, and most of the projects involve authorities from more than two countries). Thanks to this support, two Euroregions exist, where Polish and Swedish regions participate (together with certain areas of some other countries of the Baltic Sea): Euroregion Pomerania and Euroregion Baltic.

There follows a presentation of various sources of possible financing from the EU that can be (or could be), and are, or were used in cooperation arrangements between Polish and Swedish communities and counties.

### **The Phare Baltic Project Facility and Interreg**

The Baltic Project Facility (BPF) is a general programme encompassing a number of specific measures and facilities (including the Phare Small Project Facility – SPF) supporting cooperation between local and regional authorities in countries around the Baltic Sea. The grants are earmarked for projects that involve at least one partner from the so called Phare countries (non-member Central European countries). On the other hand one of the participants must come from any of the member countries, and the countries around the Baltic Sea (Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Finland) are given priority.

In particular, BPF provides support to projects in the fields of economic and regional development, cultural and educational exchange and other people-to-people projects, and development of self-government and institution building. "Environment" is named as one of the eight eligible spheres of cooperation and a couple of projects between Poland and Sweden that dealt with environmental issues have obtained grants. As it is generally described, the resources may be earmarked for activities improving the state of environment and the ways it is managed, as long as it is "relevant to the broad range of competencies of local or regional authorities".

Part of the BPF funding has also been allocated to projects where the participating partner from an EU country receives a grant from the Interreg facility (a major programme supporting interregional cooperation within the Union). This type of funding is denoted Phare/Interreg. The aim is to support more extensive cross-border cooperation and to introduce the countries applying for membership of the Union to the ways

the internal, so called Structural Funds, operate in the EU. The subject of cooperation varies according to the specific Interreg programme in which the partner from a member country participates, and the environment is an eligible area only in some of the cases. It is even possible for a cooperation project between partners from the member countries and from Central European Countries to be solely financed from one of the Interreg funds. Still a joint Phare-Interreg application is said to have a stronger chance of support by meeting the two different criteria of the two different funds at the same time.

In the latest version of Interreg programme (Interreg III), announced in April 2000, the bulk of the financial resources is devoted to promoting cooperation between regions situated along national borders (Interreg IIIA). Although the external borders of the Union and some maritime borders are also included, arrangements between Poland and Sweden are not eligible for finance from this source (as opposed to those between Poland and Germany). Only a small part of the funds (Interreg IIIC) is devoted to exchanging experience and good practices between all the European regions in general. Here, both the environment, participation of applicant countries and cooperation between maritime regions are among the prioritised areas, creating new opportunities for common arrangements between Polish and Swedish regions.

### **ECOS-Ouverture**

ECOS and Ouverture were two similar programmes launched by the European Commission in 1991, channelling financial resources allocated from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Phare-fund. Their purpose was to contribute towards beneficial cooperation between regions and towns in the Union and their counterparts in Central Europe, and later also the New Independent States of the former Soviet Union and non-member countries of the Mediterranean. The objective was to contribute to economic and democratic transition, particularly in the countries of the Central Europe, which are partner countries of the Union. The programmes were fused into one single scheme in 1995, and called ECOS-Ouverture since then. A "call for proposals" was announced each year, from 1991 to 1998, and the programme was replaced by Interreg III C in 2000.

The cooperation supported in this way aimed at "exchanging experience by the transfer of knowledge or development of a shared project, improving the efficiency of action and methods of achieving economic and social development for those involved at local or regional level, providing examples of how to respond to the challenges facing contemporary

society, and strengthening pre-accession strategies in the countries applying for membership of the Union".

The presence of at least one partner from Central Europe was obligatory, so Swedish municipalities willing to participate in the project had to cooperate either with Poland, one of the Baltic States or other Central-European countries. On the other hand, Polish communities could take part in the programme, only if they cooperated with some member country, of which Sweden, together with Germany and Denmark, was definitely one of the closest.

Although the fields of action selected for the call for proposals may have varied from round to round, protecting and improving the environment "with a view to sustainable development" was present among the four-five major areas in all the rounds of the programme. The 1997 round stressed e.g. promoting renewable sources of energy and energy saving, while the last, 1998 round, also added the areas of nature protection, pollution control, solid waste and wastewater management.

