

**THE INFLUENCE OF THE CRISIS
ON THE BEHAVIOUR
OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED
ENTERPRISES**

RESEARCH RESULTS

Edited by
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Chapter 6

The Models of Cooperation Between Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises as an Expression of the Changes in Their Behaviour Triggered by the Crisis

Marta Ziólkowska

6.1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are considered to be an important element of a competitive economy. They are the institutional dimension of entrepreneurship. The behaviour of businesses in the last decade has been shaped by the changes in the condition of the economy. What can be first of all observed at the time of the crisis are the changes in the population of enterprises including for instance: the periodic decrease of the number of business entities, the fall of the size of investment or the decrease of the enterprise survival rate. The worsening of the condition of the economy forced small and medium-sized enterprises to redefine their objectives and introduce changes in organization and operation. The changes may be short-term ones, which let a given business survive the hardest period, but they can also be a factor deciding that the competitiveness of an enterprise improves in the long-term perspective. This is mainly manifested in the fact that the companies create new and more effective market and organizational solutions, adopt modern methods of conducting a business, introduce innovative strategies of operation or offer a greater variety of products.

The complexity of the processes taking place in the modern economy, in which SMEs function, significantly contributes to the increase of the number of market interactions between enterprises. Not only does a contemporary business compete

and coexist with other entities on the market, but more and more frequently it also builds interorganizational relations. This is to a great extent due to the need to constantly strive to grow, the increase of the level of innovativeness as well as gaining access to the key resources and skills. The completion of the aforementioned tasks is possible solely thanks to the connections based on cooperation, which means abandoning the independent pursuit of growth in order to establish more or less constant cooperative relations. Such cooperation makes it possible to achieve results that would not be obtainable if the business activity was run individually.

The functioning of the enterprises in the period between August 2007 and mid 2009 was determined by the worldwide financial and economic crisis after which a more favourable time for entrepreneurship began. The market situation deteriorated again in 2012, but in the following years one could observe its revival. The crisis, which was at the beginning only of financial character and only later turned into the economic one, significantly changed the conditions of the functioning of the SME sector also in the area of relations based on business cooperation. In this situation the conditions and factors that had been considered less significant before the crisis gained importance. In the face of the crisis the difficult market situation forced business owners to analyze costs and revenues more carefully. Moreover, the recession highlighted the weaknesses of Polish companies by revealing their level of skills and abilities that was insufficient to let them function in rough market conditions. The necessity to operate in the situation of high market uncertainty became the most significant macroeconomic factor.

What creates a chance to improve the market situation of SMEs conditioned by the economic changes is their ability to establish cooperation and construct models of behaviour that make it possible to overcome the barriers appearing in their environment. The strength of these cooperation-based relations determines the condition of the entire sector. At the time of the crisis cooperation supports the growth of enterprises and at the same time it is a condition necessary for their survival and for the achievement of competitive advantage.

This chapter aims to analyze the changes taking place in the behaviour of the businesses operating in the SME sector with regard to the way they establish cooperation in the face of a crisis and to the way this cooperation functions. The purpose is to present the condition of small and medium-sized enterprises in the years 2009–2014 as well as the indications of their adaptation to the market conditions in the situation of the crisis in Poland that concerned their cooperation with other entities on the market. Therefore, the thesis to be supported here states that: small

and medium enterprises display flexibility in their operations and in establishing cooperation by using its modern forms in order to optimize financial outcomes and achieve economic and market results through overcoming the external and internal barriers, which results in their special importance in the process of sustaining social and economic growth in the conditions of considerable crisis.

The discussion presented here is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. When did the enterprises begin to cooperate with the entities functioning on the market – before, during, or after the crisis?
2. Which factors decided about the SMEs' engagement into cooperation with other companies?
3. Was the establishment of the cooperation related with the economic crisis? How strong was the relation?
4. What forms of cooperation with other market entities did the SMEs use in the face of the crisis?
5. What were the dominant effects of the cooperation with external entities?
6. What were the barriers to the cooperation with external entities?

