

# EU Cohesion Policy support for problem areas identified in the NSRD 2030: spatial differentiation and policy directions

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**Abstract.** The Cohesion Policy (CP) is the European Union's largest financial instrument supporting regional development policy, with Poland being its largest beneficiary. This article presents the directions and intensity of CP support according to the location of fund implementation in areas classified as problematic in the *National Strategy for Regional Development 2030 (NSRD 2030)*. The analysis is based on data from the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy (MFiPR) concerning the implementation of projects at the municipal level under the 2014-2020 financial perspective. The results show that problematic areas received financial support comparable to that of other municipalities; however, the assistance was more strongly targeted at projects related to, among others, energy and labour market activation. Significant disparities in the level of support between eastern and western parts of the country were identified, which may result from greater allocations for regional programmes and the additional operational programme dedicated to Eastern Poland.

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## 1. Introduction

European funds, and the Cohesion Policy (CP) in particular, play a crucial role as an investment instrument in Poland, especially in the context of local and regional government units. Poland has been the largest beneficiary of CP in all full programming periods, namely 2007–2013, 2014–2020, and 2021–2027 (Churski, 2008; Dorożyński, 2013; Murzyn, 2016; ECA, 2019). The Cohesion Policy itself is the largest financial instrument of the European Union, accounting for approximately one third of the EU budget, and its primary objective is to strengthen socio-economic cohesion among Member States and reduce developmental disparities (Grosse, 2008; Murzyn, 2016; Jegorow, 2018). This approach results in the allocation of greater financial resources to those countries and regions that exhibit socio-economic underdevelopment.

The effectiveness of interventions implemented under CP has been the subject of numerous studies, including in Poland (Celińska-Janowicz et al., 2010; Gorzelak, 2014; Gibas & Heffner, 2015; Churski, 2016; Hryniewicz, 2017). The findings of these studies reveal considerable divergence in the assessment of the role of EU financial policy as an instrument for stimulating socio-economic growth and generating positive long-term economic effects. According to the review by Biedka (2021), some studies suggest that CP effectiveness depends on the type of area receiving support. For example, in studies of macro-regions (NUTS 1) and regions (NUTS 2), Mohl and Hagen (2010) demonstrated that CP had no significant impact on the wealthiest and transitional regions, in contrast to the least developed regions, where the importance of such support was clearly visible. Bradley (2006), in turn, showed that not only the allocation of funds but also their withdrawal affects regional development. Musiałkowska and Wiśniewski (2017) argue that, in the 2014–2020 period, the share of European funds in the current expenditure of local and regional governments was low and did not exceed 2%, which means that in this respect they played only a supplementary role. However, EU co-financing played a very significant role in capital expenditure, accounting for 10–35% of total capital expenditure and 60–75% of investment projects, programmes and tasks.

Survey research conducted by Rapacz (2004) among entrepreneurs in the Nysa Euroregion identified several problems contributing to the ineffective implementation of EU funds: a complicated application form that was particularly difficult to complete for more demanding projects; project assessment

based more on formal correctness than on the innovativeness of the project idea; excessive bureaucracy; and a long waiting period for the reimbursement of beneficiaries' own expenditures incurred during project implementation. This indicates that the relevance and impact of CP implementation depend on a range of factors, including both the available pool of EU support and the planned directions of expenditure, as well as the entire process of administration and management (including call procedures, project implementation monitoring, substantive support and beneficiary services).

Concerning findings were presented by Misiąg et al. (2013) and also discussed by Gorzelak (2015), who identified a relatively strong negative correlation ( $-0.59$ ) between the inflow of EU funds and GDP growth dynamics in Polish voivodeships in the years 2004–2012. Despite receiving significantly greater support, less-developed voivodeships did not achieve higher economic growth than regions with the largest urban agglomerations, which may, as the authors suggest, be the result of the metropolitanisation of regional development.

International studies provide additional insights. Medve-Bálint (2018) analysed two programming periods, 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, in southern and eastern EU countries. The study highlighted that investments in physical infrastructure constituted the dominant form of support, despite doubts regarding their positive effect on long-term economic growth. By contrast, less support was directed towards human capital development and research and development (R&D), even though these areas are considered particularly important for generating long-term economic growth. It was also emphasised that only part of the investments in physical infrastructure and institutional development corresponded to national needs, which suggests a preference for allocating European funds to this type of infrastructure.

Research by Surubaru (2017), based on qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires, examined the impact of administrative capacity on the implementation of CP in Romania and Bulgaria. The more favourable state of European fund implementation in Bulgaria resulted from greater administrative capacity, which in turn stemmed from a higher level of political stability. The findings of Gagliardi and Percoco (2017) further underline the importance of geographical characteristics and settlement structure for the development-oriented absorption of European funds. Balletto et al. (2020), analysing the impact of CP in the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods on the development of metropolitan areas in Italy, showed that EU

funds were concentrated primarily in the southern parts of the country, particularly in Palermo and Naples. Given the socio-economic disparities between the more-developed northern parts of Italy and the southern regions, this outcome should be regarded as favourable. Another Italian example is provided by Ciffolilli et al. (2018), who found a strong relationship between expenditure from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 2007–2013 and the creation of new enterprises at the subregional (NUTS 3) level. The ERDF may therefore constitute an important instrument contributing to the development of entrepreneurship in most Italian regions.

The positive impact of structural funds, including those forming part of CP, is also visible in Romania and Bulgaria, where European funds contribute to regional competitiveness, particularly with regard to economic and social indicators, thereby supporting growth in productivity and employment. However, with respect to technological indicators, the results showed that in Romania there was no correlation between structural funds and regional expenditure on R&D or employment in high-technology sectors (Gabriela & Deila, 2015). Interesting findings on CP in Romania can also be found in the studies by Marin et al. (2023a, 2023b), which indicate that, in 2014–2020, higher absorption occurred in those rural areas where the population remained stable or increased. In addition, the authors emphasise that rural areas with prior experience in using EU funds in the previous programming period performed better in absorbing resources in the subsequent period. Another important conclusion is that rural areas in a better fiscal condition, particularly in terms of own-source revenues, demonstrated greater capacity to absorb EU funds.

An important factor in assessing the effectiveness of CP, and European funds more generally, is the sphere of governance and the programming of expenditure priorities by managing authorities at both the national and regional levels. In this context, the studies by Jegorow (2015, 2016) should be highlighted, as the author points to a fundamentally flawed approach adopted by institutions managing European funds in Poland, where implementation effectiveness is most often reduced to the volume of contracted and settled funds. This constitutes a mistaken approach, as it places emphasis on the quantitative assessment of intervention effectiveness rather than on a qualitative diagnosis of how effectively the most pressing socio-economic problems are being addressed.

A weak point remains the evaluation of the CP implementation process in Poland, which often provides limited benefits for diagnosing challenges related to the implementation of EU funds and socio-economic needs. In this context, Rokicki (2011) emphasises that these problems concern not only Poland but also other Member States. Furthermore, Jegorow (2018) criticises the extensive administrative apparatus responsible for implementing CP in Poland, arguing that it contributes to the complexity of fund implementation and often generates unnecessary project costs, such as promotional activities or excessive application documentation. In the same study, the author analysed support provided under the 2007–2013 programming period and noted that the largest amounts of support were not directed to the poorest voivodeships in Poland (with the exception of the less-developed Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Podkarpackie voivodeships). Instead, the leading recipients of support included the relatively well-developed Mazowieckie, Łódzkie and Pomorskie voivodeships.

