

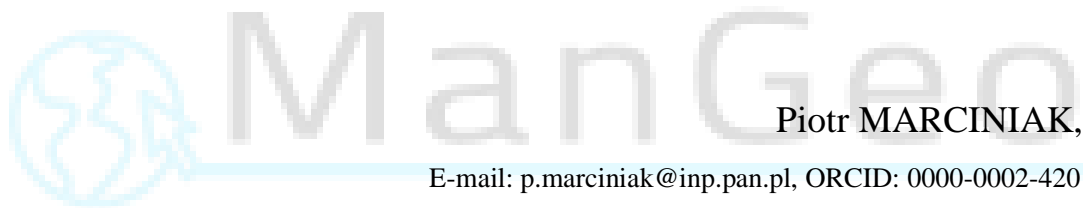


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**Chambers of commerce as a bridge to local socio-economic conditions and  
business dynamics: A proposal for a new research area for management  
geography**



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## Abstract

Investing abroad is a challenge. It requires exportable idea, location, resources, contractors, various contacts, etc. The key is good knowledge and understanding of the foreign market, customer needs, business environment, statutory and customary law. But in an extremely diverse social, cultural, political and even geopolitical world, it is very difficult to understand the specifics of a foreign market and its rules. The more geographically, culturally and politically distant the planned foreign market is, the more difficult this task is. Local employees, consultants and government agencies can be helpful. But chambers of commerce should be considered as one of the most effective institutional interface and a useful tool in international trade and investment. First of all, they support companies and refer business positions in consultation processes to public institutions. Some of them also deliver public services and tasks of a non-authoritative and authoritative nature. They are business neutral and independent. However, that this is an extremely diverse ecosystem. We find there both small private-law associations of 50-300 companies and large, public-law institutions associating all enterprises by operation of law. They operate as local, regional, industry, national and international (mainly bilateral) organizations. Hence this term is used collectively to refer to organizations with different methods of establishment, political and economical position, number of members, resources, tasks, area of operation, social perception and possibilities. Understanding the taxonomy and specifics of chambers and the principles of their operation in the country of potential investment or trade may constitute significant assets for a foreign company. This study aims to present the taxonomy of chambers in the context of their usefulness in planning and implementing international trade and foreign investments.

## Introduction

Planning and managing investments, production, trade, and services is always a complex process that requires considering multiple factors, including market analysis, available infrastructure and resources, the competitiveness of own project, etc. These processes become much more complicated when they take place abroad, where regulatory differences are often accompanied by political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental (PESTLE) factors (Marmol T., Feys B., 2016). Recognizing and managing them requires research and partners who understand foreign conditions. From the perspective of International Business (IB) and Economic Geography, an important element of Management Geography (ManGeo) analyses should be the review of institutional instruments that can facilitate the implementation of foreign projects. Their proper selection provides not only support, but is sometimes even a condition for the success of a business.

Of course, the concept of an institution can be considered from different perspectives, which are discussed in the new institutional economics (Coase, R. H., 1987, North, D. C., 1990, Williamson, O. E., 1985). But this paper examines the classic organizational aspects of chambers of commerce, providing a brief analysis of various models and their potential to support foreign investors.

Research on the impact of cultural differences and the business environment is the essence of the analysis of the ManGeo Working Papers series (<https://mangeo.org/working-papers/>). Considerations on chambers of commerce can provide insights into how their support can help in preparing for and managing foreign business operations.

### Ecosystem of chambers of commerce

Chambers of commerce can be found in most countries around the world. In February 2025, 124 of them (representing countries and territories, not lower levels such as regional ones) are listed as members of International Chambers of Commerce World Chambers Federation (<https://iccwbo.org/world-chambers-federation/our-chamber-network/>). Unfortunately, it was not possible to verify the total number of chambers operating at the national level in the literature or on websites.

And we know much less about the number and type of chambers operating at a lower level. The Eurochambres report from 2010 mentioned about 2,000 regional and local chambers (The European Chambers' System, p. 5). However, national studies contradict this. In Great Britain, it has been estimated that there are around 600-700 chambers of various types – affiliated and not affiliated (Heseltine, p. 14). The latest research conducted in Poland lists 446 local, regional and sectoral chambers (Brzeziński, Dorożyński, Kretek-Kamińska, Marciniak, Korczyńska, p. 5). Just these two studies list a total of over 1,000 chambers operating at local or sectoral level. The discrepancy in the rankings may, however, result from the fact that Eurochambres only counts those chambers that are members of national chambers. Looking beyond Europe for comparison, it is worth mentioning just random 2 examples. There are approximately 7,000 local chambers in the United States, of which 174 are accredited with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (<https://www.uschamber.com/program/federation-relations/chamber-accreditation>) and 515 chambers of commerce in Japan (<https://www.icci.or.jp/english/about/icci/index.html>). The way in which they are established, the structure, tasks, resources and number of members vary between countries.