## **SWEBALTCOP**

SWEBALTCOP, that is the Baltic Sea Cooperation Programme for Eastern and Southern Sweden, is a specific pilot project under ERDF, Article 10. It was established by several Swedish regional councils in cooperation with the Swedish government and the European Commission in 1998. Its aim is to support cooperation between communities and regions in Southern and Eastern Sweden and their counterparts in Poland, the Baltic countries and Russia. It is meant as a continuation of the Swedish decentralised assistance to those countries, and the areas of cooperation which it is designed to cover are: the environment, economic development and public administration.

50 million Swedish kronor are available within the programme as co-financing of various larger and smaller projects, although only the Swedish part in the project is financed from SWEBALTCOP, while e.g. the Polish partners are expected to be financed from the Phare BPF programme. During the first year of existence, 70 cooperation projects were initiated thanks to support from SWEBALTCOP.

## **Twinning Grant Scheme**

The resources for this kind of activity were allocated officially for the first time in the European Community's budget in 1989. The money can be used both to establish new relationships and develop existing cooperation. Support is generally allowed for single arrangements and events:

exchange between citizens, conferences, meetings or training courses (designed to promote the twinning concept), which in some way support the idea of community between the members of the Union (have "a European dimension").

When granting resources, twin cities which in some way are disadvantaged are favoured – taking into account both the geographical location, language and size of the city/town. New arrangements, as well as arrangements with the countries that are new members of the Union, are generally favoured too.

Although the criteria stress particularly the European dimension of the contacts, protection of the environment ("in Europe") is among 15 subjects that are encouraged as a subject of citizen exchanges.

Sweden can of course participate in the programme, since it is now a member of the Union. Its advantage at the beginning was its position of a newcomer in the Union and is now its language, which is defined as not wide-spread (according to the new criteria issued in 2000). As the recent criteria of the assistance programme particularly encourage efforts to find partners in Central and Eastern Europe (as well as Cyprus, Malta and Turkey), Poland as a country associated with the Union is also one of the openly favoured areas, if Swedish municipalities want to make use of the programme.

### **3. Dimensions of Polish-Swedish interregional cooperation on environmental issues supported by the EU**

A short remark must be made at the beginning of this presentation. It is of course sometimes difficult to define what kinds of issues should be denoted as "environmental issues". For the purpose of this compilation, a somehow vague and broad definition of environmental projects as projects that aim at improving the state of the environment or the way it is protected/managed must suffice.

Over the period of five years, from 1995 (when Sweden became a member of the EU) to 2000, Polish and Swedish regions and communities have thus cooperated within 18 environmental projects supported in some way by the EU:

- Four were supported directly from Phare SPF (one of them co-financed from Tacis SPF, a corresponding facility designed for North-Western Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, due to participation of a Belarussian municipality).
- Three projects received joined grants from Phare CBC and Interreg.



- Phare SPF has also lent its support to three Polish-Swedish environmental projects within the framework of Euroregion Baltic.
- Five cooperation projects on environmental issues between Poland and Sweden have been initiated by SWEBALTCOP and received joined support from this programme (the Swedish part) and from Phare (the Polish part).
- One project received a grant solely from Interreg fund.
- Two projects were supported by ECOS-Ouverture.

As these different schemes have involved a wide variety of contacts between Polish and Swedish regions and communities, it would not be easy to show how the Polish system of environmental protection has benefited from them by presenting the cooperation in its organisational context – analysing such units as support programmes or single projects. To give a coherent picture of the goals and effects of EU-supported environmental cooperation between Poland and Sweden, it is much better to concentrate on the topics of cooperation. Thus, the whole phenomenon can be divided into a number of sections, covering different environmental areas that communities and regions deal with.

