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# Challenges of the cohesion policy in Poland. A study on the implementation of regional programmes in Dolnośląskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie in 2007-2013

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**Abstract:** Cohesion policy has become the key EU policy based on its share in the EU budget. This policy is supposed to help the EU regions to develop and thus increase socio-economic cohesion among them. Yet, given the recent EU crises and still uncertain willingness of all its Member States to continue the common project, there is a question whether it should also support increasing citizens' identification with the EU.

The paper is based on the case studies conducted in two Polish regions within PERCEIVE, a Horizon 2020 project, and aims at presenting challenges of cohesion policy in Poland.

The results show that Polish case study regions, despite the differences in the level of their socio-economic development, face the same challenges to the cohesion policy. Moreover, these challenges are a clear set of policy recommendation for the reform of the cohesion policy and they all concentrate around trust, both among citizens, between citizens and authorities, and among different levels of administration and political power.

**Keywords:** EU cohesion policy, Poland, policy implementation.

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Cohesion policy has become the key EU policy based on its share in the EU budget. This policy is supposed to help the EU regions to develop and thus increase socio-economic cohesion among them. Cohesion policy encompasses support for regions within the following EU funds: European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund and Cohesion Fund<sup>1</sup>.

The paper is based on the case studies conducted within the Horizon 2020 project entitled “Perception and evaluation of Regional and Cohesion Policies by Europeans and Identification with the values of Europe” (PERCEIVE). This project contributed to developing a comprehensive theory of “cohesion in diversity” and applied it to achieve “a better understanding of the channels through which European policies contribute to creating both different local understandings of the EU and different levels of European identification across profoundly different European regions” (PERCEIVE, 2019, p. 8)<sup>2</sup>.

A vital part of the PERCEIVE project were case studies. There were 9 case study regions chosen, which represented different parts of the EU and different levels of socio-economic development. In Poland, two regions were chosen for the case studies within the PERCEIVE project. It was decided that they should differ significantly in terms of their socio-economic development and growth potential. Dolnośląskie is one of the Polish regions with the highest GDP *per capita* and borders with two other EU countries – Germany and Czechia, while Warmińsko-Mazurskie is one of the poorest Polish regions and borders with a non-EU member – Russia. The choice of these regions enables verification of the relationship between the level of socio-economic development and challenges related to the implementation of cohesion policy within a single legal and administrative system.

The paper aims to present the challenges related to implementing cohesion policy in Poland. It focuses on the programming period 2007-2013 but also tackles the challenges of the following programming period. The paper is divided into two main parts. The first of them presents the key features of the cohesion policy for 2007-2013 in the Polish case study regions. The second part concentrates on the challenges faced by the two regions related to the implementation of the cohesion policy. The results of the case study presented in this paper allow for drawing policy recommendations that are presented in the conclusions.

<sup>1</sup> In the programming period for 2007-2013 design, implementation and evaluation of the regional operational programmes were governed by the EU regulations no. 1083/2006, 1828/2006, 1080/2006, 1081/2006, 1082/2006 and 1084/2006.

<sup>2</sup> More details on PERCEIVE project and the project deliverables can be found on the project’s website: [www.perceiveproject.eu](http://www.perceiveproject.eu).

## Cohesion policy 2007-2013 in Poland and case study regions

The document determining the implementation of the European Funds for 2007-2013 is the National Cohesion Strategy (NSS) (official name: National Strategic Reference Framework, NSRF). It defines the priorities and areas of intervention as well as the system for implementing the following EU funds: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Cohesion Fund. The allocation for Poland from these funds was divided into sixteen regional operational programmes – one for each of the Polish sixteen voivodships, several programmes covering the whole area of Poland as well as one programme covering the least developed regions of the eastern part of Poland. It must be stated that the key part of the EU support within the cohesion policy allocated to Poland for the analysed programming period was targeted at infrastructure and environment. Over 50% of the EU allocation was devoted to the operational programme supporting these two areas (Tab. 1). Whereas, only 17.5% of the EU allocation was given for the regional operational programmes, the key focus of the PERCEIVE project's case studies.