Model studies of chambers of commerce categorize national systems based on key characteristics, such as their establishment process and membership structure. The simplest taxonomy was proposed by Rehker (1982), who divided chambers into two categories based on the method of their establishment: public-law and private-law. Pilgrim and Meier (1995) followed the same way when constructing the most commonly used taxonomy today, in which, to the continental (public-law) and Anglo-Saxon (private-law) models, they added a mixed model (a big box for organizations with elements of both systems are assigned).

Of course, these are not the only classifications of national ecosystems. From the perspective of these considerations, it is also worth mentioning the administrative (Bandarzewski K., 2014, p. 289, Marciniak P., 2023, pp. 199-205) or public (Fedotov V.I., 2007, pp. 11-18) model, in which the chamber of commerce is established by public-law act and controlled by the state (fully or partially). Such institutions are usually established to deliver strictly defined services - most often related to foreign trade and investment support. They exist in some countries in the Asia. The administrative model can also be used as a group for specialized state agencies / institutions that support foreign trade, use the name chamber of commerce or trade but do not associate companies.

The above division can be briefly visualized by describing the autonomy of chambers and the method of their establishment.

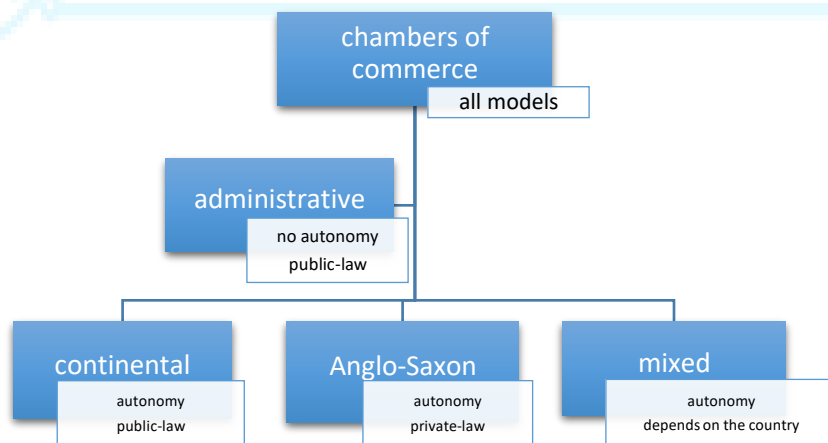


Figure 1 - Division of chambers of commerce into models taking into account the method of their establishment and autonomy - own study.

When looking at above model specification, everyone should be aware that in each country the chambers operate on slightly different principles. Despite the model similarities, they have different structure, political positions, competencies and resources. They are perceived differently by business, politicians and society. The scope of support they can provide to an investor or a foreign company will therefore vary greatly. These differences will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

At this point we should also note that the above classification of national models does not cover the entire ecosystem. From an international business perspective, another group of discussed organizations can be extremely helpful. These are bilateral chambers of commerce, specialized in networking and facilitating transactions between two specific countries. By their nature, they are private-law associations. They are created and financed by their members interested in developing and supporting business between specific countries. It is interesting that there are almost no multilateral chambers, apart from a few representing regional close business relations (e.g. there is a group of joint Belgian-Luxembourg foreign chambers: <https://belgianchambers.be/en/the-chambers-of-commerce/the-chambers-abroad/>).

Discussed ecosystem is further complemented by associations of national chambers, such as:

- International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) (iccwbo.org)
- Eurochambres (eurochambres.eu)
- European Federation of Bilateral Chambers of Commerce (eurobilateralchambers.eu)
- International Union of Bilateral Chambers of Commerce and Industry (iubcci.com)

Before discussing the potential of chambers of commerce worldwide, it is important to note that relatively few scientific studies on this topic exist in English-language literature. During Chambers of Commerce - 3rd International Conference Prof. Gratiela Noja from West University of Timisoara, Romania presented results of the latest research. During the search, only 303 English-language, peer-reviewed scientific articles on chambers of commerce were identified.

