

New Quality of Public Spaces as a Stimulant for Socio-Economic Development – the Specificity of Medium-Sized Towns

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1 ABSTRACT¹

Compared to Europe, Poland is a country with a relatively low rate of urbanization. The main pillars of economic development are in emerging metropolitan areas. However, the majority of the population live outside the largest cities.

Medium-sized towns have been affected by the adverse effects of political and economic transformation more drastically than large multifunctional centers. But even in the conditions of low budgets and limited interest from private investors, smaller municipal centers turned out to be much more determined than large cities in implementing projects aimed at improving the physical quality of their public spaces. First major projects were initiated in the 1990s, but a significant increase in this type of investment came along with availability of the EU Structural Funds.

We can distinguish several phases in the investment in public spaces. At the initial stage, the main motive for changes was to create a new town image, attractive for both tourists and investors. Later, as integrated revitalization programs were promoted and the municipalities themselves experienced first negative symptoms of gentrification, more attention was paid to the everyday needs of local communities. A change of attitude could be seen at the level of institutions in charge of defining the distribution of the Structural Funds as well as in the municipalities themselves.

The paper presents the evolution of strategies for small and medium-sized towns – including the expected impact of the new EU programming period.

2 INTRODUCTION

Beside the evident advantages, the democratic breakthrough of the early 90s in the region of Central Europe brought along also a series of transformation shocks related to the need to adapt quickly to the new rules of state organization and new economic conditions.

As the region's largest country and the first one to be subjected to the said transformations, Poland is an interesting example for observing these adaptation processes. After 45 years of a centrally planned economy, we could still see regional differences that were the effect of the partition of the country that lasted throughout the 19th century (the present territory of Poland was divided among Prussia, Russia and Austria) and migrations after World War II (differences between the parts inhabited by the original native populations and the so-called recovered territories). The differences were manifested in various aspects and scales: from the development of settlement networks, through economic standards to the residents' self-identity and approach to the heritage of the space around them (SAMSONOWICZ & TAZBIR 2002).

The administrative systems of the countries of the Eastern Block were strongly centralized, based on the principle of the primacy of ministry-level structures (HIRT & STANILOV 2009) This state of affairs virtually made it impossible to pursue social, economic or spatial policies in a rational way, taking into account the local specificity, which seemed crucial with regard to the above-mentioned regional differences. The inefficiency of that system of managing the country became particularly evident when juxtaposed with the system of developed Western countries, where the managerial revolution that had started in industries was transposed also to the public administration (KULESZA 2000).

In 1990, the first significant step was taken in Poland towards decentralizing the state management: the establishment of self-governing communes. The process of changes was launched in many institutions and areas of managing public affairs, such as education, welfare, public order protection. The chief tools for spatial planning were, too, given over into the communes' hands. This is how a state based on civil society

¹ For the purpose of the present paper, "medium-sized towns" are understood as those with populations between 10,000 and 100,000, in accordance with the term as it is defined in the National Spatial Development Plan of 2005. This rather broad term includes also, with regard to their functions, also smaller towns that are the capitals of powiat districts.

was to begin functioning (KULESZA, 2000). The giving over of the previously centrally supervised tasks to the communes was related to the need to provide to the local governments funds for running development programs – especially by establishing a participation in the tax revenues and by communalizing the estate resources. These mechanisms were being merely shaped in the first half of the 90s (REGULSKI 2000). Accordingly, the first full-fledged communal development strategies could appear only after the situation had stabilized.

The experience showed to us that those new entities did not yet possess a sufficient institutional capability to shoulder the new challenges in this respect. In fact, as the free-market principle started to replace the old order rather abruptly, the system of spatial planning found itself in a deep crisis (KOCHANOWSKI 2004, JĘDRASZKO 2005). The effects of that crisis exerted a strong impact on the quality of public spaces – that element of the urban tissue that did not generate any direct financial benefit. Owned by "nobody", the public spaces were often appropriated for parking or retail purposes.

One specific element of this complex settlement system was the medium-sized town. Despite the rapid urbanization taking place in the world, the majority of the country's population still live outside the largest cities. Theoretically, medium-sized towns, as an intermediate link in this arrangement, should provide to their residents access to translocal services and innovations. Such was one of the assumptions of the second phase of the territorial reform (1999), which resulted in the establishment of poviats (ZWIĄZEK POWIATÓW POLSKICH 2013). Practically, strengthening the role of translocal centers turned out to be difficult because the poviats' capitals were on their own in coping with local problems and the fact that a given town was the poviat's capital was not a sufficient factor in attracting private capital.