**Table 1. Indicative allocation of the cohesion policy for Poland for the programming period for 2007-2013 (EU contribution)**

Operational Programme	Fund	Allocation in EUR	Share in Polish total allocation
Regional Operational Programmes	ERDF	16,555,614,188	17.5
OP Development of Eastern Poland	ERDF	2,273,793,750	2.4
OP Infrastructure and Environment, in which	ERDF, CF	27,913,683,774	29.5
	ERDF	5,737,330,000	6.1
	CF	22,176,353,774	23.5
OP Innovative Economy	ERDF	8,254,885,280	8.7
OP Technical Assistance	ERDF	516,700,000	0.5
OP Human Capital	ESF	9,707,176,000	10.3
Performance reserve	ERDF, ESF	1,331,304,099	1.4
Total		94,466,840,865	

Source: Own elaboration based on the Ministry of Regional Development (2007), p. 11.

The National Cohesion Strategy was supposed to create conditions enabling an increase in the competitiveness of the Polish economy based on knowledge and entrepreneurship as well as cohesion in its economic, social and spatial dimensions. It named the following horizontal objectives:

1. "Improving the functioning standard of public institutions and development of partnership mechanisms.
2. Improving human capital quality and enhancing social cohesion.
3. Establishment and modernisation of technical and social infrastructure crucial for better competitiveness of Poland.

4. Improving the competitiveness and innovativeness of enterprises, including in particular the manufacturing sector with high added value and development of the services sector.
5. Increase of the competitiveness of Polish regions and preventing their social, economic and territorial marginalisation.
6. Balancing growth opportunities and supporting structural changes in rural areas” (Ministry of Regional Development, 2007, p. 51).

It is worth putting the scale of the allocation offered to case study regions in the Polish context. The EU allocation for their ROPs seems to be a function of both their share in the total area of Poland and the share in the Polish total population (Tab. 2). Given the fact that Dolnośląskie is smaller and much more populated than Warmińsko-Mazurskie, its EU ROP allocation *per capita* amounts to less than 60% of the figure for Warmińsko-Mazurskie. At the same time, it must be stated that the *per capita* allocation for Dolnośląskie is only slightly lower than the Polish average, while for Warmińsko-Mazurskie it is over 168%.

**Table 2. The scale of the ROPs in the case study regions**

Specification	Dolnośląskie	Warmińsko-Mazurskie
Area (in km)	19,947	24,173
Share in the area of Polish	6.4	7.7
Population	2,893,055	1,428,714
Share in the Polish population	7.6	3.7
Regional Operational Programme (EUR)	1,213,144,879	1,036,542,041
Share in total ROPs (%)	7.3	6.3
ROP per capita (EUR)	418.1	725.4
ROP per capita as a percentage of the Polish average	97.0	168.3

**Source:** Own elaboration based on GUS (2005, p. 17) and Ministry of Regional Development (2007).

Naturally, both regions profited also from other programmes under the cohesion policy which were not region-specific. Financial assistance from the EU Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund in Dolnośląskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie in 2007-2013 was granted under the selected operational programs: Regional Operational Programme, Operational Programme Infrastructure and Environment, Operational Programme Innovative Economy and Operational Programme Human Capital, while in the case of the later region there was also Eastern Poland Programme. The support involved over 6,200 projects (Chmieliński et al., 2017a, p. 20). In the case of Warmińsko-Mazurskie, there were 5,000 projects implemented (Chmieliński et al., 2017b, p. 17-18).

Dolnośląskie region envisaged for the programming period in question increasing the standard of living of the inhabitants of the region and improving the competitiveness of the region while respecting the principles of sustainable development. Warmińsko-Mazurskie focused on enhancing the competitiveness of the economy and increasing the number and quality of network connections.

As for the institutional side to the implementation of the cohesion policy in the Polish case study regions, there are no differences between them. Poland is a unitary state and both the structure and powers of regional authorities are the same in all 16 regions. These are the regions who design their regional operational programmes and they are responsible for implementing them. The chosen ministry of the central government coordinates the design and implementation process as well as supervises them. While designing and implementing their operational programmes, regional bodies must comply with both the EU and national regulations on the EU funds.

