

THE NEW ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION OF POLAND

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The problems of the administrative territorial division of the country constitute a very important element of the wider policy and strategy of the development of the state and the society. The various choices are conditioned by multiple factors, such as:

- (1) the *natural environment* (broadly defined as mountainous areas, large rivers, boggy areas, or lakes), which may hinder accessibility to centres of public administration, while lowlands through which few large rivers flow, facilitate such access;
- (2) *geopolitical circumstances* – the necessity of formation of administrative units along the state borders;
- (3) *economic factors*, e.g. the zones of extraction of definitive raw materials or the large industrial regions force the establishment of smaller spatial units in view of high population concentration, while agricultural areas, where population density is low, may be broken down into larger territorial units;
- (4) *ethnic factors*, which can generate motivations to various solutions – the “local” population constituting the majority over a given territory would tend to create the homogeneous units, while the central government would as a rule display quite contrary tendencies;
- (5) the *historically shaped settlement and transport systems* – this factor playing an important role in view of the large “inertia” of the fixed assets and the respective infrastructure, related to the very high costs of establishing new settlement and transport infrastructure.

The factors listed above have to a large extent an *objective* nature, but one must be aware that they are ultimately not decisive for the final decisions concerning the administrative division. In my opinion, based upon the experience of Poland, but also from other countries, the decisive factors are the *political* factors. These political factors have, of course, to somehow account for the objective ones – i.e. for such as, e.g. transport accessibility, social and technical infrastructure available within the potential centres of public administration, as well as the attitudes of the population. For a broader consideration of this subject, see the relevant reports of the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization¹ and of the Committee for the Spatial Development of the Country², Polish Academy of Sciences.

THE FORMS OF ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION

After these introductory remarks one should add yet that the administrative division has as a rule a hierarchical character, allowing for the *transmission of the actions of the central administration downwards*. Naturally, depending upon the systemic forms of the state, and the stages of development of the civil society, this hierarchy can be more or less centralised, that is, the range of actions of the units of administrative division of the lower level may secure for them a bigger or lesser margin of independence in the functioning of public administration, the subject to which we will later return. The present tendency of the majority of societies in Europe is aimed at limiting the omnipotence of the state, especially at the lower levels of the administrative division, and at ensuring the significant increase of responsibility of the local societies – and partly also the regional ones – for the economy and for the socio-economic development of these units.

Thus, we are currently dealing as a rule with the following situation in the management of space of a given country. We have *public administration* which is divided into:

- (1) governmental administration (central and territorial), responsible for the general management of the country and the supervision of the regional and local administration;
- (2) self-governmental administration, as a rule responsible for the local administration and partly also for regional administration (at the latter level the mixed forms prevail).

In terms of the hierarchy of the administrative division we also have a certain choice of designs. There are, in principle, two systems of the division of the country's space: the *three-tier and two-tier* ones. The differences between them are as follows:

- (1) The three-tier division is usually characterised by:
 - division into large regions or provinces, known in Poland as voivodships;
 - subdivision into smaller units, bearing various country-specific names (county, *Kreis*, district or – in Poland – *powiat*);
 - local units, generally being referred to as communes, e.g. *gmina* in Poland, *Gemeinde* in Germany.
- (2) The two-tier division is characterised by:
 - division into a much bigger number of provinces (in Poland: voivodships);
 - local units equivalent to communes (*gmina*).

Thus we can see that in the second case there is no intermediate level, the *powiat*, located between a medium-sized province (voivodship) and the local unit (commune).

The supporters of the two-tier division say that, owing to the development of transport and communication, the *intermediate link* – *powiat* or county – which was indispensable in the era of horse-driven transport, has become a relic. They argue that emphasis should instead be placed on the development of the local self-governments at the level of communes, through, in particular, an increase of the potential of these

units by merging of communes (decrease of their number) and by formation of the communal associations (this taking place, for instance, in Sweden). I continue to support this concept.

The supporters of the three-tier division maintain that the growing role of the regional development planning and formation of the strategies of regional development requires the existence of larger provinces: regions, since only such units can fulfil these tasks. The leading example quote here is constituted by Germany³.