Despite their limited funds, the development strategies of medium-sized towns show a stronger co-relation between implementing development strategies and improving the quality of public spaces than it is in the case of cities with a metropolitan potential.

3 MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS IN THE NEW REALITY

In order to better understand the situation of smaller urban centers at the threshold of democratic transformations, we should examine more closely the political and economic factors of the 20th century. In the time of rapid civilization changes, the original role of such centers – servicing the surrounding rural areas, turned out to be too modest an offer. The need to diversify the economic offer of small and medium-sized towns was understood already in the times of real socialism, but the ministerial rule was largely restricted to locating new state-owned industrial enterprises instead of promoting the urban development processes. Naturally, this way of development could not be successful everywhere (KOLIPINSKI 1973). What seemed to be a "lottery win" in the 60s and 70s turned out to be a curse at the threshold of the market economy. Sudden collapses of "breadwinning" enterprises deprived of state subsidies – enterprises providing both work and an educational-cultural-and-sport offer – led not only to unemployment but also to frustration of individuals and a crisis of the collective identity.

| | Year | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 |
| Population of Poland in total | 38,609,399 | 38,253,955 | 38,157,055 | 38,200,037 |
| Urban population | 23,876,667 | 23,659,690 | 23,423,740 | 23,264,383 |
| Ratio | 61.84 % | 61.85 % | 61.39 % | 60.90 % |
| Population of cities > 100.000 | 11,275,064 | 11,204,400 | 11,059,584 | 10,940,879 |
| Ratio to population in total | 29.20 % | 29.29 % | 28.98 % | 28.64 % |
| Ratio to urban population | 47.22 % | 47.36 % | 47.22 % | 47.03 % |
| Population of medium-sized towns | 10,662,853 | 10,432,343 | 10,350,202 | 10,270,558 |
| Ratio to population in total | 27.62 % | 27.27 % | 27.13 % | 26.89 % |
| Ratio to urban population | 44.66 % | 44.09 % | 44.19 % | 44.15 % |

Tab. 1. Share of urban population in the country's population. Source: Own summary based on Local Data Bank (2012)

The economic situation affected the demographic one. Medium-sized towns, considered in a strictly demographic context, are home to almost 27 % of Polish population counted in total, and more than 44 % of

urban population. Taking into account the statistical average from years 1995-2010, this group of towns was affected by population loss (Tab. 1). However, the ratio of population in comparison to general population of Poland or urban population in total remains stable. Basing on criteria of population change, medium-sized towns can be divided into three types of categories:

- towns affected by rapid loss – caused by unemployment and low quality of life or, on the contrary, gentrification
- stable towns – in which the falling industry was replaced by new business, usually small and medium-sized enterprises
- fast growing towns – located on the outskirts of large cities or connected to them with frequent rail connection (GOŁĘDZINOWSKA 2012).

3.1 Specificity of public spaces in medium-sized towns

Describing the condition of the public space at the threshold of the Polish transition to democracy, we can claim that the Polish towns were affected by the effects of the solutions reducing their significance similar to those that could be seen in other countries of Europe. The phenomena such as the establishment of mono-functional districts stripped of public space, spatial expansion of towns, extensive use of new residential functions and primacy of road traffic were accompanied by a lack of sufficient care for the condition of shared spaces characteristic of the Eastern Bloc, and, which resulted from the political situation of the time, lack of positive connotations with regard to co-participation in the public space. In the mid 90s, competition emerged for the degraded public-access spaces: multifunctional retail-and-entertainment centers, which led nearly to extinction of historical market places and boulevards in many towns.

First discussions about the need for individualization of spatial solutions and return to the development of residential projects of a smaller scale conducive to the residents' association with the surrounding space arose in Poland most probably already in the 1980s, but the true renaissance of this way of thinking came took place only after the decentralization of the spatial planning system of the 90s – so as long as 30 years after the process had been completed in Western Europe. The irony of the situation is that large cities became the subject of intensive development by a new group of interest holders: private developers, who saw a business opportunity in addressing the problem of insufficient housing. They provided a range of housing options in smaller residential complexes but without providing any connection with the system of public spaces. Many of those residential complexes were fenced off the surrounding area, because such were the expectations of atomized society. Another factor contributing to the degradation of public spaces was the growing availability of the thus-far luxurious article: the car. In fact, many public spaces were converted to serve parking purposes.

