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Michal Kulesza

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**Symposium on Urban Sprawl:  
Local and Comparative Perspectives on  
Managing Atlanta's Growth**

**CITY OF WARSAW AND ITS SURROUNDINGS:  
MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS AND  
POLITICAL QUARRELS\***

Michal Kulesza<sup>†</sup>

**INTRODUCTION**

I was invited to this Symposium in Atlanta to discuss Polish administration and Warsaw urban sprawl and to provide an international comparative perspective. I will discuss the case of the economic boom in Warsaw, institutional and political problems connected with Warsaw administration, land use planning, and development control. In that respect I will address the impact of politics upon the organization of public management in Poland. I would like also to show you some right and wrong examples of such an impact.

**I. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN POLAND**

Let me start by telling you a few words about public administration in Poland because I suppose you have had rather limited opportunity to obtain considerable information about it.

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\* This essay is an edited transcript of Mr. Kulesza's remarks at a symposium on urban sprawl, co-sponsored by the Georgia State University Law Review and the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, on February 1, 2001. The transcript has been modified to reflect a print rather than an oral presentation.

† Michal Kulesza is a Professor at the University of Warsaw and Head of the Public Administration Department. He has published over 150 works about administrative law and public administration, including the basic textbook for the university's courses in public administration. From 1992 to 1994, Mr. Kulesza was Under-Secretary of State in the cabinet of Mrs. Suchocka responsible for public administration reform in Poland. From 1997 to 1999, he served as Secretary of State in the cabinet of Mr. Jerzy Buzek and Government Plenipotentiary for the Systemic Reform of the State, and Mr. Kulesza was responsible for the second stage of public administration reform in Poland.

Poland, as you know, is a central European country with a population of almost 40 million inhabitants. It is a unitary state with the central government in Warsaw. Polish administration was highly centralized during the communist period from 1945 to the end of the 1980s. Under communist rule, the Polish economy was nationalized and centrally planned and steered.

After 1989, there have been significant changes in the above respects. Democratic order with political freedoms and new parties enabled a new democratic government and decentralized local administration. In addition, a market economy was successfully introduced. Decentralization has been the main issue of the transformation of Polish state and public management. Reforms helped to transfer and distribute powers among three main segments of new Polish administration: local governments, regional governments, and a central government.

#### *A. The Structure of Polish Local Government*

Poland has two levels (tiers) of local authority. The first level consists of almost 2500 urban and rural communities (municipalities) called *gminas*. There are towns (approximately 300), rural *gminas* (approximately 1700), and townships consolidated with rural environments (approximately 500).

*Gminas* are of diverse size. The smallest have a population of only a few hundred people, while the largest, the city of Central Warsaw has one million inhabitants. The rural *gminas* have an average population of 7000 inhabitants, and there are only twenty-eight rural *gminas* with populations less than 2500. Such an average size of *gmina* allows constituting it as a basic level of local government with general responsibility for meeting the collective needs of a self-governing community.

Apart from *gminas*, there is also second level of local government: counties (*poviats*). Giving you only an idea about the scale, the average *poviat* has statistically a population of about 85,000 people living in eight *gminas* (seven rural and one urban). There are approximately 300 *poviats* in Poland. In addition, Poland's sixty-five biggest towns (urban *gminas*) are entrusted with the rights of a *poviat*. The city of Warsaw has its special organization.

Under the Polish Constitution, local governments are responsible to the citizens primarily for meeting the collective needs of a self-governing community. Local governments

provide public services in various fields and manage public property and administrations. For example, local governments provide schools, hospitals and medical care, roads and technical infrastructure, welfare benefits, low-income housing, unemployment benefits, cultural institutions, land use planning, public transportation, consumer protection, etc. They are also responsible for public control in various areas of local administration: communication, planning and construction licenses, geodesy and land records, and public order and collective security (sanitary administration, veterinary inspection, police, fire department).