To summarise, any discussion of CP effectiveness must take into account the difficulty of separating its impact from other factors shaping socio-economic structures in a given country or region. Despite criticism, CP still represents a major opportunity for Polish regions in terms of accelerating the reduction of developmental disparities; at the same time, it poses a challenge for both central and local government administration in terms of its effective programming and implementation (Dorożyński, 2012; Jaki & Rojek, 2018). Cohesion policy is therefore the most important financial instrument of the European Union for reducing developmental disparities between the regions of the Community, while Poland, as a major beneficiary, has access to substantial investment opportunities. The national and international studies discussed above present CP as an exceptionally broad field of research in territorial, thematic and sectoral terms.

The importance of CP in Poland (which receives substantial financial resources for regional development), together with a certain research gap regarding detailed spatial analyses of fund allocation (including in problem areas), prompted the authors to undertake a study intended to enrich the existing literature. A particularly important stimulus was the release by the ministry responsible for regional development of a detailed database of projects financed (or co-financed) from EU funds, in which, for the first time in Poland, the allocation of these funds was estimated down to the municipal (gmina) level. On this basis, a unified database of funding in municipalities and other

local government units for the years 2015–2021 was prepared, which was subsequently used to develop, on behalf of the Polish Press Agency Local Government Service, a report on the use of EU funds in Poland (Śleszyński, 2023).

Against this background, the main aim of the article is to analyse the directions and intensity of support provided under CP in the 2014–2020 programming period in problem areas identified by the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organisation of the Polish Academy of Sciences for the purposes of the National Strategy for Regional Development 2030 (MFiPR, 2019), and previously for the Strategy for Responsible Development (MFiPR, 2016). By problem areas, the authors refer to municipalities threatened by permanent marginalisation (Śleszyński et al., 2017) and medium-sized cities losing their socio-economic functions (Śleszyński, 2017), according to the updated lists published on the website of the ministry responsible for regional development. In addition, the article addresses the extent to which EU intervention is reflected in socio-economic change trends in these problem areas during the implementation period of the programming perspective under consideration (i.e., 2014–2023). The indicators applied make it possible to assess differences in the level and orientation of support, as well as its co-occurrence with changes in selected socio-economic indicators; however, they do not allow the observed changes to be attributed unambiguously and exclusively to CP intervention.

This study is probably the first in Poland (apart from the above-mentioned PAP report) in which such analyses have been conducted for the entire country at the municipal level. This level of detail offers a new methodological and analytical perspective, in which the impact of EU funds on development can be examined while taking into account the strong heterogeneity of this tier of local government.

## 2. Research methodology

The analysis utilised a dataset of projects implemented under CP in Poland during the 2014–2020 programming period, obtained from the central ICT system SL 2014 and made available by the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy. The dataset covers sixteen regional operational programmes and six national operational programmes (Operational Programmes – Infrastructure and Environment (OP I&E), Intelligent Development (OP ID), Knowledge Education Development (OP KED),

Digital Poland (OP DP), Technical Assistance (OP TA), and one supra-regional programme dedicated to selected voivodeships, namely the Eastern Poland Operational Programme (OP EP)).

The data were subsequently grouped according to a custom classification of beneficiary types, distinguishing seven categories (Table 1), including private enterprises, central government administration, local (gmina) governments, and NGOs. In addition, nine thematic support areas were defined, covering, among others, vocational activation, e-services, entrepreneurship and innovation, and health and social services. Some of the proposed support area categories encompass broad domains; however, this reflects the wide thematic scope of the interventions on which the groupings were based.

For further analysis, all beneficiary types and seven out of the nine support areas were utilised, excluding Technical Assistance and Transport Infrastructure. These areas were omitted because they either do not have a direct impact on regional development and are specific in nature, or they relate primarily to administrative implementation of CP. The data were presented with reference to the locations of project implementation under CP in the 2014–2020 programming period.

The methods applied include the dominant support area/beneficiary type approach, cross-tabulation of mean values, and calculation of EU funding *per capita*, with the identification of quartiles and standard deviations across various territorial divisions. The results were analysed across multiple territorial scales, including voivodeships, subregions (NUTS3), and municipalities (gminas).

While using the monitoring data for CP in Poland, the authors acknowledge that the dataset contains certain quality-related issues, which pose challenges for the analysis. The first and most significant issue is the large number of projects without a specified location at the county (powiat) or municipality (gmina) level, which complicates spatial analyses below the voivodeship scale. Moreover, the recorded data often do not fully correspond to reality and contain errors, such as assigning the project location based on the beneficiary's headquarters for large, nationwide or voivodeship-wide projects. This can result in inflated values for voivodeship capitals, as this issue primarily affects projects implemented by central or regional government administrations and their organisational units.

These limitations highlight the need for caution when analysing CP project information. Accordingly, the authors carefully processed the data to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, the accuracy and reliability of the information.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of projects financed in Poland with EU funds in 2014–2020

		Beneficiaries (EU contribution in million PLN)							Total
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Areas of support (EU contribution in million PLN)	A	11,718	124	894	3,109	2,744	615	102	19,307
	B	10,749	4,375	1,162	3,772	1,202	876	2	22,138
	C	709	1,753	2,021	42,955	587	5,054	16	53,095
	D	12,564	2,478	5,266	749	326	98	0	21,481
	E	10,677	565	1,466	342	2,253	187	1	15,491
	F	4,062	2,303	4,817	1,044	1,392	637	3	14,258
	G	1,911	188	1,720	3,835	222	246	9	8,131
	H	26,076	25,640	14,795	863	333	7	0	67,715
	<b>Total</b>	<b>78,466</b>	<b>37,427</b>	<b>32,141</b>	<b>56,669</b>	<b>9,059</b>	<b>7,721</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>221,615</b>
	<b>Total (excl. H)</b>	<b>52,390</b>	<b>11,787</b>	<b>17,346</b>	<b>55,806</b>	<b>8,726</b>	<b>7,713</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>153,900</b>

Designations:

Types of beneficiaries: 1 – LGU (counties and municipalities), 2 – government administration, 3 – voivodeships, 4 – enterprises, 5 – "third" sector (NGOs, associations, communities, etc.), 6 – scientific units, 7 – others

Thematic areas of activities: A – labour activation together with education and reduction of marginalisation, B – entrepreneurship and innovation, C – energy, D – environment and adaptation to risks, E – tourism and cultural infrastructure together with revitalisation and local development, F – health and social services, G – e-services, H – communications infrastructure.