The smaller towns stand out against this background. Here, the traditional places of the residents' everyday integration largely retained their social functions, despite their predominant wear and poor aesthetics. It is related to a smaller interest on the part of private investors in developing facilities that would be competitive to the public space and or in any investment whatsoever. Consequently, the public authorities remain here the creators of the socio-economic policy to a larger extent than it is in larger centers. We should observe also that in smaller towns and in more compact urban systems smaller distances to a large number of destinations made them more conveniently accessible on foot.

In the context of the contemporary tiredness with uniformity and the demand for uniqueness and authenticity of experience, the livability of the public spaces in medium-sized towns was certainly perceived as their advantage. It may become the foundation for creating a new image, especially in the degraded post-industrial towns, and a boost for the development of tourist and urban functions.

T. Markowski confirms that it is the physical attributes of smaller towns' public spaces that played a larger role in shaping their competitive image than such factors as innovations or a knowledge-based economy (2006). The phenomenon is confirmed by the observed consistency of the local authorities in such towns in applying for funds with a view to upgrading their public spaces. The purpose of the work carried out in medium-sized towns is usually to improve the technical condition and the functional features of the public space. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases little attention is paid to the architectural qualities of the work – the applied solutions are often average-quality, cheap or historicist.

Over the past 20 years we can distinguish certain trends concerning investment in public spaces, largely subject to the process of integration followed by functioning within the structures of the European Union. The matter concerns not only availability of external funds but rather the adoption of a certain culture in managing the urban development.

3.2 Formal conditions coming from the Polish law

To understand the role and context of the quality of public space in the development policies of Polish communes (towns), it is important to become familiar with the chief related formal-legal conditions.

The Constitution of the Republic of Poland (1997) provides that the state "shall ensure the freedoms and rights of persons and citizens, the security of the citizens, safeguard the national heritage and shall ensure the protection of the natural environment pursuant to the principles of sustainable growth," and it "shall provide conditions for the people's equal access to the products of culture which are the source of the Nation's identity, continuity and development," while the citizen's function is to care for "the common good", among other duties.

Despite the Constitution's emphasis on the values related to the functioning of public space, a definition of the "territory of public space" first appeared as late as in the Act of 23 March 2003 concerning spatial planning and development, where the term was defined as "a territory of special significance for the needs of the residents, improvement of their quality of life and conducive to establishing social contacts with regard to its location and functional-spatial features, determined in the study of conditions and spatial development objectives of the commune." The requirement to determine in a study of conditions and spatial development objectives territories of such great importance for the residents' quality of life seems justified but further provisions of the Act stipulate an immediate need to draw up a relevant local plan. This obligation causes that the matter of shaping a system of public space is often omitted in the communes' plans for fear of the need to provide for it financially. However, lack of such a declaration does not mean that public space does not exist in a given commune (town). Squares and streets are often presented as traffic space while parks and other similar places of leisure are referred to as green areas or places of the provision of services. Their proper function is quoted only at the moment of drawing up a local development plan or even later while applying for a specific construction permit. As much as a spatial policy pursued this way secures the existence of public spaces in the structure of the town, it does not guarantee that the venues' features determining their values will be preserved – values including the spatial continuity and cohesion as well as thought-out interactions with the area around it.

Nevertheless, activities aimed at developing good public spaces often occupy an important place among the provisions of other programming documents which are not related in any direct way to the Act on spatial planning and development. These documents include, above all, general strategies for the commune's (town's) development and local revitalization programs. Noteworthy, the inclusion of provisions on public spaces in these documents are a voluntary initiative of local governments assuming that an improved quality of public spaces can help in resolving diagnosed problems or achieving the adopted development objectives.

As it was already mentioned, the first such documents were drawn up in the mid 1990s, but they became more widespread at the beginning of the new century, as part of the preparations for the functioning in EU structures. Defining a development strategy and local revitalization programs, even if not required by the Polish law, was to create opportunities for the town of applying for external funding.