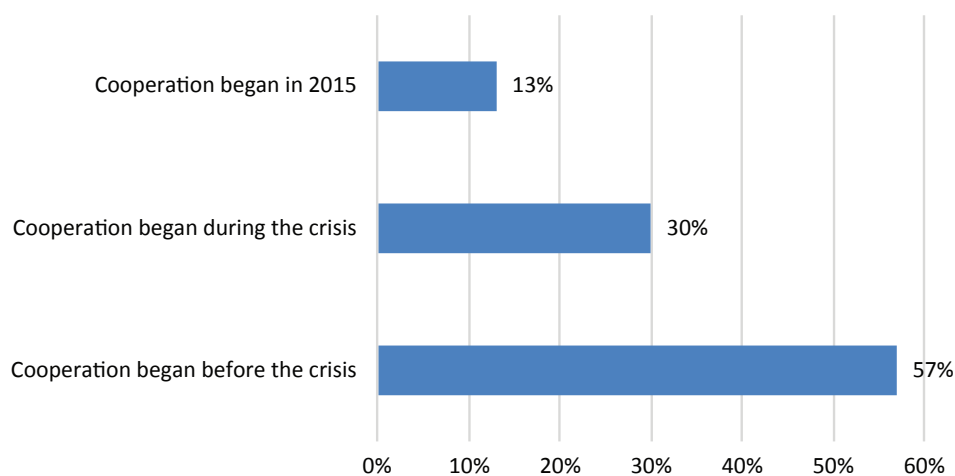
The analysis was based on empirical research presenting the opinions of managers and business owners concerning the forms of cooperation and the behaviours of their enterprises with regard to the establishment and functioning of cooperation in the companies from the SME sector.

6.2. Cooperation between small and medium-sized enterprises – the analysis of its level and determinants

The discussion concerning cooperation between enterprises began with discussing the factors determining its intensity and the period in which small and medium-sized enterprises operating in Poland established the cooperation. The first stage focused on the analysis of the relation between the establishment of the cooperation and the occurrence of the crisis. The research touched upon the issue of cooperation with external entities and, in particular, analyzed the question whether the economic crisis contributed to the emergence of cooperation with other businesses. The respondents were asked in what period their company engaged in cooperation with other entities on the market (Figure 6.1.).

The research findings suggest that over a half of the surveyed enterprises cooperated with external subjects before the signals of the crisis appeared (57%). For 30% of the companies the time of the crisis was a moment in which they started cooperating with other business entities, while after 2014 the contact with them was established by 13% of the SMEs.

Figure 6.1. Cooperation between enterprises and external entities at the time of the crisis



Source: M. Ziółkowska, *Współpraca małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw jako reakcja na kryzys (The Cooperation Between Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises as Their Reaction to the Crisis)*. In: *Reakcja małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw na kryzys (The Reaction of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises to the Crisis)*, ed. A. Skowronek-Mielczarek, CeDeWu.pl, Warszawa 2016, p. 244.

Careful analysis of the distribution of the responses related to the range of operations of the companies indicates that, in comparison with the total number of the surveyed enterprises, the businesses functioning on the international market more frequently reported engagement in cooperation before the symptoms of the crisis appeared. The proportion was 69%. Such finding signifies that for the enterprises operating on the global market cooperation with other entities is of great importance. On the other hand, the study revealed that 38% of the enterprises with the regional or local range of operation more frequently established cooperation already at the time of the crisis¹.

¹ This chapter focuses on the research results concerning general distribution of answers. All the remaining cross-sections and detailed results of the empirical study concerning particular areas of the distribution of the answers are analyzed in: M. Ziółkowska, *Współpraca małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw jako reakcja na kryzys (The Cooperation Between Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises as Their Reaction*

Another aspect of the study was the analysis of the factors determining the cooperation with other market participants. These determinants can be generally described as the participants' readiness to engage in cooperation as well as the high level of social capital that determines the level of social trust. The sources of the synergy effect created by the cooperation of enterprises, however, are described as some particular benefits that can be called motives (reasons) for becoming an element of the network. They include a variety of factors such as for instance: globalization of economic activity, fragmentation of the economic life, virtualization of economic activity, specialization and core competencies, easier access to information or faster diffusion of explicit knowledge².