As we know, starting on January 1, 1999, the two-tier division will be replaced in Poland by the three-tier one. In both types of division a very important role is played by the *local self-government* functioning at the level of the commune-type unit (*gmina*), and in the three-tier system also at the level of the intermediate link of *powiat* (*Kreis*, county or district).

THE ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION OF POLAND

Until 1939, then a country of 35 million inhabitants and surface area of some 390,000 km², Poland had used the three-tier system of spatial division. There were 17 voivodships, including one urban voivodship, i.e. the capital city of Warsaw, 264 *powiat*, including 23 urban *powiat* separated from the respective surrounding ones (the so-called town *powiat*), and 3,195 *gmina*⁴. The self-governmental bodies were well developed at the levels of communes and towns. The decisive role in the *powiat* was played by the officer of the state administration, the *starost*. The voivodships, with the exception of the Silesian voivodship, had a very limited scope of self-governmental competence. The voivodships were headed by a high official of the state administration – the voivod (province governor).

After 1945, after the westwards shift of the boundaries of Poland, the necessity arose of establishing a new organisation of Polish space. Until 1950 there were 14 voivodships and 300 *powiat*. The commune, the *gmina* still constituted the lowest level unit. In 1950, when Poland had 312 *powiat*, 17 territorial voivodships were established, along with 5 urban voivodships encompassing the 5 largest towns (Warsaw, Łódź, Cracow, Wrocław and Poznań).

Thus until 1975 we had had 22 voivodships (including 5 urban voivodships), some 300 *powiat* (with more than 60 urban *powiat*), and more than 2,000 *gmina*. Let us add here that for the purposes of regional planning the urban voivodships were included in the respective territorial provinces. Therefore regional planning was conducted for 17 regions. There was a similar situation with the urban *powiat*, which were in planning terms included in the respective territorial *powiat*. Formally, participation of the population in public administration was very high, as a result of the introduction of the socialist system of the National Councils, starting at the level of the voivodship, through *powiat*, down to the communes, this system linking the territorial state administration with the self-governmental one, by means of the so-called uniform system of public administration.

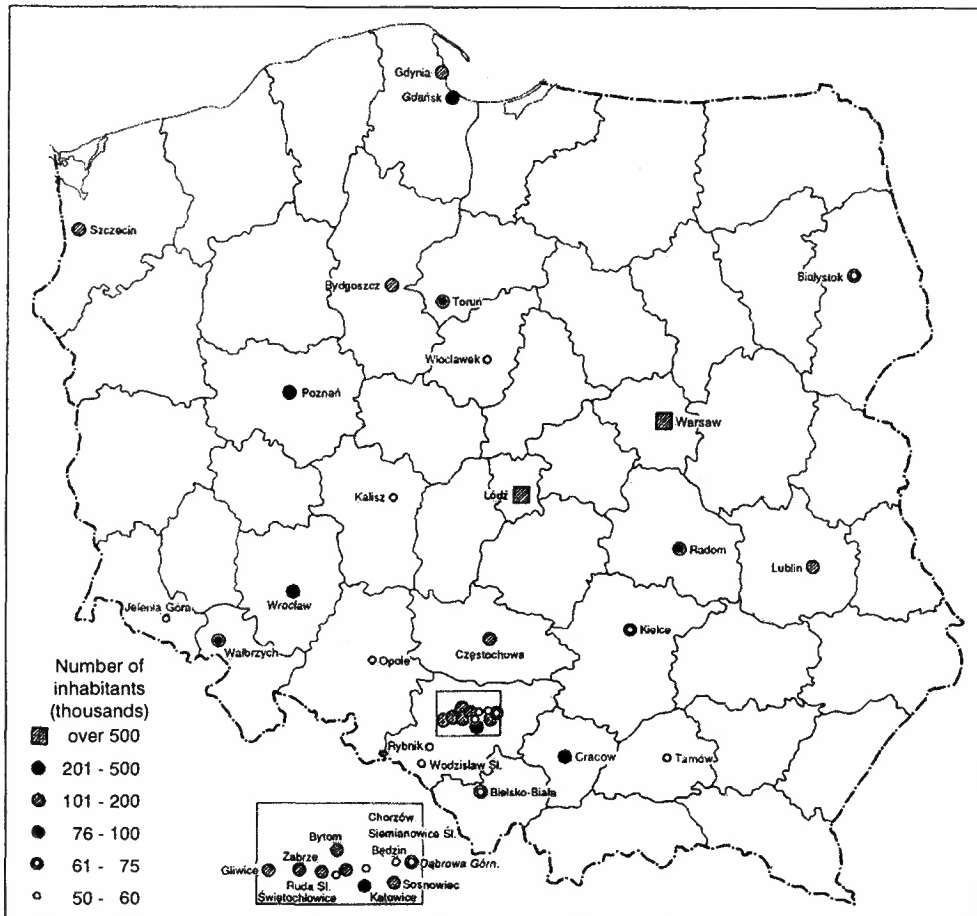
As it is well known, however, this was only a paper democracy, the “people’s democracy”, within which all actual decisions were taken at all levels (provincial, county and communal) by the respective party committees of the PUWP (Polish United Workers’ Party), strictly subordinated to the Central Committee of PUWP in Warsaw.