3.3 Financing the transitions in public spaces

Since the financial opportunities related to Poland's accession of the European Union were first made available, we have seen a steady growth in the number of projects aimed at creating new or renovating old public spaces. One of the factors that have led to the surge in the investments can be found in the access of Polish local governments to the resource of good practices from other European countries. However, the key factor for the decision-makers seems to be the fact that public space, as public good, improves the competitiveness of the whole region without favoring any particular entities, and so without violating the balance of competition.²

² "A company which receives government support obtains an advantage over its competitors. Therefore, the EC Treaty generally prohibits State aid unless it is justified by reasons of general economic development."

Considering the accessibility of the funds and principles of allocating them to Polish self-governments, we can distinguish three basic periods:

- pre-accession period,
- programming period 2004-2006,
- programming period 2007-2013.

Financial support in the pre-accession period was available from the year 2000. At this stage of support, with regard for the delay in the development of the basic infrastructure there was no question yet of financing integrated programs of renovating the urban space.

Taking into account the increasing competence of the relatively new, democratically elected local governments, we should mention also the assistance programs related to the transfer of good practices from the EU member states and from the United States (e.g. USAID, KnowHowFund), initiated already in the 1990s. On the wave of those projects, in the 90s first development strategies were being drawn up to revitalize degraded residential districts (MILCZYŃSKA-HAJDA 2007). Interestingly, the innovative solutions were first applied in smaller urban centers such as Sopot, with a population of 40 thousand at the time, or Dzierżoniów, with 35 thousand inhabitants.

| Voivodeship | Differentiation of revitalization projects depending on the town's population or its administrative function |
|---------------------|--|
| Dolnośląskie | Individual priorities: 1) up to 10,000, 2) above 10,000 |
| Kujawsko-Pomorskie | Individual competitions within a single priority: 1) from 5,000 to 10,000, 2) towns from 10,000 to 15,000, 3) from 15,000 to 20,000, 4) above 20,000, 5) sub-regional towns, 6) nodal cities of the voivodeship's capital agglomerate area |
| Lubelskie | Not applicable – open to all urban districts meeting the criterion of degraded area |
| Lubuskie | Not applicable – open to all urban and rural areas meeting the criterion of degraded area |
| Łódzkie | Not applicable – open to all urban districts meeting the criterion of degraded area |
| Małopolskie | Not applicable – open to all urban districts meeting the criterion of degraded area |
| Mazowieckie | Scoring preference for town with populations above 5,000 |
| Opolskie | Not applicable – open to all urban districts meeting the criterion of degraded area |
| Podkarpackie | Not applicable – open to all urban districts meeting the criterion of degraded area |
| Podlaskie | Not applicable – the program does not cover comprehensive revitalization of urban areas |
| Pomorskie | Separate priorities: 1) Development of local basic infrastructure up to 35,000 inhabitants, 2) comprehensive revitalization programmes above 35,000 inhabitants (separate competitions for towns with a powiat role and others) |
| Śląskie | Separate operations: 1) up to 50,000 inhabitants, 2) above 50,000 inhabitants |
| Świętokrzyskie | Separate operations: 1) growth centers: voivodeship's capital and capitals of poviats, 2) other urban centers |
| Warmińsko-Mazurskie | Not applicable – an indicative list of towns of various sizes |
| Wielkopolskie | Within the same priority: 1) comprehensive revitalization of urban areas (in town up to 50,000), 2) revitalization of degraded urban areas (integrated projects in town above 50,000 residents, combine with projects improving the housing infrastructure). |
| Zachodniopomorskie | Separate priorities: 1) up to 5,000, 2) Szczecin Metropolitan Area |

Tab.2. Criteria of size and function of towns applied in Poland's 16 Regional Operating Programs. Source: Own study

The programming period of 2004-2006 was the first period in which Polish towns could benefit from the European Regional Development Fund. As a shortened period (for the old member states the period stretched from 2000 to 2006), it was largely the time of adaptation to the new conditions and the time of building institutional capabilities to develop policies of regional development. For all the Polish voivodeships, a common Integrated Operating Program of Regional Development was adopted.

source: http://ec.europa.eu/competition/state_aid/overview/what_is_state_aid.html

Financial assistance for the renovation and shaping new public spaces was directed first of all within the operation "Degraded urban, post-industrial and post-military spaces". In order to qualify for financing within this program, towns had to first adopt the said local revitalization programs, which required analyzing the purposefulness and objectives of the planned projects. Moreover, support was available only in what were believed to be the so-called degraded areas – delimited on the basis of criteria modeled after those adopted for the Joint Programming Initiative URBAN.

