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**HOW NOT TO STIMULATE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT.  
SYNDROMES OF FAILURES IN THE ABSORPTION  
OF EXOGENOUS FACTORS  
IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT GOVERNANCE BASED  
ON THE EXAMPLE OF POLISH SMALL TOWNS**

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**JAK NIE STYMULOWAĆ ROZWOJU LOKALNEGO.  
SYNDROMY PORAŻEK ABSORPCJI CZYNNIKÓW  
EGZOGENICZNYCH W ZARZĄDZANIU  
ROZWOJEM LOKALNYM NA PRZYKŁADZIE  
POLSKICH MAŁYCH MIAST**

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**Summary:** The absorption of exogenous factors represents one of the main components of local development governance (LDG). Today, in many countries, it is facilitated by numerous supra-local determinants. It primarily refers to these countries where local governments take advantage of the financial support of the EU. This absorption, however, experiences occasional failures which have various reasons and effects. The article presents the results of research in this subject matter conducted in Poland. They were carried out in two phases. The first covered participant observations performed in the period 2000-2014 in 61 Polish municipalities, aimed at the identification of the a.n. failures characteristics and their typical patterns. The second focused on determining the prevalence and reasons for these patterns occurrence in local development governance of Polish small towns. Long personal interviews, conducted in 2014 with the mayors of 46 such towns, were used in its course. The article is concluded with recommendations related to the improvement of local and supra-local governance of local development and focused on the reduction of the number and consequences of absorption failures.

**Keywords:** municipality, local authorities, local development (LD), local development governance (LDG), small town, exogenous factors of local development, Poland.

**Streszczenie:** Absorpcja czynników egzogenicznych to jeden z głównych elementów zarządzania rozwojem lokalnym. W licznych krajach sprzyja jej dziś wiele ponadlokalnych uwarunkowań. Szczególnie dotyczy to krajów, których samorządy lokalne korzystają ze wsparcia finansowego Unii Europejskiej. W absorpcji tej zdarzają się jednak niepowodzenia

o różnych przyczynach i skutkach. Artykuł prezentuje międzynarodowemu czytelnikowi wyniki badań w tym zakresie, przeprowadzone w Polsce przez autora. Wykonano je w dwóch fazach. Pierwsza obejmowała obserwacje uczestniczące, poczynione w latach 2000-2014, w 61 różnych polskich gminach – ich celem była identyfikacja cech wspomnianych niepowodzeń i ich typowych wzorców. Druga ukierunkowana została na identyfikację częstości i przyczyn występowania tych wzorców w zarządzaniu rozwojem lokalnym polskich małych miast. Wykorzystano w niej długie wywiady osobiste, które przeprowadzono w 2014 r. z burmistrzami 46 takich miast. Artykuł kończą zalecenia w zakresie doskonalenia lokalnego i ponadlokalnego zarządzania rozwojem lokalnym w Polsce i za granicą. Mają one zredukować liczebność i skutki niepowodzeń absorpcji egzogenicznych czynników rozwoju lokalnego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** gmina, władze lokalne, rozwój lokalny, zarządzanie rozwojem lokalnym, małe miasto, egzogeniczne czynniki rozwoju lokalnego, Polska.

## 1. Local development (LD) in two perspectives

Local development (LD) has already been repeatedly defined and the particular definitions (e.g.: [Brol 1998, p. 11; Filipiak et al. 2005, p. 107; Garofoli 2009, p. 225; Marques 2011, p. 144; Pietrzyk 1997, pp. 89-90; Wojtasiewicz 1996, p. 38]) emphasized its different characteristics and were also subject to changes along with the conception of localism evolution and dissemination (see e.g.: [Morris, Hess 1975; Sowa 1989; Clarke, Goetz (eds.) 1993; Gilejko 2007]). Today it is perceived in two ways.

The first consists in its perception from the local perspective, i.e. from the position of an individual local system, that is the socio-territorial composition with all its characteristic economic, spatial and cultural features, the social component of which expresses individual needs and the hierarchy of values. Using a simplification this composition is identified in many countries with a municipality. In this perspective LD represents a long-term, non-unified, multidimensional, self-sustaining process of municipal structures' transformations and their relationships as well as their relations with the environment, co-creating the desirable supra-local processes, resulting from the planned and participative creation, in a coordinated manner and following the idea of integrated order, mainly through and in the interest of the local community, by means of the consensus based mobilization of the primarily endogenous factors. The objective of LD, understood in this way, is the improvement of the quality of life experienced by the local community through meeting its needs, however, along with the simultaneous generation of values useful for the local system's environment.

Therefore, LD observed from the local perspective does not represent an autonomous process occurring exclusively within a particular local system. It is a multidimensional local process, however, related in various ways to social, economic and environmental supra-local objects and processes (regional, national, continental, global and characteristic for the unions of countries, e.g. the EU) and included in

other local systems. It means, i.e. that in spite of being based mainly on endogenous factors, such as human, social, cultural, financial capital, but also innovations, information, natural resources, technical and social infrastructure as well as the means of production, the discussed development is also based on analogical exogenous factors. Their inflow to the local system can take the following, inseparable forms:

- simple reinforcement of social, economic and environmental local system components by these factors, i.e. supporting their existence and functioning<sup>1</sup>;
- initiating or maintaining the startup, or also impulsive stimulating the LD processes by these factors<sup>2</sup>;
- modifying social, economic and environmental components of the local system by these factors, resulting in the dissemination of the particular supra-local values on the local level<sup>3</sup>;
- modifying social, economic and environmental elements of the local system through these factors resulting in the new local values (local innovations)<sup>4</sup>;
- transforming these factors by social and economic components of the local system into the completely new local values<sup>5</sup>.

