

Krzysztof Lisowski*

**LACK OF TRUST OR NO TRUST STRATEGY?
THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE COMMUNE
AUTHORITIES AND TOWN AUTHORITIES IN ZIELONA
GÓRA IN THE PROCESS OF MERGING THE TWO
ADMINISTRATIVE BODIES**

In recent years the issue of merging local governments has become important in a number of local government units. It results from social processes and strategies implemented mostly by municipalities that are supposed to give a new impetus to development or prevent degradation. Successful and unsuccessful attempts to incorporate suburban areas into the boundaries of central cities have been made in Rzeszów, Opole, Lublin, Elbląg, Gniezno, Kołobrzeg, Słupsk, Poznań, Zielona Góra, etc. However, so far the only successful consensual merger of local government units have been carried out in Zielona Góra, where the governments of the town and rural commune became united.

Social processes that affect the pressures to integrate local governments include urbanization (Jałowiecki, Szczepanski 2006) and suburbanisation (Kajdanek 2011, 2012) as the mechanisms that at first cause the rapid growth of towns and then their sprawl into suburban areas. These two stages in the demographic and structural model cycle of urban life (Van den Berg et al. 1982) can be found in relations between the populations of central towns and surrounding communes. The phenomena of urban depopulation and demographic forecasts (GUS 2014) indicating the intensification of the process and, on the other hand, population growth in suburban areas illustrate the changes in the population size.

These processes in Poland, which have become more intense during the last two decades, have made the administrative division mismatch the formation of the actual areas and territorial communities. Development barriers resulting from this neighbouring and fragmentation of local governments (communes, districts) have been identified in government documents

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(Ocena sytuacji... 2012). Their authors point out that the administrative division into numerous units of local governments do not fit into contemporary challenges. They encourage communes to merge as it has the potential to bring benefits in service provision, management and finance.

Incorporating adjoining villages into the boundaries of the town is not a new phenomenon. In almost every big city there are areas which used to be separate territorial units – mostly suburban villages. However, the procedures which define the relations between local authorities and the conditions for making a decision on the merger are new (Dziennik Ustaw 1990). In the past decisions on the merger were made in the offices of politicians, now the law provides that they must be widely consulted with inhabitants and experts.

Ideas to merge face a series of obstacles, the most important of which is the resistance of commune authorities and inhabitants who fear of marginalization and loss of identity. In recent years these concerns have been repeatedly expressed in public consultations regarding possible mergers of local communes¹. In the communes that have discussed the merger conflicts often occur at various levels and with varying intensity.

The article presents just one dimension of the public debate and conflict situation in merging local governments of the town of Zielona Góra and the commune of Zielona Góra. It focuses on the relations between the authorities of the commune (commune head and commune council) and the town (mayor and town council). The article analyses the strategy adopted by the commune authorities to run the debate on the merger. The title of the article contains the question “lack of trust or no trust strategy?”, which I will try to answer.

Background for the merger of the commune of Zielona Góra and the town of Zielona Góra

The concept of incorporating the commune of Zielona Góra into the town of Zielona Góra appeared three times. For the first time in 2001, but the only effect of actions taken at that time was the resolution of intent adopted in both councils and the creation of a joint committee. The idea returned in 2005, when Bożena Ronowicz was the mayor, but consultations conducted at that time were not successful. Once again, the concept was presented on

¹The inhabitants of the following communes were against the merger of their communes with Rzeszów: Trzebowisko (94.7% against), Krasne (63.0% against). Similarly, the inhabitants of the following villages located in the commune of Dobrzeń Wielki were against the merger of their commune with Opole: Borki – 100% against; Brzeziny – 98.6% against; Czarnowasy – 99.1% against; Dobrzeń Mały – 99.8% against; Krzanowice – 99.7% against; Świerkle – 96.0% against.

October 10, 2012 at the University of Zielona Góra, when the meeting took the form of a public debate on the conditions of the merger (Osękowski 2014). For the first time the proposed merger was presented in a detailed form as the general terms and specific schedule of the merger were presented. It was also stated "... that the merger may take place after being discussed with the inhabitants of both administrative units, after which they should feel convinced that any decision on the merger is right and the principle of partnership and balance of both governments must be followed" (ibid. p. 7).