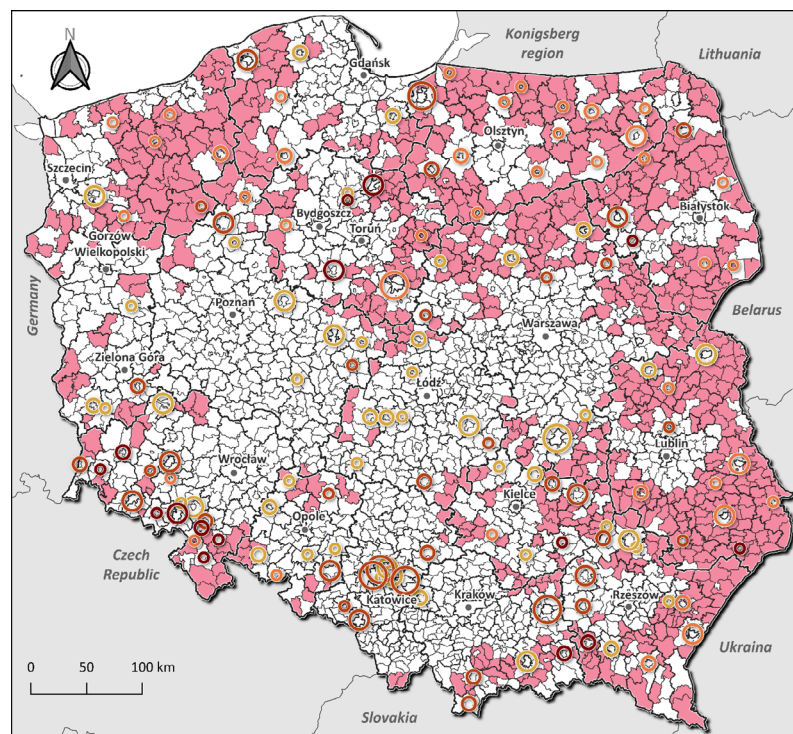
Source: own compilation based on the MFIPR project database

### 3. Problem areas identified in the NSRD 2030

The *National Strategy for Regional Development 2030* (MFIPR, 2019) is the key strategic document defining the directions and challenges of Polish regional policy, particularly in terms of socially inclusive and territorially balanced development. It represents a continuation and expansion of the *Strategy for Responsible Development until 2020* (with a perspective to 2030) (MFIPR, 2016). *NSRD 2030* identifies seven major regional policy challenges and defines three overarching and twelve specific objectives to be achieved by 2030. Within Objective 1, which focuses on enhancing the cohesion of national development in social, economic, environmental and spatial dimensions, as well as addressing the challenge of counteracting territorial inequalities and mitigating crises in degraded areas, *NSRD 2030* refers to Strategic Intervention Areas (SIAs) that face multiple developmental challenges. The designated SIAs include, among others, municipalities threatened by permanent marginalisation and medium-sized cities losing socio-economic functions – that is, areas characterised by weaker developmental conditions, demographic challenges and the loss of socio-economic roles.

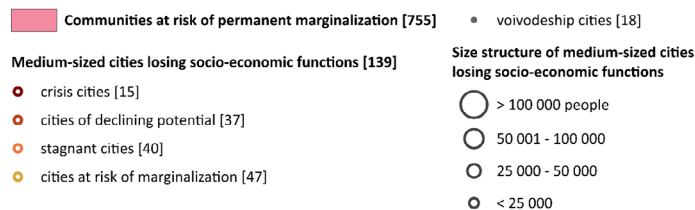
Over the past decade, the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organisation of the Polish Academy of Sciences has conducted studies resulting in a model delimitation and typology of municipalities at risk of permanent marginalisation and medium-sized cities losing socio-economic functions (Śleszyński et al., 2017; Śleszyński, 2017). These analyses have been updated several times (e.g., Śleszyński et al., 2020). Municipalities threatened by permanent marginalisation comprise rural areas and small towns, with the causes of these adverse processes being diverse and including factors such as delayed urbanisation, internal peripherality, and the transformational shock. Medium-sized cities losing socio-economic functions are urban centres with populations of 15–20 thousand (if they are county capitals) or other non-voivodeship cities with populations above 20 thousand, characterised by: the loss of administrative, social and economic functions; outmigration; and population ageing. References to municipalities at risk of permanent marginalisation and medium-sized cities losing socio-economic functions can also be found in various strategic documents, including regional development strategies of voivodeships.

According to updated data for 2019, out of 2,477 municipalities, 755 were identified as being at risk of permanent marginalisation, and 139 were classified as medium-sized cities losing socio-economic functions. This means that, nationwide, 891 municipalities (36% of all municipalities in Poland) can be considered problem areas (Fig. 1). In 2023, these designated problem areas



**Problem areas designated in the National Regional Development Strategy 2030 (NRDS 2030)**

*[the number of municipalities/cities is given in brackets]*



**Fig. 1.** Problem areas and so-called "losing socio-economic functions" cities designated in the NSRD 2030

Source: based on the National Strategy for Regional Development 2030 (Śleszyński et al., 2017; Śleszyński, 2017, updated)

were home to 9,9 million people, representing 26% of the national population. At the voivodeship level, this share ranged from 11% in Wielkopolskie and 16% in Mazowieckie to 51% in Lubelskie and as much as 60% in Warmińsko-Mazurskie.

#### 4. Cohesion Policy and support for problem areas

Within the CP framework for the 2014–2020 programming period, as of 31 December 2023, a total of 101,3 thousand agreements were signed, with EU co-financing amounting to PLN 363,1 billion. Of these, 91,9 thousand agreements, representing an EU contribution of PLN 221,7 billion, were linked to projects with a designated implementation loca-

tion at the municipal level. Projects in the areas of transport infrastructure (PLN 67,7 billion EU contribution) and technical assistance (PLN 2,4 billion EU contribution) were excluded from the detailed analysis due to their specific nature; these either relate to the administrative management, monitoring, and reporting of CP or are difficult if not controversial to allocate precisely. Excluding these two areas, which are mostly implemented by central or regional government entities, allows a clearer focus on the directions and amounts of support implemented by local beneficiaries, such as private-sector enterprises, the third sector, and municipal and county governments.

The detailed analysis covered a total of PLN 153,9 billion in EU co-financing, which corresponds to PLN 4,1 thousand *per capita*, of which PLN 3,9 thousand *per capita* was allocated to problem areas

and PLN 4,2 thousand *per capita* to other municipalities. Problem areas were characterised by slightly higher medians and quartiles, as well as lower standard deviations of EU co-financing *per capita* compared with units not classified under the adopted typologies. At a more detailed level, municipalities at risk of permanent marginalisation and medium-sized cities losing socio-economic functions received higher levels of EU support in the areas of vocational activation combined with education and

marginalisation reduction (PLN 605 *per capita*), energy (PLN 683 *per capita*), tourism and cultural infrastructure along with revitalisation and regional development (PLN 465 *per capita*), and e-services (PLN 305 *per capita*). These differences were generally not substantial, except in the area of entrepreneurship, where problem areas received significantly lower allocation from signed agreements, estimated at PLN 980 *per capita* compared with PLN 1,6 thousand *per capita* for other municipalities (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Characteristics of support from the 2014–2020 Cohesion Policy (excluding the areas of Technical Services and Communication Infrastructure) (utilisation status as of 31/12/2023)

Indicators	Problem areas in NSRD 2030				Other municipalities	
	Total	Total	Incl. municipalities at risk of permanent marginalisation	Incl. medium-sized cities losing socio-economic functions	total	of which, voivodeship cities
total co-financing [million PLN]	153,9	38,5	13,9	24,9	115,4	47,6
<i>per capita</i> (PLN)						
1st quartile	1,777	1,870	1,738	2,887	1,726	5,969
<b>2nd quartile (median)</b>	<b>2,838</b>	<b>2,916</b>	<b>2,766</b>	<b>3,920</b>	<b>2,767</b>	<b>6,912</b>
3rd quartile	4,344	4,527	4,304	5,401	4,247	8,550
standard deviation	2,798	2,524	2,525	2,288	2,939	2,271
<b>average</b>	<b>4,089</b>	<b>3,885</b>	<b>3,236</b>	<b>4,378</b>	<b>4,162</b>	<b>6,134</b>
including funds allocated for:						
Economic activation with education and reduction of marginalisation	513	605	501	684	480	588
Entrepreneurship	1,411	980	612	1,256	1,565	3,002
Energy sector	588	683	737	641	554	459
Environment and adaptation to threats	571	514	466	552	591	620
Tourism and cultural infrastructure with revitalisation and local development	412	465	376	535	392	487
Health and social services	379	333	164	463	395	815
e-services	216	305	380	247	184	162
<i>Share of projects whose beneficiaries are provincial governments and government administration with their subordinate entities (%)</i>	18.9	15.5	10.5	18.4	20.1	24.7
Funds allocated to beneficiaries - enterprises	1,483	1,319	1,097	1,482	1,541	2,333
Funds earmarked for beneficiaries - LGU (municipal, county)	1,392	1,589	1,489	1,669	1,321	1,313
Funds allocated to beneficiaries - NGOs, associations, communities and foundations	232	298	262	326	208	222
Funds earmarked for beneficiaries - scientific entities	205	71	44	90	253	745

