

## THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF THE GMINA IN TOURISM POLICY IN POLAND

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**Abstract.** *The aim of the article is to indicate the role and importance of the gmina as a special institution of the Polish tourism system in shaping the local tourism policy of the area. The article presents the concept and objectives of tourism policy, and describes the various entities of tourism policy in Poland and their tasks. Against this background, the article captures the gmina's tasks in the sphere of tourism together with the instruments of tourism policy that are at its disposal. The article uses a descriptive and qualitative analysis method that allowed to identify the role of the gmina in the tourism system in Poland. The analysis includes literature in the field of economic sciences, based additionally on legal acts related to the discussed issue. As an institution of the tourism system, the gmina has the task of satisfying the needs of the local community and stimulating local development, thanks to which it plays an important role in shaping the local tourism policy. The gmina has a wide range of activities on the local tourist economy. It should be emphasized that this is not an individual task of the gmina, although there is no doubt that it has a wide range of opportunities to influence this sphere of social and economic life. Tourism policy should be undertaken and implemented in cooperation with private sector entities conducting tourist activity, but also entities from outside the tourism industry (so-called paratourism entities) and their organizations and associations. Tourism policy should also be implemented together with other local government units, the area of which is covered by an initiative in the field of tourism development, including also higher-level entities (such as poviats and voivodships), as well as with local and regional tourist organizations and other non-governmental organizations.*

**Key words:** *gmina, tourism policy entities, tourism policy instruments*

### Introduction

The aim of the article is to indicate the role and importance of the gmina<sup>1</sup> as a special institution of the Polish tourism system in shaping the local tourism policy of the area. The topic of the article, due to its nature, fits in with the relevant and current issues of local development, especially tourism policy, which should be implemented and systematically coordinated with local socio-economic policy and the higher-level tourism policy (regional, national, EU), in line with current trends in the tourist market and the preferences of domestic and foreign tourists. The article uses a descriptive and qualitative analysis method

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<sup>1</sup> A gmina is the lowest level of territorial self-government units in Poland.

that allowed to identify the role of the gmina in the tourism system in Poland. The analysis includes literature in the field of economic sciences, based additionally on legal acts related to the discussed issue. The gmina, as the basic unit of local government, also referred to as the self-government community and the territory it inhabits, is aimed at satisfying the collective needs of its inhabitants. When the purpose of the gmina is formulated in such a general way, one can assume that, like other entities, the gmina also aims at local development, which is one of the main goals of its activity. Tourism plays a diverse role in the socio-economic development of areas, which is jointly dependent on the nature of the environment, the policy of local authorities and decisions taken by entrepreneurs (present and future) in the tourism industry. With a properly conducted tourism policy, taking into account the real local opportunities and determinants of tourism development, tourism can become a pole of growth, stimulating the development of the area outside its centre in other fields of the local economy. Tourism can be a tool to diversify the local economy, thus contributing to its greater resistance to unfavourable trends in sectors of economy currently dominant in a given area. It can also provide a new stimulus for the development of these areas, when the previously dominant feature is no longer the driving force of development.

### **Tourism policy and its goals**

Bearing in mind the benefits of tourism development and its role in the socio-economic development of the area (Chudy-Hyski, 2009), it is advisable to have an impact on it, so that it is possible to maximize the beneficial external effects generated by tourism. In this respect, tourism policy plays a role, which enables direct influence of the state (actors of tourism policy) on the tourism economy.

Tourism policy covers the whole of activities regulating socio-economic processes in the tourism sector and undertaken for the development of tourism in various spheres of social, economic and political life. It consists in the conscious support and shaping of tourism by various types of organizations and institutions, including local self-government communities, influencing through their activity everything what is important for tourism (Gaworecki, 2000). Due to the multifaceted nature of tourism and its integration with many areas of the economy, tourism policy consists of social, environmental and economic policy, and the tourism policy itself should not be treated as a sectoral approach but as one comprehensively combining different areas of economic and social life. Tourism policy is also connected, inter alia, with the cultural and promotional policy of the given administrative unit.

