

## Understanding strategies for overcoming peripherality: A Polish experience of transition

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**Abstract.** This article addresses the problematic county of Wieruszów—a peripheral area of Poland, constituting a classic case of historical development away from urban agglomerations, additionally burdened by the stigma of a former near-border location, and later (including today) functioning at the fringe of an administrative district. The area in question exemplifies structural transformations associated with changes in patterns of accessibility to large urban agglomerations following the coming into operation of a key expressway. The work detailed here has sought to analyse the aforementioned area's position vis-à-vis accessibility, as set against the background of factors justifying the description of “inner periphery”. An essential element in accounting for any strategy for overcoming this peripherality takes the form of the results of in-depth interviews carried out by the authors. Joint consideration of the two perspectives mentioned, i.e. the structural (showing the position of a given area in relation to its proximate (regional) and ultimate (national) environments), and the social (i.e. the expert assessment), ultimately allowed for an assessment of opportunities and threats as far as the overcoming of peripherality in its geographic and social dimensions is concerned.

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## 1. Introduction

Spatially conditioned disparities in levels of development between regions are inevitable and ever-present, but their causes and status continue to be both discussed and addressed, most of all by those responsible for planning and management, but also obviously by those “on the receiving end”, i.e. members of society who experience the consequences of both the spontaneous processes and the active regional policy/policies being pursued (Sommers, Mehretu, 1998). While sensible politicians and policymakers refuse to entertain the idea that disparities of this kind can be eliminated entirely, most modern concepts of relevance outline actions to be taken to ensure that they remain within certain limits, so as not to pose a threat to social stability in the state as a whole, or in any of its regions. This leaves social and economic development in peripheral areas as key issues when it comes to the shaping and implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy in which the dimension of territorial cohesion has come to be a fully-fledged pillar within the strategy to reduce disparities, alongside the social and economic dimensions (e.g., Bonde, 2007). The territorial dimension of development has assumed special significance following adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, especially where place-based policy is concerned (Barca, 2009).

Thus, modern development policy, by deploying different legal, financial and institutional instruments, above all seeks to ensure equality of opportunity when it comes to people being active occupationally and socially, irrespective of their place of residence. The EU Cohesion Policy thus attaches special weight to access to services of general interest, as well as to transport-related access to centres able to offer such services (Świątek et al., 2013).

In those EU Member States that are experiencing rapid (typically post-accession) transformations in a modernising direction, primarily thanks to development centred around newly-built expressways, the issue of the role played by the transport factor in regions’ economic and social development gains frequent consideration as regional policy is being shaped (Ludlow, Rauhut, 2013; Milbert et al., 2013; Wiśniewski, Komornicki, 2015). In many cases, key importance is ascribed to the impact new investments in transport (but also other means of communication, like the Internet) can exert on shaping the structure of regions in general, but especially those that are located peripherally to core centres, whose rank may either fall further or rise in consequence. First and foremost, these are of course rural areas, if typically also supporting small urban centres (Bryan et al., 1997; Naldi et al., 2015).

In the work detailed here, matters relate to the development (or non-development) of the Polish *powiat* (county-level unit of administration) of Wieruszów which has been regarded as peripherally located vis-à-vis large urban centres. It nevertheless exemplifies what the latest scientific literature has tended to refer to as an “internal periphery” (Czapiewski, Janc, 2009; Jakešová, Vaishar, 2012), or an “inner periphery” (Copus et al., 2017), given that Wieruszów lies in the centre of Poland. In general, this county offers an interesting case of the appearance of new conditioning of social and economic development following the launch of one of the aforesaid expressways nearby, which can only be seen as improving accessibility and communication (travel times) in respect of the large urban agglomerations represented by Łódź (the capital of the voivodship within which Wieruszów lies) and Wrocław (the capital of the neighbouring Dolnośląskie Voivodship).

The interest here is first and foremost in public perceptions of the development-related prob-

lems currently present in Wieruszów, especially as these relate to strategic documents currently in force which regard development of the transport network as a key factor ensuring economic growth and an improvement in life quality. A fundamental objective of the work performed has thus been to have this area's key social and economic problems identified by experts whose professional tasks involve either the planning and implementation of programmes of regional and local development, or the appraisal and evaluation of their impacts. A key role in any such evaluation is assigned to changes in the accessibility of the aforementioned services of general interest.

The analysis of what the above experts had to say represents material for discussion and for an attempt to answer key questions as to whether new road (expressway) developments so typical for and essential to contemporary regional development may actually bring solutions to the key social and economic problems burdening a peripheral area.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework of the study

There is a long tradition of researchers taking an interest in the reasons for the emergence of disparities in levels of economic and social development in/between regions, with various theories being developed in consequence (e.g., Capello, 2011; Pinto, 2015). Much of this work starts from naturally-occurring spatial differences, or views space as a factor capable of accounting for the growth of some regions and the marginalisation of others (Grosse, 2002; Vaishar, 2006; Jones et al., 2007). However, the current discussion concerns the various dimensions that peripherality can entail, and is thus both richer and more diverse (e.g., Dawkins, 2003; Edwards, 2007; Capello, Nijkamp, 2009; Nijkamp, 2009; Málíková et al., 2016). It also extends from theory and analysis into the actual practice of regional and local development (e.g., Agnew, Corbridge, 1995; Copus, 2001; McDonagh, 2002).

The first theories of regional development sought to account for the decisions taken as businesses located economic (e.g., manufacturing) activity, as well

as services. Location theories after Alfred Weber and the Central Place Theory of Walter Christaller resembled further theories that followed on and developed from them in stressing the way businesses sought to minimise transport costs (Nurzyńska, 2016). The many further concepts referred to in the previous sentence all pushed the idea that the process of agglomeration denoted benefits, with priority thus assigned to conceptualisations of space that could distinguish between regions of growth and stagnation (North, 1955; Capello, 2011).

However, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also brought a development of theories that paid attention to genetic factors. An example here was the cumulative causation theory espoused by Gunnar Myrdal (1957) and Nicholas Kaldor (1970). This launched work to find explanations of more of a social or cultural nature, for example entailing the influence of decision-making mechanisms, the role of knowledge and innovation, and the role of institutions (cf. Williamson, 1985). These new concepts frequently linked up with models of neo-endogenous and local development (Capello, 2011).

Likewise, core-periphery theory as conceived today has various conceptualisations inherent to it, if mainly ones linked to the different methodological approaches taken (Lucas Jr, 1988; Krugman, 1991; Mehretu et al., 2000; Leimgruber, 2004). For her part, regional economist Roberta Capello (2007; 2011) calls upon researchers to take more account of the microscale, and hence of behaviour in society and other non-material aspects of development. This in turn denotes the devising of analytical responses that can espouse qualitative methodologies.

