
**THE ROLE OF CROSSBORDER COOPERATION
IN SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BASED
ON THE EXAMPLE OF EUROREGIONS NIEMEN
AND POMERANIA**

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Key words: crossborder cooperation, euroregion, EU financial instruments.

A b s t r a c t

The paper presents the scope of current crossborder cooperation within euroregions Pomerania and Niemen. The particular attention was paid to comparison of activities of those euroregions, indication of differences and similarities in their structures, goals and activities undertaken. Additionally, economic, financial and formal-legal constraints to crossborder cooperation and factors influencing its development were discussed. The paper also presents the level of use of the European Union funds within the frameworks of implemented goals of cooperation within euroregions.

Studies were carried out during the period of April – November 2007. During the analyzed period preparation for absorption of European Union funds, which was to be the antidote for financial limitations posing the major obstacle in tightening crossborder cooperation proved to be the priority for the municipal authorities. The European Union funds received were allocated mainly to development of infrastructure and tourism, cultural and youth exchange and business investment projects.

**ROLA WSPÓŁPRACY TRANSGRANICZNEJ W ROZWOJU SPOŁECZNO-GOSPODARCZYM
NA PRZYKŁADZIE EUROREGIONÓW NIEMEN I POMERANIA**

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Słowa kluczowe: współpraca transgraniczna, euroregion, instrumenty finansowe UE.

A b s t r a k t

W artykule przedstawiono zakres dotychczasowej współpracy transgranicznej w euroregionach Pomerania i Niemen. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na porównanie działalności euroregionów, wskazanie różnic i podobieństw w ich strukturze, celach oraz realizowanych działaniach. Ponadto

wskazano na gospodarcze, formalnoprawne i finansowe ograniczenia współpracy transgranicznej oraz na czynniki wpływające na jej rozwój. W pracy przedstawiono także stopień wykorzystania funduszy unijnych w ramach realizacji celów współpracy euroregionalnej.

Badania przeprowadzono w okresie kwiecień–listopad 2007 r. W analizowanym czasie priorytetowym zadaniem władz gminy okazało się przygotowanie do absorpcji funduszy unijnych, które miało być antidotum na ograniczenia finansowe stwarzające największe trudności w zacieśnianiu współpracy transgranicznej. Otrzymane środki unijne przeznaczono głównie na rozwój infrastruktury i turystyki, wymianę kulturalną i młodzieży oraz inwestycje gospodarcze.

Introduction

Belief that further European integration will be possible thanks to closing the gaps in development between individual countries and regions was the main stimulus for establishing instruments of financial support for crossborder cooperation in the European Union. The idea of crossborder cooperation in Europe has more than 50 years tradition. Experience resulting from crossborder cooperation between regions of Western Europe was the cause for interest in the effects of that form of collaboration and development in Poland. Crossborder cooperation was perceived as an opportunity to improve the living standards of residents in border regions.

Development and intensification of crossborder cooperation has occurred in Poland since the early 1990s. The process of harmonization of Polish regional policy with the EU regional policy undoubtedly was of significant influence on the crossborder cooperation development. Currently, both material and intangible effects of that cooperation are becoming increasingly visible. It should also be pointed out that border areas situated along the western and eastern borders of Poland are characterized by different conditions for cooperation. Western and eastern euroregions are characterized by complementary (cooperative) economic structure supportive for crossborder cooperation. In those border areas economic, social and financing asymmetry can be found. Differences in the rate of self-government development are also visible. On the other hand, the southern euroregion have competitive (similar) structure (KOSZYK-BIAŁOBRZESKA, KISIEL 2008).

Methodology of studies

The diagnosis of the current crossborder cooperation in euroregions Pomorania and Niemen is the aim of the paper. Particular attention was paid to the comparison of activities covered by crossborder cooperation in euroregions Pomorania and Niemen and sources of financing it.

The paper discusses the results of own studies conducted among municipalities of the Polish parts of euroregions Pomerania and Niemen. To obtain the information necessary to conduct this study a questionnaire was developed that was mailed to municipalities selected for the purpose with the request for answering the questions. The questionnaire consisted of 17 questions concerning crossborder cooperation conducted by those municipalities. The study covered municipalities of euroregions Pomerania and Niemen situated on the Polish side of the border. Location on the state border or bordering with municipalities situated directly along the border (the belt of two municipalities) was the criterion for selection of municipalities to participate in the study. Those municipalities were defined as border ones (*Gminy przygraniczne*. 1997). The selected group encompassed 45 municipalities in Western Pomeranian voivodship, 10 in Warmia and Mazury voivodship and 49 in Podlaskie voivodship. Completed questionnaires were returned by 43% of municipalities in Euroregion Pomerania and 48% of municipalities in Euroregion Niemen.