Source: own compilation based on data from the Central Information and Communication System SL 2014 (MFIPR)

Lower EU allocations from signed agreements in problem municipalities were also observed in the areas of health and social services, as well as environment and climate change adaptation. This is consistent with the service role these centres play for larger functional urban areas and should not be interpreted as a deficiency: investments such as in a county or regional hospital or in public transport fleets need to be concentrated in a specific centre at the appropriate level of the administrative-settlement hierarchy, even though the benefits extend beyond that centre.

However, some projects implemented by certain entities have incorrectly assigned locations, often recorded solely based on the beneficiary's registered office. This can result in a significant share of funds, particularly in the entrepreneurship area being attributed to voivodeship capitals, even though the resources were actually "consumed" elsewhere. This issue is not unique to Poland; it has also been observed in the Czech Republic (Mirošník et al., 2014). The cited study presents the example of Prague, where 40% of funds obtained by beneficiaries relate to nationwide projects. The problem arises when a beneficiary from a voivodeship capital does not assign a specific implementation location, while some beneficiaries "mask" the true location by indicating their registered office as the sole project site. In such cases, only a detailed analysis of each project allows the discrepancy to be detected, and therefore the reported support for voivodeship capitals should be considered overestimated.

In terms of the amount of EU funding *per capita*, municipal and county local government units (LGUs) play the most significant role in problem areas, implementing projects with an average EU contribution of PLN 1,6 thousand *per capita*, surpassing entrepreneurs (PLN 1,3 thousand) and the "third sector" (PLN 298). In contrast, for other municipalities, the primary project beneficiaries were enterprises (PLN 1,5 thousand *per capita*), followed by municipal and county LGUs (PLN 1,3 thousand *per capita*). Problem municipalities also showed a greater role of the third sector compared to other municipalities (PLN 298 *per capita* vs. PLN 208 *per capita*). The opposite pattern was observed for research units, which concentrated their activity primarily in non-problem areas (PLN 253 *per capita* vs. PLN 71 for problem municipalities).

These results appear to confirm that problem areas do not possess the same potential as other municipalities – particularly larger urban centres – in terms of business and research activity, which emphasises the importance of local governments and third-sector entities, such as foundations, associa-

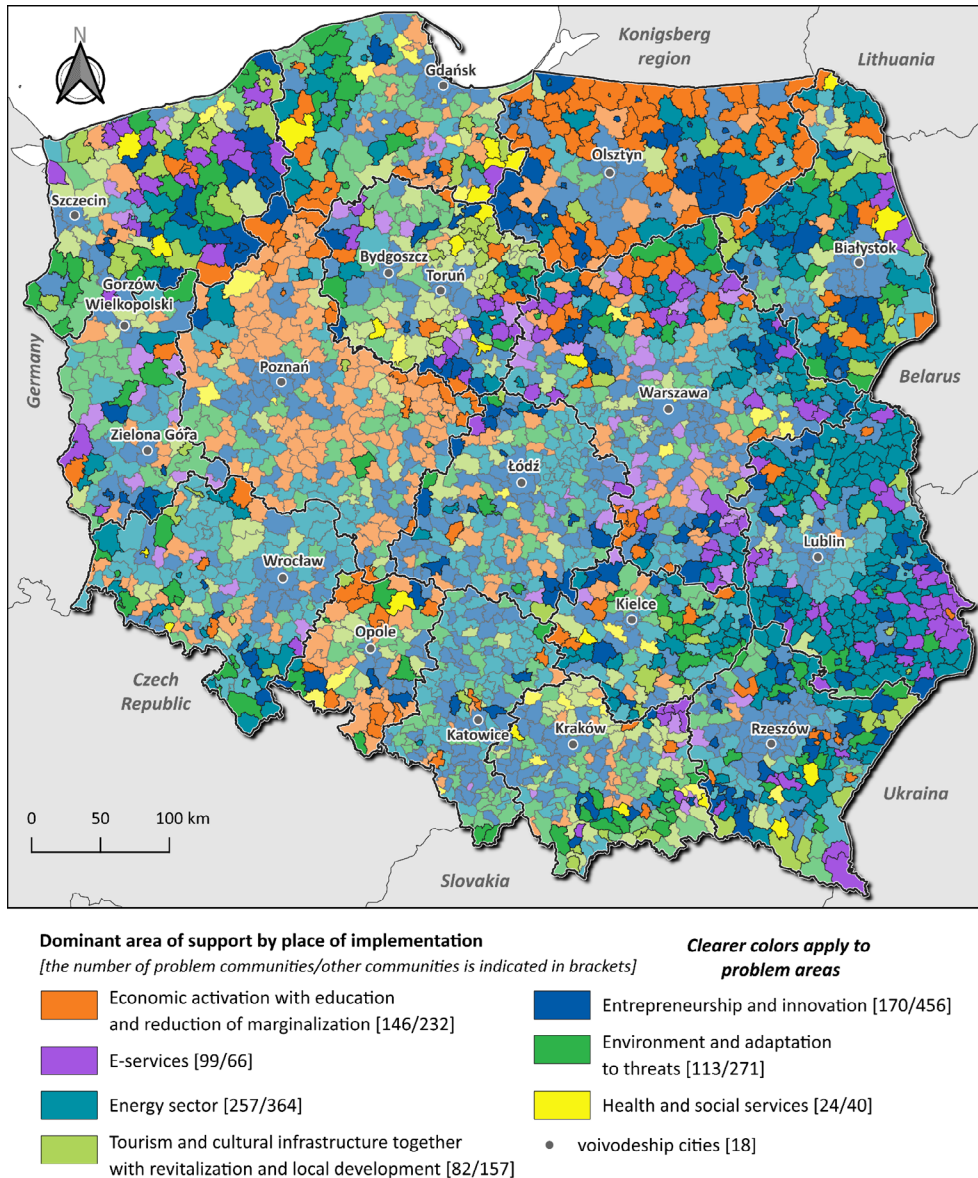
tions, or community organisations. Problem areas also exhibited a lower concentration of engagement from central and regional administration, with projects implemented by these entities accounting for 15.5%, as compared to 20.1% in the remaining municipalities. This difference can primarily be attributed to two factors: first, the already mentioned issue of potentially incorrect assignment of project locations to voivodeship capitals based on the beneficiaries' registered offices, and second, the significantly higher capacity especially of the largest urban centres to absorb EU funds, particularly in the areas of entrepreneurship and climate change adaptation. A substantial portion of funding is directed to projects implemented by companies or organisational units of central or regional government administration, which are mostly located in the 18 voivodeship capitals.