A certain novelty was introduced with the administrative reform of 1975, which introduced the two-tier system, eliminating the intermediate level of the *powiat*, and dividing up the country into 49 medium-sized voivodships, and playing an important role in the local management of the sub-communal units, whilst still under the supervision of the party officers. This reform has certainly allowed for relatively fast development of the smaller and medium-sized towns, those which became the capitals of new voivodships. In this manner Polish provincial areas obtained an essential stimulus, also in terms of investments, including expansion and construction of the voivodship hospitals, research centres, universities, cultural institutions, and mass transport, the stimulus which lasted for more than twenty years. Note that among the “new” voivodship capitals there were as many as 11, whose population did not exceed 40,000. Together, there were 16 with population below 50,000 and only 5 in which more than 100,000 people lived.

In 1996 there were only 4 capitals of the “new” voivodships with less than 50,000 inhabitants, and as many as 13 of them exceeded 100,000 inhabitants. This is proof of the essential significance of the role played by the administrative division introduced in 1975 for the development of Polish provincial areas⁵. (Figures 1, 2) Naturally, the development of these smaller voivodship centres constrained to a degree the development possibilities of the previous 17 voivodship capitals, but in my opinion this was certainly advantageous for the Polish provincial areas. One should add that the towns which had been previously the county seats had in principle not lost their role of local – and even often supralocal – centres, since in 270 of them the administrative districts were located.

Post-1990, during the phase of socio-economic transformation, the wave of a lively discussion on the subject of administrative division of Poland returned. The strongest supporters of the re-establishment of the three-tier system, composed of the large provinces, corresponding to regions, *powiat* and communes (*gmina*), were divided between two political groups. The first of these two groups were the post-communists of the SLD, who had, and still have, the hope of strengthening their party structures at the *powiat* level and the liberals, the present Union of Freedom (UW), who shared similar views. The whole discussion was taking place, of course, under the banner of the increased role of territorial self-government and the local societies. Liberals were also putting forward the idea of dividing Poland into 8-12 large regions, supposedly facilitating our entry into the European Union. A clear opposition to the concepts of the three-tier division was represented by only one significant political force, the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), arguing that this would bring the decline of the provincial centres. I personally agreed with this view. The largest political power, Solidarity, represented through the AWS electoral block, remained initially neutral in this respect.