Proposals invoking the societal generation and shaping of space (constructivism) stress its relational nature (Harvey, 1989; Gregory, 1994; Soja, 1996). Thus, interest is directed not just at the emergence of marginal space and the measurement of growing or declining spatial disparities, but also at society's (or a local community's) involvement in or commitment to the critical assessment of processes that lead to such disparities taking shape. This means that new ways of looking at core-periphery divisions also relate "peripherality" to the state of social awareness of inhabitants (Schmidt, 1998; Wójcik, 2017), not least what they think of themselves as (potential) inhabitants of a periphery.

The insertion of a more profound and far-reaching cultural interpretation into work on regional development gave rise to debate over the search for other manifestations of peripherality, and the obvious consequence was a new, broader way of looking at peripheries in the social, political and institutional contexts (Copus, 2001; Boschma, 2005; Leimgruber, 2004). Among other things, the planning and implementation of programmes under the EU Cohesion Policy has come to assign ever-greater importance to the aforesaid concept of the “inner periphery” (Copus et al., 2017). This is deemed to arise out of new forms of connection or relationship with the immediate or further surroundings, and hence changes in the conditioning of access to public services and labour markets.

Changes in conditioning as they relate to the locating of economic activity and even the distribution of population are such that efforts to identify declining regions have to extend beyond the traditional logic set out in core-periphery concepts. For regional configurations of growth and stagnation seem to assume the form of mosaics reflecting the impact of complex external and internal factors. In turn, the logical outcome is that research into the mechanisms underpinning local development should require a mix of both quantitative and qualitative instrumentation. Málíková et al. (2016) write that the “[...] internal periphery, unlike its external form (traditionally perceived in terms of geographical location, e.g. along a state border), can be found in a country, on the outskirts of impact of regional centres, or in economically weak areas along regional borders.”

Thus, a debate on the perceptions of peripherality held by society in general and local communities in particular is present in academic discourse, and especially in the work on the developmental disparities present within the European Union (McDonagh, 2002). The paper by Crewe (1991), for example, considered variability of the perception of a region’s status as “lagging behind” or even backward. As qualitative conceptualisations in attempts to study peripherality took shape and developed—especially regarding the ways in which people view their environment—there was more and more questioning of those approaches that confined themselves to identifying peripheral regions by way of formal methods and the straightforward mapping

of phenomena (see Musil, Müller, 2008; Málíková et al., 2016).

While many approaches to the identification of peripherality (or marginal status) have appeared, a large number of authors have been underlining the role of a perceptual approach (Schmidt 1998; Sommers, Mahretu, 1998; Leimgruber, 2004; Czapiewski, Wójcik, 2014; Málíková et al., 2016). Working to arrive at a synthesis of the different concepts, Málíková et al. (2016) show how the said perceptual approach relates to a kind of subjectivity that in turn reflects individual attitudes and perceptions. In contrast, Schmidt (1998) draws a distinction between the so-called internal and external perception. While the former is associated with perceptions of a study area among those who live there, the latter is the point of view adopted by outsiders with no close links (e.g., experts).

All of the above concepts come together in the challenge Woods (2012) issues to the effect that there should be deeper reflection on different approaches leading to the discovery of multiple dimensions to processes restructuring given areas; as well as the ways in which these are represented (Halfacree, 2006).

### 3. Methodology

The first stage of the conducted investigations encompassed an analysis aiming to determine the degree of peripherality of Wieruszów County in relation to the closest regional and sub-regional centres, these centres assumed to be the closest towns, hosting voivodship authorities or county-level authorities. In line with theoretical foundations referred to in the introductory section, the degree of peripherality of the area under study was determined by assessing accessibility (expressed in terms of travel time to the closest regional/sub-regional centre), as well as socio-economic potential.

The second stage of investigations entailed an analysis of national and regional strategic documents of key importance to Wieruszów County. Analysed in this context were: the “National strategy for regional development, 2010–2020: Regions, cities, rural areas” (Ministry of Regional Development, 2010), the “Development strategy for the

Łódzkie Voivodship, 2007–2020” (Regional Assembly of Łódzkie Voivodship, 2006) and the “Integrated development strategy for the Wieruszów County, 2014–2020” (Council of Wieruszów County, 2013), with the identification of the notions of “peripherality” as well as development prospects set out in these documents. These prospects were then evaluated by experts in the course of the third stage of the study.

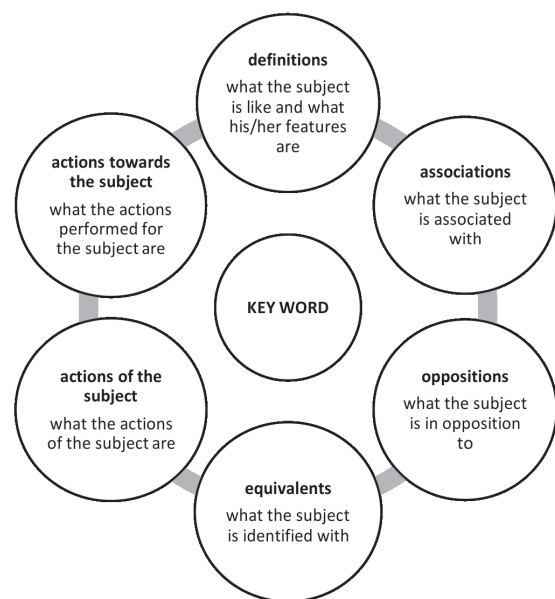
A textual analysis of the above documents was conducted using a semantic field technique devised by Robin (1980). This entails a search for words and phrases in an analysed text, with a network of relationships formed from the analysed concepts (i.e. key words and phrases, and in this case the term “peripherality”). This approach allows for full extraction of meaning and context and derives from linguistic studies beginning as early as in the 1930s. It may also be associated with qualitative text analysis or discourse analysis. The analysis of a semantic field entails the separation of elements making up a statement, only for these to be put back together in line with their meaningful readability. The process is based on the building of an inventory consisting of:

- definitions – indicating features of the subject (in this case peripherality);
- associations – indicating what the subject is associated with;
- oppositions – indicating opposites of the subject;
- equivalents – expressions which may substitute for the subject in particular;
- actions towards the subject – indications of the actions performed for the subject;
- actions of the subject – indications of the subject’s actions and their effects (Fig.1).

In the framework of expert-based study, the technique applied comprised in-depth interviews carried out using a standardised list of questions. This is a technique founded upon a direct communication process and is only standardised to a limited degree. It therefore has an expressive and biographical aspect, with the interview’s main aim being to gain familiarity with the knowledge, experience and opinions among respondents deemed to be experts on the subject being researched. The deployment of

this research technique is typically justified (as it is here) where a situation under analysis is complex and multi-stranded, and where a researcher is only able to arrive at a theoretical depiction whose verification using quantitative methods might yield as many artefacts as genuine results. Obviously, it is vital that a researcher should also uncover the true underpinnings of respondents’ appreciation of reality (by reference to what they imagine and perceive and hold to be significant)—and that is only possible where a qualitative approach is applied.