Among the main goals of the tourism policy are:

- satisfying the tourist needs of the society,
- rational use of tourism assets, labour resources and capital in the sphere of tourist economy,
- shaping the optimal size and structure of tourist traffic,
- coordinating the development of tourism, taking into account its functions and connections with other spheres of social and economic life (Kurek, 2007),
- development of tourist and paratourist infrastructure,
- creating favourable legal and organizational conditions,
- stimulating entities on the tourist market for pro-efficiency actions,
- initiating the creation and development of tourist products,
- supporting business entities that create a tourist offer (Migdal, 2015).

### **The gmina among tourism policy entities in Poland**

Tourism policy is implemented by institutions distinguished at various levels: international, national, regional, local, hence it has a multilevel nature. Lower-level actors coordinate the guidelines of the tourism policy implemented in their area of operation with senior policy objectives. As a tourism policy entity, one can define the institution and organization of various levels in which responsibility of tourism matters lies. These entities should create a logically connected system, including the ways of their impact on the real sphere of processes taking place on the tourist market.

At the national level, the tourism policy is regulated by the state. Among the main institutions that affect the tourist economy, the following can be mentioned (Alejziak, 2013):

- state legislative bodies,
- central non-tourism state administration bodies (e.g. the Ministry of Finance, labour, communication, environmental protection, foreign affairs, domestic affairs),
- the national tourist administration (NTA) in the form of a minister competent for tourism,
- a national tourist organization (NTO) in the form of the Polish Tourist Organization,
- advisory bodies of state administration and tourist administration,
- tourist economic organizations,
- tourist social organizations.

In Poland, the minister responsible for tourism is the authority responsible for the sphere of tourism at the central level (as of 1 January 2018, it is the Minister of Sport and Tourism). It is the supreme organ of state administration,

and its main tasks in the discussed area include the shaping and implementation of the tourism policy, which includes, among others, matters related to the tourism development of the country and mechanisms regulating the tourist market. Within the Ministry of Tourism, there is the Tourism Department responsible for programming development and shaping the legal and economic mechanisms of tourism, setting directions and priorities, and supervising the implementation of tasks in the field of tourist promotion on the domestic and foreign market (see BIP – Ministerstwo Sportu i Turystyki, 2008).

The Department of Tourism in particular supervises the Polish Tourist Organization (Polska Organizacja Turystyczna – POT), which creates conditions for cooperation of government administration bodies, local government units and organizations associating entrepreneurs in the field of tourism, including economic and professional self-government, and associations operating in this field. The main tasks of the Polish Tourist Organization focus on the promotion of the country, the functioning of the tourist information system, as well as the issue of tourist infrastructure. It is an entity whose operation is associated with the cooperation of such institutions as local government units, regional and local tourist organizations and other organizations associating entrepreneurs in the field of tourism (Ustawa, 1999).

The Polish Tourist Organization together with regional and local tourist organizations (ROTs and LOTs) form a three-level organizational system oriented at supporting and promoting the development of tourism at its individual levels, according to the area in which individual institutions implement their activities. Regional and local tourist organizations operate on the basis of the provisions of the Act on the Polish Tourist Organization (Ustawa, 1999) and the Law on Associations (Ustawa, 1989). Regional and local tourist organizations are established in order to implement the tasks specified in the Act on the Polish Tourist Organization, including: tourist promotion of their area of activity, supporting the functioning and development of tourist information, initiating, giving opinions and supporting development plans and modernizing tourist infrastructure, as well as cooperation with the Polish Tourist Organization. Regional tourist organizations (ROTs) operate at the voivodship level and constitute a form of cooperation between local government units of various levels (especially regional level) and tourist operators, industry organizations and other tourist organizations, as well as local tourist organizations (LOTs) and institutions interested in developing the tourist economy (e.g. cultural institutions, sports organizations, universities educating personnel for the needs of tourism). Local tourist organizations create a space for cooperation between local government units (especially at the gmina and powiat level), local entities of the tourist industry and local non-governmental organizations, in particular dealing with broadly understood issues related to

tourism. The area of LOTs' activity is rather a tourist-attractive area, as it may go beyond the territory of the gmina or powiat and even may combine the initiatives of units from the area of more than one voivodship (Borzyszkowski, 2011). ROTs and LOTs play the role of coordination in relation to the activities of the various actors in shaping the tourist product of the area.