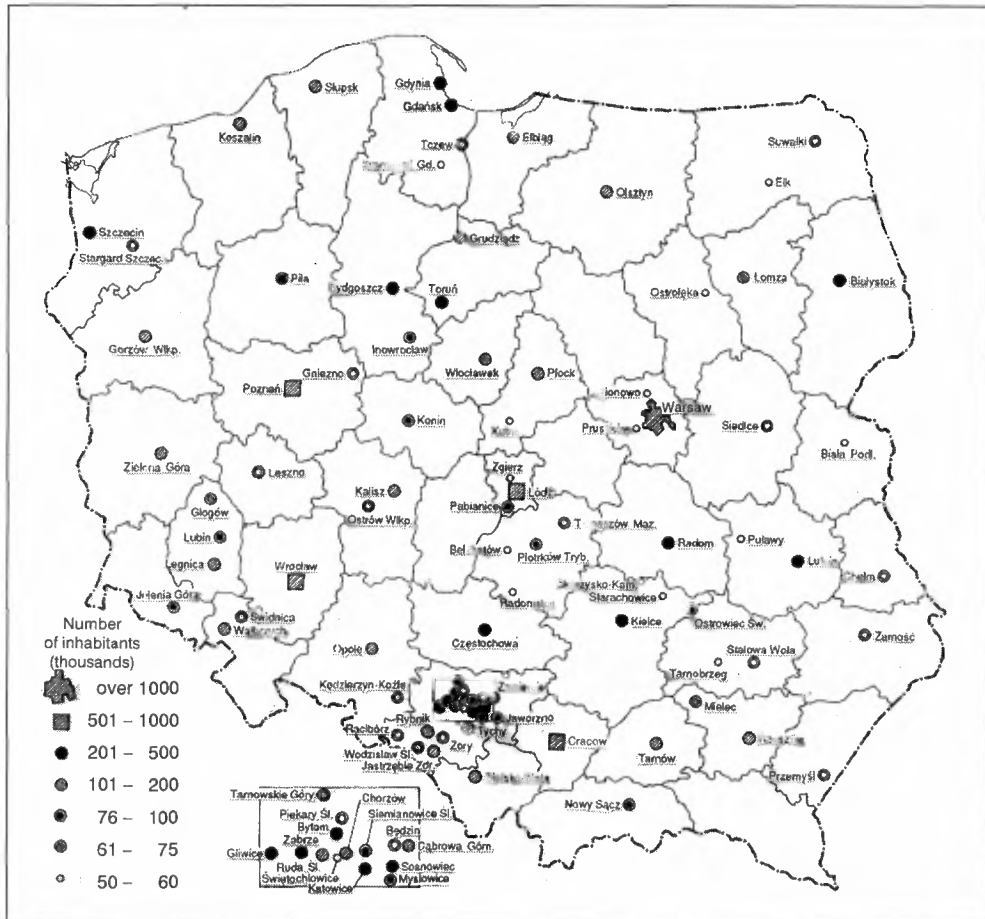
Figure 1
Cities with over 50 000 inhabitants, 1950



After the parliamentary elections of 1997 the governing coalition formed out of the AWS and UW, the latter convincing the AWS of the need to create the new administrative division into 12 regions and approximately 300 counties, with some 70 urban counties, preserving in principle the number of communes. In view of the volume limitations of this paper I will not report in detail the discussions and debates among the scientists and MPs. I will simply note that the reports prepared for the Government presented three versions of the territorial division, namely:

- (1) the retrospective, with 25 voivodships,
- (2) the conservative, with 17 voivodships,
- (3) the prospective, with 12 voivodships.