In May and June of 2017, a total of eleven interviews were carried out. Respondents were classified into a group of seven so-called “internal” experts (i.e. representatives of local authorities, NGOs and local media and hence people associated professionally and personally with Wieruszów County); as well as group composed of four people as so-called “external” experts—which is to say those taking decisions regarding the shape of regional policies at voivodship level (within the Łódzkie Voivodship). The introduction of this division not only allowed for a juxtaposition of assessments, experiences and relations—formulated from diverse perspectives—but also provided for a multidimensional perception of development-related problems, accompanied by an identification of regularities appearing in interview responses. This kind of approach does much



**Fig. 1.** The structuring of semantic field analysis. Source: The authors’ elaboration of Robin (1980).

to enrich, differentiate and enhance the reliability of the conclusions. In the case of the work described here, it emerged that the process by which internal and external stakeholders in regional development were identified and divided was not merely a solution necessary in depicting respondents' thoughts as they informed the definition of "the sense of being peripheral", but also—indeed first and foremost—a kind of interesting novelty from the cognitive point of view, in and of itself.

The interview dispositions (lists of items of information sought in the study) were the same for the two groups and they were organised around two thematic axes. The first of these axes concerned the perception espoused by respondents with regard to the most important social and economic problems affecting Wieruszów County (as a peripheral area). The second one, contrarily, concerned the assessment of access to services of general interest, as well as development tasks and processes in the county currently being implemented and planned. The selection of respondents for the study was made purposefully, given that those targeted represented various sectors of political, social and cultural activity, and were at the same time well aware of Wieruszów County's problems. These were people deemed important (in the broadest sense) to the planning and implementation of the socio-economic development strategies for the area in question. What is more, and quite significantly, these were also people who tended to refer to each other as holding the posts and discharging the functions.

At the same time, it is necessary to add that respondents' comfort was borne in mind, with interviews being one-off events, at the place of work, carried out in line with an adopted procedure, recorded on a voice recorder, and continued with for some 2 hours—until such time as the subject matter had genuinely been exhausted.

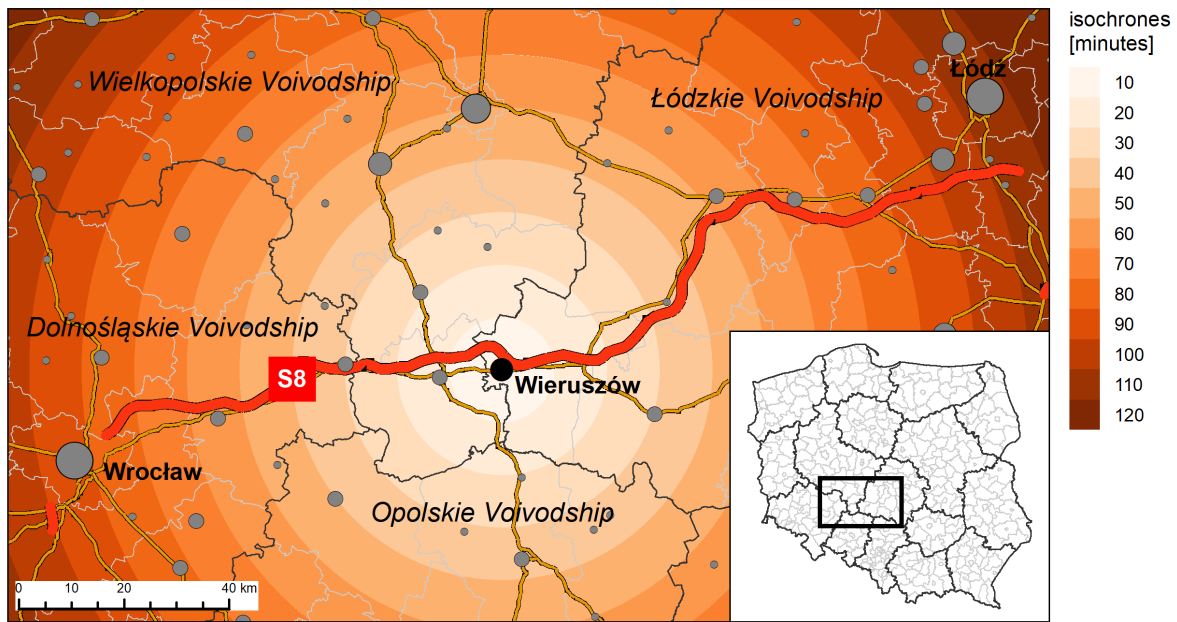
#### **4. Wieruszów County as an inner periphery**

Wieruszów County is located in central Poland, on the south-western fringe of the Łódzkie Voivodship. Wieruszów County, as an LAU 1 unit, consists of

seven smaller administrative units (at LAU 2—i.e. *gmina* or commune—level). One of the latter (Wieruszów, i.e. the administrative centre of the county) has an urban-rural designation while the remaining six (Bolesławiec, Czastary, Galewice, Lututów, Łubnice and Sokolniki) are rural. Both in terms of population size (42,200) and area (577 km<sup>2</sup>), the county in question is below the national average. Similarly, the county's population density, at 73 persons per sq. km, is below the national average (of 121), and even more so below the voivodship average (of 137), this fact being associated with the agricultural character of the territory. 80% of the entire population of Wieruszów County in fact live in areas formally designated as rural.

Wieruszów County is situated between the five relatively large cities of Łódź, Poznań, Opole, Wrocław, and Częstochowa. Although this district does not border directly upon the Dolnośląskie Voivodship, the capital of the latter—Wrocław—is of higher transport accessibility than the capital of the Łódzkie Voivodship (Fig. 2). Even though the county is located peripherally within its voivodship and in relation to the centre of the administrative region (the city of Łódź), it is a place in which important national and international road routes intersect. The axis of the area is formed by the S8 expressway, forming part of the E-67 route that runs from Prague (the Czech Republic), through Warsaw (Poland) and the Baltic States, to Helsinki (Finland). This has two junctions in Wieruszów and Walichnowy—with route 74.

The S8 expressway has been the largest and most important investment project in the study area in recent years. Owing to this undertaking, efficient connections with the capitals of the respective voivodships—Łódź and Wrocław—have been established, and the county of Wieruszów became more accessible, gaining a stimulus for the development of new non-agricultural functions. There are two sections of the S8 road inside the county: the Walichnowy–Wieruszów section, completed on 21<sup>st</sup> December 2013; and the Walichnowy–Złoczew section, brought into operation on 29<sup>th</sup> October 2014. The construction of both sections of the S8 expressway has been co-financed by the European Union within the framework of the European Regional Development Fund.



**Fig. 2.** Ten-minute ideal isochrones (velocity of 60 km/h) for Wieruszów.  
*Source:* The authors.

Irrespective of the improvement in transport-related accessibility over recent years, the peripherality of the county in question is above all conditioned by a location relatively far from regional and sub-regional centres. Notwithstanding the relatively good transport accessibility to regional centres (1), the analyses of potential road and rail accessibility in 2014, carried out for the whole territory of Europe within the framework of the project entitled “PRO-FECY” ESPON (2), showed that this was below the average noted in neighbouring regions, with the increment in the standardised potential road and rail accessibility over the period of 2001–2014 also being negative.