Using exogenous factors in LD has a dynamizing effect for it and offers an opportunity for a more extensive, faster and fuller satisfaction of the local community needs and also the needs of external entities. In the local systems, suffering from an acute insufficiency of internal factors, the absorption of external ones becomes the necessity, because without them the process of LD could be slowed down, even when supported by intensive efforts of the local community (see e.g. [Filipiak 2006; Gorzelak 1996; 2000]). Therefore, in such situations a certain critical mass of LD factors is necessary, whereas their sources have to be of external nature. Moreover, even if endogenous factors are present to a minimal or larger extent, the pace of LD processes and meeting the needs can be unacceptably low from the perspective of both the local community and the external beneficiaries. Furthermore, in comparison to analogical processes occurring in different local systems, they may indicate a relative regress. These characteristics are of particular significance in view of the modern, intra-state and global competition for capital and innovations occurring between the local systems. The chances for the success of those based on insufficient own factors and deprived of appropriate external support and thus characterized by

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. money transfers from the state budget aimed at supporting such local institutions as museums, schools or branches of state offices function in this way.

<sup>2</sup> It refers to financial means, less frequently to objects the transfer of which to the local system remains the result of an individual decision made by the supra-local authorities. In modern Poland it mainly refers to subsidies based on the EU funds.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. local dissemination of the supra-local knowledge in the course of trainings for residents carried out by supra-local entities, or local popularization of supra-local art.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. new products of the local ceramics constituting the result of combining traditional, unique pottery technologies and the most modern graphic technologies.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. establishing a local NGO aimed at achieving the supra-local goals.

e.g. inadequately qualified labor resources, underdeveloped business environment, or shortages in the basic technical infrastructure, are simply small.

All of it, however, does not mean that the category of LD covers the situations in which the long-term transformations of a particular local system and its relationships with the environment and also its effect in the form of meeting the needs of beneficiaries, remain the result of only or primarily exogenous factors, e.g. the flow of money from the state budget (simple support), or large, direct investments (impulsive stimulation). Such transformations can be defined as the supra-locally generated development in a local scale, rather than LD. To be recognized as the LD, apart from meeting other conditions, they have to result mainly from the sustainable mobilization of material and non-material internal resources, even if it was initiated or is carried out with external support. This condition has been emphasized in the international subject literature, especially in the recent years, and in order to separate earlier LD conceptions, either without it or not emphasizing it, from the modern ones the concepts of “local sustainable development” or “local self-development” are used (see e.g.: [Blair, Evans 2004; Graziano da Silva 2002]). They express not only the multifaceted integration of this development, but also its persistence based on the internally self-sustaining transformations. Understood in this way LD is currently also defined as the neo-endogenous one (see e.g.: [Ray 2006]).

The second approach to LD consists in its perception from a supra-local perspective, i.e. from the perspective of supra-local systems – regions, countries, unions of countries and also from a global perspective. LD perceived from a supra-local perspective represents such structural transformations of supra-local systems and relationships between them and their environment which result, to a significant extent, from the processes of LD occurring in local systems as the components of a particular supra-local system. It is, however, not only about the development processes of many local systems and their effects to be aggregated in the supra-local, simple “sums”. In a supra-local approach to LD the idea is also that, owing to network interactions between numerous local systems, and also between them and other supra-local entities (countries, companies, organizations and others), the newly aroused, as well as protected and intensified, existing supra-local (and thus regional, national and global) development processes were stimulated to the greatest possible extent, which are different from the LD processes, not only in their spatial aspect. In simplified terms, LD in the supra-local perspective means the transformation of LD processes into supra-local development processes. The objective of LD comprehended in this way is to upgrade the living standards of regional and national societies as well as otherwise delimited supra-local human groups.

Both categories of LD, the local and the supra-local one, when combined form a paradigm of LD, which means a set of laws, conceptions and model solutions concurring specific philosophy for generating development in general, i.e. in all its spatial and generic aspects, based on the fundamentals of localism. It can be defined as the paradigm of LD in its broad sense. Its acceptance, however, does not mean

assigning the role of the only correct determinant of all developmental processes to LD. On the contrary, it means assigning an important and interactive position to it among those taken by other, but complementary or even incorporative for it, theoretical concepts and actual developmental processes. At this point the particular significance should be assigned to its relationships with paradigms of regional and territorial development.

## **2. Obtaining exogenous factors in local and supra-local governance of local development (LD)**

Management is defined as taking rational advantage of the available resources for achieving particular goals. Management as a science and practical activity originates from the output of the identification, creation and verification of managerial operations, determinants and endeavors to succeed in business. This activity represents its tradition and, in a way, its basic domain. However, in recent years it gained new domains. Among them the sphere of activities performed by public authorities was included, where it is referred to as public governance. In Polish, but not only, systematics of sciences it is a sub-discipline of management science, whereas in practice it represents a set of public authorities' activity patterns rooted not only in general management, but also in other fields of knowledge covering social, economic and environmental processes. Initially, public governance was and still is associated with individual public institutions, which are supposed to achieve some goals. In more recent approaches it is also referred to the groups of such institutions constituting a particular system or set, which is sufficiently uniform in its functional or structural terms and also recognized as an organization aiming at something. Such approaches had and still have their justification in some of these situations. However, recently the category of management, both in theory and practice, has ceased to represent commercial operations exclusively, as well as the organizations which represent coherent systems. In various contexts management is increasingly often associated with a society and its organized activities having different than economic motives and apart from that with space and natural environment as well as processes occurring in them. For this reason the concept of public governance is currently also used in terms of activities undertaken with reference to structures and phenomena characterized by a low level of closure, related to entities constituting the elements of organizational networks characterized not only by the boundaries which are difficult to define clearly but which are also fluctuating. It refers to structures and phenomena which are on many occasions significantly different, in various aspects, from the organizations and processes occurring in them, even the non-profit ones. The term governance is nowadays also used to define efforts in achieving collective objectives, based not only on economic rationality, but also on the rationality of public choice incorporating, among others, economic, ecological, scientific and even the religious ones.