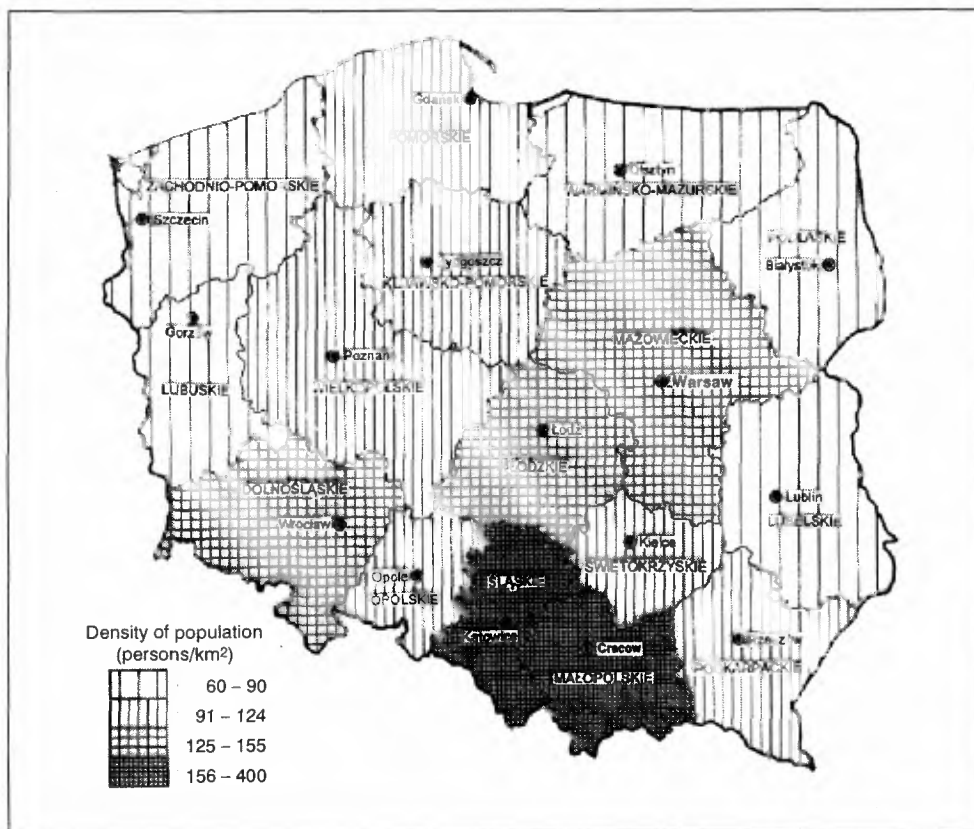
Figure 2
 Cities with over 50 000 inhabitants, 1995



Finally, due to a strange kind of agreement and a compromise between the AWS, UW and SLD, the Parliament passed the Act of July 24, 1998, on the introduction of the principle of three-tier territorial division of the state. This law stipulated the establishment of 16 voivodships as of January 1, 1999⁶. (Figure 3)

According to the new law, the units of the essential three-tier territorial division of the state are constituted by *gmina* (communes), *powiat* (counties) and voivodships (provinces). Article 7 of the Act binds the Diet, the Senate and the Council of Ministers to accomplish an assessment of the new essential territorial division of the state by December 31, 2000. An amendment of the essential territorial division of the state can be made on the basis of results of this assessment.

Figure 3
The average density of population in the new voivodships, 1998
(The average for Poland is 124 persons/km²)



The law of July 24, 1998 had been preceded by the laws on voivodship self-government; of June 5, 1998, on governmental administration in the voivodships, and on *powiat* self-government, both also of June 5, 19987. On the basis of this latter law on *powiat* self-government, the Council of Ministers passed a by-law concerning the establishment of *powiat* on August 7, 19988.

On January 1, 1999, 308 counties (*powiat*) were established (paradoxically, Warsaw is also a landed county), along with 65 towns as urban counties. In line with the law on *powiat* self-government of June 5, 1998, the urban counties are the towns of more than 100,000 inhabitants and towns which ceased to be voivodship capitals on December 31, 1998. However, if in the latter case the City Council of a given town did not want it to become a separate urban county, the Council of Ministers could make an exception (there are two such cases: the town of Sieradz in the present Łódź voivodship, and Piła in the Wielkopolska voivodship).