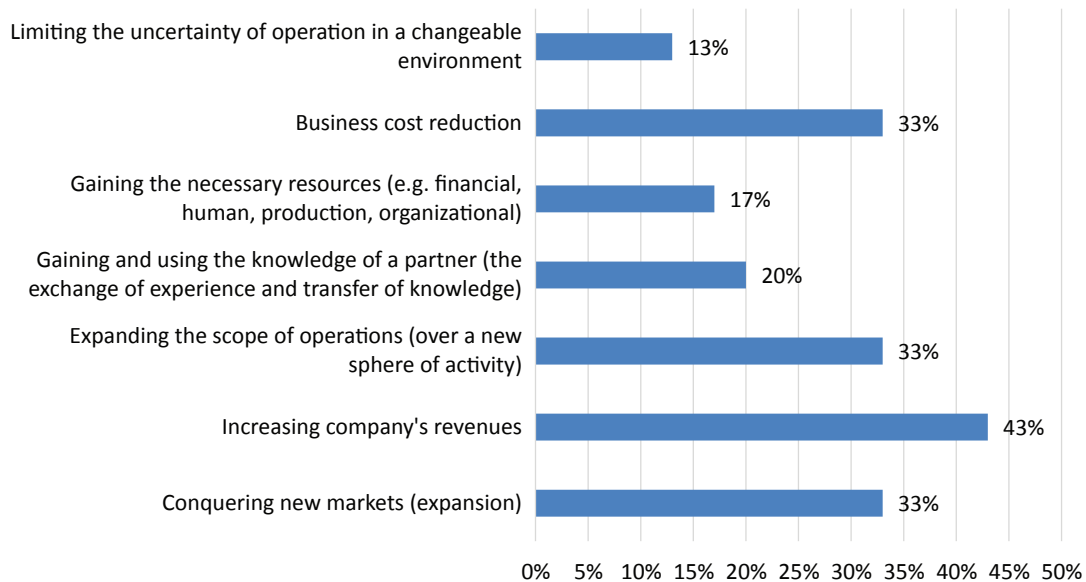
Out of the analyzed stimuli for cooperation, the respondents mainly chose the strive for increasing the company's revenues – 43% of the responses³. As shown by the data in Figure 6.2., further stimuli included the pursuit of conquering new markets, i.e. market expansion (33%), the possibility of expanding the scope of activity (33%) and the aim of reducing the business cost (33%). The opportunity to gain and use the knowledge possessed by the partner was less significant. The transfer of experience was reported by 20% of the respondents. The acquisition of the necessary resources was mentioned by only 17% of the surveyed enterprises, while the reduction of the uncertainty of operation in a changeable environment was considered a stimulus by only 13%. The distribution of the responses described above clearly shows that what is of key importance for the enterprises in the study when it comes to the reasons for establishing cooperation are the determinants that concern the revenues and costs of conducting business activity and market expansion. The entrepreneurs participating in the research attributed less significance to the factors connected with resources or the possibility of limiting the risk of functioning in a changeable environment. Acquiring the resources necessary to conduct business activity is a factor determining cooperation and decreasing the level of uncertainty of the functioning only for a slight proportion of the companies.

to the Crisis). In: *Reakcja małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw na kryzys (The Reaction of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises to the Crisis)*, ed. A. Skowronek-Mielczarek, CeDeWu.pl, Warszawa 2016, p. 237–274.

² M. Ziółkowska, *Modele współpracy małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw jako przejaw zmian ich zachowań pod wpływem kryzysu gospodarczego (The Models of Cooperation Between Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises as an Expression of the Changes of Their Behaviour Triggered by the Crisis)*. In: *Zmiany zachowań małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw w okresie spowolnienia gospodarczego (The Changes of the Behaviour of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises at the Time of the Economic Slowdown)*, ed. A. Skowronek-Mielczarek, Oficyna Wydawnicza SGH, Warszawa 2015, p. 203–204.

³ The respondents could choose maximum 3 options.

Figure 6.2. Factors conducive to establishing cooperation between enterprises in the years 2009–2014



Source: M. Ziółkowska, *Współpraca małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw jako reakcja na kryzys (The Cooperation Between Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises as Their Reaction to the Crisis)*. In: *Reakcja małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw na kryzys (The Reaction of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises to the Crisis)*, ed. A. Skowronek-Mielczarek, CeDeWu.pl, Warszawa 2016, p. 248.