This new conceptual trend covers the category of local development governance (LDG), which is carried out by the local authorities (in Poland it refers to municipal authorities). Such governance is related to local development perceived in a local perspective, i.e. to a particular, multidimensional process occurring in a municipal scale (i.e. local system), in which local enterprises, public institutions, NGOs, the elements of ecosystems, natural and other persons participate, rather than just to a municipality understood as a set of organizations constituting a municipal, institutional system. It consists in taking advantage of this institutional system by the municipal authorities to stimulate the transformations of municipal (local system) structures, mutual relations between them and their interconnections with the environment so that they constitute LD. Due to the significance of supra-local factors in LD it covers, among other actions, the activities aim at their inflow to a municipality in every of the five above presented forms. Obtaining simple, external reinforcement for the local system components, i.e. supporting their existence and functioning, remains the significant part of these activities. However, having in mind the discussed requirement of the persistent reliance of LD on endogenous factors (self-sustaining), these activities should be focused on obtaining exogenous factors in the way that (at least one):

- they bond with endogenous ones creating new, persistent factors of LD, permanently associated with a municipality and active in the LD process;
- they persistently ignite endogenous LD factors which were previously inactive or active to a much lesser extent;
- they contributed to persistent absorption of other, desirable exogenous factors by constructing e.g. stable feedbacks between the local system components and its supra-local environment.

Moreover, such situations should be avoided in which the exogenous factors obtained in this way, by stimulating certain components of the LD process, become barriers for others and thus the balance of profits and costs of the entire operation is close to zero or even clearly negative. The proportions of broadly understood costs for obtaining a particular exogenous factor against the broadly understood advantages achieved due to that in LD are also crucial. The identification and quantification of all costs and profits necessary to calculate these proportions remain a complex task and rarely performed in the practice of LDG, but the clearly unfavorable situations should simply be avoided.

The category of LDG performed by supra-local authorities is also covered by the above discussed new conceptual trend. This governance refers to LD perceived from a supra-local perspective, i.e. transformations of supra-local systems' structures and relationships between these structures and also their environment representing direct and indirect effects of the LD processes occurring in the local systems which they are composed of. It consists in taking advantage by the supra-local authorities (regional, national, international) of the institutional systems at their disposal for the purposes of:

- creating supra-local, systemic, organizational, legal, financial, infrastructural and other conditions of LD perceived from a local perspective;

- stimulating LD in particular municipalities or their groups by supplying them with the development factors which are exogenous for them;
- stimulating transformations of LD processes into supra-local development processes.

Therefore, LDG from a supra-local level covers in its assumptions – apart from many other actions – also the activities aimed at transferring their exogenous LD factors to the local systems and combining them with endogenous factors. Hence, in this aspect the discussed governance remains compatible with the above described activities performed by the local authorities.

### **3. The syndromes of failures in the absorption of exogenous factors**

In spite of the local and supra-local authorities' as well as the supporting experts' involvement in the local absorption of exogenous factors, despite the functioning of intentional, public, legal and organizational systems, within the framework of which this absorption is carried out, and also regardless of the existence of numerous documented, international experiences, there happen to occur failures in the course of the a.n. activities. Their descriptions can be found in the scientific literature although, having considered their significance, they receive limited coverage usually along with discussing other problems related to public governance. They can also be found directly in Polish self-government environment made up of (as at 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015) 2478 municipalities (local self-government), 314 counties (sub-regional self-government) and 16 regions (regional self-government). Since 1996 the author has come across such failures by carrying out a lot of research and implementation as well as research and development projects in Poland related to local and supra-local governance<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, since 2000 the author decided to take advantage of this situation in conducting systematized research making one of their objectives the identification of characteristics underlying failures in the discussed absorption. Since 2010 the author has been using an additional opportunity for his research, i.e. playing the function of a counselor in a county council<sup>7</sup>. Till mid-2014 the total of 61 municipalities from all over Poland were covered by the research<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> It covered about 150 projects referring to the construction and implementation of local and regional development strategies, the identification of success factors in local development governance, obtaining the EU funds, foreign direct investments and special economic zones, conducting local economic policy, public-private and also public-social partnerships, urban revitalization, innovativeness stimulation, process oriented governance in public administration.

<sup>7</sup> A county council represents a decision-making body of the county authorities. It takes up the most important decisions about the implementation of the county self-government's tasks. In Poland counties often cooperate with municipalities in obtaining exogenous factors of local development.

<sup>8</sup> These were: Biała Podlaska, Bielawa, Bogatynia, Bolków, Chocianów, Długoleśka, Dobromierz, Drelów, Dzierżoniów, Grębocice, Janowice Wielkie, Jelenia Góra, Jeżów Sudecki, Karpacz, Konin, Kowary, Łądek, Łądek-Zdrój, Leszno, Lubawka, Łomazy, Maków Mazowiecki, Mały Płock, Marci-

Due to the purpose and conditions of the research, the method of qualitative field research was applied. Its essence is the systemic observation of the research object in the place and time where it occurs and develops. It is characterized by complexity and thus offers an opportunity to detect the subtleties of the analyzed object. It features high research accuracy and, hence, is used in exploring research (see: [Kostera 2003, p. 25]). This method applies both neutral and non-neutral techniques. The first consist in observations about which the observed ones are unaware and in the course of which an observer has no influence on their actions. In the latter case either such knowledge or impact is present. The author's direct involvement in the discussed projects excluded neutral techniques and determined the choice of the participant observation technique, i.e. the author's open participation in the observed absorption processes. The subject literature provides that this technique is burdened with a disadvantage of being a non-neutral one due to the observer's inevitable impact on the monitored processes and thus also the risk of observing their different course than the one which would have been observed if such involvement had not taken place. However, no significant changes in the behavior of absorption participants, as resulting from having been informed that it is subject to scientific observation, were recorded. An opportunity to observe processes and objects in their natural environment remains the advantage of the discussed technique. The characteristics of absorption failures were thus identified in the locations and at the time when they were most apparently revealed. The collected materials, after supplementing them with the information from the subject literature<sup>9</sup>, were processed using the cause and effect analysis and the logical reduction methods. As a result three groups of such failures were identified, the characteristics of which created similar patterns (syndromes of absorption failures) and which can therefore be conceptualized as typical failures.