### **Challenges in implementing the cohesion policy for 2007-2013 in case study regions**

The programming period for 2007-2013 was the first full programming period for Poland as it joined the EU in 2004. Therefore, the Polish institutions involved in the design and implementation of regional operational programmes had still not much experience with the functioning of the EU cohesion policy in their regions.

The case studies conducted in Poland showed that the specific construction of the EU cohesion policy for the programming period limited the positive impact of the support. This result was not specific to Polish case study regions. Also, in other case study regions chosen for the PERCEIVE projects (Chmieliński et al., 2017c), the representatives of managing authorities underlined that there was little room for adapting the policy instruments to the actual needs of their region. This conclusion can also be found in the literature on the EU cohesion policy. As stated by Wojtowicz (2019, p. 6), “factors limiting positive effects of availability of the EU funds include:

- (1) the specificity of the construction of support in the 2007-2013 programming period shaped by the EC;
- (2) the occurrence of phenomena analogous with the effect of using incomes that were not gained within the region”.

There is also a growing problem of complicated rules and regulations that tend to be significantly modified in subsequent programming periods. This administrative burden is a problem for both managing authorities and beneficiaries as they must struggle with interpreting the regulations. Changes in regulations often lead to actual discontinuation of support for specific types of projects or beneficiary groups which results in confusion among potential beneficiaries and does not allow the employees of managing authorities to fully benefit from experience gained in previous years.

As the results of the survey conducted among the EU citizens within the PERCEIVE project showed, people in the regions with a higher allocation of the EU cohesion support tend to identify with the EU project more. This is the case of both Polish regions studied where the EU funds visibly changed the quality of public infrastructure. Now, with the plans of lowering the allocation in the multi-annual financial framework for 2021-2027 for the policies that Poland benefits the most – cohesion policy and common agricultural policy – there is a danger that both the identification with the EU project and the satisfaction with the Polish EU membership can significantly decrease.

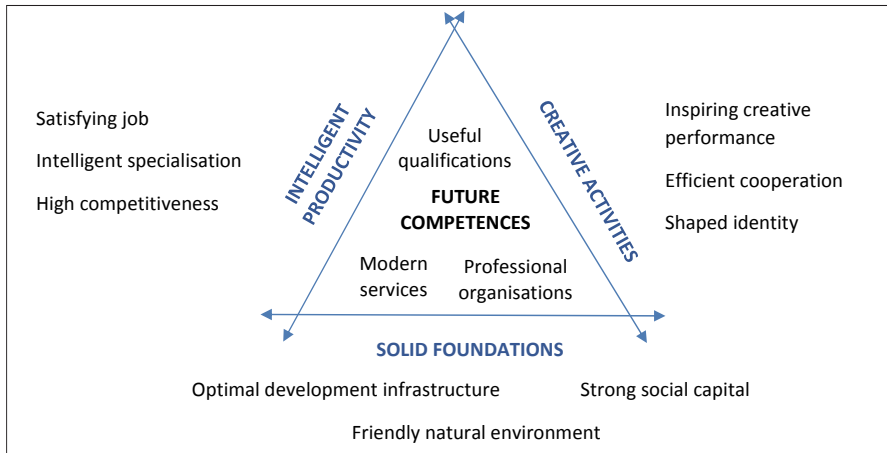
To avoid such a scenario, as well as to strengthen the positive impact of the cohesion policy, its communication must substantially improve. The key issue should be the language of communication with citizens and the channels used to communicate. The language is still too technical to be effective in informing the general public and potential beneficiaries. Moreover, with rapidly changing media new communication channels develop and require both new style and language of presenting the information.

Another way to improve the image and effectiveness of cohesion policy is to involve citizens in the process of designing the programmes so that their needs can be better targeted using the EU funds. However, for this to function Member States and their regions must be given more power to shape their programmes for implementing cohesion policy. An interesting experiment in empowering Member States is to be conducted in the next programming period within the CAP. Member States will be asked to prepare their strategic plans for CAP in their country and present evidence-based explanation for their policy choices. The question is whether this will work and will not endanger achieving the EU goals.