### *B. Regional Authorities and Central Government*

Regional governments, the second segment of public administration in Poland, are also a new issue in our administration. There are sixteen regions: we say in Polish "województwo" (voivodship). The four smallest regions have about one million inhabitants each, and the two biggest have populations of five million. One of these two is the region of Masovia with its center in Warsaw, which is both the capital city of this region and the capital of Poland.

Regional government is elected by the regional community. It is responsible primarily for regional policies and creating competitive conditions for economic development in the area. Regional authorities are responsible for collaborating with the local governments, neighboring regions, and the central government to solve problems in the region.

Central government is of course responsible for tasks connected with general public interests and policies.

### *C. Public Finance in Poland*

From the financial point of view, it is perhaps interesting that all of the public money in Poland could be schematically described as belonging to one of four main (and more or less equal) areas of public expenditures. The first one is the general state budget, which covers the expenditures of the central government and its administration. The second main area of public expenditure consists of the local and regional budgets. Their revenues come from taxes, fees, state transfers and grants, and property incomes.

The third part of the public finance system is created by various public funds with special destinations. In this set of public funds, the Labor Fund and the Environmental Fund are the most important. The Labor Fund serves to create new workplaces and covers unemployment benefits; this fund is based upon payments of employees and employers. The Environmental Fund is based upon environmental fees and fines paid by industry, and it is designed for capital investments in the area of environmental protection and water management projects as well as environmental education. A major part of those (and other) funds is used under the control of local and regional governments. The fourth area of Polish public finance consists of two large special insurance funds: the Social Security Fund and the Regional Public Health Funds. These are funded by a separate fee paid by all taxpayers. They cover retirement and disability pensions as well as medical services. Regional Public Health Funds function under the regional governments' political control.

## II. WARSAW

Now let me say a few words about the city of Warsaw, which is located in central Poland in the Masovia region. As mentioned above, Warsaw is both the capital city of the Republic of Poland and of the Masovia region. Warsaw is an urban conglomeration with an overall size similar to Atlanta. There are around 2.7 million inhabitants in the whole metropolitan area.

Warsaw as the capital city of Poland does not have any special political status. But it does have a special administrative organization. Warsaw is comprised of eleven local governments. The city of Central Warsaw is the urban core with a population of one million. This government is surrounded by ten Warsaw local governments, which together have a population of 700,000 inhabitants. The rest of Warsaw's 2.7 million people live outside of the town in the surrounding *poviats*.

Such an administrative organization of Warsaw was created in 1994. Before this reorganization, Warsaw was a unified city government with eight city districts. Creation of the new structure with eleven autonomous local governments was a political and managerial response to the growing urbanization process and its related problems. Centralization tendencies

became more and more visible since the late 1950s when the city of Warsaw grew and took over the neighboring administrative units.

### *A. A Brief History of Warsaw Government*

From the American point of view, the period between 1945 and 1989 was a strange time of central planning and a communist economy. Results, however, were disappointing. Instead of solving urban problems, central planing drove Polish towns into atrophy, broken social life, and large sections of poorly-planned housing projects. Warsaw was not an exception to that rule. New housing districts with a total lack of social functions and infrastructure were neighbored by industrial areas without proper industrial organization or proper transfer facilities.

In 1990 new government of the city of Warsaw, democratically elected for the first time after fifty years of communist rule, started to solve urban problems. Dysfunctional organization of the town created strong obstacles. The main changes were introduced in the downtown district, but the peripheries became more and more neglected. Outer housing districts were left with their problems—a lack of social infrastructure, substandard public transportation, etc. This created very strong negative social tensions and even created conditions for increased crime. Furthermore, the town's public income from industry (corporate income tax) was reinvested in other areas, mainly in downtown. Peripheral industrial and store districts were then developed more and more chaotically and were left to themselves.