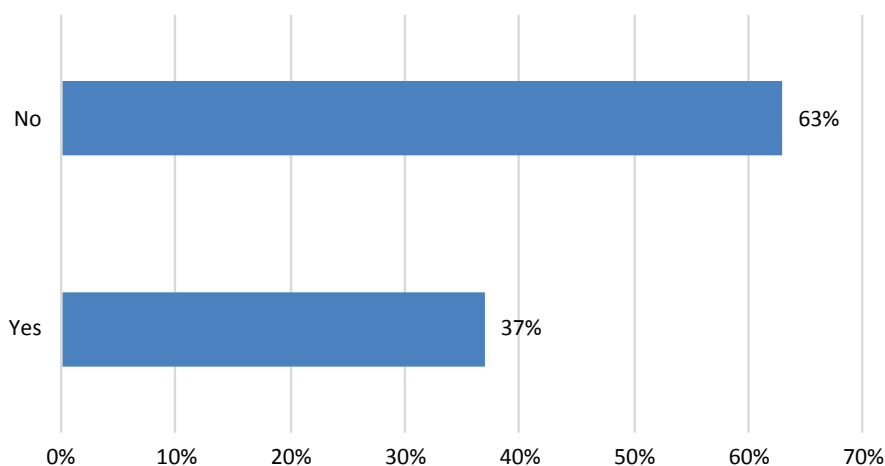
It was also vital in the course of the research to investigate whether the beginning of cooperation with external entities was connected with the economic crisis. The results show that for 63% of the companies in the study the cooperation was not determined by the period of economic stagnation. Business relations based on cooperation established during the crisis were reported by 37% of the surveyed companies (Figure 6.3.). The findings suggest that, in their market activities, the enterprises use the cooperative connections regardless of the macroeconomic situation.

When analyzing the distribution of the responses it should be noted that for the small companies the studied period was the reason for establishing cooperation with external entities more often than in the case of the remaining companies participating in the study (46% of the cases)⁴. What is more, on the basis of the obtained analysis results it was established that family companies reported the relation of the cooperation with the crisis more often than the other businesses (43%). Also

⁴ Ibid.

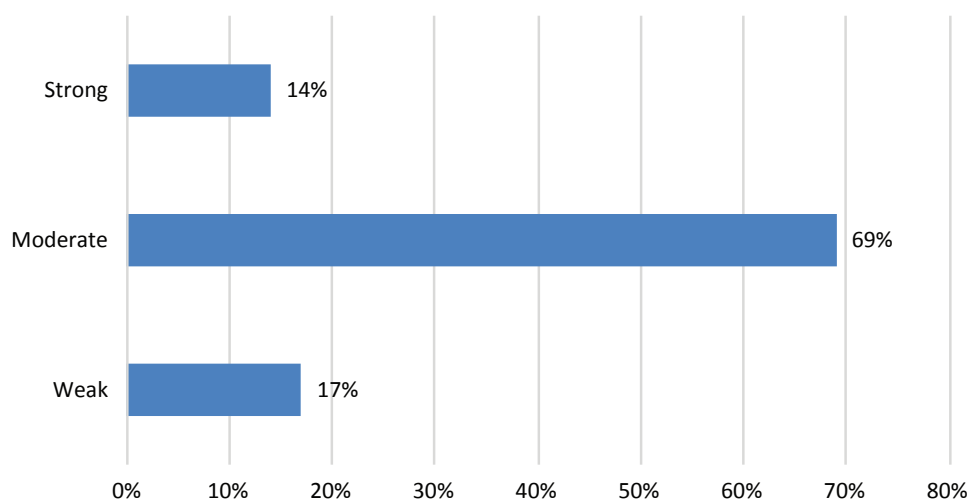
the manufacturing companies connected the crisis with the establishment of economic cooperation to a greater degree than the total number of the respondents (47%).

Figure 6.3. Relation between the economic crisis and the cooperation of the SMEs



Source: M. Ziółkowska, *Współpraca małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw jako reakcja na kryzys (The Cooperation Between Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises as Their Reaction to the Crisis)*. In: *Reakcja małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw na kryzys (The Reaction of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises to the Crisis)*, ed. A. Skowronek-Mielczarek, CeDeWu.pl, Warszawa 2016, p. 251.