One can recognize that the role of public authorities is to shape the space and relations in it, so that it favours socio-economic development in a given area, as well as to control this development. It can be assumed that this role is similar in the sphere of tourism development. Among the public authorities, local government units play a special role in the development of tourism at the regional and local level. Being equipped with the appropriate instruments to shape the regional and local tourist economy, they are the actors of tourism policy. Their role manifests itself in particular in the provision of tourist information services, including, for example, the issue of marking tourist routes and tourist attractions, as well as matters related to the maintenance and development of the paratourist infrastructure.

Among the local government units, the gmina level plays a special role in affecting the tourism-related sphere, mainly due to its direct contact with the entities of a tourism economy, both the demand and supply side and the fact that tourism development depends directly on the resources available in given area. The gmina is the host of the area, being at the same time one of the entities of tourist supply, understood as an arrangement of interrelated entities and facilities distinguished on the basis of the functions fulfilled in the process of shaping the tourist product (Zmyślony, 2008). The significance of the gmina's influence on the development of tourism in its area is determined by such aspects as its connection with government administration bodies, investment opportunities resulting directly from financial resources and competences, using tourism as a stimulus for local development, as well as the scope of cooperation with economic self-governments and the range of available instruments for influencing local business entities.

The impact of the gmina on the tourism economy conducted in its area takes place through shaping the social, spatial and economic order, and consists in balancing the tourism sector with other sectors of the local economy in the use of local resources. Possibilities of the gmina's influence on the course of economic processes in tourism have statutory mandate within the catalogue of its own tasks and the possibility of conducting direct activities to meet the needs of the community, understood in two ways, both as the needs of residents in the sphere of tourist and recreation consumption in terms of shaping its implementation, and also as the needs resulting from taking up economic activity by the residents in the field of tourism services (Gordon, 2003).

### **Tasks of the gmina in the sphere of tourism development**

The tasks of the gmina in the sphere of tourism development can be presented in the form of two groups, i.e. tasks directly related to the tourism economy, aimed at stimulating tourist activity as well as tasks aimed mainly at meeting the needs of residents (various factors of quality of life also translate into perception and attractiveness of the given area, and thus the development of tourism), (Pawlusiński, 2005). Irrespective of this division in the literature, there are also other ones. For example, B. Mejer (2010) points out that the scope of tasks of the gmina in the sphere of tourism consists of three groups: 1) tasks activating the local tourist economy, directly related to the functioning of this sector; 2) general-purpose tasks affecting the functioning of the tourism economy; 3) obligatory tasks imposed on gminas by virtue of legal acts. Referring to the Act on Local Government (Ustawa, 1990), among the tasks of the gmina directly connected with the sphere of tourism, there are tasks in the field of:

- culture, including the gmina's libraries and other cultural institutions, and protection and care of monuments;
- physical culture and tourism, including recreational areas and sports equipment;
- promotion of the gmina.

Treating the gmina's area as a tourist product and having regard to the perception of this product by a tourist, this list of tasks can be extended to those fields of the gmina's functioning that support entrepreneurship and make the gmina's area more attractive also in economic terms. It would be necessary to mention here all the gmina's tasks related to shaping space (e.g. spatial order, nature protection), infrastructure (e.g. roads, network infrastructure devices), social services (e.g. collective transport, health care), (Bem et al., 2017), as well as cooperation with the private and non-government sectors. The total of actions taken in the above-mentioned fields, supported by incentives aimed at activating entrepreneurship and supporting already functioning entities, contributes to the improvement of tourism development conditions in a given area. In this way, tasks supporting local development can also be treated as tasks improving the conditions for tourism development. This approach is confirmed, among others, by W. Alejziak (1999). There is a significant feedback in this respect. On the one hand, tourism is treated as a factor of local development, and actions aimed at stimulating this sphere of the local economy stimulate the development of the area. On the other hand, stimulating local development (in general) creates the basis for improving the conditions for tourism development (development of the area through tourism means development of tourism through local development and vice versa).