The first of them takes the form of a failure consisting in obtaining an exogenous development factor(s) which, by assumption, was supposed to (at least one):

- activate persistently the so far inactive or insufficiently active endogenous factor(s), by activating it in the process of LD;
- become combined with an endogenous factor (factors) and create with it a new, permanent factor (s) of LD, persistently combined with the local system and continuously active in the LD process,

however, these objectives were only partly or not at all achieved because (respectively):

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szów, Mysłakowice, Nowogrodziec, Orchowo, Osiecznica, Ostrowite, Piechowice, Pieńsk, Piszczac, Płock, Podgórzyn, Polkowice, Powidz, Przemków, Puławy, Radków, Radwanice, Rokitno, Rudna, Stara Kamienica, Starachowice, Stronie Śląskie, Słupca city., Słupca village., Strzałkowo, Sulików, Szklarska Poręba, Świerzawa, Tomaszów Lubelski, Urzędów, Waganiec, Wądroże Wielkie, Węglińiec, Wojcieszków, Wronki, Zagórów, Zgorzelec (urban municipality), Zgorzelec (rural municipality).

<sup>9</sup> Mainly from: [Ademola Olukotun 2008; Csosz, Aftanache 2013; Boström 2012; Hardy 1998; Vale 2000; Sipikal et al. 2010; Grabher 1994].



- the endogenous factor(s) was activated but non-persistently (usually for the time equal or slightly longer than the time of the obtained exogenous factor impact), after which it returned to its initial status or even faded away;
- the new LD factor(s) did not develop or turned out unstable and faded away or left the local system losing the mutual ties stimulating LD of this system.

Such failure of the exogenous LD factor(s) absorption can be conventionally and briefly defined as a syndrome of ephemeron. It should be emphasized that the negative absorption result is usually not limited to failing to achieve its intended purpose only, but it also means using up the obtained exogenous factor e.g. the grant-aid. One should also bear in mind that the unfortunately ephemeral, but in line with intent, -absorption effects can be accompanied by the unintended, secondary or side effects, often difficult to identify, however, non-ephemeral and still, to some extent, positive from the perspective of LD. For example, the planned effect of grant-aid could have been insignificant, but the local company, which using the money from this grant-aid rendered services that generated this effect for its beneficiary, could have been substantially recapitalized.

The second type of the typical failure in the discussed absorption consists in obtaining a large, in its broadly understood value and expected results, exogenous factor(s) and (one of the following):

- this factor(s) permanent location in a local system;
- combining this factor(s) with endogenous factor(s) and as a result creating a new, persistent object (objects) located persistently in the local system,

however, along with long-term and only its minor inclusion in the LD process, or without this inclusion at all. Such a situation can be referred to as the syndrome of a cathedral in the desert. This term seems inadequate sometimes, since comparing every local system which obtained such a “cathedral” to a “desert” can raise doubts, however, it has been used for two decades in similar contexts in the international literature and is already rooted in it<sup>10</sup>. It also well reflects the fact that in many such situations the obtained factor or its absorption effect was relatively expensive and spectacular. As the example a historic monument can be given, which was revitalized with large external funds and was supposed to attract crowds of tourists to a municipality, however, it never happened. Similarly to the syndrome of ephemeron, the absence or poor impact of a new object on LD can be accompanied by the unintended and difficult to identify effects, nevertheless stimulating this development to some extent.

The third type of failure refers to a situation when an exogenous development factor(s) was obtained and (at least one):

- it persistently activated an inactive or insufficiently active endogenous factor(s) by involving it in the process of LD;

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of a “cathedral in the desert” was used for the first time as expressing contrast between the growth enclaves and the experiencing recession region in [Grabher 1994, p. 185].

- it was combined with an endogenous factor(s) creating, as a result, a new, persistent factor(s) of LD, persistently connected with the local system and continuously active in the LD process,

but at the same time such activated, old or active, new endogenous factor(s) by stimulating some components of the LD process became the crucial and persistent destimulant for others. Such failure can be conventionally and briefly defined as the syndrome of ballast. The example is a communal marina constructed with the EU means, equipped with extensive infrastructure for tourists and used by them, however at the same time generating high maintenance costs for its owner, i.e. a municipality. It should also be added that a particular, absorptive, failed investment, which for one local government remains a serious burden, for another, the above-average wealthy one, constitutes much smaller ballast.

The presented failures in LDG should not be approached as the disjoint ones. The result of exogenous factor absorption (e.g. a municipal airport the construction of which was financed from grant-aid) can turn out a “ballast” (maintenance costs), which does not stimulate LD processes in any significant way (no flights) and thus also represents a “cathedral in the desert”. On the other hand, a “cathedral in the desert” (e.g. a research and development center functionally isolated from the local system) can after some time leave the local system and thus gain the features of “ephemeron”. These failures, however, do not represent situations in case of which corrective actions are impossible. In Polish, but not only, self-government practice a number of examples can be found of a successful, multidimensional and strong inclusion of the existing “cathedrals in a desert” in the LD process or reducing burdens caused by the existing “ballasts”. The restitution of “ephemerides” remains a rarity.