Figure 6.4. The connection between the cooperation and the economic crisis



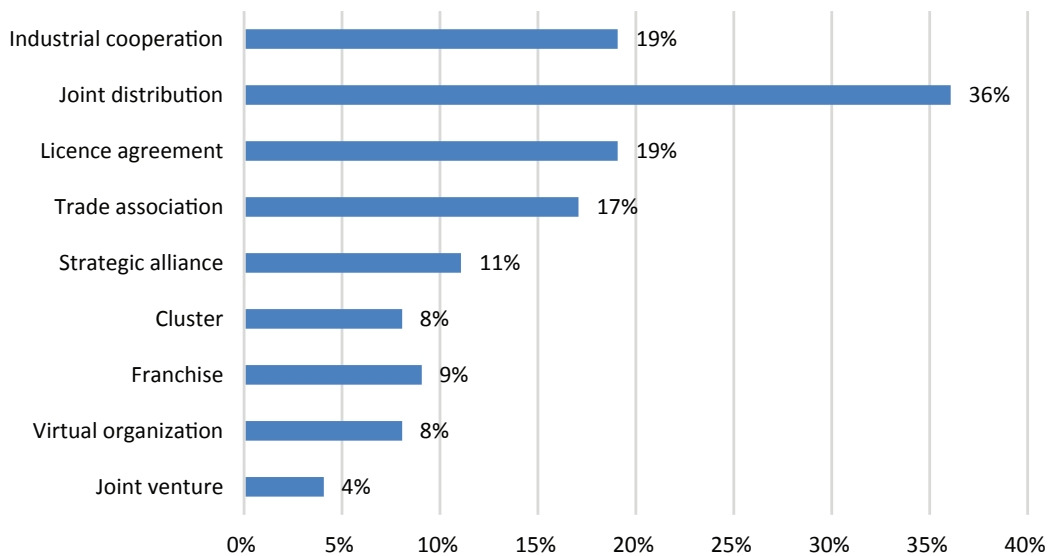
Source: M. Ziółkowska, *Współpraca małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw jako reakcja na kryzys (The Cooperation Between Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises as Their Reaction to the Crisis)*. In: *Reakcja małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw na kryzys (The Reaction of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises to the Crisis)*, ed. A. Skowronek-Mielczarek, CeDeWu.pl, Warszawa 2016, p. 253.

In the subsequent part of the study it was also significant to investigate the intensity of the relation between the companies' engagement in cooperation and the economic crisis. The distribution of the responses shows that in the case of the majority of the surveyed enterprises the connection was described as moderate (69%), in 17% of cases – as weak, while in 14% of the cases as strong (Figure 6.4.). In the majority of the cases the macroeconomic situation determined the establishment of the cooperation moderately. According to the respondents, the crisis was not a strong motivator for establishing cooperation.

6.3. The forms of cooperation between the SMEs at the time of the crisis

Further analysis was an attempt to identify dominant forms of cooperation with other entities on the market adopted by the SMEs (Figure 6.5.), which is an expression of the adaptation processes taking place in the face of the crisis in the companies representing the discussed sector.

Figure 6.5. The forms of cooperation adopted by the small and medium-sized enterprises in the face of the crisis



Source: M. Ziółkowska, *Współpraca małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw jako reakcja na kryzys (The Cooperation Between Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises as Their Reaction to the Crisis)*. In: *Reakcja małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw na kryzys (The Reaction of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises to the Crisis)*, ed. A. Skowronek-Mielczarek, CeDeWu.pl, Warszawa 2016, p. 258.

What is of interest in this area is the fact that the most frequent forms of cooperation observed in the enterprises in the study were: joint distribution (36%), industrial cooperation (19%), licence agreement (19%) and trade association (17%)⁵. Moreover, the distribution of the responses showed that subsequent positions were occupied by the modern models of cooperation which included: strategic alliance (11%), franchise (9%), cluster (8%), virtual organization (8%) and the joint venture agreement (4%). The results also explicitly demonstrate that joint distribution was the dominant form of cooperation. It that does not require either a significant capital connection or resources and can take various forms. Moreover, it is characterized by high flexibility, low level of formalization and by the possibility of adapting its scope to particular businesses. The aforementioned features make it a popular form of cooperation among the studied companies.