Thus the argument about the administrative division of Poland is now over. On the other hand, with the local elections in the autumn of 1998, and the start of functioning of the new units, a new era of public activity has begun. Namely, on the much lower levels of the administrative division, i.e. in all *gmina* and *powiat* virtually all of the public administration was given over to the elected, local self-governmental authority. The representative of the governmental administration – the voivod – is in fact only responsible for the legal supervision. Thus at the level of voivodships the authority is split between:

- (1) the *territorial* governmental administration, represented by the voivod (the province governor) and his office; the voivod is nominated and removed by the Prime Minister and so the subordination to the central administration is preserved, this administration having the influence ensured on the shaping of regional policy in accordance with the concepts of the state and the legal regulation in force;
- (2) the *self-governmental* administration, established by the body elected through voting, i.e. the self-governmental diet. The diet nominates the voivodship board as the executive power, and this board is presided over by the voivodship marshal. In accordance with Article 11 of the Act on Voivodship Self-government of June 5, 1998, the provincial self-government will define the strategy and the policy of voivodship development. The strategy of province development is being implemented through provincial programmes.

There are, naturally, a number of more detailed tasks, but all of them are in fact contained in the above three goals and task categories. Hence, the voivodship self-government was really granted very broad competence, and the role of the voivod as the representative of the central authority, as well as the role of the self-governmental executive body, presided by the marshal, will have to take the ultimate shape in the course of practice. This is an extremely important issue, since elaboration of the strategy of development of a voivodship has on the one hand to account for the needs of a given area and be related to exercise of pressure on the central authorities but on the other hand it must involve an effort of adjustment to the concept of development of the state as a whole. It is highly probable that numerous areas of conflict will arise here, which will most likely have to be resolved within the Parliament (the Diet and the Senate of the Republic of Poland).

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW VOIVODSHIPS

As already mentioned, the new territorial administrative division of Poland, in force since January 1, 1999, is composed of 16 voivodships, 308 landed *powiat* and 65 urban *powiat*⁹. We will only quote the fundamental information and data concerning the provinces. The respective division is illustrated by *Figure 3*. *Table 1* lists the names of voivodships, their areas, populations, population densities and capitals. In accordance

Table 1
Basic information on the new voivodships, 1998

No.	Name of province	Area (km ²)	Population (thousands)	Population density (persons/km ²)	Name and population number of provincial capital (thousands)
1.	Dolnośląskie	19 946	2 984	150	Wrocław – 639
2.	Kujawsko-Pomorskie	17 970	2 098	117	Bydgoszcz – 386
3.	Lubelskie	25 113	2 242	89	Lublin – 356
4.	Lubuskie	13 984	1 020	73	Gorzów – 126
5.	Łódzkie	18 219	2 673	147	Łódź – 812
6.	Małopolskie	15 144	3 207	212	Cracow – 741
7.	Mazowieckie	35 597	5 065	142	Warsaw – 1 625
8.	Opolskie	9 412	1 092	116	Opole – 130
9.	Podkarpackie	17 926	2 117	118	Rzeszów – 161
10.	Podlaskie	20 180	1 224	61	Białystok – 283
11.	Pomorskie	18 293	2 179	119	Gdańsk – 461
12.	Śląskie	12 294	4 894	398	Katowice – 349
13.	Świętokrzyskie	11 672	1 328	114	Kielce – 213
14.	Warmińsko-Mazurskie	24 203	1 460	60	Olsztyn – 170
15.	Wielkopolskie	29 826	3 345	112	Poznań – 580
16.	Zachodnio-Pomorskie	22 902	1 730	76	Szczecin – 419