The tasks of gminas in the sphere of tourism also result from the provisions of other acts. This applies in particular to spa gminas and those with the status of a spa protection area. Such gminas are obliged to carry out tasks related to the preservation of the healing functions of the spa, including (Ustawa, 2005):

- protection of natural conditions of a spa or spa protection area;
- creating conditions for the operation of facilities and devices for spa treatment and development of the gmina's infrastructure in order to meet the needs of people staying in the gmina for the purpose of spa treatment;
- creation and improvement of the gmina's infrastructure for spas or spa protection areas.

Also, the provisions of the Act on Tourist Services (Ustawa, 1997) impose specific duties on gminas that already perform their tourist function, for example in the field of grading campsites and keeping records of other accommodation operators.

### **Instruments of the gmina's tourism policy**

The gmina, as a unit of state administration in the area, has wide possibilities of influencing the course of economic processes in its area. It has the instruments to shape the course of local development processes as well as the development of tourism as one of its possible components. These instruments of local intervention are characterized by A. Sztanto (1999), who explains that they may be "any information, act or omission of the local authority, affecting the development of local business entities or the activities of institutions, bodies, tangible and intangible objects, as well as people interacting with these entities. The instruments also include actions and information necessary for the construction, implementation and verification of the correctness of the application of the above instruments." The quoted definition allows us to recognize any activity undertaken by the gmina aimed at shaping local development as an interventionist instrument. Taking into account the criterion of the form of influence, the cited author classifies the gmina's instruments of shaping development into nine basic groups, distinguishing instruments of:

- administrative coercion,
- cognitive,
- economic and market influence,
- direct impact,
- infrastructural stimulation,
- information,
- education,

- conceptual and organizational as well as other.

Instruments of the local tourism policy give the opportunity to create favourable conditions for functioning (conditions for the implementation of tourism activity understood on the one hand as tourist business, and on the other – as tourist consumption) of tourist business entities (producers, distributors, organizations, consumers). Their application consists in direct involvement of the gmina's authorities in improving the possibilities of performing the tourist function of a given area, as well as in undertaking initiatives related to the creation of a tourist product and having an impact on the service of tourist traffic. Generally speaking, the scope of the gmina's activity in the area of shaping space for the needs of tourism development consists in the gmina's investments (tourist and paratourist infrastructure) and coordination, initiation and further stimulation of activities undertaken by other entities for the development of tourism in a given area (Nawrot & Zmysłony, 2004). In the sphere of tourism development, the gmina may appear in a threefold form, i.e. (Vaughan et al., 1999):

- as the main entity responsible for planning the development of the tourism sector at the strategic level;
- as the manager of tourism and infrastructure resources that can initiate and regulate their creation and use;
- as the unit responsible for promoting the tourist reception area, which also includes local tourist operators.

The division of interventionist instruments in the local (and regional) tourism policy is carried out by A. Panasiuk (2009). He lists their exemplary types broken down into passive and active instruments such as: economic (passive: local taxes and fees; active: tax breaks, tourist investments, promotion of tourism, creation of a tourist offer, public-private partnership, shaping the tourism brand), administrative (passive: records of the accommodation base, records of travel agencies, procedures for applying for EU funds, elaboration of a tourism development strategy, a spatial development plan; active: implementation of tourism strategies), organizational (passive: creating a LOT and a ROT, active: active cooperation of entities forming a LOT and a ROT, creation of cluster structures, euroregional cooperation) and human resources (passive: issuing health entitlements; active: training of tourist staff for local governments and the tourism industry).