#### **4. Failures of exogenous factors’ absorption in local development governance (LDG) of Polish small towns**

As it has already been discussed, the result of qualitative research allowed identifying the characteristics of failures in the absorption of exogenous LD factors and also distinguishing these failures the characteristics of which presented similar patterns (syndromes of absorption failures), i.e. typical failures. Therefore, they facilitated conducting the subsequent studies of the discussed part of LDG, extended against the previous ones by quantitative aspects, however, narrowed down to the deliberately defined group of the authorities involved in such governance.

The author selected the authorities of Polish small towns from the available options. This choice resulted from the fact that the majority of the a.n. observations occurred exactly in the course of cooperation with such authorities, which helped in designing the research, collecting the research materials and their interpretation. It was also based on the conviction that the extension of knowledge about the governance processes of Polish small towns could result in the desirable improvement

of their socio-economic situation. Currently their large group is experiencing structural developmental problems and facing either a regression or stagnation. It is manifested by the population decline, unemployment, decapitalization of residential, manufacturing, technical and social infrastructure buildings, spatial disconnectedness, migration of enterprises and their capital, increased crime, alcoholism and other pathologies, the reduction of residents' incomes, decreasing availability and quality of services, degradation of historic monuments, as well as other negative phenomena. These processes have already received a lot of coverage in the subject literature and their entire complex is referred to in Polish literature as the shrinking of small towns (see e.g.: [Kantor-Pietraga et al. 2012]). Therefore, exogenous factors of LD are highly desirable in these towns, whereas the discussions and activities focused on their absorption remain the leading paths of the governance carried out there.

In the socio-economic categories a small town is usually perceived as the spatially coherent, however, generically diversified relationship of local community and local economy characterized by the specific socio-cultural, spatial, infrastructural and economic features, distinguishing it clearly from rural settlements and the analogical medium-sized relationships and even more from the large ones (see: [Trutkowski, Mandes 2005, p. 13]). The practically used methods in defining which towns are included in this class are, however, diversified. In the conducted research it was adopted that the population number of such towns ranges from 5 to 20 thousand. It was considered that the bottom limit of such range separates satisfactorily from this class the units having town privileges but, in fact, still constituting intermediate rural-urban forms, whereas the top limit analogically separates towns having other, important quality features and thus classified as medium-sized. Such an assumption, despite the simplification of the phenomenon complexity, was adopted e.g. in the studies conducted by the researchers originating not only from Poland, but also from other countries (see e.g.: [Chądzyńska, Iwaszko 2012; p. 28; Dericioğlu 1988, p. 14; Hardoy, Satterthwaite 1986, p. 15; Kok 2013, p. 20; Kurek 2006, p. 114]).

In Poland there are three types of municipalities – rural, urban and urban-rural. Rural municipalities cover from several to several dozen localities, none of which have town privileges. Urban-rural municipalities are made up of a similar number of locations, however, one of them is a town. In such municipalities, for statistical and other purposes, their urban and rural part are separated, but from an administrative perspective it constitutes a unified entity. Urban municipalities represent the ones which are made up of only one locality which is a town. The authorities of each Polish municipality consist of two bodies – a decision-making body and an executive body. A council represents a decision-making body and is called, depending on a municipality type, a parish council (*rada gminy*), a town and parish council (*rada miasta i gminy*) or a town council (*rada miasta*), consisting of several to several dozen members elected by the local residents for a four-year term of office. The executive body is represented by one person called, depending on a municipality

type, a village head (*wójt*), a mayor (*burmistrz*) or a town president (*prezydent miasta*), also elected by the local residents for a four-year term of office. Therefore, the research population consisted of local authorities understood as the groups of the decision-making and executive bodies of all Polish towns representing urban municipalities or urban parts of urban-rural municipalities, meeting the a.n. population criterion. Its size of 369 units was defined as at 31.12.2013 using the LDB CSO<sup>11</sup>, which i.a. provides information about the population number of urban municipalities and urban parts of urban-rural municipalities according to the actual place of residence.

The following detailed research goals were adopted to identify:

- the share of authorities which, in general, recognize, i.e. have experienced in the course of the recent 2 terms of office, are currently experiencing or anticipating serious failures in the absorption of exogenous factors occurring in their towns' governance;
- the prevalence in their perception of syndromes of these failures;
- the primary reasons of these failures observed by them;
- the examples of these failures.

The town mayors were chosen as the information sources and the idea of obtaining them from councilors was given up. Such a decision was taken up because among the individuals making up the local authorities they have the largest impact on the absorption of the exogenous development factors. They usually represent its initiators and strategic creators, which results from the construction of Polish law concentrating in this position the attributes of a local authority and the streams of key information. It is also the effect of the observed, not just by the author, frequently experienced passive attitude of the councils of Polish small towns, in terms of the development policy and the way mayors are perceived by the local community as the most obliged to lead such a policy (see: [Bober et al., 2013, pp. 29, 96]). It also results from the mayors' personal attitude, usually coinciding with these expectations, sometimes accompanied by the strong motivation for assigning certain characteristics to this development, which they personally consider desirable. Moreover, even if they did not participate in the particular absorptive municipal actions, because e.g. they were not a part of local authorities, they are most often informed about the serious absorptive failures. Therefore, Polish mayors have extensive knowledge about the past, present and probable future of the exogenous development factors absorption, but at the same time they constitute its integral and exceptionally important, conceptual and causative component.