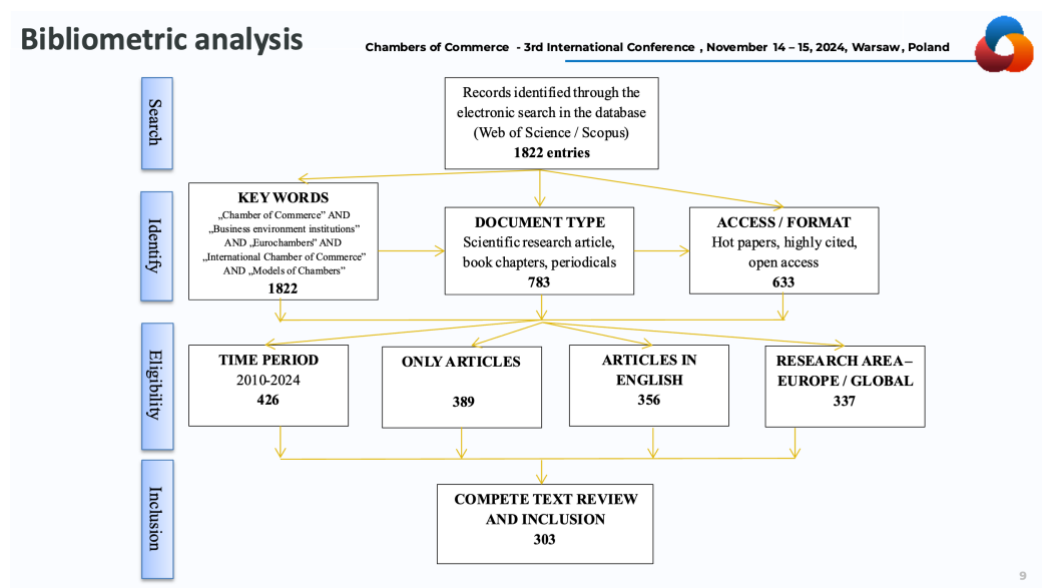


Figure 2 - Bibliometric analysis for Chambers of Commerce - 3rd International Conference, November 14 – 15, 2024, Warsaw, Poland - Prof. Gratiela Noja from West University of Timisoara, Romania.

Although the above study did not cover publications in other languages, it suggests a significant research gap. Moreover, a closer analysis of the content of the identified publications (also in other languages) allows us to put forward the thesis that most of them are based on general model or historical analyses and selected aspects of the chambers' activities. Relatively few of them provide a closer analysis of the activities and achievements of specific chambers. This makes it advisable to conduct systematic basic research on data that should be collected from chambers. In this situation, today's assessment of the opportunities offered to investors by cooperation with these organizations is perhaps based primarily on the information they publish and direct conversations.

In this diverse ecosystem, finding the right partner is not an easy task. The examples below are not intended to be a complete analysis. They were chosen to show directions for possible future research.

#### Private-law chambers

Generally, chambers established through private law procedures are referred to as the Anglo-Saxon model. However, many of them differ significantly from the British solutions (Marciniak 2023b). Its main common feature is the creation and liquidation of such organizations by decision of interested companies, which at the same time defines the voluntary nature of membership. However, they have very different basis of establishment, structure, competences and level of membership.

In some countries, their activities are regulated by dedicated acts. However, the scope of the regulations is very different. In Poland, Canada and Lithuania, there are quite extensive acts. In the United Kingdom, the act only describes the rules for registering the name "chamber of commerce". And in countries such as Belgium, Switzerland and the US, there are no regulations dedicated to chambers of commerce at all – they operate on the basis of regulations on associations and even limited liability companies (Bennet 1995, pp. 258-259, Marciniak 2023b, pp. 90-93, Marciniak 2023a, pp. 113-117).

In most countries chambers operate locally at the level of cities or regions (e.g. Canada, the UK or Belgium). In these countries, there may be an umbrella organization that represents all regional chambers (e.g., Belgium) or only some of them (e.g., the UK). It is interesting to note that, due to the way they are established, chambers may not exist in certain regions of a country, or their activities may be very limited due to a small number of members (e.g., in Sweden, strong chambers are concentrated in the southern part of the country). But there are also countries with chambers dedicated to specific industries (e.g. half of the chambers in Poland).

The purpose of their establishment determines the scope of their activities and competencies. An industry organization and a regional organization will provide different types of substantive and networking support for a foreign investor. The evaluation of potential benefits will depend on the focus of the investment.

If the investor's goal is to network with local companies, an important factor in the evaluation is the number of members in the chosen organization(s). In Europe, the average membership level is only 1-2% (Author's data obtained from conversations with chambers). In countries with a large number of chambers, this translates to an average of 50-300 members per organization (e.g., Poland). These are therefore organizations with limited potential. There are, however, countries with a strong regional structure (e.g. Belgium) or smaller ones, where only one national chamber operates. The networking potential is definitely higher in these last cases.

Note that in some countries with a private-law model, there may be parallel public-law chambers dedicated to specific forms of activity, in which membership is mandatory. Good examples are the agricultural chambers popular in Central and Eastern Europe and the Polish Chamber of Insurance (<https://piu.org.pl/en/>).