6.4. The effects of and the barriers to cooperation between small and medium-sized enterprises

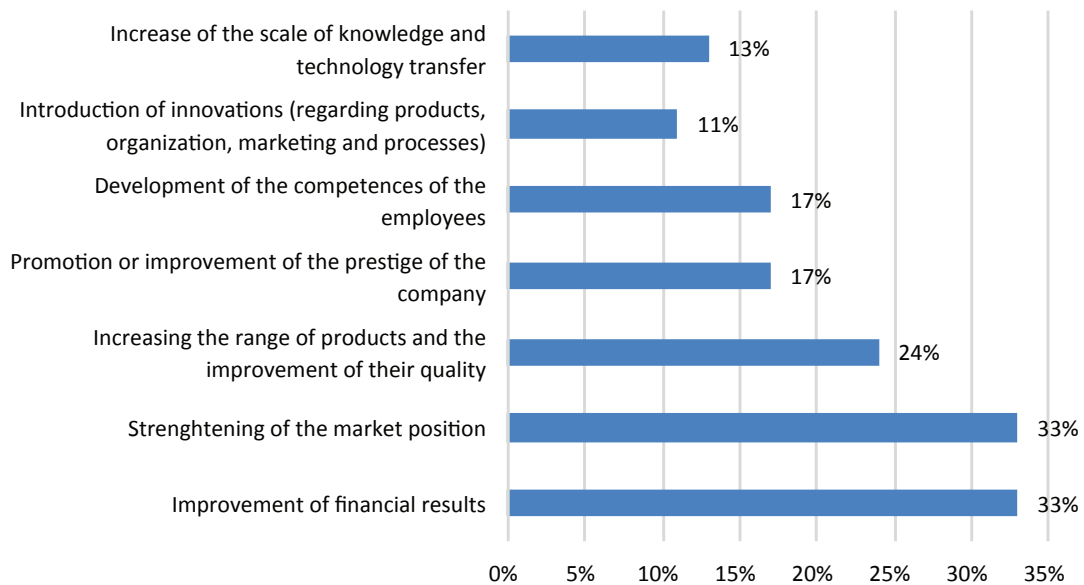
The subsequent part of the research performed in order to analyze the cooperation in the SME sector focused on the evaluation of the effects of cooperation between small and medium-sized enterprises with external entities. The distribution of the responses indicates that for the group of companies under study the increase of their financial results (33% of the responses) and strengthening of their market position (33%) were the most significant ones⁶ – see Figure 6.6.

Further positions included: increasing the range of products and the quality of the services of a given company (24%), promotion or enhancement of the company's prestige (17%) as well as the development of the competences of employees (17%). Less importance was attributed to the growth of the scale of the knowledge and technology transfer processes (13%) and to the introduction of innovations (concerning products, organization and marketing) – chosen by 11% of the respondents. The findings presented here demonstrate that the companies from the SME sector attach a lot of weight to the issue of financial results and the market position. The benefits of cooperation connected with innovations and the exchange of knowledge are perceived as much less significant.

⁵ The respondents could choose maximum 2 options.

⁶ The respondents could choose maximum 2 options.

Figure 6.6. Dominant effects of cooperation between small and medium enterprises in the years 2009–2014



Source: M. Ziółkowska, *Współpraca małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw jako reakcja na kryzys (The Cooperation Between Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises as Their Reaction to the Crisis)*. In: *Reakcja małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw na kryzys (The Reaction of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises to the Crisis)*, ed. A. Skowronek-Mielczarek, CeDeWu.pl, Warszawa 2016, p. 261.

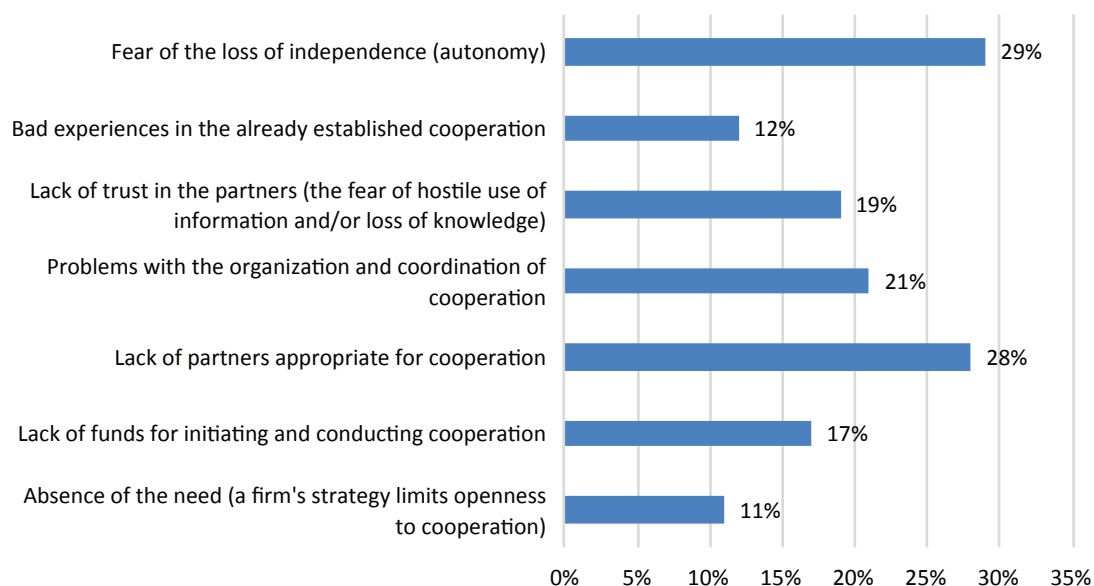
The next aspect of the analysis was the issue of the barriers to cooperation of the SMEs with external partners at the time of the crisis. The distribution of the answers demonstrates that the most frequently appearing discouraging factors were, on the one hand, the internal one – the fear of losing autonomy (in 29% of the cases), and on the other hand, the external factor – the lack of appropriate partners for cooperation (28%)⁷ – see Figure 6.7.