Turning to the spatial perspective of support areas, it should be noted that, in problem areas, the most frequently dominant sectors were energy (257 municipalities, i.e., 28.8% of all such units), entrepreneurship (170 municipalities, 19.1%), and vocational activation combined with education and marginalisation reduction (146 municipalities, 16.4%). In contrast, in other municipalities, the dominant sectors were entrepreneurship (456 municipalities, 28.8%), energy (364 municipalities, 23.0%) and environment and climate change adaptation (271 municipalities, 17.7%).

Comparing (Fig. 2) problem areas with other municipalities, projects in the energy and e-services sectors were more frequently dominant in problem municipalities, while projects in entrepreneurship and environment/climate adaptation were less prevalent. Spatially, a clear pattern emerges: energy and e-services were notably more dominant in municipalities in eastern Poland, particularly in the Lubelskie voivodeship, whereas in western Poland, vocational activation and environment/climate adaptation were more pronounced.

A range of factors influence this distribution, including the substantial allocation dedicated to actions related to renewable energy and public-sector efficiency within the regional operational programmes for the Lubelskie and Podkarpackie voivodeships, as well as a significant amount of contracted funding earmarked for digitalisation (broadband internet) for the Lublin voivodeship under the Digital Poland Programme. Similarly, vocational activation projects are prevalent in municipalities in the Wielkopolskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodeships, reflecting the financial streams from regional programmes.

Regarding the structure of beneficiaries implementing projects, it can be inferred that municipal



**Fig. 2.** Dominant type of beneficiary by place of implementation in the 2014–2020 Cohesion Policy

Source: own elaboration based on data from the Central Information and Communication System SL 2014

and county-level local government units play a key role in both problem municipalities and other municipalities. They dominate in 537 problem municipalities and towns (i.e., 60.3% of the total) and 864 other units (i.e., 54.5% of municipalities not classified as problem areas). In both cases, the second most important group of beneficiaries were enterprises, while other beneficiary groups particularly research institutions and the “third sector” play a clearly supplementary role.

Despite the similar pattern (Fig. 3), municipal and county-level local government units play a relatively more significant role in problem municipalities,

dominating a higher percentage (by 5.8 percentage points) of units than in other municipalities. The reverse trend is observed for enterprises, which more frequently (by 3.6 percentage points) appear as the dominant type of beneficiary in municipalities and towns not classified as problem areas. Similarly, central government administration and its companies, like enterprises, are more prominent in municipalities that are neither marginalised nor losing socio-economic functions.

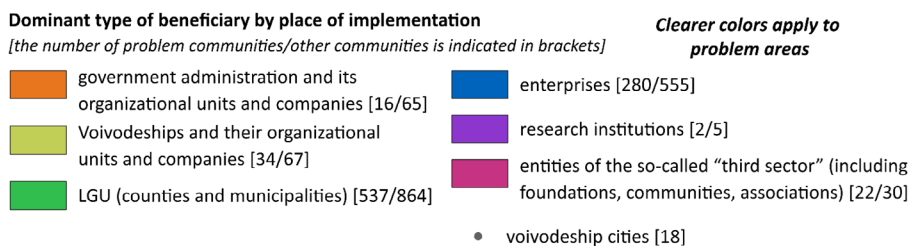
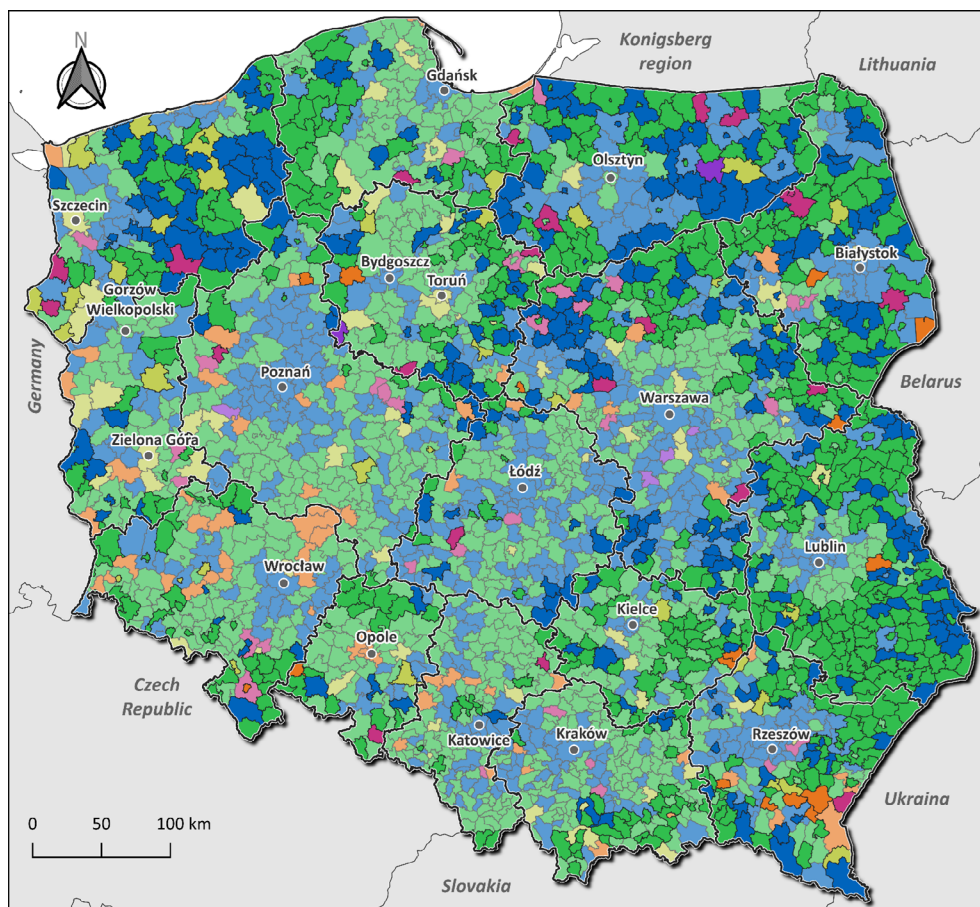
The relatively weak presence of central government administration and voivodeship-level units, together with their companies and organisational

units, results primarily from the exclusion of transport infrastructure areas from the detailed analysis, in which these entities account for as much as 59.7% of spatially implemented EU funding.

On average, the problem areas identified in the NSRD 2030 received EU Cohesion Policy funding of PLN 3,9 thousand *per capita* in the 2014–2020 financial perspective. Among them, the highest funding *per capita* was recorded in Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodeship (PLN 5,1 thousand), Świętokrzyskie (PLN 5,0 thousand), and Podkarpackie voivodeship (PLN 4,7 thousand), while the lowest was observed

in Mazowieckie (PLN 2,2 thousand), Lubuskie (PLN 2,8 thousand), and Pomorskie voivodeship (PLN 3,0 thousand). Notably, five of the voivodeships with the highest support for problem areas were located in eastern Poland. These disparities largely result from the principles and methodology of CP fund allocation, which favours less-developed states and regions.