### **Environmental responsibility and environmental decision-making at the local and regional level**

The Union's support of cooperation between Polish and Swedish local and regional authorities aims at establishing transboundary networks between elected politicians and administration workers and promoting knowledge transfer from Sweden to Poland in various areas, among others in the field of environmental protection. Due to their experience, the Swedish authorities are believed to be capable of teaching their Polish counterparts optimal ways of managing the environment at the local and regional level. At the same time, they can prepare their Polish partners for future membership of the Union, informing them about the changes it will bring concerning their responsibilities (e.g. new legal acts on environmental protection) and new opportunities for action (e.g. the subsidiarity principle). This is one of the subjects of the project realised in the cooperation between the Swedish counties of Kalmar and Skåne and two Polish voivodships: Pomorskie and Zachodniopomorskie. The project, called *RERES (Regional Revival and Subsidiarity)*, was initiated by SWEBALTCOP. Similar goals were stated for a Phare CBC-project between Suwałki Voivodship, the city of Linköping in Sweden, the Lithuanian county of Marijampole and the Belarussian county of Grodno (*Creation of the Belarus National Bureau of the Neman Euroregion*). Its main aim was to support the development of Euroregion Neman and the

role of the Swedish municipality was to share its experience with its Polish, Lithuanian and Belarussian partners – among other things on environmental issues.

### **Waste management**

Exchange of experience and transfer of knowledge between municipalities in the EU countries and candidate countries leads to implementation of new models of waste treatment in the latter, as was the case with an ECOS-Ouverture project *TRANSFORM*, conducted in cooperation between Sanok in Poland, Örnsköldsvik and Östersund in Sweden, and a Finnish municipal refuse collection company. The project's result for the municipality of Sanok was aid in establishing a new landfill site.

In another project supported by the same programme, denoted *TASS (Towards a Sustainable Society Around The Baltic Sea)*, the Polish municipalities of Gryfice, Piecki, and Pruszcz Gdański collaborated with Nybro in Sweden and Güstrow in Germany. As far as waste management is concerned, two of the Polish communes started pilot projects of waste sorting and waste collection from households and were sharing their experience in this field. Gryfice chose e.g. 200 families to test a model of a waste segregation system (aimed at decreasing the amount of waste by 20 per cent), which would be ultimately introduced to the whole town. In the same town a recycling programme was started in one of the primary schools. A pilot project in Pruszcz Gdański involved fifteen families and concentrated both on waste collection, recycling, and public awareness, and was expected to indicate optimal solutions to the problem of household wastes and compostable wastes. Piecki on the other hand learnt about the idea of eco-teams and waste-sorting by the households from the Swedish municipality of Hylte in a *SWEBALTCOP* project denoted *SVUF (Swedish abbr. for Cooperation and Friendship for Development and Confidence in the Future)*.

### **Water management**

None of the EU-supported cooperation projects between Polish and Swedish regions or communities directly concerned the question of water supply, water saving or wastewater treatment. In the course of the *SVUF* and *TASS* projects (see above) one of the primary schools in the municipality of Piecki was transformed into an "ecological school" taking advantage of the experience of the Swedish partners from Hylte, and among the areas of concern were an alternative toilet system and treatment of sewage from the school building. The *TASS* project, involving,

beside Piecki, also Gryfice and Pruszcz Gdański, stressed also the need to decrease the use of water in households and here the exchange of experience concerning eco-teams or "ecological families" between the members of the project proved to be very important.

### **Energy production and energy saving**

Cooperation with municipalities in the EU countries helps Polish communities to prepare programmes of energy conservation. By monitoring energy consumption in various buildings, methods of minimising it are worked out, while at the same time new and renovated buildings are made as energy efficient as possible. This was one of the three main subjects of the *TASS* project on the part of Gryfice and the first step was to monitor energy use in one of the primary schools and decrease it by 15%. On the other hand Pruszcz Gdański concentrated on energy saving in households, while working with the chosen fifteen "ecological families" in the same project.