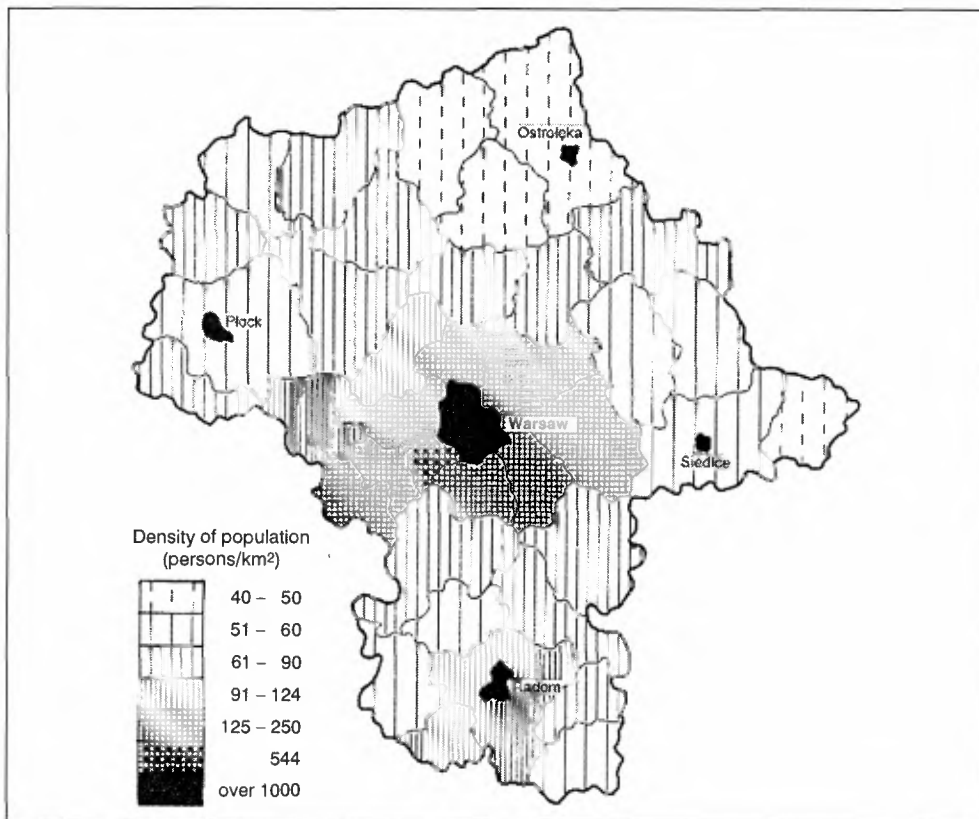
with the Act of July 24, 1998¹⁰ voivodships are listed alphabetically. Let us try, however, to carry out a certain quantitative analysis of the set, and compare with the previous division into the 49 voivodships.

Under the previous system of division the average area of a voivodship was 6,380 km², and the average population, 790,000. The ratio of areas of the largest voivodship (Olsztyn: 12,327 km²) to the smallest one (Łódź: 1,524 km²) was 8:1. The ratio of the extreme population numbers in the voivodships (Katowice: 3,907,000 to Chełm: 249,000 persons) was 16:1. A similarly high differentiation existed in terms of population density (ranging from 729 persons/km² in Łódź province down to 49 persons/km² in Suwałki voivodship, i.e. 15:1.)

Currently, owing to a significant decrease in the number of voivodships this differentiation flattened out. Thus the largest province, Mazovia, has an area of 35,597 km² (comparable to a small European country), whilst the smallest province, Opole, is only 9,412 km². The ratio of the extremes has thus dwindled to 3.8:1. The Mazovian province is also the largest in terms of population: 5,065,000 inhabitants, while the lowest population figure is in the Lubusza province: 1,020,000. Here the ratio is 5:1.

There was a similar decrease in disproportion in population density. The maximum is attained in Silesia voivodship: 398 persons/km², while the minimum is in Warmia-Mazuria province with 60 persons/km². These data, however, are somewhat misleading when observed on the scale of voivodships. (Let us not forget that the average for the whole country is 124 persons/km².) An example of this situation is provided by the largest, Mazovian province, in which the average population density is about 142 per-

Figure 4
 The average density of population in the 'powiat' of the Mazovian voivodship, 1998
 (The average for the voivodship is 142 persons/km²)



sons/km², owing to the concentration of more than 2 million people in the Warsaw agglomeration. It is only the data on the *powiat* and *gmina* scale that show the true differentiation in the distribution of population. Thus in this particular province, out of 38 *powiat* there are as many as 24 with population density below 90 person/km², and in 12 of them this density is below 60 persons/km². (Figure 4) These data show the degree of difficulty in presenting a uniform regional policy in, for instance, this voivodship.