The authorities of the commune found the proposal made by the mayor unnecessary and they pointed out that the good cooperation between the two local authorities should be continued. The commune head sent a letter to the inhabitants in which he outlined his position:

"Cooperation between the town and commune has been and still is very effective and based on partner relations; it is based on concluded agreements and mutual support aimed at improving the living conditions of the residents both in the town and the commune, and this includes a common sewage system, public transport, and now a common waste management and the creation of the economic zone. I want to emphasize that there is no indication that the merger would be a 'lifeline' for our commune. We are developing dynamically, the population is growing, we are implementing all scheduled investments, the inhabitants become more involved in the lives of their village, the budget is stable"(Zalewski 2012).

In his letter the commune head also stated that the decision on the merger should be taken by the citizens themselves in a referendum, because everyone has the right to decide where they want to live. An indication of the participatory decision-making model (Lewenstein et al. 2010) did not automatically prevent the authorities from presenting their positions. From the very beginning, they were clear and unambiguous. Having let the citizens make the decision "the fight" for the votes of the residents in the planned commune referendum began. Lack of major conflicts before the announcement of the merger project and the evaluation of the existing cooperation between local authorities would suggest correct partner relations that had to be based on shared goals and mutual trust.

Local communities perceived these relations in a similar way. The surveys² showed that 71.5% of the town population and 75.7 % of the com-

²In all the surveys the population consisted of adult residents (18+) of the two administrative units (town of Zielona Góra and rural commune of Zielona Góra). Each community was treated separately as an autonomous whole, and the same procedures for the construction and sampling were applied. Quota sampling was chosen as it guaranteed the representativeness in view of characteristics which were most important from

mune population described the relations between the town authorities and commune authorities as rather good or as very good. Moreover, they were of the opinion that this cooperation was definitely or rather necessary (commune – 78.0%, town – 90.0%). This would suggest a stable situation in mutual relations, which were not disturbed by conflict, lack of confidence or any “games” but quite normal. This peace was disturbed by a new situation that is the desire of one party (the town authorities) to incorporate the commune. After all the commune authorities were generally against the merger project and said that explicitly during meetings and debates as well as in the media. A growing conflict situation resulted in the rural commune being presented by the town authorities as a stowaway. The mayor described the situation in the following way:

The mechanism is simple. It is the town that invests in better and better services, industrial zones, advanced education, culture, roads etc. As a result, both the town and the commune are good places to live in. With municipal investments we improve the quality of life. It attracts new residents who settle in the town. They work here, they start families, earn money. Later, some of them move to the neighbouring villages (Czyżniewski 2012a, p. 2).

The crisis of trust?

The public discourse and conflict emerging from it revealed a big deficit of trust in municipal authorities on the side of the commune authorities. A clear difference of interests leads to the question whether this lack of trust was based on real premises, or it was a kind of strategy of campaigning against the merger. In the absence of substantive arguments, this strategy could bring the desired result, namely the residents of the rural commune not giving their consent to merge the two local governments. The question is even more justified by the fact that before the merger project the cooperation between the local governments was perceived by residents as very good.

In human activities, regardless of whether they relate to individuals, social groups, communities and nations, the element of trust is extremely important (Sztompka 2007). Trust is based on the knowledge or belief that the actions of other entities (people, institutions, organizations, societies, nations) are in line with one’s predictions or expectations. It becomes espe-

the point of view of the study (gender, age, education). An additional factor in the rural commune was the division of the sample into 17 villages proportionally to the number of their adult residents. In the urban area starting points were drawn to provide proper territorial deployment. Finally, the survey conducted in January-February 2013 covered 758 respondents – 375 residents of the rural commune and 383 residents of Zielona Góra. In October 2013 the sample size in the rural commune was increased from 375 to 600 respondents and the number of respondents from the urban area remained unchanged.

cially important in a situation of uncertainty and risk often connected with new situations or the situations that one cannot control. Defining trust Piotr Sztompka (ibid., pp. 69-70) claims that: "Acting under uncertainty and lack of control, we take risks, we count on something, we take a bet on uncertain sovereign future actions of other people. This leads to a simple, most general definition of trust: Trust is a bet on uncertain future actions of other people".