Another area where foreign experience proves to be very valuable to Poland is the question of renewable energy resources. Contacts with Hylte, due to the *SVUF* project, helped e.g. Piecki to decide on an alternative source of energy for the ecological school in Stare Kiełonki (heating by straw was chosen). In Gryfice the idea of using straw instead of oil or coal, or growing an energy forest, was born in the course of cooperation with Nybro in the *TASS* project

### **Environmental aspects of transportation and spatial planning**

The environmental aspects of city planning are difficult problems, which single cities are not always capable of solving on their own, and cooperation is a means of finding the best solutions in specific situations. The Polish city of Torun participated in a Phare CBC project concerning *Promotion of an Ecological Approach in Territory Development Planning* in general where the Swedish partner was the municipality of Svalöv (and cooperation involved also the Lithuanian municipality of Kedainiai). The EU also supports creating a network of cities and towns in the Baltic Sea Region, that would share their experience concerning the spatial planning and development of the areas of the cities by the coast or a river (so called waterfronts). This subject is part of a Phare/Interreg project named *Waterfront Urban Development*, where the Polish cities of Gdynia, Szczecin, Elbląg and Tczew are cooperating with Göteborg in

Sweden, Berlin-Brandenburg, Vaasa in Finland, and the Danish town of Koge.

Cooperation on transport and traffic planning involves among other things finding innovative and environmentally friendly logistic measures, in order to organise future transport demand. To improve the integration of different levels of transport planning with regard to spatial and environmental requirements contacts across the borders are inevitable and a good example is an Interreg (Interreg IIC) project named *TransLogis*, where the Zachodniopomorskie Voivodship in Poland cooperates with neighbouring areas in Germany (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Berlin-Brandenburg) and Sweden (county of Skåne). Environmental transportation also means supporting environmentally-friendly means of transport, and here the Polish city of Gdansk benefited from cooperation with Kalmar in Sweden within the framework of Euroregion Baltic as a project to plan bicycle paths on Sobieszewo Island was realized (*The cooperation of Baltic Islands*, financed by Phare SPF).

### Environmental education

Contacts between schools in different countries prove to be very valuable not least in developing environmental education programmes. Organising common classes and discussing experiences results in a better understanding of the environmental situation in the other countries and in improved methods of ecological education in schools. This was the content of a Phare SPF project between a secondary school in Elbląg in Poland and a similar school in the Swedish town of Ronneby (*International ecological cultural program of high school youth*, realised within the context of Euroregion Baltic). Presenting youth from different countries with the opportunity of meeting each other and debating common environmental problems was also one of the main goals of a SWEBALTCOP project called *Baltic Sea Youth Forum*, where the Zachodniopomorskie Voivodship cooperated, among others, with the Swedish county of Södermanland and the Regional Council of the Mälardalen region (as well as regional authorities from Russia and the Baltic countries). A smaller scale project was the Phare SPF project (*Forms of natural environmental protection*, realised within the framework of Euroregion Baltic) between the Swedish commune of Hultsfred and Rumia community in Poland – in this case small groups of youths from both countries met to talk about how the environment is and should be protected in their home regions. Such projects are in fact not limited to the secondary school level. Polish and Swedish children from primary schools in Gdynia and Svalöv were given the possibility of working together on the

"first Agenda 21 for children" in a SWEBALTCOP project *European Environmental Searchers*, and the Swedish partner was the initiator of the cooperation.

A further step is designing so called "ecological schools" or "sustainable schools", with stress not only on ecology classes, but on all environmental aspects of the functioning of a school. Sweden possess much more experience in this field and it was due to Swedish assistance that one of primary schools in the Piecki community in Poland was transformed into an ecological school. The Swedish partner was in this case the Hylte community and the means came from ECOS-Ouverture (*TASS*) and SWEBALTCOP (*SVUF*). Also, Gryfice and Pruszcz Gdański, cooperating with the Swedish community of Nybro in the same *TASS* project, decided to involve children from selected primary schools in innovative ecological programmes, teaching them energy conservation, water saving and waste recycling.

### Nature protection

Common environmental problems in the Baltic Sea Region make cooperation between the countries of the region very important. One of the largest threats to the waters of the Baltic Sea is eutrophication, and this question was the subject of a Phare/Interreg project *BERNET (Baltic Eutrophication Regional Network)* with the city of Gdańsk in Poland cooperating with several local and regional authorities from Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Germany and Sweden (the Swedish partners were the Båstad and Svalöv municipalities and Halland County).