Intermediate and final reports from implementation of crossborder cooperation programs made available by secretariats of euroregions, official statistics as well as other published expert opinions concerning the issues related to the studies provided the additional sources of information.

Results of studies and discussion

In line with the general trend for institutionalizing crossborder cooperation, euroregions were established along borders of Poland as of 1990s. The major factors for development of cooperation within the frameworks of euroregions were: regaining of political sovereignty, revival of free market, democratization of the state and building of civic society coupled with development of local governments and regional awareness (KOSZYK-BIAŁOBRZESKA, KISIEL 2008).

The earliest euroregion initiatives developed along the Polish-German border. Euroregion Pomerania established on the 15th of December 1995 is the youngest euroregion along the western border of Poland. Establishment of euroregion Niemen on the 6th of June 1997 resulted from the need of increasing the living standards of the border area communities. The areas of both euroregions are closely linked to the Baltic Sea and protection of its waters. The area of Poland that belongs to the euroregion Pomerania is larger (20 616 km²). Also, the majority of the population of that euroregion lives in the Polish part of it (1 610 239). Both euroregions carry out tripartite cooperation (Tab. 1).

Table 1

Euroregions in Poland in 2006 – basic comparative data

| Name | Date established | Partners of the Polish partners | Euroregion area in km ² including: | | Euroregion population, including: | |
|-----------|------------------|---------------------------------|---|--------|-----------------------------------|-----------|
| | | | Foreign partners | Polish | Foreign partners | Polish |
| Pomerania | 15.12.1995 | Germany, Sweden | German: 15 424 | 20 616 | German: 1 028 296 | 1 610 239 |
| Niemen | 6.06.1997 | Lithuania, Byelorussia | No data available | 10 774 | No data available | 905 176 |

Source: Own work based on: *Euroregiony ...* (2007).

In the current Polish practice of interregional cooperation two basic models for establishing legal and institutional bases have been applied by the authorities and local governments. The local government cooperation model is applied in euroregion Pomerania. It involves creating first a special purpose union of municipalities registered by a competent court for cooperation on the Polish border and next making the agreements and establishing the structure of the euroregion with a similar union of territorial units of the territorial partner or partners. Attention should be brought to the fact that in practical terms, at a certain moment of building the cooperation inclusion of regional authorities takes place, which represents an important success factor at further stages of crossborder cooperation.

The second, administrative-local government model, characteristic for euroregion Niemen, represents establishment by regional and local administrative bodies and local governments (frequently with support of central authorities) of a crossborder interregional union or trans-border union. The euroregion established in that way operates on the basis of the charter formulated jointly by the parties to the agreement.

Organizational structures of euroregions represent an important aspect of their operation. Bodies of euroregions situated along different borders specified in the charters show certain similarities but also differences. Both euroregions have similar organizational structures in which the Board is the most important body. The Board determines the main directions of euroregion activities and specifies priorities in implementation of joint projects. It is the joint body that coordinates the basic issues of euroregional cooperation and assures funding for and implementation of that cooperation (KOSZYK-BIAŁOBRZESKA, KISIEL 2008). In euroregion Pomerania the Board consists of 24 members and in euroregion Niemen – 18 members.

The Presidium fulfills the representative and coordinative functions in euroregions between sessions of the Board. The Board and the Presidium are

the highest executive bodies in euroregions. The Presidium drafts resolutions for the Board, implements the resolutions, supervises the secretariat, manages the assets, approves the activities and financial plan, implements the main directions of euroregion activities and appoints some organizational structures (KOSZYK-BIAŁOBRZESKA, KISIEL 2008). The Presidium consists of 3 (Niemen) and 4 (Pomerania) representatives of each of the parties.