Support for the modernization of local road infrastructure and local cultural and tourist facilities was possible in turn within the operation entitled "Areas qualified for restructuring" – here, the supported territory was delimited in the poviats scale, and much simpler criteria were applied. In practice, it meant a possibility of supporting public space renovation projects in most territories outside the largest urban centers.

In the programming period of 2007-2013, the integrated program was replaced with 16 Regional Operating Programs (ROP). All these documents provide for the possibility to support projects related to renovating public space, but in different ways, as determined by the voivodeship's authorities on the basis of the region's specific features. In 15 out of 16 voivodeships, there was a possibility to co-finance the implementation of comprehensive revitalizing projects, but in as many as 8 voivodeships separate provisions were incorporated depending on the size of the particular center and its role in the settlement structure. 5 voivodeships provided for the possibility to extend repayable assistance for urban revitalization within the JESSICA Initiative,³ but no project relating to public space has been carried out through this program so far.

In the case of the Pomorskie Voivodeship, which will be examined in detail further in the present article, "Comprehensive Revitalization Projects" were reserved for towns with populations above 35,000. Smaller towns could obtain co-financing for simpler projects concerning the development of "Local Basic Infrastructure". In the latter case, simpler procedures were used; the applicants were not required to have an Local Revitalization Program or to delimit a degraded area on the basis of predefined criteria. However, preference was given to the so-called structurally weak areas. In the Pomorskie Voivodeship also smaller projects improving the quality of degraded historical downtown districts could receive support within the priority axis "Tourism and Cultural Heritage".

4 PUBLIC SPACES IN DEVELOPMENT POLICY – A CASE STUDY BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE POMORSKIE VOIVODESHIP

The Pomorskie Voivodeship has been selected for the purpose of an in-depth analysis. The region is characterized by a very diversified settlement pattern. The group of towns meet the "medium-sized" criterion includes 22 places, 16 of which are capitals of poviats or towns with poviats rights. The population of the biggest town in this group in 2011 amounted to 9676 inhabitants (Sztum). Population changes in years 1995-2011 varied from 27.78 % growth rate (Reda) to 14.25 % decrease (Sopot). What is interesting, both of the extreme examples are situated within so called Tricity Metropolitan Area (Tab. 3).

The area is characterized by historic Polish (i.e. Tczew) or Kashubian⁴ towns (i.e. Kartusy, Kościerzyna, Wejherowo) as well as towns dominated by settlers moved there after the Second World War (i.e. Pruszcz Gdański, Nowy Dwór Gdański, Słupsk). Considering the economic base and its changes, the division may be more detailed, towns afflicted by a bankruptcy of a significant production company (for instance Tczew, Starogard Gdański, Ustka), service providers which try to adapt their offer to current needs and towns within so called Tricity Metropolitan Area, which want to ensure competitive conditions for a housing market rivaling with the central parts of the metropolis. When it comes to public space development as a part of urban composition, the most interesting examples are new towns deprived of historical centres, located in the Metropolitan Area: Rumia, Reda and Pruszcz Gdański.

Several spectacular examples of transformation of public space from the pre-accession period may be found in the Pomorskie Voivodeship. They are often highlighted in literature of the subject as examples of good practices. A forerunner of restoration of the cityscape was Sopot. This historic health resort, which is located in the very centre of the Tricity Metropolitan Area, had its local revitalisation program designed in cooperation with local inhabitants. From 1997, renovation of consecutive historic quarters is being supported. Projects are executed mostly thanks to subsidies offered by town authorities to tenants'

³ Joint European Support for Sustainable Investment in City Areas.

⁴ Slavic autochthonic group in Pomorskie region

associations, but a central fragment of the town, which had been devastated during the war, was redeveloped thanks to one of the first examples of public-private partnership in Poland. Another example is renovation of the Old Market Square in Chojnice. Here, town authorities developed the market square and provided support to owners of the tenement houses located nearby, providing financial support as well as executing elevation restoration works. Thanks to its new and attractive image, this historic center reported significant development of services and the town became a major centre in the south-western part of this voivodeship. During this time, works on the new centre in rapidly developing Pruszcz Gdański were initiated. The majority of works was completed only in 2006 but it was the crowning of the process initiated by an architectural contest from 1996. In this case, again, the project was conducted with use of no external means.