The area of the present-day Wieruszów County has always been peripheral in relation to the main centres of economic and cultural activity of different regions of Poland and has usually found itself in a borderland between administrative regions. Such location close to the border of administrative regions of differing historical and cultural backgrounds even combined with several changes in administrative affiliation, resulted in an unclear regional identity among inhabitants. Probably for that reason, local identity and territorial attachment is very strong, and represents a factor of importance to both social activity and involvement in processes of local development. Nevertheless, when

asked about their area’s affiliation with wider regional structures, locals tend to be confused as to whether to opt for Central Poland (Łódź), Lower Silesia (Wrocław), or Wielkopolska (Poznań).

What is more, the border location of the county has proved very disadvantageous from the perspective of possible functional relationships with at least the two closest major regional centres, i.e. Łódź and Wrocław. The distances and travel times to both of these have always been too long to ensure effective socio-economic cooperation. The economic development of the county has also been influenced by its location between the county towns of Kępno and Wieluń, both of which are situated just 10 km from the county’s boundaries, while representing towns twice as large in terms of population and characterised by greater economic potential. The consistent consequence has been an outflow of well-educated personnel, as well as increasing competition for companies based in the county of Wieruszów.

The demographic situation in the county reflects many tendencies typical for rural areas, and especially for ones that are peripheral with respect to large regional centres. The area features a declining population, with young people leaving the area to study in Łódź or Wrocław rarely returning. The consequences take the form of problems with a low birth rate and ageing population that this area faces.

When set against national or regional averages, the unemployment rate is not seen to be high. However, this is not so much an indication of good economic condition as an effect of high employment in low-efficiency agriculture dominated by small farms, or in neighbouring centres actually located outside the county itself (often in the aforementioned closest county towns of Wieluń and Kępno, or further off in Wrocław).

More specifically, the unemployment rate in the county of Wieruszów can be seen to have decreased since 2004, the year of Poland's accession to the EU and of the consequent gradual opening up of labour markets in other EU Member States to Polish citizens. Unemployment in fact grew once more in 2008 and 2009, especially among young people, only to return to a downward trend, through to the present day. In 2016, the overall rate of unemployment in the county of Wieruszów was 5.8%, as compared with the average of 8.6% for the Łódzkie Voivodship as a whole. However, since unemployment has indeed been falling among young people aged up to 34 (who are characterised by greater mobility and a capacity to move to major urban centres), the problem of exclusion from the labour market mainly affects the over-55s, who suffer from economic immobility, being attached to their place of residence and its local labour market.

What is more, the ostensibly-quite-favourable situation on the labour market does not translate optimistically into the individual incomes of working people which have remained at about 72% of the national average since 2002, irrespective of what occupation is involved.

The limited economic potential of the studied area is also made clear by the limited tax take characterising all of the county's units of local government administration, with the knock-on effect of low expenditure feeding into local technical and social infrastructure. The poor condition of local roads, the fact that only about 50% of households have sewerage, the lack of childcare institutions (absence of a nursery) all attest to living conditions that remain worse than in neighbouring counties and the Łódzkie Voivodship as a whole.

On a more positive side, it must be stressed that since the time of Poland's accession to the European Union local authorities of the county of Wieruszów and of all of its sub-parts have proved very effec-

tive in obtaining external funding for its further development.

## 5. Coping strategies for Wieruszów County

Polish development policy has undergone an important evolutionary process in the last few years. The system of development management is now based on an integrated approach to planning, aiming to match sectoral and territorial interventions to bring together economic, social and regional perspectives on regional and local development. To present the county of Wieruszów as the subject of national, regional and local coping strategies, further analysis was concerned with three documents addressing the area indirectly or directly, i.e.: 1) the "National Strategy of Regional Development: Regions, Cities, Rural Areas"; 2) the "Integrated Development Strategy for the Lodz Region for the years 2007–2020"; and 3) the "Integrated Development Strategy for Wieruszów County 2014–2020".

Each of these documents consists of a diagnostic part plus strategic aims and activities for future development. Table 1 shows the analysis of the semantic field for statements centred around the terms "peripherality" and "peripheries" as characterised in the documents. These are seen to be defined by a geographical location close to the state's borders or on the outskirts of administrative regions, with the consequence seen to be poor connections with centres of socio-economic growth. Characterised by an underdeveloped offer as regards SGIs, and by the loss of economic and social functions, they are seen as endangered by further socio-economic decline and deepening peripheralisation. In the national and regional strategies, peripheries are considered areas of strategic intervention, and a subject of special interest with a view to economic, social and spatial cohesion being achieved on both the interregional and intraregional scales.

The "National Strategy of Regional Development: Regions, Cities, Rural Areas" coordinated by the Ministry of Regional Development is one of the nine documents on strategic development corresponding to long- and medium-term strategies for



the development of Poland. However, this report is rendered unique by a horizontal rather than vertical design that provides for linkage with all other, sectoral documents. The main instrument for strategy implementation is a Territorial Contract coordinating development activities between central and regional authorities based on recognised needs and development priorities in respect of voivodships, as well as development priorities at the level of the country as a whole.

The strategy introduces areas of strategic intervention (ASI) to which regional policy is addressed in a particular way. These include both places of concentration of socio-economic development processes within the country and regions, as well as places beyond the sphere of influence of these centres—i.e. territories with the highest concentration of negative patterns and processes, requiring the establishment or improvement of conditions for their socio-economic growth. In line with the typology set out by the National Strategy of Regional Development, Wieruszów is recognised as a strategic in-

tervention area as a county town which is losing social and economic functions.

Actions the Strategy points to as important from the point of view of inner peripheries, and which may be implemented for the County of Wieruszów, are: 1) increased transport accessibility within regions; 2) support for the development and importance of regional and local centres; 3) full utilisation of the development potential of rural areas (e.g., by creating institutional conditions in support of increased non-agricultural investment in areas of low agricultural competitiveness—and thus non-agricultural employment—by way of support networks involving consultancies, business incubators, industrial parks, etc.); 4) advantage taken of territorial specialisation in the said areas' development processes (e.g., through the development of a cluster of the furniture industry or other business networks within the area, or in the context of cooperation with neighbouring counties).