Secretariat is responsible for the current administrative and office activities in euroregions (*Euroregiony...* 2004). On the other hand, working groups are responsible for solving specific problems and undertaking cooperation in specific areas. They develop concepts of joint projects and implement tasks commissioned by the Board, Presidium and Secretariat. They also prepare draft motions and recommendations for meetings of the Board and Presidium (KOSZYK-BIAŁOBRZESKA, KISIEL 2008). The number of working groups varies:

- 5 in euroregion Pomerania covering the following subject areas: economic cooperation, transport and infrastructure; tourism, rural areas and natural environment; education, social issues, youth, culture and sports; cooperation of administration and municipal institutions; and public order;
- 6 in euroregion Niemen, that is: for economic issues; social issues; environment protection, culture and sports within which there is a special sub-group for Augustów Canal, tourism and physical development.

The funding of crossborder cooperation is generally defined in the charters of individual euroregions. Activities in euroregion Pomerania are financed through: contributions of signatories, revenues from own activities as well as subsidies and donations. In euroregion Niemen the sources for financing of activities are defined differently. Each of the parties provides funds for implementation of goals, tasks and joint projects based on the principle of equality. The associations fund their activities mainly from member contributions, EU structural funds, revenues from activities and donations (*Euroregiony...* 2004, KOSZYK-BIAŁOBRZESKA, KISIEL 2008). Use of those funds for common goals is agreed among the parties to the euroregion.

Socioeconomic development, continuous improvement of living standards of residents and facilitating mutual contacts between communities are the basic goals of cooperation within euroregion (KOSZYK-BIAŁOBRZESKA, KISIEL 2008). According to the agreement on establishment of euroregions, undertaking joint activities for their sustainable development and bringing closer its residents and institutions at both sides of the border are the main goals of cooperation in the euroregions studied. The tasks resulting from the assumed goals are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Tasks resulting from the assumed goals of cooperation

| Tasks | Euroregions | |
|--|-------------|--------|
| | Pomerania | Niemen |
| Improving the living standards of residents | + | |
| Cooperation in physical planning | | + |
| Development of economic cooperation | + | + |
| Adjustment of infrastructure to the needs of those crossing the border | + | + |
| Establishing common information systems | + | |
| Cooperation in culture, education and sports | | + |
| Cooperation and exchange of community, scientific, professional, cultural and youth groups | + | |
| Improvement of the natural environment status | | + |
| Development of good relations between neighbors | | + |
| Creating conditions allowing free contacts | | + |
| Cooperation for liquidation of hazards and natural disasters | + | + |
| Supporting the idea of European unity | + | |

Source: KOSZYK-BIAŁOBRZESKA, KISIEL (2008).

This is confirmed by the studies conducted (Tab. 3) according to which the priority undertakings in crossborder cooperation implemented by municipal authorities in euroregions Pomerania and Niemen include: integration of activities in science, education and culture, promotion of tourism and economy and activities aiming at improvement of transport conditions. Activities aiming at support for European integration and cooperation in physical planning enjoyed the lowest interest to the studied euroregions.

Table 3

Activities implemented within the frameworks of crossborder cooperation by the studied municipalities in euroregions Pomerania and Niemen (in %)

| Form of crossborder activity | Euroregions | |
|---|-------------|--------|
| | Pomerania | Niemen |
| Conducting economic promotion | 10,1 | 13,1 |
| Cooperation in physical planning | 0,8 | 1,9 |
| Cooperation in municipal management | 5,0 | 1,9 |
| Cooperation in the area of ecology | 6,3 | 2,8 |
| Conducting activities aiming at improvement of transport conditions | 12,9 | 11,1 |
| Integration of activities in science, education and culture | 36,9 | 41,4 |
| Promotion of tourism | 24,0 | 22,2 |
| Activities aimed at supporting the European integration | 4,5 | 5,6 |

Source: Own work based on studies.

On the basis of the experience of euroregions on borders of Poland the most frequent barriers to cooperation can be identified. Analyses conducted by the Statistical Office in Wrocław (*Euroregiony*. 2007) indicate that according to the experiences of euroregions within the borders of Poland the set of the most frequent barriers to crossborder cooperation includes the following limitations:

- the visa requirement (Niemen),
- difficulties in finding a foreign partner; smaller number of entities participating in the cooperation, lower interest of those entities in such cooperation (Pomerania),
- language barrier (Pomerania),
- insufficient funds available for support of cooperation (Pomerania),
- asymmetries in economic and financial potentials of partners to cooperation (Pomerania, Niemen).