### *B. Political Reorganization*

In response to these problems, in 1994, the Parliament of Poland decided to reorganize Warsaw into a large central government (city of Central Warsaw) and the surrounding ten local governments. The main challenge was revitalization of the whole urban system with special emphasis on the outskirts. The boundaries of the city of Central Warsaw were reduced to the pre-war (Second World War) administrative area of Warsaw with one million inhabitants. That reduction allowed a separate local government for the core urban area of Warsaw, with the pre-war city development and infrastructure, which was very different

from the outer areas that were attached to the town of Warsaw in the 1950s and 1960s. These outer areas of Warsaw, with approximately 700,000 inhabitants, were divided into ten new, independent local governments. Among them, the smallest *gminas* are less than 30,000 people, and the biggest have populations of about 150,000.

To reiterate, the goal of reorganizing the Warsaw periphery was to reduce social apathy and to revitalize deteriorated social relations. The idea was to create, almost from nothing, ten vivid local communities of various size around the city of Central Warsaw. And I must say that I am very proud of that idea, the resulting decisions made in 1994, and their implementation because in reality we achieved the ultimate goal. Now, after only seven years, there are eleven local governments in Warsaw, which are very responsive to local needs, connected with the local populations, and independent for making local decisions. All of those eleven Warsaw local governments execute public tasks similar to those of the rest of the 2500 urban and rural *gminas*. All are focused on local questions: land management, zoning, local environmental protection, local roads, bridges, streets and squares, water mains and delivery, sewage and solid waste disposal, public markets and fairs, public order, primary health care service (public), social welfare institutions, elementary public schools, local cultural institutions, promotion of sports, etc. The only, but important, difference from the rest of Poland is that all of these eleven local governments of Warsaw are part of one urban area—the town of Warsaw. Thus, all of these eleven local governments were deemed by statute to create a common administrative unit for the entire town of Warsaw.

As a result, the town of Warsaw is a statutory association of these eleven local governments. Warsaw has a separate Town Council elected in a universal election, a Board of Warsaw appointed by the Council with the head of the Board (the President of Warsaw) also appointed by the Council. Although the local public tasks are usually the responsibility of the Warsaw *gminas*, the town of Warsaw is responsible only for some areas of public life that are common for the entire area of Warsaw. There are three main issues. First, the town of Warsaw is responsible for general development planning: the town creates standards for land use planning to guide the decisions

made by Warsaw local governments. Second, the town is responsible for major public undertakings and investments important for the whole town, such as bridges, public transportation systems, environmental facilities, and transit highways. The third area of responsibility of the town involves the delivery of a few general services, such as water delivery, sewer systems, and public transportation. That managerial function is executed by the town on behalf of the eleven Warsaw local governments.

Apart from the town of Warsaw and the eleven Warsaw local governments, there is also the urban county of Warsaw (Warsaw *poviat*). Because of the special administrative organization of Warsaw (eleven local governments), the town of Warsaw was not subject to the earlier mentioned regulation made for the sixty-five largest Polish urban *gminas* (towns) and has not taken over the *poviat* responsibilities. Thus, there is another layer of government, the Warsaw *poviat*. The Warsaw *poviat* includes the entire area of the town of Warsaw, and it was created in 1998 during the second stage of public administration reform in Poland. The Warsaw *poviat's* responsibilities are similar to those all the Polish counties (*poviats*) have. The *poviat* provides some specialized public services (e.g., hospitals, secondary schools, social care houses, and family care centers) and many administrations (e.g., construction licensing, driving licensing, and sanitary inspection).

### *C. The Warsaw Metropolitan Area*

Beyond the town of Warsaw and its eleven local governments, there are fifty or sixty local governments (municipalities) of urban and rural character belonging to six suburban *poviats* that border the town of Warsaw. The total Warsaw metropolitan area has a population of 2.7 million: one million inhabitants living in the city of Central Warsaw, about 700,000 people living in ten Warsaw local governments, and around one million inhabitants in the surrounding suburban areas.