Mapping the state of the natural environment on one's own territory must be carried out taking appropriate steps. Here Polish regions and communes can sometimes take advantage of the experience of their Swedish partners, that were able to begin this process much earlier. In this way the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship benefited from the twinning partnership with Halland County in a SWEBALTCOP project entitled *Baltic Atlas of Environment*. It was a preliminary study of the prerequisites for a major project aimed at creating a GIS-based description of the environmental conditions based on the existing environmental data. Also a Phare/Interreg project between the Swedish community of Hylte and Polish municipalities of Piecki, Sorkwity and Świętajno, called *Local Agenda 21 along Krutynia River (LAK 21)* implied cooperation on mapping the state of the environment in the participating communes. Smaller scale activities of this kind were executed in the course of a Phare SPF project *Forms of natural environmental protection* (an Euroregion Baltic project), where youth from the Swedish town of

Hultsfred worked together with their Polish partners from Rumia while preparing a brochure about nature monuments in Rumia commune.

### **Environmental management in business**

The EU propagates its own standards of Environmental Management, EMAS, also in the candidate countries. A project aimed at stimulating and facilitating the introduction of Environmental Management Systems (both EMAS and ISO 14000) in medium and small-size enterprises in Northern Poland, and adapting them to tourism activities and local and regional authorities, was conducted within Phare BPF. The project (called *SEMLA*) aimed at presenting the experience of Swedish companies and authorities in the Kalmar region to companies and authorities in Gdańsk Voivodship.

### **Sustainable tourism**

The attention paid to the environmental aspects of tourism activities and adaptation of tourist products to minimise their impact on the environment is a relatively new area. Advice and training schemes offered by EU regions to their Polish counterparts are certainly valuable in this situation. One such project, called *Sustainable Tourism in Town & Country*, helping the Polish municipality of Goldap (and the neighbouring Nemencines municipality in Lithuania) to take advantage of its tourist potential in a sustainable way, has been carried out in cooperation with Värmland County in Sweden and the British District of Dean. Another project of this kind was *High Quality Tourism*, an attempt to start a network of sensitive nature areas and cultural landscapes in the Baltic Sea Region, in order to exchange experience. In this case the Suwałki Voivodship in Poland was cooperating with the Council of East Sweden and partners from Germany and Latvia. A specific project promoting environmentally friendly tourism was the planning of a net of bicycle paths on Sobieszewo Island in Gdańsk in Poland thanks to the help of Kalmar County in Sweden, cooperating with Gdańsk within Euroregion Baltic (*The cooperation of Baltic Islands*, with support from Phare SPF).

## **4. Evaluation of the support measures**

Environmental cooperation between local and regional authorities in the Baltic Sea Area has certainly been widened and received new dimensions, since it became a concern of the European Union. The support

programmes designed by the Union enabled a number of Polish and Swedish communities and counties to launch cooperation projects concerning a wide variety of environmental issues, projects that would not be realised without external financial support. The arrangements realised proved that support of interregional cooperation, when compared to international contacts, is a very effective way of addressing environmental problems in Central European countries. Their strength lies, on one hand, in contacting single local and regional authorities, offering them valuable experience, knowledge and expertise adjusted to their needs, and thus improving the way the environment is managed in these chosen places. On the other hand, it is difficult to overestimate the influence of the cooperation activities on local communities and neighbouring regions. Most of the exchange schemes have been pilot projects presenting novel solutions and novel attitudes to environmental issues, and thanks to their local scale they have both directly affected and actively involved certain (often relatively large) groups of people, while arousing curiosity and interest on a much wider scale.

Thanks to support from the EU, at least eighteen environmental projects between Polish and Swedish communities and regions have been carried out during the last 5 years (1995–2000), since Sweden became a member of the Union. They involved 24 communities and 8 counties/regions from these two countries. If we are though to compare the assistance given by the EU with the support to similar cooperation schemes given by the Swedish government, these numbers themselves are not so impressive. As far as interregional cooperation on the environment is concerned, in the period 1990–2000 Swedish governmental agencies financed over 60 projects with Polish partners! Thanks to bilateral Swedish support, most of the authorities had already had some contacts before they applied for, and received funding from an EU-fund (the need to present a joint application, or at least prepare a common plan, obviously favours those who have already worked together and know each other).