Similar results were obtained from the conducted studies (Fig. 1), where the major obstacles to tightening crossborder cooperation noticed by municipal authorities in euroregions Pomerania and Niemen were the financial limitations (over 35% of the responses), uneven level of economic development of the partners, differences in competence of local authorities and absence of adequate regulations and legal standards as well as low activity of the local community. According to the authorities of the municipalities covered, absence of equivalent or alternative jobs was the least important obstacle to cultivating crossborder cooperation (only ca. 3–4% of responses).

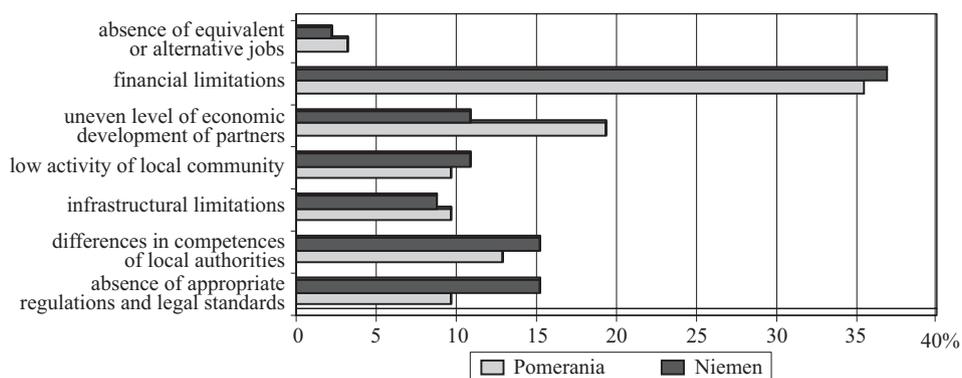


Fig. 1. Difficulties in tightening crossborder cooperation perceived by municipalities in Euroregions Pomerania and Niemen

Source: Own work based on the results of studies.

The benefits offered by crossborder cooperation, according to the authorities of municipalities in euroregion Pomerania, include mainly: stimulating cultural exchange and tourist traffic as well as improvement of contacts

between people in the border area. On the other hand, in euroregion Niemen the key benefits of tightening the cooperation indicated by the respondents were: the possibility of modernizing the infrastructure, enterprise development and increased inflow of capital and technologies. Considering the information presented as concerns the tasks resulting from the assumed goals of cooperation, the conducted studies confirmed the major disproportions between benefits of crossborder cooperation indicated by respondents. Both regions presented a similar position only in case of benefits resulting from improvement of the natural environment status (ca. 10% of responses).

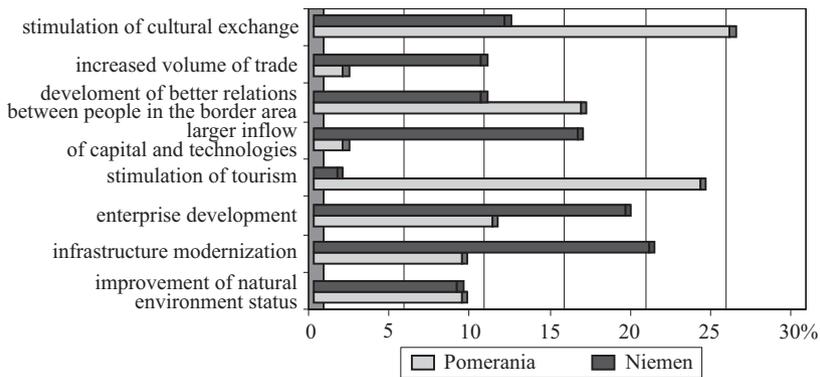


Fig. 2. Benefits achieved within the frameworks of crossborder cooperation according to the opinions by respondents from the studied municipalities in Euroregions Pomerania and Niemen
Source: Own work based on the results of studies.