In the 2014–2020 perspective, Mazowieckie was classified as a more-developed region, where GDP *per capita* was equal to or exceeded 90% of the EU-27 average. Consequently, this region received considerably lower allocations for its regional operation-



**Fig. 3.** Dominant type of beneficiary by place of implementation in the 2014–2020 Cohesion Policy

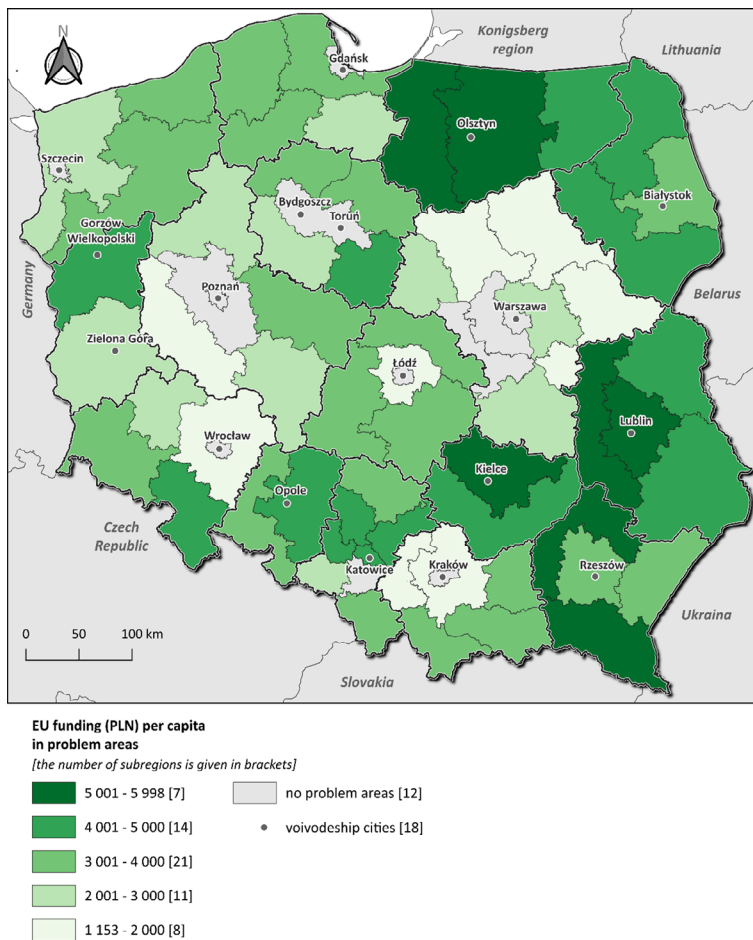
Source: own elaboration based on data from the Central Information and Communication System SL 2014

al programme – only 60% of the theoretical amount calculated under the allocation of funds among regional programmes (Gostomczyk, 2016). The allocation methodology (so-called “Berlin methodology”), which assigned ~40% of the funds to 16 regional operational programmes, favoured less-developed voivodeships and was based on criteria such as population size, GDP in PPS *per capita*, the deviation of GDP from the EU average, and unemployment rates relative to the EU average (Gostomczyk, 2016; Bień, 2018). As a result, the largest *per capita* allocations went to Świętokrzyskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Podkarpackie voivodeships, while the lowest were assigned to Mazowieckie, Wielkopolskie, Dolnośląskie and Śląskie voivodeships.

In addition to the increased allocations under regional operational programmes, the voivodeships of so-called Eastern Poland (Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Podlaskie, Lubelskie, Podkarpackie and Świętokrzyskie) also received a dedicated instrument – the East-

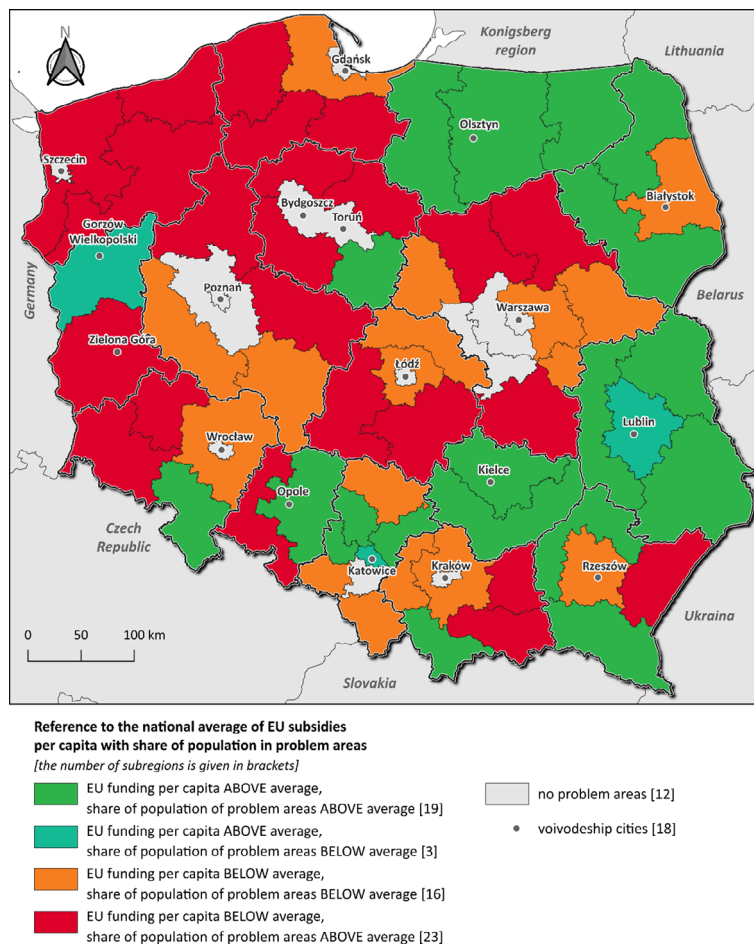
ern Poland Operational Programme – specifically targeting these regions. This programme enabled problem municipalities and medium-sized towns losing socio-economic functions to receive an increased share of EU funding, estimated at 5.5% of the total EU contribution from the 2014–2020 Cohesion Policy. The share varied by voivodeship, ranging from 7.7% in Podkarpackie and 7.4% in Podlaskie to 2.5% in Świętokrzyskie.

At the subregional level, all subregions with support above PLN 5 thousand were located in Eastern Poland, which also dominates the top ten rankings of subregions with the highest *per capita* EU funding. Conversely, the lowest support was recorded in the Kraków, Wrocław and Siedlce subregions, where EU funding was estimated at less than PLN 1,6 thousand *per capita*. Twenty subregions with the lowest funding (<PLN 3,1 thousand *per capita*) were mainly located outside Eastern Poland, particularly in Wielkopolskie, Pomorskie, and Dolnośląskie voivode-



**Fig. 4.** EU funding per capita by place of implementation in problem areas in the 2014–2020 Cohesion Policy as of 31.12.2023

Source: own compilation based on data from the SL 2014 Central Information and Communication System



**Fig. 5.** EU funding per capita by place of implementation in problem areas and reference of support to population concentration in problem areas by sub-regions in the 2014–2020 Cohesion Policy as of 31.12.2023

Source: own elaboration based on data from the Central Information and Communication System SL 2014

ships. Within Eastern Poland, the weakest-performing subregions were Białystok (PLN 3,2 thousand *per capita*) and Przemyśl (PLN 3,4 thousand *per capita*), ranking 24<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> in terms of the lowest *per capita* EU funding (Fig. 4).

The spatial distribution of support clearly demonstrates the disparities between eastern and western subregions, as well as the weak position of suburban subregions of Kraków, Łódź, and Wrocław. Moreover, low absorption of funds is noticeable in Mazowieckie, despite the significant presence of problem areas in the region (excluding Warsaw and its suburban zone).