Further barriers to cooperation mentioned by the respondents included: problems with organization and coordination of cooperation (21%), the lack of trust in the partners stemming from the fear of hostile use of information and the loss of knowledge (19%) as well as the lack of funds for the initiation and conducting of cooperation (17%). Interestingly, less importance was attributed to the factors related to bad experiences connected with the cooperation already established (12%) and with the absence of the need for cooperation (11%)⁸.

⁷ The respondents could choose maximum 2 options.

⁸ More in: M. Ziółkowska, *Współpraca małych...* op.cit., p. 237–274.

Figure 6.7. Dominant barriers to cooperation of small and medium enterprises in the years 2009–2014



Source: M. Ziółkowska, *Współpraca małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw jako reakcja na kryzys (The Cooperation Between Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises as Their Reaction to the Crisis)*. In: *Reakcja małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw na kryzys (The Reaction of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises to the Crisis)*, ed. A. Skowronek-Mielczarek, CeDeWu.pl, Warszawa 2016, p. 266.

Further analysis identified significant barriers to cooperation faced by small businesses and mentioned more frequently than by the total number of the surveyed companies. The results highlighted the following factors: problems with organization and coordination of cooperation, the lack of trust in the partners (both mentioned by 26% of the respondents), whereas the loss of autonomy was reported by 26% of the respondents, which is less than by the total number of the enterprises in the study. On the basis of the data obtained in the research it might be concluded that for the medium-sized companies the most significant barriers are primarily those connected with the insufficient number of partners appropriate for cooperation (31%) as well as with the problems concerning organization and coordination of cooperation (30%).

What should also be pointed out is the dependence existing between the industry in which a given company operates and the barriers to cooperation. Interestingly, bad experiences occurring during the already established cooperation are significant more often for the manufacturing companies than for the total number of the interviewed firms (15%). Further analysis demonstrated that, in comparison to the total of

the enterprises, the trade companies attributed more importance to the problems with organization and coordination of cooperation (25% of the cases). The service companies, in turn, viewed the fear of the loss of autonomy as the greatest barrier (33% of the studied cases). What the results also showed is that for this group of companies the lack of funds for the initiation of cooperation and conducting it was a discouraging factor more often than for the total number of the respondents.

From the perspective of the scope of operations, the distribution of the answers indicates that in the case of the companies with an international scale of operations the biggest barrier is the lack of appropriate partners for establishing cooperation (indicated by 33% of the surveyed businesses). The representatives of the local or regional firms, however, reported the lack of funds for the initiation of the cooperation and conducting it more often than the other companies (25%). What is also interesting is the fact that young companies viewed the fear of losing autonomy as the biggest barrier, whereas in the case of the mature enterprises the lack of appropriate partners for cooperation was of the greatest importance.

6.5. Conclusions

The economic crisis in Poland triggered new phenomena in the sphere of operation of small and medium-sized enterprises. Moreover, it accelerated the growth processes and caused changes in their behaviour, which also occurred in the area of cooperation. The discussed period confirmed the vital role of cooperation between enterprises from the perspective of their short-term operations as well as in the long-term context. The past economic crisis demonstrated that the main failures that occurred on the market and their causes originated within the enterprises themselves. By setting short-term goals the companies took very high risk.

The time of the crisis was a period used for seeking new opportunities for growth and thus determined the introduction of adaptive behaviours. The companies focused on rebuilding their potential and attempted to use the current market situation to their advantage. It should be noted that this was a challenge across all areas of a company's operation, but to a great extent it also concerned the notion of cooperation and the opportunities created by gaining new skills, resources or the growth of potential. The research results clearly indicate that multilateral relations between enterprises are treated as strategic resources which entail the achievement of competitive advantage in a rapidly changing and turbulent environment.