| Town | Population | | Spatial features | | Change of development strategy | | Most important project in public spaces | | |
|--|------------|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|--|------------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| | In 2011 | Change 1995-2011 (%) | Part of larger agglomeration | Historic centre | Economic base before 1989 (state driven) | Current strategy | Pre-accessio | 2004-2006 | 2007-2013 |
| Ślupsk (p) | 96655 | -6,15 | | + | I/S | I/S | | so | so |
| Tczew (p) | 60152 | -0,77 | + | + | I | I/S/T | | so so | so |
| Starogard Gdański (p) | 48185 | -5,22 | | + | I | I/S | | | |
| Wejherowo(p) | 47794 | 0,44 | + | + | S | S/T | | t | so |
| Rumia | 46107 | 12,70 | + | | I/R | R | | | |
| Chojnice (p) | 39919 | 0,12 | | + | I/S | I/S/T | so/t | so t | t t |
| Kwidzyn (p) | 38296 | -2,57 | | + | I | I/S/T | | so | |
| Malbork (p) | 38278 | -4,99 | | + | I/T | S/T | | t | t |
| Sopot (p) | 38141 | -14,25 | + | + | S/T | S/T | so | so t | t |
| Lębork (p) | 34581 | -5,02 | | + | I/S | I/S/T | | | t so |
| Pruszcz Gdański (p) | 26834 | 20,56 | + | | I/R | R/S/Te | so | so t | so |
| Kościerzyna (p) | 23138 | -0,16 | | + | S/T | S/T | | | t/so |
| Reda | 20959 | 27,78 | + | | I/R | R/S | | | so |
| Bytów (p) | 16650 | -5,44 | | + | S | S/T | | | t/so |
| Ustka | 16062 | -7,17 | + | + | I/T | T | | t | t |
| Władysławowo | 15111 | 4,51 | | | I/T | T | | | |
| Kartuzy (p) | 14922 | -8,08 | | + | S/T | S/T | | | t |
| Człuchów (p) | 14189 | -8,37 | | + | I | S/Te | | | t |
| Puck (p) | 11249 | -2,90 | | + | T | T | | | t/so |
| Miastko | 10695 | -11,17 | | + | S | S | | | so |
| Nowy Dwór Gdański (p) | 9904 | -4,33 | | + | I/S | S/T | | | t/so |
| Szum (p) | 9676 | -13,14 | | + | I/S | I/S/T | | | t |
| Town: (p) – capital of powiat or individual status of powiat Change of development strategy: I – industry, S – services, T – tourism, R – development of residential areas (assigned to the cities in order of importance) Most important project in public spaces: s – local society oriented, t – tourism oriented; so – financed within the cohesion policy | | | | | | | | | |

Tab. 3. Characteristics of medium-sized towns in the Pomorskie Voivodeship. Source: Own study on the basis of Local Data Bank, local strategic documents and interviews (2012).

As it was already mentioned, during the period 2004-2006, it was possible to finance integrated revitalization projects in degraded areas, selected within the URBAN Initiative methodology. Within the probed group of towns, only Chojnice managed to execute the project of transformation of a hospital, located in the town centre, into a culture-and-social complex. Ustka managed to execute the first stage of its revitalization program within 'restructuring areas' action. Tczew currently faces the consequences of restructuring railway infrastructure. It managed to create Exhibition and Regional Centre for lower Vistula river and created recreational space along the river banks. Thus a gap of lost identity of this railway town was filled with the new clear image of a river town.