A different division of instruments of the gmina's impact on tourism is proposed by R. Pawlusiński (2005), who lists five groups of them: planning instruments (various types of strategic documents), financial (e.g. budget expenditure on tourism), organizational and legal instruments (regulatory), institutional instruments (establishing cooperation and creation of entities operating in the field of tourism development), information instruments



(creating and providing information on the area of the gmina, its resources and the status of development, including tourism).

Yet another division of instruments for shaping the tourist economy by the gmina's self-government authorities is presented by J. Majewska (2012). Accepting the nature of the impact and function as the criterion of classification, the author distinguished the following tools: planning, organizational, information, economic and financial, infrastructural stimulation and others. Planning instruments in the gmina are applied in the form of: the gmina's development strategy, spatial planning documents, long-term investment plans, multi-annual financial plans, local development plans, local revitalization programmes, promotion programmes of the gmina, action programmes to stimulate local entrepreneurship and others. Organizational instruments are related to the autonomy of the gmina in terms of the choice of organizational and legal form of the tasks, freedom to shape the internal organizational structure of the gmina's office depending on the needs, resources and conditions, the possibility of undertaking business and acting as a producer of goods (services) that tourists benefit from, as well as cooperation with various public, private and non-governmental entities in the field of local development and the development of the tourism economy. Information and promotion instruments regarding influence on development processes in tourism, which are related to the impact on the behaviour of other entities (e.g. enterprises of various industries, inhabitants) to encourage or discourage them from undertaking specific activities consistent with the gmina's preferences from the applied development directions. Information incentives can be transmitted via planning documents of the gmina, but also with the use of other channels of information about the characteristics of the area, in particular the state of its resources and preferred forms of their use, local enterprises, implemented investments, infrastructure development, including tourist infrastructure, local tourist products, a desired image of the gmina, etc. The use of information instruments directly in the sphere of tourism is reflected in the form of establishing tourist information points, marking trails and tourist attractions, etc. Promotion instruments of the gmina are used to influence entities within the gmina (residents, local entrepreneurs, social organizations) and outside (acquisition of external investors, new residents, tourists, institutions of various levels and various forms of ownership). Promotional activities are undertaken in order to shape, consolidate and disseminate the preferred image of the gmina's area as a place of particular attractiveness for tourists, entrepreneurs from the tourism industry, but also from other industries. The promotion of the gmina is at the same time the promotion of the tourist product of the area (given area as a tourist product). The economic and financial instruments of the gmina in the sphere of tourism development result from the scope of financial independence

owned by the gmina. They are associated with the freedom of public funds as part of the independently developed budget, with power to impose taxes and a certain freedom to shape elements of fiscal technique, income policy, access to capital markets and the possibilities of applying for external financing, as well as policy in the field of shaping prices and the scope of provided services and resources. Financial instruments are also reflected in the possibilities of granting public aid. Infrastructural stimulation instruments are related to the creation of convenient conditions for the functioning of the population, business activity and tourists.

### **Conclusions**

Impact on the tourism economy at the local level is not an individual task of the gmina as a territorial self-government unit, but nevertheless the gmina has great potential for influencing this sphere of social and economic life. Activities in the direction of tourism development should be undertaken and implemented in cooperation with private sector entities conducting tourist activity, but also entities from outside the tourism industry and their organizations and associations. It should also be implemented together with other local government units (also at higher levels), the area of which concerns the initiative in the field of tourism development, as well as with local and regional tourist organizations and other non-governmental organizations.

The gmina's undertaking of activities towards the development of tourism in a given area should be preceded by an analysis of its own capabilities and existing conditions that allow the identification of the local potential in the implementation of the tourist function, which involves both the creation and development of new tourist and pro-tourist businesses, consumption and meeting the daily needs of residents in face of increased competition for local resources due to tourism. The analysis should also take into account the financial possibilities of the gmina related to the implementation of objectives in the field of tourism development of the area, in terms of its own and external (repayable and non-returnable) sources of financing.

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