The “Integrated Development Strategy for the Lodz Region for the years 2007–2020” resembles

**Table 1.** Semantic field for the category “peripherality/peripheries”

Elements of semantic field	Fragments of strategic documents
<b>Definitions</b>	areas beyond the sphere of influence of development centres; located close to the borders of the voivodship; territories of low socio-economic potential, characterised by underdevelopment / bad access to SGIs
<b>Associations</b>	ASI (area of strategic intervention)
<b>Oppositions</b>	centres of socio-economic growth; regional centres
<b>Equivalents</b>	areas of the highest concentration of negative patterns and processes; problem areas, marginalised areas
<b>Actions of the subject</b>	losing social and economic functions; further peripheralisation due to weak linkages with regional centres; low economic potential influences low tax revenues, thus limited possibilities for local government to cover the needs of local communities, as well as to contribute to projects co-funded with external resources
<b>Actions towards the subject</b>	a comprehensive set of activities focused on improving transport accessibility to regional centres, as well as strengthened socio-economic potential of peripheries and the counteraction of their marginalisation

*Source:* The authors' elaboration based on the National Strategy of Regional Development: Regions, Cities, Rural Areas, the Integrated Development Strategy for the Lodz Region for the years 2007–2020 and the Integrated Development Strategy for Wieruszów County 2014–2020.

all 16 regional development strategies focusing on the level of the voivodship and its specific needs, in being prepared and implemented by the regional authority (in this case obviously of Łódzkie Voivodship), in close relationship with priorities set by national-level documents, and serving at the same time as a basis for the implementation of a Regional Operational Programme (which is to say an instrument of European Cohesion Policy assuming a regional dimension). The focus here is on improving internal cohesion of the whole area, in respect of three horizontal dimensions: spatial, social and economic.

Spatial cohesion of the Łódzkie Voivodship is defined in terms of sustainable spatial development with an effective settlement network, with internal and external accessibility assured by well-connected transport infrastructure and the wise use of the natural resources of the region. Projects already implemented or at least planned for implementation in Wieruszów County, with a view to improving the spatial cohesion of this area within the Łódzkie Voivodship, have focused on: 1) support for highways and expressways, and the extension or reconstruction of public roads; 2) support for new terminals, and the modernisation of the transport and communications linkages between logistic centres, cargo airports and economic zones; 3) the development of water-supply systems and sewerage; 4) the rationalisation of waste management; 5) the creation of a cohesive intra-regional system of protected areas in relation to the national system; and 6) the linking of urban and rural centres to form a complementary functional settlement system.

In the context of social cohesion, the strategic goal set involves enhanced social activity, with good access to services of general interest considered to provide for the social inclusion of excluded groups. This objective is being implemented by developing local communities and their local and regional identities, by developing SGIs and improving their accessibility, and by counteracting economic poverty.

Economic cohesion is understood in the document as the optimal use of development potential in the region, mainly through integrated projects and cooperation networks. The improvement of economic cohesion at regional level requires the mobilisation and strengthening of endogenous po-

tentials often going underutilised due to a lack of cooperation between economic partners and units of local government. If we take into account the regional specialisation of Wieruszów County (in the furniture industry and food production), this specialisation is seen to constitute potential for the implementation of projects aimed at economic cohesion. However, it also requires a strong focus on the use of knowledge and intellectual capital with a view to triggering the development of modern and intelligent technologies in key sectors. This of course represents a major challenge, given the problem of declining population and mainly the outmigration of working-age young people from Wieruszów County.

By also addressing territories of particular character and needs (such as urban and rural areas, or areas of specific geographical features, i.e. functional areas), the Integrated Strategy for the Lodz Region, prescribes areas of special intervention (ASI), either in the national strategies or from the perspective of the region, and aims to mount an adequate response to challenges facing Wieruszów County as regards rural areas, and at the same time tourist attractions, located along the valleys of the Pilica, Warta and Bzura. Wieruszów is also referred to explicitly as one of the county towns losing its socio-economic functions.

In turn, the “Integrated Development Strategy for Wieruszów County 2014–2020” presents opportunities, needs and actions in respect of the area in question, as these have been planned for implementation with a view to development goals being achieved within the next few years. These in fact correspond to the dimensions set out in the Integrated Development Strategy for the Lodz Region for the years 2007–2020, including: 1) economic development, 2) the improvement of social cohesion, 3) the safeguarding of spatial order and environmental protection, and 4) the pursuit of institutional efficiency in territorial management. From among the specific projects foreseen for implementation in Wieruszów County, noteworthy examples include:

1. the establishment of an industrial zone along the S8 expressway,
2. the founding of a centre whose remit is to press for and achieve the region’s further development and promotion,

3. the activation of the area's young people,
4. the establishment of a "Senior City", with places in which elderly people can be active,
5. the establishment of a hiking trail along the River Prosna,
6. a programme for the improvement of air quality,
7. the construction or modernisation of the sewer network,
8. a programme of integrated water management along the valleys of the Prosna and Warta.

Inner peripherality, reflecting a geographical location between large centres of socio-economic growth, is an objective feature, and so the county of Wieruszów will always be peripheral in this sense. Thus, success with the development of this area will not be achieved without coordination of strategic documents and development plans and cooperation between local authorities, both horizontal (e.g., integrated territorial investments of municipalities) and vertical (i.e., between the county and voivodship authorities at the higher level, and between municipalities at the lower administrative level).

## 6. Problems facing the development of Wieruszów County as noted by stakeholders

### 6.1. Identification of key problems with developing Wieruszów County

The in-depth interviews run with stakeholders in the area's social and economic transformations bring to light numerous development-related problems in the county, relating to the causes, mechanisms and consequences of current structural and organisational transformation processes. One of the key issues touched upon in this context entails identification of the main social, economic and environmental problems of a development-related nature. Respondents were in fact allowed to point to what they saw as the three main problem issues, being then asked to account for their causes, and to detail their connotations for the community, especially regarding the inhabitants' quality of life.

The responses obtained provided for the identification of ten main development problems facing Wieruszów County, together with a large number of side issues. Those appearing at least three times among the indications of the eleven stakeholders are considered the key problems (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Key development problems of Wieruszów County, in the opinions of interviewed stakeholders

No.	Identified problems	Number of indications (in brackets: indications of stakeholders from the regional level)
1	Poor level of development of technical and/or social infrastructure	7 (3)
2	Ageing of population, outflows of young people and depopulation of the area	5 (5)
3	Transport-related accessibility to large centres of development (capitals of voivodships)	4 (2)
4	Environmental pollution locally	3 (1)
5	Insufficient external financial support for development	3 (0)
6	Poor development of entrepreneurship	1 (1)
7	Poor level of development (inadequate modernisation) of farming	1 (0)
8	Insufficient number of large commercial investors	1 (1)
9	A lack of political clout in decision-making centres (the region)	1 (0)
10	Structural backwardness	1 (1)

Source: The authors.

The problem with development pointed to most frequently as regards Wieruszów County was the bad state of its infrastructure, and especially its technical infrastructure. Considered the severest challenge facing the county was a lifting of local roads out of their currently dire technical state (given both inadequate repairs and a lack of appropriate undertakings in the name of modernisation). Attention was directed to the adequacy of road network density, albeit with conditions of road surfaces considered to pose a genuine threat to both vehicles and pedestrians. In this domain, a contrast appeared between expressway S8, which had come into operation and was seen to have raised the level of (time-wise) transport accessibility vis-à-vis Wrocław and Łódź, and the hardships inhabitants faced as a result of delays in modernising the country's remaining road infrastructure.