A diagnostic poll method was selected from the group of the available methods. Its application is particularly recommended in descriptive, explanatory and exploratory

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<sup>11</sup> Local Data Bank being a part of the state Central Statistical Office (LDB CSO) is the base of official data about social, economic, spatial and environmental characteristics of Polish self-government units: municipalities, counties and regions and also their selected groups and parts.

research of non-locatable phenomena, including the institutional ones (see e.g. [Babbie 2004, p. 269]). As far as the research technique is concerned, questionnaire techniques were rejected. It was decided based on the identified, in the course of the previously conducted research, high diversification of the local authorities' perception and terminology of the categories characteristic for the exogenous factors' absorption. Attention was also paid to the observed, at that time, very limited willingness of the respondents to fill in a questionnaire. The absence of personal contact would also eliminate the dialogue indispensable to achieve the two final research goals. In this situation the technique of long, personal interview was chosen as recommended in the studies of the opinion leaders and the difficult to reach individuals, especially when analyzing a complex subject matter. The research sample was selected based on a non-probability quota sampling technique. Town size was chosen as the control characteristics (three of its levels: 5000-9999, 10000-14999 and 15000-20000 residents) and its local government's wealth (three of its levels: up to 2999 zł.<sup>12</sup>, 3000-3999 zł. and from 4000 zł. and over per one resident per year). In case of the above characteristics, during qualitative studies, a positive relationship was recorded between their level and quantity and the diversification of absorptive efforts taken up by the local authorities. The information about the distribution of characteristics in the studied population, as well as their values adequate for each unit of this population were collected from LDB CSO – the number of residents as at 31.12.2013 and budget revenues per one resident in 2012. More recent data were not available. Due to the adoption of the non-probability sampling technique it was not possible to specify its size using the statistical formulas based on sampling error, therefore the approach based on the research reference points was applied. Having considered the above factors it was adopted that the sample would cover 46 small town authorities<sup>13</sup>, which represented 12.5% of their population. The drawing technique was used in selecting the population units to the quotas. The interviews with mayors selected in this way were conducted in the period from 9 May till 24 July 2014. It should also be pointed out that these interviews were extended by other problems covered by two other research projects focused on LDG of small towns. Their results remain the subject matter of separate publications.

The conducted research revealed that the participation of the authorities which happen to perceive, i.e. experienced during the two recent terms of office, are experiencing or anticipating serious failures in the absorption of exogenous factors

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<sup>12</sup> The złoty (sign: zł, ISO 4217 code: PLN) is the currency of Poland.

<sup>13</sup> These towns were as follows: Barlinek, Boguszów-Gorce, Czarna Białostocka, Dobre Miasto, Grodków, Gubin, Kazimierza Wielka, Kolutzki, Konstancin-Jeziorna, Krasnystaw, Krzyż Wielkopolski, Leżajsk, Limanowa, Lwówek Śląski, Łask, Łosice, Miastko, Milicz, Morąg, Mszana Dolna, Myślenice, Namysłów, Nasielsk, Nidzica, Nowy Tomyśl, Ostrzeszów, Otmuchów, Ozimek, Ożarów Mazowiecki, Puck, Rabka-Zdrój, Rogoźno, Sędziszów Małopolski, Sianów, Stęszew, Strzelce Opolskie, Sucha Beskidzka, Sulejówek, Szklarska Poręba, Węgrów, Wieleń, Włodawa, Wysokie Mazowieckie, Żelów, Żarów, Żychlin.

is about 35%. The most frequently noticed issue was an excessive burden of a town by the factor obtained from the supra-local environment (the syndrome of ballast). Such a situation was indicated by 28.3% mayors. Among these indications about half of them referred to obtaining funds by the local authorities which mainly originated from the EU aid funds for the construction of some types of social and technical infrastructure. Within the framework of social infrastructure the most often mentioned facilities were waterparks and swimming pools, which have relatively highest operating costs out of all types of sports and recreation infrastructure, and along with low earned income require serious, long-term, indirect or direct subsidization. Individual examples of very expensive to maintain sports or entertainment arenas, or playing both functions simultaneously, were also mentioned. In terms of technical infrastructure all indications referred to an extensive water supply and sewage networks including water treatment plants, the depreciation, operating costs and also repayment commitments incurred for own contribution<sup>14</sup> determine the need to set the above-average high service tariffs. As a result some entrepreneurs (e.g. hoteliers) reduce their business activities and some residents need to receive pay-in to their bills, i.e. *de facto* social aid. If the a.n. commitments were incurred by a municipality rather than its company, then their repayment reduces persistently the investment possibilities of such a municipality and if the debt is critically high, obtaining another external support for other investments turns out impossible (no possibility to guarantee own contribution). It was also identified that high service tariffs often and effectively provoke illegal water intake from the system and sewage discharge to either sewage systems or rivers, ponds and lakes.

The conducted interviews, along with the participant observations, allow distinguishing five basic reasons for the syndrome of ballast occurrence in the LDG of Polish small towns. The first of them is the pressure exerted by residents on local authorities aimed at motivating them to get involved in obtaining the available co-funding and executing a particular investment. The so-called local leaders represent, most often, the main creators pressure, including some councilors for whom the fact of having persuaded the authorities to build a given object – the larger the better – remains their personal victory, however, discounted in the public sphere, frequently also during the coming elections. The particular investment legitimacy is supported by the argumentation of the local community needs, which have been unsatisfied for a long time. However, their presented scale is larger than the real one. As the underlying reason they also voice that – as one of the mayors quoted – “now there is a chance to obtain the EU funds, whereas in a year or two it will be gone”. They also announce that the investment effects shall strongly develop the exogenous functions of the town (e.g. the swimming pool will be used by tourists and the sports hall will serve sport clubs from other locations in the region), despite numerous circumstances

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<sup>14</sup> Own contribution is a part of project implementation costs subsidized from the EU funds which must be covered by the beneficiary.