It can be assumed that lack of trust means that all "transactions", including social ones generate higher costs, and it is not just about their economic dimension. In the relations between entities in which at least one of the parties does not trust the other, mutual contacts and reaching an agreement is much harder. This situation may foster the formation and the escalation of conflicts. The starting point for the verification of the thesis on the no trust strategy is to examine whether in the public debate the representatives of the commune authorities used the arguments concerning the failure to fulfil promises, instead of their substantive content. For example, the commune authorities did not use an argument that teachers working in the rural areas would lose their privileges nor did they discuss their compensation (full compensation was guaranteed in the merger offer). Instead, they questioned the credibility of the offer, arguing that the town government would not keep these promises, and sooner or later teachers would lose everything. Any resolutions could be changed and the next mayor might want to introduce different ideas.

The proposals of the merger offer were first presented at the University of Zielona Góra; they became a subject of public debate and, consequently, took the form of a social contract (called Zielona Góra Contract) containing the commitments of the municipal authorities to the residents. Some of its promises were fulfilled long before the formal merger, treating them as a pilot programme (the integration fund³). The town council passed relevant resolutions. These actions were also to give credibility to the town authorities and their promises (statement of the mayor of Zielona Góra):

I want to convince the residents of the commune that our intentions are honest. Proposing the merger of the town and the commune we offer something in return: lower taxes, cheaper bus tickets and extra money (Czyżniewski

³The ministry was to give 5% more tax income as a bonus for consensual merger of local authorities; the whole amount (about 100 million PLN) was intended for the development of the rural commune. Since the funds could be available after the merger (on 1 Jan 2015 or later), the town authorities offered a pilot programme, implemented in 2013-2014, for which they allocated 3 million zloty per year. The villages themselves had to decide how to spend the allocated amount.

2012b, p. 4).

The analysis of the public statements made by the representatives of the commune⁴ reveals that their numerous opinions fit in the no trust strategy. It occurs when the credibility of other entities – in this case the credibility of the municipal authorities – is undermined. One of the major points of the merger offer was to allocate the entire ministerial bonus, resulting from greater participation of the local government in income tax, to the development of the commune areas. It was estimated that in time of five years it could be the amount of about 100 million zloty. In his statements the commune head claimed that he had no doubt that after the merger Zielona Góra would receive the bonus, but he did not trust the assurances of the mayor and expected more guarantees (commune head Mariusz Zalewski): *This plus is covered by the minus: lack of guarantee that about 100 million zloty, according to my calculations, will be destined for the commune. I cannot find a warranty which would guarantee that to the inhabitants of the commune* (Radni o połączeniu 2012, p. 7).

The credibility of the mayor's proposals were also questioned with arguments referring to ministers failing to keep promises. It was to lead to the conclusion that it would be even more probable at the lower level (councillor Krzysztof Wołczyński):

Perhaps the mayor's intentions are honest, but it will not be up to him how it will be implemented in the future. It's about credibility. Even ministers' promises are not kept. It is our duty to ensure that promises are kept. Although we sign contracts, no one can guarantee they will be performed. We can cooperate without the merger. My trust in the Town Hall is very limited (ibid., p.7).

Natural changes in the office, resulting from the election calendar were also to be an obstacle in the implementation of the commitments of “the town” to “the commune”. One of the councillors argued her lack of trust in this way (councillor Antonina Ambrożewicz-Sawczuk):

In two years we may have another government and the money we are talking about can only be virtual. How are we to believe? (ibid., p. 7).

The chairman of the commune council doubted the town authorities would keep their promises because after the merger there would not be another partner (commune) to be the guarantor of the contract provisions (chairman of the commune council Jacek Rusiński):

There is one difference between the contract to build a sewage system and a contract to merge the town and the commune. The former did not inclu-

⁴The analysis included statements published in local press and on websites.

de the liquidation of one of the parties which would be a guarantor of the contract. And this is the basic problem. As the representatives of the commune residents we were elected to defend their interests, protect from being harmed (ibid., p. 7).

The resolutions of town and commune councils form local law provided they comply with the law of a higher order. This local law is the basis for actions taken by mayors and commune heads. Expecting that local issues related to the merger of local governments should be settled in the “higher regulations” cannot be an argument of a councillor, who is supposed to know more about the complexities of local government functioning:

The project of Zielona Góra Contract does not refer to the future. This means it does not give any guarantee for the future. Resolutions of the town council can be changed at any time. This should be written in legislation of a higher level. . . (Czyżniewski 2014, p. 3).