In technical, demographic, and sociological terms, the Warsaw metropolitan area has many common issues to solve, such as public roads and transportation and environmental control problems, but the Warsaw metropolitan area does not exist as a separate administrative entity. Local governments within the Warsaw metropolitan area generally cooperate with each other,



but the existing ways of cooperation do not satisfy the need for comprehensive metropolitan management in areas such as gathering useful statistical information for the whole area and coordinating development planning and control issues in the metro area.

Warsaw is not the only existing urban conglomeration in Poland. The Upper Silesia area has a population of about five million, and two or three other areas in Poland each have populations of more than one million. All of these large urban metropolitan areas need a new administrative structure that includes a Metropolitan Area Authority, and such a proposal is now under preparation. We hope this new structure will strengthen managerial possibilities to solve important technical, social, and environmental problems experienced by large Polish urban metropolitan areas.

### III. PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE IN WARSAW

Decisions regarding Warsaw made during the 1990s have become a subject of a new political quarrel between the managerial approach and political pressures.

The managerial approach attempts to identify real problems in public management and various scales of existing substantial challenges, and tries to create institutions appropriate for the various scales of public management in Warsaw and its surroundings. Thus, it would create local governments for local needs, a town government for issues of urban development and public services in the whole Warsaw, and then a Metropolitan Area Authority (in the near future) for larger-scale development issues.

On the other side of the quarrel are the political needs (or whims) of some parties to take over the power in the entire Warsaw area, but who do not have enough chance to win the elections in the eleven Warsaw local governments. These political parties use very catchy arguments: we must reduce bureaucracy because there are too many government officials, too much administrative business, and too much money spent on nothing. Therefore, Warsaw should have only one government combining all the functions of the existing authorities: we need only one Council, one Board, one President of the city of Warsaw (says present Mister President of the

Town), and that is enough to satisfy all the managerial needs of the area. They want to fuse all existing Warsaw governments (local governments, town, and county) into one unified authority.

Many people (and some experts) support the idea of fusing town and county governments. But the idea of abolishing eleven Warsaw local governments is only destructive. Warsaw local governments function well—it is a rare story of success. Further, the main problems in Warsaw involve large-scale management (town of Warsaw and the Warsaw Metropolitan Area), not local management. Because local governments deal only with local problems, local populations, and local administration, abolishing Warsaw local governments will not improve large-scale management, but will contribute to more problems at the local level. This proposed solution will destroy the new accomplishments of the ten outer Warsaw *gminas* and their new social identity. Also, the city of Central Warsaw will lose its traditional identity, recently regained, as a core urban area.

In my opinion, the above debate is not of substantial value. It is purely a political issue. Because left wing and liberal parties have a majority in the city of Central Warsaw, they hope to cover all the Warsaw area after reunification. By trying to change the entire administrative organization, they expect to take over power in the entire town, including areas in which their position is rather weak. Taking power means having control over all the public money, all of the development and growth decisions, all of the town administrations, and all of the institutions. From that point of view, the ten surrounding Warsaw local governments are even more important than the city of Central Warsaw itself because today's growth in these areas is fueled by many new public investments and also money from the private sector which is then reinvested into the local communities.

The future of administration in Warsaw is uncertain. We shall see changes within the next weeks or months in the Polish Parliament when it considers the Reunification Warsaw Act and the opposing draft act. The future also promises more political battles because the ten Warsaw local governments do not want to surrender their power or make any concessions. They are ready to fight by using both the political process and legal means (Constitutional Tribunal).

### CONCLUSION

I hope these issues have given some insight into how important politics can be in certain issues in the Warsaw metropolitan area, such as public management, administrative structure, and development issues like urban sprawl. On one hand, political pressures have allowed Poland to create new structures, new proceedings, and new institutions. On the other hand, certain political pressures can be destructive. However, this is also a battle about democracy. It is interesting to see how, after only a few years after Warsaw administration reform, the newly-created local governments defend their political independence against these new political pressures to centralize Warsaw.