indicating that it will remain highly limited. They frequently carry it all out with media coverage space encouraging more residents to join the local battle for e.g. an indoor swimming pool or at least to keep observing it. Therefore, it does happen that the authorities surrender to the pressure even though their concerns result from being almost sure that maintenance costs of this or other facility will remain disproportionately high for a long time as opposed to the advantages it offers. All mayors covered by the conducted interviews, who resisted to the presented, absorptive lobbying, evaluated it as their and the town strategic success. The second reason differs from the first one only in the respect that such a project is forced by the mayor himself/herself – independently or together with a group of councilors. Therefore, its realization is easier and among its true motives the following can be listed: gigantomania, a desire for re-election and – in the opinion of one of the mayors – “the desire to leave something really big and important behind”. The third reason takes the form of a conviction shared by some members of the authorities that since there occurs an opportunity to obtain funds for some project, an advantage should be taken to the utmost, following the principles voiced by such expressions as “having too much does not cause headaches<sup>15</sup>”, “surplus will come handy later”, “it is better to get something not fully necessary than receive nothing at all”. It is combined with the already characterized conviction regarding the execution of powers in the times when a strategic window for the EU means distribution is periodically opened and it seems unreasonable to resign from applying for them. It is also combined with an incomplete adjustment of the supra-local support programs’ offer to the actual developmental needs of small towns and forcing supra-local conceptions of their development with the help of this programs (frequently pointed to by the mayors). It, moreover, involves the certainty that the evaluation of the authorities’ term of office by the society and the opposition will take into account both the quantity and size of the carried out projects and the total value of funds obtained within their framework. The fourth reason results from the mistakes made in good faith in estimating parameters constituting the assumptions of feasibility studies performed prior to the absorption attempts. They cover prospective: share of co-funding and the eligibility of costs, demand for the particular services, costs of energy carriers, the level of tax burden, the intensity of competition, the price of money, etc., thus determined primarily by the supra-local, rather than local factors. The fifth reason comes down to the defects of aid funds’ distribution systems related to an insufficiently accurate substantive assessment of the filed projects and reducing the importance of these assessments, and also limited possibilities for correcting projects in the course of their implementation. Additionally, it should be borne in mind that the a.n. reasons may occur jointly.

The second half of the indications pointing to the syndrome of ballast refers to diversified cases having individual causes. Quoting a few of them allows illustrating

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<sup>15</sup> It is a Polish proverb which English equivalents are: “plenty is no plague”, “store is no sore”, “opulence does no harm”.

how extensive their spectrum is. For example, in the town of Zelów an attracted investor, who was supposed to turn into a manufacturing facility certain objects in the city center which used to be a cotton industry plant, decided to change it into a textile waste landfill, highly burdensome for the environment (in 2012 only about 300 residents applied in writing to the town authorities for intervention). Furthermore, there was a fire which lasted several days. It resulted in emigration processes and in reducing other external investments. Another situation referred to the town of Barlinek which acquired the subzone of Kostrzyńsko-Słubicka Special Economic Zone along with Barlinek S.A. enterprise. Today it is one of the leading employers having a significant input in the LD. Nevertheless, strong and many years lasting presence of its name in Polish media, related to advertising its products, resulted in the fact that in the supra-local environment the town is commonly associated with industry rather than tourism and recreation, even though it presents numerous advantages of this kind and the local authorities are focused on their development. Therefore, the additional, long-term expenditure turns out to be a burden, as it has to be covered by the local government to regain and transform the brand of “Barlinek” as the tourism and recreation one in the awareness of potential, supra-local town users. It also takes the form of lost revenues, which could have been earned from tourism and recreation by entrepreneurs, residents and the local government if the town had not been primarily mistakenly perceived as an industrial center. Yet another example covers the period 2013-2014 when Volkswagen AG concern was considering the possibility of constructing a new plant worth about 1 bn euros in the outskirts of Stęszew town. This investment could have had a great impact on the rapid economic development of this town and its area. Numerous negotiations were conducted with the local authorities. Nonetheless, after estimating the financial liabilities to be incurred in order to satisfy the investor’s infrastructural expectations, the local authorities decided that it was going to be an excessive burden for the local government and gave up negotiations.

The syndrome of ephemeron turned out to be the second in terms of the number of indications. It was voiced by 8.7% mayors. The majority of indications again referred to the factors acquired within the framework of projects, especially the so-called soft ones, financed from aid funds. Among the reasons of such situations, recorded by the author during his work and confirmed in the conducted interviews, the ones related to the acquired burdens on the local system are included. Public pressure, the ambitions of an executive body or simply some planning errors were rarely the case. More often it was the conviction about the justified maximization of using the a.n. strategic window, without concentrating on the actual demand for the particular factor absorption and the realistic possibilities of its persistent integration with the urban social or economic structures. To put it more precisely, without conducting any deeper analysis of:

- town capacity and readiness to absorb a particular factor at the stage of development which the town is currently experiencing,



- the “absorption address”, i.e. whether this animating factor is addressed to the town structures constituting the reason of a particular problem, or the ones which remain its symptom (effect),
- the possibilities for such adaptation of the acquired factor to reach at least a satisfactory level of its integration with the local system.

It is worth illustrating the results of such an approach with the examples originating from interviews and earlier observations. The project aimed at upgrading digital literacy of a large group of people experiencing a long-term unemployment and without professional qualifications, carried out in one of the small towns, did not result in persistent effects. The real motivation for education and taking up employment was missing, as well as the available jobs where these competencies could have been used. Therefore, they were soon lost, if they had ever been acquired at all. The revitalization of a group of municipal buildings inhabited by people with low incomes, carried out in another town using the acquired funds, resulted in a significant improvement of their technical condition. It, however, did not change the fact that these residents were still incapable of paying their rents at the level which allowed maintaining this condition. Numerous subsidies obtained for starting a small business in another town did not bring about any persistent effects, since many of them were established mainly in order to just obtain these subsidies. The majority of them terminated their, anyway, poor activity immediately after the contractual, minimal project life-cycle duration came to an end. In another town, within the framework of an acquired project, a municipal tourist information and promotion center was established, which was dynamically functioning for one year. However, when the project was finished this activity almost ceased to exist. The relatively low budget revenues, along with a skeptical approach of the councilors to promotion as such, did not allow for allocating the similar funds again, whereas the initial plan for acquiring them from the local businesses operating in the sphere of tourism failed.