Lack of trust was also reflected in discrediting the social contract, calling it “a vague contract” which does not guarantee the contents of the contract: *The mayors of Zielona Góra, as I see it, tantalise us, try to bribe us with a vague contract. This document is no guarantee that, for example, village schools or libraries will not be closed. Anyway, let the residents decide about it in a referendum. I will accept their decision (Iwanowski 2013).*

The pilot Integration Fund programme, which started in 2013, was also criticised. The town authorities were to give the villages 3 million zloty a year on investments chosen by the residents themselves. This time procedural issues were questioned and the commune authorities were of the opinion that the commune council should make key decisions in this regard otherwise the programme would be untrustworthy (one of commune councillors):

The Integration Fund lacks credibility. This project was not sent to the council, which will be the decision-making body in the implementation of the budget, but to the residents on the pages of newspapers. And it will be us who will implement these investments (Radni o połączeniu 2012, p. 7).

In the debate the mayor of Zielona Góra repeatedly referred to the lack of trust and arguments of the commune authorities, and he emphasized that the greatest guarantor would be the residents who should decide to merge or reject this project (mayor Janusz Kubicki):

You’re talking about guarantee without which nothing can be done. We never have full guarantee for anything. It may also happen that the state will liquidate your local government. Ms Ambrożewicz says the commune will not be represented. I can guarantee with all my property that the commune will be represented. We want to run a referendum in 2014 and then we will know

the opinion of the residents. But first we want them to be well informed. If the residents sign under something they, as voters, will be the guarantors. Politicians will not have the courage to withdraw from such arrangements (ibid.).

The analysis of texts, a small portion of which is shown above, leads to the thesis that lack of trust presented in the statements was a specific action strategy and distrust stemmed from reluctance to the destruction of the commune institutional order. It did not take into account social changes that were well advanced and resulted in a high level of integration of the commune areas with the town. Arguments related to the lack of trust referred to uncertain future, which might sound rational for many residents. Defending their opinion on the merger and trying to convince the residents of the rural commune to reject the project, the commune authorities (the commune head and council) adopted a strategy to undermine trust in the mayor and his offer. I assume that it was not a carefully planned and meticulously executed strategy. It probably resulted from the absence of other arguments, as it was quite difficult to convince the residents that lower taxes, better public transport, investments in infrastructure or in the economic zone were something improper for them.

It was also difficult to use the argument of the loss of the identity of small homeland, which because of suburbanisation had become more and more incorporated in the urban space with a clearly visible partition into old and migrant residents. 65.8% of the commune residents declared that they felt the inhabitants of Zielona Góra and it may be repeated after Florian Znaniecki and Janusz Ziółkowski (1984, p. 35) that “the town is in the realm of common experience and action, they constitute it as a very complex social structure”.

Another explanation for the adoption of this strategy may be lack of alternatives for the provisions of Zielona Góra Contract. The contract provided a kind of status quo for the commune after the merger. Schools, libraries, NGOs, employment of commune office workers, village councils and many other elements of social life in the commune were to remain unchanged. On the other hand, the contract offered a specific “leap forward”, connected with the development and greater financial and territorial possibilities. The commune authorities focused on undermining the credibility and good intentions of the town authorities, without giving their own vision of development. If it was mentioned it mainly concerned human potential which would grow because of the migrants from Zielona Góra. However, this would make the commune even more urban.

The adopted strategy of lack of trust in the town authorities did not

bring the expected results, and the proponents of the merger won in the referendum. On 1 January 2015 the rural commune was incorporated into the town. Nearly two years after the merger the provisions of Zielona Góra Contract have been executed and the social consequences of the merger may constitute an interesting topic for further research and study.

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Keywords: succesful consensual merge of local governments units, the strategy of lack distrust, the public debate, suburbanization.

The article is the attempt to describe the process of merging the two administrative bodies of city and communes governments units. In the first part I established the base for public process which was created for integration of self-government bodies. I characterized also relations of city and commune authorities before the appearance of the project to merge. While searching for the answers for the question put in the title of the article, I referred to the public debate (texts placed in the local media). The analysis showed the large lack of the trust of commune authorities in comparison with municipal authorities, which did not result from the levering of essential recordings of the prepared social contract but from lack of belief in their constancy and realization. Such manner was called the strategy of the distrust.