Euroregions facilitate access of local government units to European Union funds and implementation of crossborder projects. The PHARE CBC Program established in 1994 by the European Union represented an important instrument of financial support for crossborder cooperation as 1/4 of the PHARE funds was allocated for support of crossborder cooperation. Within the frameworks of PHARE CBC Program Poland-Germany the Small Projects Fund (SPF) was established in 1994. Initially the Fund was available to 4 euroregions on the Polish – German border. During the following years the Fund covered all euroregions on Polish borders with its activities. The character and amount of subsidies for projects varied. Some euroregions were able to use two programs as a consequence of their location. An example of that situation was Pomerania that used both the Polish-German program and the Baltic Sea Region program. The Small Projects Fund, similar to the entire Phare CBC program served supporting the processes of integration of Poland with the European Union through, among others, establishing links and ties between

people in the form of so-called “*people to people*” activities. It was set up for implementation of low budget “soft” projects up to 50,000 EUR. Year 2003 was the last year of PHARE programming in the countries acceding the EU, however, according to the schedule, projects covered by PHARE 2003 allocation were implemented by the end of November 2006.

Availability of funds for various projects differed. Euroregions situated along the Polish – German border benefited to the greatest extent and the longest, i.e. as of 1995. The smallest number of projects supported by PHARE CBC SPF was implemented in euroregions of the southern and eastern border areas. Between the two regions studied Euroregion Pomerania was definitely ahead. As concerns the total amount of funding obtained from the SPF, that euroregion received the highest amount of support at 5,7 million EUR while the beneficiaries from that euroregion had access to two funds: Polish – Germany and the Baltic Sea Region funds. Euroregion Niemen had much lower funds available at ca. 3,4 million EUR for 218 projects implemented. The implementation of the Small Projects Fund in the Polish parts of euroregions during the years 1995–2003 is presented in Table 4. The most frequently supported beneficiaries implementing small projects were the units of territorial government, culture houses and centers as well as non-government organizations.

Table 4

Implementation of Phare Small Projects Fund in Polish parts of euroregions during the years 1995–2003*

| Euroregion | Number of projects | Subsidy (K EUR) |
|--------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Pomerania | 469 | 5 762,2 |
| Niemen | 218 | 3 360,5 |
| Total | 4 083 | 34 389,3 |

* Projects approved for 2003 round were implemented with delay, i.e. also during the years 2004–2006

Source: *Euroregiony...* (2007).

Infrastructure development, cultural exchange between local communities and groups in the border area, youth exchange, environment protection economic development and development of tourism in border areas were the priority areas of activity within the frameworks of PHARE CBC SPF. During the analyzed period the smallest number of projects supported with European Union funds concerned activities in the areas of local democracy support and crossborder development studies and concepts (Fig. 3).

In 2004, within the frameworks of INTERREG III A program, the instrument allowing support of the so-called micro-projects was established.

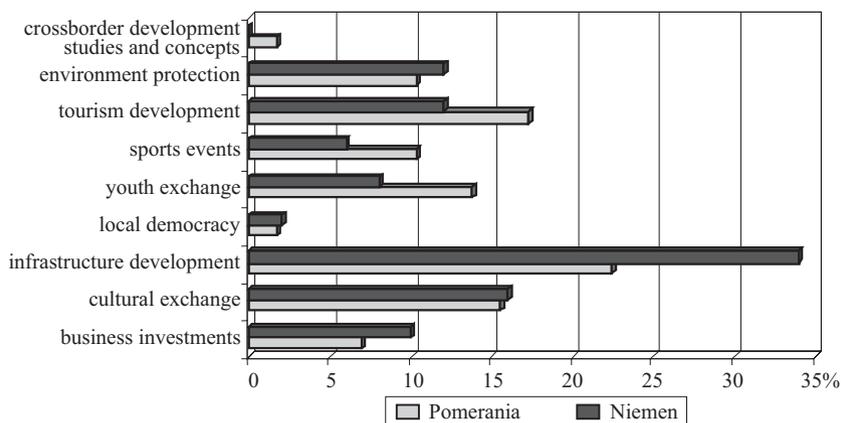


Fig. 3. Areas of cooperation implemented within the frameworks of received European Union funds
 Source: Own work based on the results of studies.

It substituted for the PHARE CBC SPF. Micro-projects supported from Interreg III A program in the Polish parts of euroregions during the years 2004–2006 are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
 Micro-projects subsidized from Interreg III A program implemented in the Polish parts of euroregions during the years 2004–2006

| Euroregion | Micro-projects | Totals subsidy amount | Average subsidy amount per project |
|--------------|----------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| | | K PLN | |
| Pomerania | 236 | 8 495,2 | 36,0 |
| Niemen | 72 | 7 516,8 | 104,4 |
| Total | 1 581 | 64 314,4 | 40,7 |

Source: *Euroregiony...* (2007).