The difference between both sources concerns, among other, the way the financial support is granted. As a rule the EU covers only part of the costs of a project, and the applicants have to supply their own resources too. This is seen as one of the barriers in making use of the available funds, especially since most of the EU support facilities offer grants only to medium and large-scale projects. It is possible to apply both for a grant from an EU-fund and some other form of external financing, e.g. from the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). Still the EU-rules of financing are widely seen as much more complicated, at least among the Swedish authorities. They have in many cases a negative perception of

EU funding saying that the information about changing criteria is insufficient, the decisions are taken without dialogue with the applying parties and the whole process of accepting a grant takes a very long time. Among the programmes that support interregional and "interlocal" contacts between Poland and Sweden only the Baltic Small Project Facility is evaluated slightly better. The Swedish sources of financing, and especially Sida's grants channelled by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities, are seen as much better instruments of support. They are first of all perceived as more stable sources of support, being at the same time quick, relatively easy with regard to applications and reporting, low on bureaucracy and open to dialogue.

The question is to what extent these opinions are only perceptions and to what extent they reflect the real situation. One obvious conclusion is that the level of knowledge about the EU-funds among the Swedish and Polish authorities is low. The funds are evaluated much higher by the authorities that have used them. They possess certain advantages over other sources of financial support. An important difference is that EU-funds support in reality both small and relatively large cooperation schemes, while bilateral funding is generally limited to small projects. Taking a closer look, one can also see that the type and objectives of the cooperation eligible for funding from the EU support facilities are in fact wider than in case of the Swedish governmental funds. The projects that have been realised show that in reality any environmental issue can be the subject of cooperation projects supported by the EU.

The involvement of partners from more than two countries in single projects is also a contribution to the interregional cooperation in the Baltic Sea Area from the Union's side. While the Swedish government generally supports contacts between a Swedish community/county and its counterpart in some other country, most of the Union's support facilities require participation from at least three countries (the rules vary according to the programme). In this way Polish regions can exchange experience and discuss environmental problems with regions from several other countries, both member countries and other Central European countries, in the same project. In this way whole nets of partners cooperating on chosen issues are created.

The declaration of the most recent congress of European Twinned Towns that "it is due to the valuable assistance of the European Parliament and the European Commission that the twinning movement is now prevalent throughout the continent" must be classified as a great exaggeration, at least with regard to the Baltic Sea Area. Nevertheless the European Union must be seen as a very important factor stimulating in-



terregional cooperation between its member countries and the applicant countries in this region.

## Literature

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## Additional web-based resources – regions, municipalities and individual projects

- [www.bernet.org](http://www.bernet.org) – the *BERNET* project
- [www.burlov.se](http://www.burlov.se) – Burlöv municipality, Sweden
- [www.eurobalt.org.pl](http://www.eurobalt.org.pl) – Euroregion Baltic
- [www.gdynia.pl](http://www.gdynia.pl) – Gdynia municipality, Poland
- [www.hylte.se](http://www.hylte.se) – Hylte municipality, Sweden
- [www.kalmar.regionforbund.se](http://www.kalmar.regionforbund.se) – Kalmar Regional Council, Sweden
- [www.n.lst.se](http://www.n.lst.se) – Halland County, Sweden
- [www.nybro.se](http://www.nybro.se) – Nybro municipality, Sweden
- [www.ostersund.se](http://www.ostersund.se) – Östersund municipality, Sweden

- www.reres.org – the *RERES* project
- www.skane.se – Skane Regional Council, Sweden
- www.swebaltcop.se – the *SWEBALTCOP* project
- www.tass.nu – the *TASS* project
- www.translogis.com – the *TransLogis* project

The declaration of the project is to be not only a...  
 www.translogis.com – the TransLogis project