Cross-referencing the level of CP absorption, measured as EU funding *per capita* in problem areas, with the average share of population living in such areas at the subregional level, reveals distinct patterns. Nineteen subregions were characterised by both funding and population share above the nation-

al average. Another three subregions showed a relatively favourable situation, where the level of support exceeded the national average, while the share of population residing in problem areas remained below the national threshold.

However, the largest group, comprising 23 subregions, received below-average EU funding *per capita* despite having a share of problem-area population above the national average. Among the 19 subregions where problem areas were concentrated and *per capita* funding was high, 13 were located in Eastern Poland. Only one subregion in Eastern Poland (Przemyśl) was classified as receiving below-average funding *per capita* despite having a population share in problem areas above the national mean.

Key factors influencing this distribution (Fig. 5) include both the relatively larger allocations in regional operational programmes for certain regions and the additional support provided by the dedi-

cated Eastern Poland Operational Programme. Average support from the Eastern Poland Operational Programme at the subregional level ranged from 1.4% in Suwałki to 11.5% in Łomża, with eight out of sixteen subregions exceeding 5% of the total EU funding according to the place of implementation. This additional instrument, favouring Eastern Poland, provided targeted support to municipalities threatened by persistent marginalisation and medium-sized towns losing socio-economic functions, contributing several percentage points to their total EU funding *per capita*.

## 5. The impact of Cohesion Policy on the dynamics of socio-economic changes in problem areas

To examine the potential impact of EU intervention on socio-economic changes in problem areas, a total of seven indicators were used, covering entrepreneurship and economic activity (4 indicators) as well as social issues (3 indicators). These

indicators comprised the number of business entities registered in REGON, individuals running a business (in sections I to U, excluding O), changes in municipalities' own revenues, and revenues from legal and natural persons (section 756). The social indicators comprised the number of unemployed persons, population receiving community social assistance, and the number of children enrolled in preschool education.

For the selected indicators, the scale of change between 2014 and 2020 was calculated and then correlated with the average level of EU funding in municipalities, broken down by different areas of support or types of beneficiaries (Table 3). Additionally, three standardised change indicators were calculated – an economic, a social and a combined socio-economic indicator – which were also correlated with selected areas of support and beneficiary types.

The results clearly show that the relationship between the dynamics of socio-economic changes and the level of support is not evident, neither across all 2,477 municipalities nor within problem areas or other municipalities not classified as problematic. In no case did the Pearson correlation exceed the range of –0.2 to

**Table 3.** Pearson correlation coefficient between EU funding per capita in selected support areas and beneficiary groups and changes in selected socio-economic indicators in problem areas

Indicators	Employment activation with education and reducing marginalisation	Entrepreneurship and innovation	Environment and climate adaptation	Health and social services	Local government (LGU)	Social organisations and religious associations	Enterprises	Total EU
Change in business entities in REGON (private sector) 2014–2023 (%)	-0.08	0.01			-0.12	-0.06	0.01	-0.12
Change in individuals conducting business activity (sections I–U without O) 2014–2023 (%)	-0.10	0.01			-0.10	-0.08	0.00	-0.12
Change in own revenues of municipalities 2014–2016 and 2021–2023 (%)	-0.06	-0.02			0.00	-0.04	-0.01	-0.07
Change in municipal revenues (PLN) (Section 756 – revenues from legal and natural persons, etc.) 2014–2016 and 2021–2023 (%)	-0.04	-0.01			-0.06	-0.01	0.02	-0.07
Change in persons using environmental social assistance 2014–2023 (%)	0.02			0.10	0.05	0.03	0.00	0.05
Change in unemployment 2014–2023 (%)	-0.08			-0.03	0.00	-0.04	0.01	0.00
Change in children in preschool education (ages 3–5) 2014–2023 (%)				-0.06	-0.10	-0.04	0.01	-0.08
Economic change index	-0.09	0.00	-0.10		-0.09	-0.06	0.01	-0.12
Social change index	-0.06	0.03	-0.02	0.00	-0.03	-0.02	0.01	-0.01

Source: own compilation based on data from the Central Information and Communication System SL 2014 (MFIPR)

0.2, and the majority of indicators showed a negative correlation.

These results reflect a range of factors, including the specific allocation of CP funds across voivodeships, the dominant role of the largest urban centres as fund recipients, and the system of spatial data collection. Therefore, the effect of EU support is not immediately apparent, which does not imply that it lacks significance in mitigating negative socio-economic phenomena. However, assessing the effectiveness of EU funds is challenging and requires very detailed, in-depth studies.

Furthermore, the complexity of CP support is often embedded at the level of calls for proposals rather than at the programme or action level, making it extremely difficult to perform a synthetic analysis summarising the overall impact of EU funds on the dynamics of socio-economic changes. Pearson correlation results ( $p < 0.05$  for key indicators) confirm the complexity of evaluating CP effectiveness in the 2014–2020 period.

## 6. Discussion

Despite being the European Union's most important financial instrument, the Cohesion Policy's effectiveness and impact on development are not unequivocal, as shown by various research findings. Its outcomes are influenced by multiple factors, ranging from administrative capacity and skilful fund programming to compliance with EU standards. These challenges are not unique to Poland; they are also observed in other countries that joined the EU after 2004.

For example, a study by Surubaru (2021) emphasises the positive impact of EU funds on the economies of Romania and Bulgaria, particularly in social and educational infrastructure. However, the issues of competent fund management, efficient planning, limiting corruption and replacing national strategies with EU programmes are crucial for achieving long-term results. A similar need for effective administration that tailors development policy to regional specificities is highlighted by Pirvu et al. (2018) in the case of Romania.

In Italy, structural funds were also found to have a positive effect on economic development (in this case, GDP *per capita*), and Coppola et al. (2017) note that reducing EU interventions in regional development policies could decrease disparities between regions. Crescenzi and Giua (2016) conclude that the Cohesion Policy (CP) supports socio-economic development, but its effects are most visible in regions with more favourable socio-economic conditions, which paradoxically contrasts with the principle of convergence.

The study by Di Caro and Fratesi (2021) underscores the ambiguous effects of CP and their variation across regions, distinguishing several categories based on the level of support and observed outcomes. Four voivodeships (including Podlaskie, Lubuskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie) were classified as regions with high EU support and significant positive results ("Effective policy"), while nine voivodeships (e.g., Małopolskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Łódzkie) were considered "Ineffective policy", where substantial funding did not translate into noticeable outcomes. Two regions (Mazowieckie and Wielkopolskie) fell into the "Trigger policy" category, characterised by low EU support but significant positive results, while Śląskie was the only region classified as "Marginal policy", with low EU support and negligible effects.

In Poland, there still appears to be a need to increase public institutions' sensitivity to development policies aimed at supporting problematic areas, particularly regarding the allocation of EU funds. Although problematic areas received a level of support similar to other municipalities during the 2014–2020 financial perspective, significant regional disparities are evident, particularly along the east–west axis. Such variations in support are not unique to Poland and can also be observed in countries like Romania, the Czech Republic and Italy, usually reflecting a concentration of support in larger cities and their suburban areas (Pirvu et al., 2018; Kachniarz et al., 2019; Balletto et al., 2020).

Similar conclusions were drawn by Kisiała et al. (2015) and Mróz et al. (2023), who noted that urban areas, especially regional capitals and their metropolitan functional areas, are the primary recipients of support. Pietrowski (2023), based on the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 financial perspectives, reached similar conclusions – that urban municipalities (particularly major urban centres) attracted the most funds. Part of this outcome results from often unfair assignment of government and regional authority projects to regional capitals.