Also, much stressed were the poor state of development of the sewer network and problems potentially arising from the bad condition in which the electricity transmission network found itself. The assessment was similar with respect to the negligence surrounding the county's water engineering infrastructure. As far as the weak points of social infrastructure were concerned, it was mainly an insufficient level of development of recreational and leisure facilities for the populace that was mentioned (as regards bathing facilities, meeting places and tourist routes), followed by issues with the accessibility of healthcare facilities and the adequacy of the primary school network.

In the opinion of the regional-level experts (from institutions managing change processes), a matter of key importance to the county's development (in the next 20 years especially) will be the age structure of the population. Attention is above all paid to that population's process of ageing, and to outflows of young people. Respondents opined that these processes taken together would result in depopulation. And, in the stakeholders' eyes, these demographic conditions are of key significance to economic development, in terms of both social capital (skills and capacities, especially at expert level) and human capital ("mains d'oeuvre"). It is interesting to note that these problems are indicated by external experts, the facts being associated with a more general knowledge of the spatial structure characterising

social and economic phenomena across the Łódzkie Voivodship as a whole.

It is likewise interesting to mention that, despite the S8-induced improvement in the transport accessibility of Wieruszów County to regional centres (in terms of time), responses continue to make rather frequent mention of problems as regards the accessibility of regional centres (Łódź especially). It remains the perception in the community that Wieruszów County continues to be treated as a regional periphery in the geographical sense. The extension of the expressway network and modernisation of the national roads has brought about a general improvement in transport-related accessibility in the peripheries to the regional centres. This means that, even if Wieruszów County has gained in *absolute* terms where accessibility is concerned, its *relative* position may well remain unchanged. In physical space, this remains the most remote part of the Łódzkie Voivodship, as seen from the regional centre that is the city of Łódź. Public transport connections continue to be of low intensity, with travel times by coach to the centre of the voivodship exceeding three hours. As far as the rail connections are concerned, there remain no direct trains, ensuring that relevant travel times typically exceed four hours. In the perception of inhabitants, this distance engenders a feeling of peripherality. Given the rather small scale of the county—as regards both area and population—this serves to strengthen a conviction as to the lack of an adequate Wieruszów lobby in regional structures, while there is a lack of justice in the division of external means, as respondents from inside the county make clear.

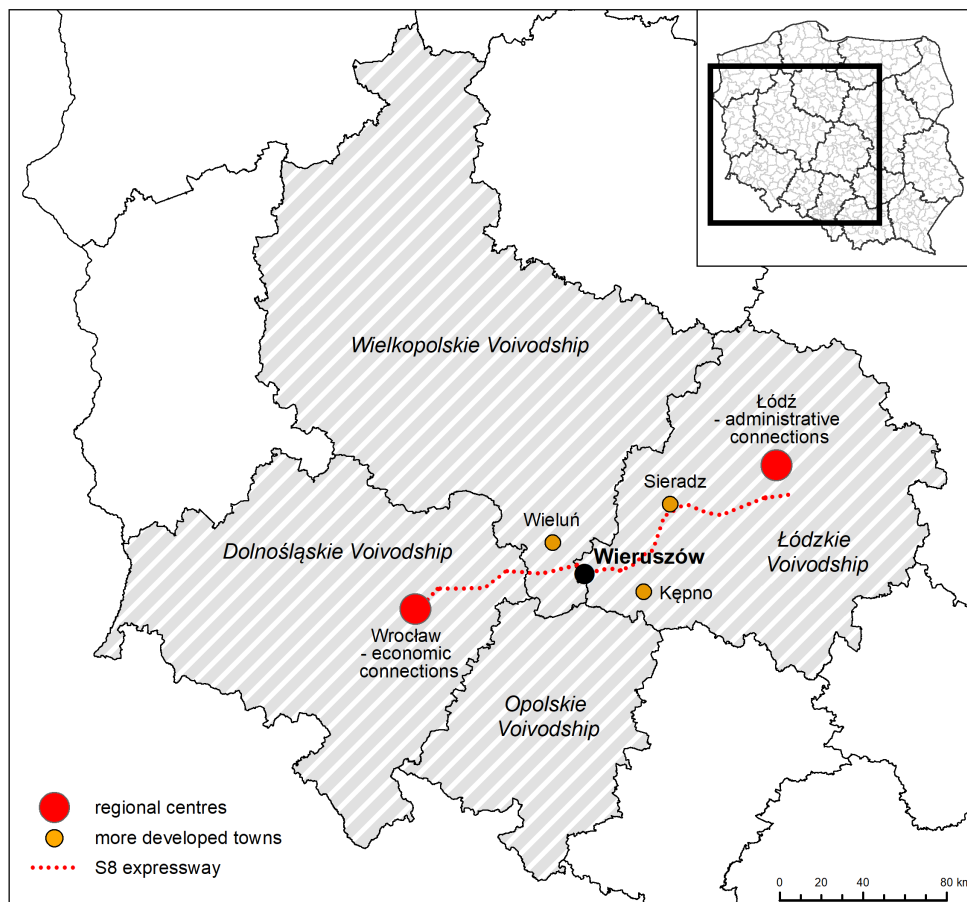
An important development-related issue whose resolution is of key importance to inhabitants' quality of life is the contamination of the environment. The location of the chipboard factory and the resulting impact on the town and its neighbourhood constitutes one of the main causes of lower quality of life in the area. The conflict between the industrial function (after all one of the pillars of the town's economic base) and the residential function engenders definite tensions of a kind actually characteristic for the development of peripheral areas, given their lower attractiveness for external investments and hence a greater propensity to accept the location and functioning of facilities actually or potentially harmful to inhabitants and nature.

An essential component in the identification of key development problems is the matter of the social image of Wieruszów County's regional environment. Respondents were asked to indicate areas in the vicinity of the studied county which they considered to feature higher development dynamics than the county in question. Figure 3 presents respondents' perceptions of the peripherality of Wieruszów County as surrounded by places described as manifesting higher development dynamics.

The majority of mentions were of an area to the west of Wieruszów, i.e. the neighbouring county of Kępno, or, more broadly, the area of the large historical region of Wielkopolska. Either way, these are places beyond the Łódzkie Voivodship (with nine mentions altogether). There were only two mentions of counties neighbouring Wieruszów to the east and actually located in the Łódzkie Voivodship. The counties of Sieradz and Wieluń were pointed to by regional-level experts, with this reflecting their

ample knowledge as to the economic and spatial structure of the voivodship.