In the case of countries where chambers of commerce operate as public-law organizations, the situation is also not uniform. For example, in Germany and Austria there are well-organized ecosystems based on mandatory membership of all companies. This may require the investor to join the appropriate chamber. These are organizations with a strong position, representative of the market and offering a range of services for business - many of them aimed at supporting foreign trade and supporting investors. A very good example of this type of support is AUSSENWIRTSCHAFT AUSTRIA (or ADVANTAGE AUSTRIA), the Foreign Trade Promotion Organization of the Austrian Economy which operates with Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (WKO) and support of the Austrian government. It has about 100 offices in over 70 countries providing a broad range of intelligence and business development services for both Austrian companies and their international business partners.

## AUSSENWIRTSCHAFT AUSTRIA in the world



Figure 3 - AUSSENWIRTSCHAFT AUSTRIA - Austria's Internationalisation and Innovation Agency presentation for Chambers of Commerce - 3rd International Conference, November 14 – 15, 2024, Warsaw, Poland - Mag. Alexander Auböck, Advantage Austria Warsaw.

The strong business partner can be also the Netherlands Chamber of Commerce KVK. It is a public service provider which manages the Dutch Business Register (Handelsregister), provides information, advice and support to companies, promotes regional economic development and networking (<https://business.gov.nl/partners/about-kvk>).

However, not in all countries chambers of commerce under public law have such a strong position and do not provide so many services. In Hungary, the position of chambers is so weak that mandatory membership has been replaced by registration (Zachar 2023). In Spain, apart from the refusal of most companies to pay fees, the employers' organizations should be considered much more dynamic (Medina I., Molins J., 2025). These chambers can still be an important partner for a foreign investor. However, the support they can provide is limited

### Bilateral chambers

The mission of bilateral chambers of commerce is to promote trade, advocate for policies that support international cooperation and investments, facilitate business connections and strengthen economic ties between enterprises from two specific countries. They offer networking platforms, organize trade missions, and provide valuable information and resources to help navigate foreign markets. A good example of complex ecosystem of such dedicated chambers can be found in Belgium and Luxembourg and connected to Belgian Chambers (<https://belgianchambers.be/en/the-chambers-of-commerce/the-chambers-abroad/>). Such specialization in bilateral relations can result in very good investor support potential.

It may be helpful for investors to note that, typically, the first country mentioned in the name of a bilateral chamber indicates the location of the chamber's headquarters and the initiating party – for



example, the Polish Canadian Chamber of Commerce (<https://pccc.pl/>). However, some chambers may be established at the initiative of one country but have their headquarters in another, such as the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan (<https://japan.ahk.de/en/>).

## Conclusions

Chambers of commerce can serve as valuable sources of information or institutional partners in analyzing foreign markets and running a project. However, their potential and capabilities vary significantly both between countries and regions or industries.

First of all, it is important to remember that any business analysis should include verifying whether the planned business activity in the target market requires mandatory membership in a chamber of commerce. Regulations may differ depending on the ownership and legal structure of the venture or the industry. If the answer is positive, the company or investor must become a member of the chamber specified by law. As a consequence of this mandatory process business may, or sometimes must, use the services provided by the chamber (e.g. applying for transport permits or certificates of origin of goods).

In the absence of mandatory membership, the next step is to establish the structure of the chambers and indicate those that operate within the scope of the project. These may operate on local, regional, sectoral or national level. It is worth to check whether the scope of activities and services they declare are provided with a needed quality. Small organizations may have limited resources for some projects.

Finally, bilateral chambers can be a valuable source of information. By their nature, they take into account the differences between the two selected countries. They help to reach companies already operating internationally or specializing in servicing foreign partners. In countries where a public-law model operates at the national level, bilateral chambers generally exist alongside, as private-law associations. Membership in them is therefore voluntary. In the case of the administrative model, the implementation of a business project may require cooperation with a chamber functioning as a specialized government agency.

In each of the situations described above, it is worth establishing cooperation with the appropriate chambers. Supporting business is their statutory task. They do not conduct competitive activities. Their wide networks of contacts and knowledge of local conditions and the specifics of running a business are an invaluable source of sometimes unique information.

Chambers of commerce, as economic, social, and political organizations, are also a highly fascinating subject for interdisciplinary research, which helps explain their influence on the evolution of global economic processes. Researchers in various fields, including political science, law, economics, sociology, history, and even geography, study these organizations. A prime example is the work of Prof. Bennett, who examines business development and international relations from a multi-dimensional perspective, using the UK and the US as case studies. He analyzes both historical and contemporary factors driving these processes, including a geographical context (Bennett, 2011). His work serves as an excellent inspiration for incorporating chambers of commerce into ManGeo analyses.

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