The largest number of projects (236) was implemented in Euroregion Pomerania; the total amount of subsidies was ca. 8,5 million PLN. Although Euroregion Niemen implemented more than three times fewer micro-projects over the covered period, the amount of subsidies was not significantly lower and amounted 7,5 million PLN. The average subsidy amount for one project was from 36,000 PLN in Euroregion Pomerania to 104,4 K PLN in Euroregion Niemen.

Nevertheless, the studies conducted confirm difficulties in obtaining European Union funds by municipal authorities from the euroregions covered. The reasons for rejection of applications filed are presented in Figure 4.

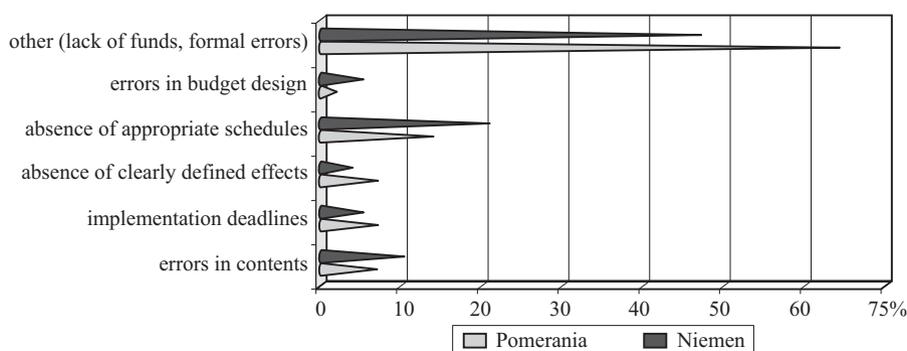


Fig. 4. Reasons for rejection of applications for subsidizing the projects implemented from the European Union funds

Source: Own work based on the results of studies.

Formal errors and absence of appropriate schedules at the stage of project application resulting in rejection of applications filed for subsidizing project implementation from structural funds during formal application evaluation were the major reasons for rejection. The other shortfalls that made implementation of projects impossible included, according to the respondents, shortfalls of content represented by lack of clear formulation of results assumed, poorly designed budgeting assumptions, excessively distant deadlines for implementation of projects and absence of appropriate schedules to the application.

Conclusions

The studies conducted allow formulating the following conclusions:

1. Presence of economic, social and local-government asymmetry is, undoubtedly, strength of border areas along the eastern and western borders of the Republic of Poland supportive for development of crossborder cooperation. During the period studied the priority activities of municipal authorities in Euroregions Pomerania and Niemen in that area included mainly integration of activities in the area of science, education and culture as well as promotion of tourism and economic promotion as well as activities aiming at improvement of transport infrastructure.

2. The visa requirement at the border is the basic obstacle to undertaking crossborder cooperation according to respondents from Euroregion Niemen. In Euroregion Pomerania the major difficulties included difficulties in finding a foreign partner, smaller number of entities participating in cooperation and their lower level of interest in cooperation as well as the language barrier and

insufficient funds for supporting cooperation. Asymmetries in economic and financial potentials concerned problem issues indicated by municipal authorities from both euroregions.

3. Opportunities offered by the possibility of obtaining European Union funds represent an important element in crossborder cooperation undertaken by authorities of euroregions Niemen and Pomerania. In view of the conducted studies, Euroregion Pomerania was a definite leader as concerns both the number of implemented projects and the amount of subsidies obtained. As concerns the total amount of funds obtained from the SPF it received the highest amount of funds at 5,7 million EUR while beneficiaries from that euroregion had access to two facilities: Poland – Germany and the Baltic Sea Region facility. Much smaller funds were available to Euroregion Niemen, ca. 3,4 million EUR, for 218 implemented projects.

4. Since 2004, within the frameworks of INTERREG III A program, euroregions had the possibility of financing projects supporting development of crossborder cooperation in the form of co-called micro-projects. The largest number of micro-projects was approved for implementation in euroregion Pomerania – 236, representing the total subsidy amount of ca. 8,5 million PLN. The average amount of subsidy per one project ranged from 36 K PLN in euroregion Pomerania to 104,4 K PLN in euroregion Niemen.

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