The smallest number of indications, only 3, referred to the syndrome of a cathedral in the desert. The underlying motives in the area of aid funds absorption are identical to the a.n. ones. Apart from that, the reason is usually associated with the interest of an entity deciding about locating within the town area a given object, non-integrating with it. Among the identified examples the following can be listed:

- a part of an international cycling route running through a town and equipped with the accompanying infrastructure, sporadically used by the supra-local tourists and of low usability for the residents,
- a grand tower with a view terrace not really popular with tourists, just like the entire town and opened only on some days in summer,
- a private company with low demand for municipal services, functioning almost exclusively based on supra-local staff and business partners, taking advantage of the privilege to run a business in a special economic zone, uninterested in cooperating with either the authorities or the local community.

Based on the interviews an additional aspect of exogenous factors' absorption was identified. It can be defined as the problem of its depth and range. It refers to the differences between the alternative variants for the correct acquisition of a supra-LD factor. Configuration variants and the strength of their relationships with endogenous factors could be various, hence the diversification and power of the resulting local changes could differ significantly. Therefore, the problem consists in making better or worse – from the perspective of LD – absorptive choices. An example was given by one of the mayors. He indicated that out of many analyzed variants of a ring road, financed mainly by the EU, the selected one does not allow for using it as a communication axis around which industrial zones could be created. Therefore, the ring road shall become a development factor reducing transit arduousness, however, it would not stimulate the absorption of new investors.

## **5. Conclusions – the activities improving absorption**

The research results indicate that the absorption failures of exogenous LD factors present a significant problem in the LDG of Polish small towns. It mainly refers to failures the characteristics of which make up the syndrome of ballast. In the light of these findings it seems indispensable to take up corrective actions. Therefore, their proposals constitute an implication of the identified absorption failures and, at the same time, the final, postulative part of the article. For a reader who is not Polish they can represent an inspiration in preventing analogical failures in other countries.

The potential corrective actions can be divided into the ones belonging to the local area of LDG and those appertaining to the supra-local governance of this development. Among the activities covered by the first area a permanent and multi-channel proliferation of knowledge about the absorption of exogenous LD factors in Polish local government circles should be included. It, however, does not refer to knowledge about its formal determinants, since it does reach them and remains strongly present in them. The gaps occur in terms of knowledge about the mechanisms for combining the acquired supra-local values with the local ones, thus the broadly understood economic, social and ecological knowledge and the transfer of this knowledge is most desirable. It refers, in particular, to acquiring factors, such as know-how, information, components of the extensively approached culture and obviously innovations. The theory, however, needs to go along with transparent case studies of the successful and only partly successful absorptions. The presented postulate should be perceived as a challenge for Polish local authorities, but also to the same extent for Polish science and supra-local public authorities. The problem of cooperation development between science and business is being discussed in modern Poland, however, the development of cooperation between science and public authorities of all levels receives much less attention. Secondly, the improvement of absorption processes could result from the changes in the legal status of decision-making and executive bodies of Polish local authorities. In case of the decision-

making body the changes could involve larger participation of councilors in the LDG, but also their responsibility for this governance. At the same time in case of the executive body the changes should cover its professionalization by resigning from the elected choice for the sake of a competition based employment by the council. It would accumulate knowledge and experience at this position, including absorption related ones.

In the area of supra-local governance of LD the corrections of the EU funds' distribution systems to Polish local self-governments are most desirable. Firstly, they refer to the corrections extending and making the requirements more realistic in terms of the effects to be achieved owing to the granted support. For example, defining a short minimal project duration is almost provoking for planning and executing the absorptions resulting in the syndrome of ephemeron. Secondly, the procedural changes are desirable and slightly transfer the emphasis from a formal-legal and financial assessment of projects and the opinion of steering committees and other similar bodies for the benefit of the substantive expert assessment. It is true not only for the so-called hard projects, where large amounts are usually at stake, but also the so-called soft projects in which the final recipients of the absorbed, intangible exogenous factors (e.g. know-how) are the entities and persons having no knowledge about them and, hence, far from comprehending their significance. Thirdly, it is necessary to increase the subjectivity of municipal authorities, including their freedom in applying for aid funds and in spending them. Such changes in the EU funds' distribution should result in their larger support for the realization of the locally defined LD objectives and to a lesser extent force the supra-locally defined goals. They should also make possible or even necessary flexible reacting to new determinants, which comes up in the course of project implementation instead of an obligation or encouragement for the strict execution of its first draft. It is also highly advisable to develop support sub-systems for the potential beneficiaries based on knowledge connected with the goals of a particular program and the potential projects applying to it but counting specificity of such beneficiaries. Furthermore, it is worth expanding the role of public-private and public-social partnerships with the participation of municipalities in acquiring aid funds. Both of these partnerships increase the probability of avoiding the situations in which the absorption results are different than intended ones. Additionally, adequate programs aimed at increasing the opportunities of Polish small towns are necessary in absorbing other than money, exogenous development factors, created in large towns which were assigned the role of its regional centers by Polish supra-local development policy. It mainly refers to these small towns which are most distant, in terms of space or transport, from these centers. The polarization-diffusion model adopted in Polish supra-local development policy assumes that small towns shall be absorbing them from these centers. Moreover, they will be playing the role of relays in the intra-regional, rural dispersion of these values.

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