The fact that stakeholders referred to the development dynamics of the county of Kępno and, more broadly, the Wielkopolska region, has causes both structural and symbolic. First, the county of Kępno is an important centre—on the national scale—for the wood and furniture industries. The town and its surroundings are thus a kind of furniture and furniture appliances production district, and therefore also serve as a centre for numerous services that support the industry. In this sense, Wieruszów County constitutes a part of the hinterland of Kępno in terms of its labour force, and well as a place supplying complementary services to companies located there. In turn, in the symbolic sense, the reference is to old political divisions and the boundary (provided by the Prosna) between the parts of Poland occupied by Prussia and Russia in the period of 1815–1918. The different regional policies pursued by the powers that partitioned



**Fig. 3.** Stakeholders' perceptions of Wieruszów County as an inner periphery.  
Source: The authors.

Poland (and particularly Russia, with its purposeful policy of discrimination against the border areas in the face of 19<sup>th</sup>-century industrialisation resulted in very pronounced differences in the economic, social and cultural aspects of development. Contemporary differences in levels of development may be looked upon as effects of “path dependency”, with the closing of existing gaps therefore having a dimension related to (organisational) culture, as well as to the economy *per se*.

## 6.2. Assessment of accessibility to services of general interest

Respondents differed from one another in their assessments of the accessibility of services of general interest, i.e. healthcare, education, transport, trade and finance, and culture. This means that, while no respondent offered an above-average assessment, indicative of a level that would go beyond inhabitants’ basic needs, it was either essential shortcomings in social infrastructure that were reported or merely accessibility assessed as adequate regarding inhabitants’ existing needs. The latter statement appears to be relatively optimistic, since it expresses a definite degree of satisfaction and legitimisation of the social *status quo*. Involved here are attitudes like “*we do not have, for we do not need*” and “*we do not have, for it would not work here*” applying in particular to the domains of education and culture.

There are no university-level schools here at all (...) we tried to get in touch, Łódź University of Technology opened its branch here (...) but this did not work well—we do not really need a university here (...) There was a branch of the Agricultural University from Wrocław, located in Lututów, a need was expressed, but then that need disappeared. (The Starosta as an internal stakeholder representing the county authorities)

As regards culture, and given that this is [only] a county town, we have all that is needed. There is no theatre, and the closest one is in the capital of the voivodship, but overall it appears we have no need of a theatre. (An internal stakeholder representing the local media)

Is a theatre needed in our area? No, it is not. We have good transport connections. (The Deputy Mayor, as an internal stakeholder representing the local authorities)

Thus, where education and culture are concerned, opinions of internal and external respondents are similar. And here it needs to be noted that both domains generate no feeling of insufficiency or shortage, and hence no sense that compensation is necessitated. The relevant reasoning of respondents can be reduced to the general statement: “*Things are OK as they are, we do what we can on the basis of what we have.*”

The opinions of respondents did differ somewhat with respect to the remaining services considered, i.e. healthcare, transport and finance. Trade activity did not give rise to more major reservations, since (in line with the opinion of a female respondent): “*[w]e are in the lead in Poland concerning the number of shops to the number of inhabitants. We have a lot of shops. There are, I think, six pharmacies in Wieruszów*” (an internal stakeholder representing the local media). In contrast, opinions and assessment as to healthcare, transport and finance emerged as full of social controversies. Generally, it should be noted how these subjects give rise—not only locally (and in areas regarded as peripheral), but also nationally—to quite definite emotions, including anger, as a consequence of the existence of needs going unfulfilled. The positive aspect to this feeling of anger is that it automatically indicates areas of dissatisfaction, places in which limits have been passed, with it thus made clear what is well beyond people’s capacity to show acceptance. When this emotion is well directed and specified, there is a chance to generate the energy needed for people to cope with situations entailing loss or the limitation of resources, or indeed their straightforward absence. And so, for instance, in the domain of healthcare, notwithstanding a basic-level securing that is present in Wieruszów, people indicate the most marked shortfalls with respect to the accessibility of specialised medical services. Given the aforementioned relatively large numbers of pharmacies in the area, the inhabitants make significant efforts to secure a night service. They express this kind of need and would like to have it satisfied. Hence, successive relevant appeals have been addressed to the authori-

ties of the town of Wieruszów. The consciousness of these problems appearing in the domain of healthcare is yet more acute and visible among internal respondents. For these people must struggle with the consequences resulting from limitations on access to a complete and satisfactory offer where the service of this kind is concerned.

Of late I have not been able to get to see a doctor (...) there is accessibility, but the doctors cannot help much, or they don't want to (...) doctors set their own limits and sometimes refuse to take any more visits. (The Secretary to the Deputy Mayor, as an internal stakeholder serving as a local official)

(...) [A]pparently specialists simply do not want to work in Wieruszów. (An internal stakeholder representing the local media)

There is access to healthcare, but there are also long queues (...) if we wished to finance these services for the inhabitants, we would have to take away from the road budget. (The Starosta as an internal stakeholder representing the county authorities)

The issues of transport, and everything associated with it, are primarily linked in the eyes of respondents with the question of Wieruszów's peripheral location. On the other hand, it must be noted that not all of the stakeholders identified with the label of "periphery":

I think that a good factor could be to not treat Wieruszów County as peripheral, since that would allow for a change of identity (...) You ask me in the context of 'You poor ones, at the far end', while we do not feel as if we are at the end, and always when I visit the voivodship authorities I am greeted by the welcome to the first county of the Łódzkie Voivodship, for it is with us that the province starts, rather than ends. (An internal stakeholder representing the Local Action Group)

In this context a problem surrounds the assessment of the role the new S8 expressway plays. It has definitely increased accessibility to the region-

al centres (of Wrocław and Łódź) in terms of travel times. This did generate increased investment-related attractiveness of areas along the road, albeit not being reflected in significantly increased frequency of public-transport connections. This impacts on the treatment of the regional centres and their service offer (especially of the "higher" kind) as easily accessible in everyday life. The feeling of exclusion and injustice as regards the territorial allotment of goods, and even a feeling of deprivation, is still lively in respondents' pronouncements, while the reduced travel times between Wieruszów and Łódź, and especially Wrocław, may actually increase the likelihood of decisions to leave for good being taken, particularly among the young.

Respondents also offered assessments in respect of the allocation of financial means—certainly a socially sensitive issue. In fact, finance is either a subject not broached at all, or one necessitating expressions of regret given the evident shortage of funding. It is hard for any potential that may be present in a given area to gain support where funds do not suffice to make good deficits in various fields of social and economic life. And—in the opinion of experts—peripheries are affected in this respect more profoundly, with this also gaining reflection in interview content. Thus:

Inappropriate allocation of European means in the Łódzkie Voivodship, these means being mainly dedicated to the functional area of Łódź itself, with this hampering our development. (The Deputy Mayor as an internal stakeholder representing the local authorities)

We do not have sufficient own revenue at our disposal, and we take advantage of external sources, which does not allow us to plan strategically. (The Starosta as an internal stakeholder representing the county-level authorities)

The challenges involved in finding ways to act in this domain are indeed demanding, as well as hard to quantify. Yet, the majority of respondents—both internal and external—appreciate the inflow of external means made available via various development programmes. Provided below are examples of pronouncements of stakeholders, when asked to refer to the role European funds have been playing in

the development of the Wieruszów area. The support for activities seeking to address and overcome the area's peripheral nature was mentioned first and foremost. Thus:

There is a very important role: when there are the EU means and Wieruszów County is able to make its own contribution then there will be external financing, and that would find its expression in a big developmental leap, with respect to innovations, modern technologies, everyday functioning, improvement in the lives of inhabitants. (A regional-level official as an external stakeholder)

The role is really great, since the county does not have own means at its disposal guaranteed by law, but only the various kinds of subsidies that currently determine the fate of the county. (The Secretary to the Starosta as a local official and internal stakeholder)

The role is significant, both when it comes to increasing access by road—the most important thing, as that can bring in investors (...) and in regard to supporting entrepreneurs and innovation. All of that builds up an image of socio-economic development; obtaining funds for revitalisation work, social services. (A regional-level official as an external stakeholder)

## 7. Discussion and conclusions

There is no doubt that Wieruszów County may be treated as an inner periphery, given not only its geographical characteristics (distance from regional and sub-regional centres) and the struggles it faces with problems typical for peripheries. The most important problem Wieruszów County faces is the dynamic decline in the level of human capital. Young, well-educated people in a position to improve networking, the knowledge base and the productivity of local businesses, instead elect not to return to the area having graduated from universities in Łódź or in Wrocław. A consequently low level of economic activity and weak economic growth rate are reflected in limited local tax-takes, and consequent short-

falls when it comes to financial means that could (ought to) be devoted to the development of local infrastructure; as well as the only poor level of provision being made as regards educational and cultural infrastructure. Taken together, this denotes a “Human and Social Capital” feedback loop, whereby a lowered level of entrepreneurship and innovation feeds back into the productivity circuit, yielding a persistent weakening of development capacities.

The decision, taken in recent years, to link Wieruszów and the county—via the S8 expressway—with Warsaw, Łódź and Wrocław, may be considered to have offered new opportunities as far as the area's future socio-economic development is concerned. Before that decision was taken, there were no special economic zones, technology parks or enterprise and innovation clusters in Wieruszów County. No commune in the county had plots set aside for investment purposes, and none had elaborated any policy by which to attract investors. A particularly negative influence on the economic development of the county was exerted by the establishment of Łódź's own Special Economic Zone, encompassing 343.5 ha in 13 subzones. The scope of the tax reliefs and other forms of public support offered to investors within that Zone made it even more difficult to attract investors willing to invest in Wieruszów County, in which no such support was available.

From this perspective, the presence of the S8 expressway became the most important factor facilitating possible new investment projects in Wieruszów County and improving conditions for the commute to Wrocław and Łódź among the inhabitants of the area in question. Nevertheless, travel to Wrocław by public transport (coach) continues to take two hours, while the journey to Łódź takes three. There are no railway connections whatsoever with Wieruszów. In the face of this, it remains too early to speak of a visible impact on development in Wieruszów County ascribable to the S8. Needless to say, the road still needs to be taken account of by local and regional authorities as a strong growth factor somehow favouring the area in the long run. Equally, it needs emphasising that potentially decreased peripherality reflecting improved accessibility in terms of transport may in some ways be offset by the way that facilitated access to the regional centres of Wrocław and Łódź may merely



**Table 3.** Potential undertakings to assuage the key development problems of the county of Wieruszów (in line with expert opinions expressed)

Internal stakeholders	External stakeholders
Social and administrative undertakings	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- better communication between the provincial authorities and the county- and commune-level authorities;</li> <li>- increased competences of the local authorities when it comes to managing development;               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- elaboration of better strategic documents;</li> </ul> </li> <li>- revitalisation of areas of importance to the identity of the inhabitants (e.g., Wieruszów town centre);</li> <li>- enhancement of development opportunities for the young, so as to curb their outflow from the county;               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- better accessibility to specialist physicians</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- activation of inhabitants (to overcome petrified ways of thinking), collaboration among local and regional authorities;</li> <li>- increased accessibility to general purpose services (e.g., in healthcare and education);</li> <li>- continuation of the government programme of support for families (500+)</li> </ul>
Economic and infrastructural undertakings	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- an increase in funding for the development of peripheral areas (at national and regional levels);</li> <li>- changes in the ways Poland's counties are financed (an increase in the share of own revenues);</li> <li>- an improvement in transport access (above all an increase in the frequency of public transport connections with Łódź);</li> <li>- development of better conditions for enterprises to be established and external investors attracted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- an increase in the frequency of connections in public transport;</li> <li>- a raising of the area's level of attractiveness for settlement;</li> <li>- greater decentralisation of administrative functions;</li> <li>- creation of new jobs (via entrepreneurship and new investment);</li> <li>- an increase in available funding for new investments in local road, gas-supply and sewer infrastructure</li> </ul>
Environmental undertakings	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- better recreational use made of qualities of the natural environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a sharpening of environmental standards governing chipboard production (with application of innovative technologies as necessary), in order to reduce emissions of dusts noxious to human health</li> </ul>

Source: The authors.

intensify the dynamic decline in human capital indicated previously.

The question thus arising concerns the devising, in line with available own or acquired means, of strategies capable of overcoming the peripherality in question. The elaboration of plans of the required kind is not easy, since the latter must above all seek to reconcile various needs and social expectations (as expressed by various social groups) with actual possibilities of fulfilment. Table 3 offers a synthetic presentation of undertakings which stakeholders (both internal and external) consider potentially capable of easing the currently acute nature of the key development problems Wieruszów County faces, with consequent success in overcoming the local community's awareness of their area's peripherality. The set of desired undertakings is presented in the

table by reference to the social, economic and nature-related spheres.

It must be stressed that the specification of potential undertakings that would alleviate key problems for development in Wieruszów County depends upon the standpoints different stakeholders adopt. Social and administrative action aiming to overcome peripherality is much better identified by internal stakeholders, who pay attention, not only to improved accessibility of the SGI, but also to better communication between provincial authorities on the one hand and the authorities at county and commune level on the other, and to the increasing of capacities of the local bodies where the management of development is concerned. The latter postulate looks crucial from the point of view of the success of undertakings pursued by authorities at

various levels of administration to overcome peripherality of the area.

## Notes

(1) Taking into account the shortest road connections and the travel times, the distance to Wrocław is about 90 km, denoting a travel time of about 1h 15min. The distance to Łódź is in turn of about 130 km, with 1h 30 min. travel time. Other corresponding figures are 190 km and roughly 3h of travel in the case of Poznań, 90 km and roughly 1h 30 min. in the case of Opole, and 100 km and approximately 1h 30min. in the case of Częstochowa

(2) „PROFECY – Processes, Features and Cycles of Inner Peripheries in Europe” was one of the ESPON 2020 Applied Research projects. Project duration was May 2016-December 2017, while the main objective of the tender on ”Inner Peripheries” was to develop strategies for such areas at the European level, with a view to marginalising effects being overcome.

(3) This article is part of the 40<sup>th</sup> issue of *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series* entitled “Sustainability—differently”, edited by Mirek Dymitrow and Keith Halfacree (Dymitrow, Halfacree, 2018).

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