For example, during 2014–2020, EU support *per capita* for urban municipalities (excluding technical assistance and transport infrastructure projects) amounted to PLN 5,1 thousand, as compared to PLN 3,0 thousand for rural municipalities. After excluding government and voivodeship projects (often incorrectly attributed only to regional capitals), *per capita* funding was PLN 3,9 thousand for urban and PLN 2,7 thousand for rural municipalities. Among the 755 municipalities at risk of permanent marginalisation (only three of which are urban) and 139 medium-sized towns losing socio-economic functions, EU support *per capita* differed substantially between municipalities (PLN 3,2 thousand) and towns (PLN 4,4 thousand).

Overall, CP should focus more on supporting areas most vulnerable to the entrenchment of negative socio-economic trends. This dual approach involves both marginalised rural areas and stagnating urban areas. A major challenge is the lack of a deeper perspective on development issues below the regional (NUTS 2) or voivodeship level, as evidenced in 2014–2020, when problematic areas in Eastern Poland received greater opportunities due to higher allocations in regional programmes and the separate Eastern Poland Operational Programme covering five voivodeships. Problematic areas in other parts of the country particularly in the north-west, where they are highly concentrated faced greater difficulties in accessing preferential EU funding.

This is particularly relevant for local investments, where European funds play a significant role. As noted by Czudec (2017) and Satoła (2009), rural municipalities that more actively utilised EU support tended to invest more. European funds are therefore crucial for improving socio-economic conditions, especially in peripheral regions. Based on the principles of programming and implementation of Cohesion Policy, convergence goals have not been fully achieved, as evidenced by the territorial disparities in support among problematic municipalities.

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of this study was to analyse the directions and levels of support provided by Cohesion Policy (CP) funds for 2014–2020 in problem areas identified in the *National Strategy for Regional Development 2030*, in comparison to other areas. Those areas defined as “problem areas” were 755 municipalities at risk of permanent marginalisation and 139 medium-sized towns losing socio-economic functions, totalling 891 municipalities. A detailed analysis was conducted using data from regional and national operational programmes. Projects with an assigned implementation location were categorised by areas of support and types of beneficiaries, and the analysis included all data except contracts classified under technical assistance and transport infrastructure. In addition, an attempt was made to assess the effectiveness of CP support by estimating the Pearson correlation between the average level of EU support *per capita* in selected areas of support and beneficiary types and the average dynamics of selected socio-economic indicators in the problem areas.

The study found that problem areas in 2014–2020 received slightly lower EU support, measured as EU funding *per capita*, compared to other municipalities. However, differences are evident within the structure of

problem areas: medium-sized towns losing socio-economic functions received significantly higher funding than municipalities at risk of permanent marginalisation. The main areas of project implementation in problem areas concerned entrepreneurship, energy and employment activation along with education and reducing marginalisation, although support for entrepreneurship was lower than in municipalities not classified as problem areas. Projects related to e-services or cultural-tourism infrastructure, revitalisation and regional development were more frequently implemented in problem areas, while the opposite trend was observed in environmental and climate adaptation projects, as well as health and social services.

Municipal and county-level local government units (LGUs) play a key role in the implementation of CP in problem areas, followed by enterprises. The “third sector” (foundations, associations, religious organisations) also has a relatively strong presence compared to other municipalities. Problematic municipalities received substantially less support through projects of public administration and voivodeship governments, which also reflects the specifics of data collection by place of implementation, especially for regional capitals.

Aggregating data to the subregional level revealed significant disparities in EU funding *per capita* between eastern and western units, due to increased allocations in regional operational programmes for eastern voivodeships and the dedicated Eastern Poland Operational Programme for five voivodeships. No clear relationship was observed between the overall level of EU support, or support by specific areas or beneficiaries, and the dynamics of socio-economic changes, as all correlations ranged between -0.2 and 0.2, highlighting the complexity of evaluating CP as a convergence tool.

Despite certain limitations related to data from the SL 2014 system, the results provide interesting insights into the direction and intensity of support for problem areas identified in the NSRD 2030. Cohesion Policy appears to “reward” problem areas, but mainly if they are located in less-developed voivodeships, exemplified by the Eastern Poland Operational Programme. This programme additionally supports municipalities at risk of permanent marginalisation and medium-sized towns losing socio-economic functions, but its territorial restriction to a select group of voivodeships is a notable limitation. Additional support for the Eastern Poland voivodeships is not inherently problematic, especially considering the concentration of socio-economic challenges they face, as recognised by the European Commission, which classified these five eastern voivodeships as lagging regions with low-income status (European Commission, 2017).

A key issue remains the lack of a perspective on marginalisation and stagnation below the voivodeship level, taking into account factors such as settlement networks, functional types of municipalities, and spatial relations. It is therefore necessary to consider how to effectively support problem areas, taking into account their main demographic and socio-economic challenges as well as their internal regional diversity.

One potential solution would be redefining programmes like the 2014–2020 Eastern Poland Operational Programme (analogous to the 2007–2013 programme of the same name) to cover problematic subregions across the entire country. This approach would particularly benefit problem areas in voivodeships such as Zachodniopomorskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Dolnośląskie and Pomorskie, where the concentration of population in the targeted municipalities and towns is often higher than in subregions of eastern Poland.

Another systemic solution could involve allocating additional funds within regional operational programmes exclusively to subregions with concentrated problem areas, or directly to municipalities at risk of permanent marginalisation and medium-sized towns losing socio-economic functions. In this scenario, voivodeship governments, in consultation with local governments, could identify key socio-economic challenges tailored to regional needs and more accurately programme funds.

An appropriate diagnosis of the needs of problem areas is critical, especially given Poland's increasingly challenging demographic situation, which is particularly visible in this group of municipalities and towns. Such a diagnosis, combined with a multi-faceted analysis of the absorption of previously allocated CP funds, would enhance the efficiency and relevance of EU assistance, thus promoting regional convergence in Poland.

It can therefore be concluded that, in its current form, Cohesion Policy is not entirely fulfilling its role as a mechanism for building cohesion between regions. One recommended change would be greater local allocation ("local perspective") in light of the current strong voivodeship-level allocation. This is feasible, as demonstrated in the 2021–2027 programming period, where Mazowieckie voivodeship was split into two NUTS-2 regions – Warszawski Stołeczny and the rest of Mazowieckie. As a result, the regional Mazovian area, due to weaker socio-economic indicators, was included in the supra-regional European Funds for the Eastern Poland Operational Programme for 2021–2027. This approach, beneficial for Mazowieckie in 2014–2020, should be analysed and potentially implemented when designing support strategies for problem areas in other voivodeships where intra-regional polarisation and divergence processes are particularly pronounced (Dolnośląskie, Zachodniopomorskie, etc.).

It is worth noting that the current 2021–2027 perspective does not introduce any new tools for supporting problem areas, except for expanding the Eastern Poland Operational Programme to include the Mazovian regional area. A strategy focused on revitalising economic conditions and combating social marginalisation in the most peripheral regions is lacking. The main difference between 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 is the expansion of the Community-Led Local Development instrument (based on Local Action Groups) from two to ten voivodeships, which promotes local initiatives and integrated structures among neighbouring municipalities. A future financial perspective after 2028 could provide opportunities for problem municipalities and towns, requiring strategies that include degraded and peripheral areas as key recipients of Cohesion Policy benefits.

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