Economic stagnation made the entrepreneurs aware of the uncertainty, unpredictability and instability of the economic situation. However, the positive aspect here is the fact that the SMEs recognized the crisis as a good opportunity to find new opportunities for growth, which was also visible in the area of cooperation with other entities on the market. They implemented new models of cooperation based on modern relations. What ought to be noted is that the structures based on cooperation are frequently founded on the exchange of resources and skills and therefore contribute to business cost reduction and generate opportunities for learning as well as for sharing experience.

The key element of the relations based on cooperation of entities is gaining the ability to conduct operations fast and in a flexible way. In the global economy the ability to react quickly is the core factor determining market success. Building competitive advantage concerning the time of reaction to the signals coming from the environment is a crucial element of partnership. Moreover, cooperation makes it possible for the business entities to reduce the cost of acquiring information. It also enables particular companies to increase their level of specialization by means of concentrating on their core abilities exploited in a coordinated way. Such processes allow for intelligent exploitation of the resources owned by partners and for the use of the knowledge potential. Enterprises gain easier access to rare resources and competences. What is more, establishing the connections between the enterprises from the SME sector contributes to the generation of innovations. Also, many models of cooperation are characterized by the complementary character of the abilities and resources of business partners.

The establishment of lasting cooperative relations by means of market cooperation allowed SMEs to reduce uncertainty through the creation of the conditions of mutual trust in a changeable business environment. It created an opportunity to increase the ability to adapt to the turbulent market as well. Flexible models of cooperation enabled the companies to reduce costs and relocate resources. Cooperation made it possible for them to acquire new growth potential and increase production power, thus supporting rationalization of their use.

The research results and the outcomes of the conducted analyses confirm the research thesis by emphasizing high flexibility of the enterprises representing the SME sector in the face of the crisis. In the course of analysis it was observed that the factors motivating for cooperation are primarily connected with financial aspects. Issues of surprisingly little importance for the firms included the acquisition of the partners' resources and the limitation of the uncertainty, which are described

in the literature as the ones that appear in the enterprises conducting business operations at the time of crisis. The theory proposing that the limitation of the uncertainty of conducting business activity at the time of difficult market situation leads to the establishment of cooperation in order to acquire the necessary resources is not confirmed by the outcome of this empirical research.

Another crucial aspect of the research was the observation of the forms of cooperation adopted by the SMEs in order to overcome the consequences of functioning at the time of economic stagnation. The analysis provides a few general conclusions concerning the forms of cooperation preferred by the businesses in the face of the economic crisis. The distribution of the responses allowed for establishing that the dominant form of cooperation was joint distribution, whereas the modern models were considerably less popular among the surveyed firms.

The adaptive processes taking place in SMEs in crisis conditions most often take the form of joint distribution. This trend confirms the thesis that building a common distribution chain can not only be performed fast but it also ensures the achievement of competitive advantage and enables the company to share the risk of functioning in a turbulent environment, which would be much higher if the company operated absolutely independently. It should also be pointed out that the modern forms of cooperation were also used in the process of growth of firms in the face of the economic crisis. However, there are no grounds to believe that at that time the enterprises began to use only the modern forms of cooperation with external partners. Relatively high proportion of the businesses reported the network-based forms of cooperation such as virtual organization, a cluster or franchise.

There exists a strong correlation between the effects of cooperation of businesses with external entities and the industry in which they operate. The crisis also verified the usefulness of the adopted forms of cooperation and identified the external and internal barriers the enterprises could face in the process. What is also worth mentioning is the correlation between the fear of losing autonomy and the characteristic features of a given company.

Apart from the factors discouraging the SMEs from cooperation, one should notice that as much as 11% of the surveyed firms reported the absence of the need for its establishment. The strategies adopted by these enterprises did not involve the willingness to create cooperative relations in the face of the economic stagnation. It is an interesting finding that gave an incentive for conducting further in-depth research and analyses.

The analysis concluded that the processes of market adaptation taking the form of engagement in cooperation and building lasting competitive advantage based on cooperation with market partners are particularly important. The examination of the behaviour of small and medium-sized enterprises indicates that these companies are more flexible in the face of the changing economic conditions. Their high level of resistance to the economic crisis is to a great extent a result of their weakness and low level of dependence on export as well as of the condition of the foreign markets which were affected by the crisis the most.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the influence of the consequences of the economic crisis on the SME sector in Poland was moderate. The period showed that the survival of SMEs was determined by the change of their approach from that based on short-term actions to the one involving long-term thinking.

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