It is also interesting to examine the differentiation of the magnitudes of provincial capitals. From the formal point of view the biggest is the capital of the Mazovian province, being simultaneously the capital of Poland, Warsaw, with 1,625,000 inhabitants. Subsequently there is a group of four provincial capitals with populations between 500,000 and 1 million, namely Poznań: 580,000; Wrocław: 639,000; Cracow: 741,000 and Łódź: 812,000. There are five further provincial capitals with population

numbers between 300-500,000. This group is composed of Katowice: 349,000; Lublin: 356,000; Bydgoszcz: 386,000; Szczecin: 419,000 and Gdańsk: 461,000 inhabitants. (One should add that Katowice constitutes the centre of the Upper Silesian agglomeration, with a population of more than 2 million, while Gdańsk is the centre of the so-called Tri-City: Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot. This latter agglomeration is inhabited by approximately 800-900,000 people.)

The two subsequent groups of voivodship capitals contain relatively smaller towns. Thus there are two towns between 200-300,000 inhabitants (Kielce: 213,000 and Białystok: 283,000), and four provincial capitals of 100-200,000 inhabitants (Gorzów: 126,000; Opole: 130,000; Rzeszów: 161,000; Olsztyn: 170,000). Thus 6 out of 16 voivodship capitals are inhabited by 100-300,000 persons.

The concept of the policy of spatial development of the country 'Poland 2000+' assumed that Warsaw would constitute a true metropolitan area, comparable on a European scale with Vienna, Prague and Budapest; while seven towns, now the capitals of the new voivodships, namely Szczecin, Wrocław, Katowice, Cracow, Łódź, Lublin and Gdańsk should become the "Europoles", the urban centres of European significance¹¹. In this manner a clear underdevelopment of the so-called Eastern Wall of Poland, the area stretching along the border with Russia, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, became visible, insofar as only one potential "Europole" – Lublin – is envisaged within this area. This is not justified, and I have expressed this opinion in numerous discussions, since from the point of view of the strategy of the country's development at least one more such centre should be located within the "Eastern Wall", namely Białystok, now also a voivodship capital.

NOTES

- ¹ STASIAK, A. (ed.), (1984) *Podział administracyjny kraju. Projekty, opinie, studia, materiały, dyskusja* (The administrative division of the country. Designs, opinions, studies, discussion), *Biuletyn IGiPZ PAN*, 126, 128, (Warsaw)
- ² POTRYKOWSKI, M. – STASIAK, A. (1996) 'Analiza głównych węzłów osadniczych Polski...' (Analysis of the primary settlement nodes of Poland...), *Biuletyn KPZK PAN*, 173, (Warsaw)
- ³ *Wariantowe koncepcje podziału terytorialnego kraju na województwa. Wersja I* (Alternative concepts of the territorial division of the country into voivodships. Version I), *Pełnomocnik Warsaw, Rządu d/s reformy administracji, 1993* (The main executor was prof. Elżbieta Wysocka and her team)
- ⁴ *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny 1939* (Small Statistical Yearbook 1939), (Warsaw, GUS)
- ⁵ STASIAK, A. (1997) 'Przestrzenne aspekty podziału administracyjnego kraju' (Spatial aspects of the administrative division of the country), In: *Opinie i materiały ekspertów dotyczące administracyjnego (terytorialnego) podziału kraju*, Warsaw, 1997 (The expert team of the Speaker of the Polish Senate, Adam Struzik)
- ⁶ *Dziennik Ustaw* (The Law Journal), 96/1998
- ⁷ *Dziennik Ustaw* (The Law Journal), 91/1998
- ⁸ *Dziennik Ustaw* (The Law Journal), 103/1998

- ⁹ *Ustrój samorządu terytorialnego i administracyjnego po reformie* (The system of the territorial and administrative self-government after the reform), Warsaw, 1998 (Introduction by prof. Z. Niewiadomski)
- ¹⁰ *Dziennik Ustaw* (The Law Journal), 96/1998
- ¹¹ *Polska 2000+. Koncepcja polityki przestrzennego zagospodarowania kraju* (Poland 2000+. The concept of the policy of spatial development of the country), (Warsaw, Rządowe Centrum Studiów Strategicznych, August 1997)