In the years 2007-2013 the biggest urban space renovation projects were to be financed through 'comprehensive revitalisation projects' section of the Pomorskie ROP – combining infrastructural, social and economic objectives for towns exceeding 35 thousand inhabitants. Contrary to the URBAN Initiative, a high culture value was not among the priorities of this program. However, beneficiaries residing in the territories meeting the criteria of "degraded areas" opted for those projects which played a key role for the town's identity. An important element of almost all the projects submitted to financing within this program was to elevate public spaces located in historic centers (Słupsk, Tczew, Starogard Gdański, Wejherowo, Lębork). An example was Rumia, which planned to create a completely new town centre based on few remaining historic relics of an old Kashubian village.⁵ Interestingly, the regional leader, Sopot, did not decide to take part in this contest. It does not mean that it stopped procuring means for its revitalization program; numerous smaller projects were successfully implemented from the means dedicated to improving tourism attractiveness. A similar procedure took place in Malbork and Chojnice. Smaller towns from this group were willing to take advantage of the simplified procedures on shaping so-called "local basic infrastructure". Thanks to this kind of support, public spaces in Kościerzyna, Bytów, Puck and Nowy Dwór Gdański were renovated and upgraded. All those projects are to elevate the tourism features of those places. Nowy Dwór Gdański also adapted the 19th century dairy into Żuławski Historic Park,⁶ a transformation that was not only to increase the general attractiveness of the place but also to shape common identity in the town dominated by immigrants. Miastko had its historic park renovated and Reda created a new park in the central part of the town, with a plan to create a green center for the town which it never had in the past. Ustka has been investing in its spa image for years. Sztum and Człuchów, which have Teutonic castles located in the centers, carried out projects on public space, within a tourism propagation section.

Several different models of support have been available for medium-sized towns in the Pomorskie Voivodeship so far. During the last period of the program, there were two models divided by the demarcation line of population size (complex revitalization and basic infrastructure development) and one optional model available to all communes (tourism propagation). Despite the fact that the EU policy shows increased expectations concerning public space renovation in the context of social problems solution, town authorities in medium-sized towns in Pomorskie region seem to combine those processes with the strengthening of their competitive position, attracting more tourists and new inhabitants. This is confirmed by the majority of projects financed from their own means as well as certain moderation when it comes to procuring funds for comprehensive revitalization programs.

5 CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Assessing the significance of the quality of public space in medium-sized towns from the European perspective, we should emphasize that the current strategy Europe 2020 promotes inclusive growth and sustainable growth, as opposed to the Lisbon Agenda that promoted improving competitiveness of the European economy in relation to the largest economies of the world. Therefore, we may assume that the role of translocal centers providing access to services and social integration opportunities will continue to grow.

The policy of the Polish state as it has been expressed recently – to a large extent an adaptation of the European policy to the Polish conditions – lets us expect another seven more active years of investing in the space of small and medium-sized towns. In the present economic situation the government is departing from the previously promoted policy of focusing on development through metropolises, as the largest urban centers can more easily depend on private capital. The National Development Strategy 2020 adopted in September 2012 emphasizes among its objectives "creating conditions for the development of regional, sub-regional and local centers and for strengthening the potential of rural areas".

The EU policy for the future programming period, too, seems conducive to the development of a "local Poland". By the decision of the European Council of February 2013, Poland is to remain the largest beneficiary of the cohesion policy in the 2014-2020 period – despite the overall cuts – receiving EUR 72.9 billion for the purpose, up 6 per cent from the budgetary period of 2007-2013. In the time of the crisis and falling prices for construction services, it indicates an opportunity of a larger number of viable projects.

⁵ This project did not obtain financing as it was decided that the proposed solutions do not significantly contribute to social and economic problems issues.

⁶ Żuławy is a cultural micro region located in the Vistula delta.

What is more, the concentration principle was introduced saying that a minimum of 5 per cent of funds in the Europea Regional Development Fund is to be used for sustainable growth of urban areas. In the context of the above-mentioned plans of Poland we may expect that the small and medium-sized towns will participate generously in this amount.

However, the open question is whether or not the quality of the public space remains an attractive instrument for achieving development objectives defined this way. The inclination to invest in public-access spaces – by nature not generating any profit – may be largely subject to the following issues: difficulty in providing own contribution to particular projects, communal debt⁷ and availability of non-repayable grants related to the predicted larger contribution of repayable assistance (JESSICA, above all) in the cohesion policy. In effect of the change in the paradigms of development we should expect departure from supporting projects related to tourism or other "leisure industries" to the benefit of community-building projects. However, in this case we should expect a growing importance of the so-called "soft projects".

The experience of the Pomorskie Voivodeship shows that the most spectacular projects of transforming the existing or shaping new public spaces were carried out without assistance from EU funds. The cause of this situation lies in the wide time span of the investment and its character reaching beyond the framework of support defined in seven-year programming periods. And so the optimal way for development may be to keep the quality of the public space infrastructure in the hands of self-governments as own tasks, shifting efforts to supporting social functions that make it possible to take the best advantage of the transformed landscape.

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⁷ Under the Polish law, communes' debt may not exceed 60 per cent of their budgets.