

CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN POLAND

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Municipal-level local government units have been operating in Poland for more than fifty years. They were established in the first half of the 1970s to replace the abolished gromadas (communal units). In justifying the introduction of a new tier of local administration, the authorities at the time emphasized above all the appropriate spatial scale and the economic potential of the new gminas (municipalities). Despite territorial adjustments introduced in subsequent decades, the fundamental shape of the “municipal map of Poland” has remained stable. Today, gminas constitute enduring local communities with their own historical, cultural, and social identities.

Over the past half-century, gminas have undergone numerous institutional transformations, the most significant of which was the 1990 reform, an integral part of Poland’s systemic transformation in both political and economic dimensions. As a result, the centralized model of local power, based on national councils, was replaced by territorial self-government endowed with its basic attributes. This reform is most often associated with the establishment of free and competitive local elections; equally important, however, was entrusting gminas with their own public tasks (gradually expanded), as well as granting them legal personality, financial autonomy, and municipal assets. Since the introduction of the new territorial division in 1973 and the empowerment of gminas and cities in 1990, far-reaching socio-demographic processes have taken place in Poland. The most significant of these is ongoing depopulation, manifested in a systematic decline in population in most gminas. This phenomenon is not spatially uniform, but its scale is increasingly evident. The situation is particularly difficult in peripheral gminas located outside the spheres of influence of large metropolitan centers. Yet even they, with few exceptions, face the problem of depopulation and a weakening development potential.

	Overall	Municipalities by population size									
		Below 2000	2000- -3999	4000- -4999	5000- -5999	6000- -6999	7000- -7999	8000- -9999	1000- 12999	13000- 19999	20000 and more



Poland	2477	23	405	288	266	203	169	247	253	278	345
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Source: Statistics Poland (GUS). As of 2024.

At present, 716 gminas in Poland have populations not exceeding 5,000, whereas a decade earlier there were 623 such units. In 2023, in five rural gminas (understood as entire administrative units, not individual localities), the number of births did not exceed five.

This trend has significant consequences for the performance of public tasks by gminas. For example, with around five births per year, maintaining the educational network becomes problematic—especially organizing classes in primary schools. Assuming a similar birth rate over the next eight years, a primary school in such a gmina would enroll only about 40 pupils. At the same time, a steady increase in average life expectancy is observed. While in 1990 average life expectancy was 75.2 years for women and 66.2 years for men, by 2024 these figures had reached 82 and 74 years, respectively. Supporting older residents in their place of residence is one of the gmina's key own tasks. One must also remember other areas of local government responsibility such as ensuring access to water and sewerage, waste management, and the upkeep of local technical infrastructure.

In light of the above challenges, changes in the functioning of territorial self-government become necessary—both at the gmina and county (powiat) levels. The main barrier to their implementation, however, remains a lack of political will and, consequently, difficulty in building a parliamentary majority to carry out radical systemic reforms. Nevertheless, several potential courses of action can be identified.

The first solution is to merge gminas into larger territorial units. Similar reforms have already been carried out in Western European countries, where negative demographic and structural phenomena emerged earlier than in Poland. Such changes, however, encounter strong social resistance, as local communities have been functioning for more than fifty years and have developed their own identities. In the Polish context, any mergers could concern only cities and the surrounding rural gminas, forming a single joint unit.

A second possible, and potentially less conflict-generating, course of action is to categorize gminas. The essence of this reform would not be the abolition of units, but rather the delegation of part of the tasks of the smallest gminas to larger and organizationally stronger units—particularly urban gminas located in county (powiat) seats. These possess relatively strong institutional

capacity and already serve as administrative centers, concentrating numerous public institutions at the county level. It would be crucial, however, to develop clear criteria defining the scope of tasks to be transferred from rural gminas and smaller towns.

A third solution is to strengthen the second tier of self-government—i.e., the counties (powiats)—at the expense of limiting the competencies of gminas. This would mean moving away from the frequently discussed postulate of abolishing counties and, de facto, a return to the solutions in place before 1975. At that time, when counties were abolished, it was asserted that their functions would be taken over by the newly established gminas; in practice, however, many tasks were concentrated at the voivodeship (regional) level, leading to further centralization of the system. It is already emphasized that a number of tasks currently carried out by gminas—such as organizing public transport, waste management, and spatial planning—should in fact fall within the domain of the counties.