To analyse the progress of both regions in developing know-how on the cohesion policy it is worth to study the changes in the regional development strategies. Both regions have recently prepared their updated development strategies. Dolnośląskie adopted it in September 2018, while Warmińsko-Mazurskie is in the phase of consulting it. In the case of Warmińsko-Mazurskie the objectives of the strategy under public consultations are very modern (Fig. 1). They concentrate on citizens and their competences enabling reaching social, economic and spatial cohesion of the region with the EU.

Looking at the developmental objectives of Warmińsko-Mazurskie it is impossible to detect any clues that this can be a region among the poorest in Poland and the EU. This set of objectives could be part of any region in the EU. Seen in the strategy of a poor region it can be proof of either thinking big or being detached from the real problems of the region. The analysis of the whole strategy indicates that the region has the ambition to leave behind its status as lagging behind part of the EU. It can be stated that this strategy is not unattainable given the degrowth trends in the industry and services and the willingness to live in smaller localities closer to nature. The region is well placed to transform into a sustainable and circular economy.





**Figure 1. Arrangement of strategic and operational objectives in Warmińsko-Mazurskie's development strategy to 2030**

Source: Zarząd Województwa Warmińsko-Mazurskiego (2019), Fig. 4.

Another proof of not only a correct diagnosis but also of knowledge of the key conditions for sustainable development and cooperation is the emphasis on social capital. The strategy states that “building relationships based on experience and trust should become the basis for the implementation of many development activities” (Zarząd Województwa Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, 2019, p. 30).

In the case of Dolnośląskie, the strategic objectives of the updated development strategy are similar in scope to the ones named by Warmińsko-Mazurskie region. Yet, they are presented less ambitiously:

1. Effective use of the economic potential of the region.
2. Improvement of the quality and accessibility of public services.
3. Strengthening of regional human and social capital.
4. Responsible use of resources and protection of natural and cultural heritage assets.
5. Strengthening the spatial cohesion of the region.

These objectives also do not reveal the type of the region concerned. There seems to be no region in the EU that would not be able to choose these five objectives as vital for its development strategy. Despite significant differences in the level of socio-economic development, the actual problems of the EU regions focus on the same issues, trust and cooperation within civic society are fundamental to improving the performance of all the EU regions. This is also one of the findings of the PERCEIVE project<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> See Chmieliński et al. (2017c).



Cohesion policy has become a key part of the EU activities. Yet, its results are increasingly being questioned by different groups of stakeholders. The economic results prove that the impact of the funds is not significant to the development of most of them. This is predominantly due to the scale of resources available. Most economic analysis of the EU cohesion policy has focused on its role in the convergence processes and economic growth (Hagen and Mohl, 2009; Wostner and Slander, 2009). Yet, the cohesion policy can be seen from a different perspective than single state policies. The EU as a community of Member States trying to create a union of equal Member States based on common values and the rule of law. Therefore, the EU policies targeting the well-being of its citizens can be viewed not only from a purely mainstream economics perspective but also as part of the way of spreading its rules and values among its citizens as well as creating among them a sense of community and identity with these values.

In conclusion, it is worth to assess the developments in the cohesion policy in the case study regions that have taken place in the analysed period. An important proxy for the changes in an administrative capacity and the cooperation with the civic society, is the regions' development strategy. As the analysis of the updated development strategies showed they are both ambitious and very similar to each other. They also show the understanding of the challenges faced by both regions and the tasks that must be achieved to improve the performance of these regions both at Polish and the EU level.

The challenges related to the cohesion policy translate directly into policy recommendations. These are common to all the PERCEIVE case study regions and prove the importance of transforming the EU cohesion policy in line with them. The policy recommendations based on the PERCEIVE guidelines (PERCEIVE, 2019, p. 6):

1. A strategic approach to the design and implementation of the cohesion policy is necessary.
2. Simplification and continuity of regulations are needed.
3. Flexibility enabling targeting specific needs of a region.
4. Capacity building for designing and implementing cohesion policy.
5. Open data enabling public scrutiny.

All these recommendations can be summed up with a single word "trust". There is a need to increase trust at all the levels of designing and implementing cohesion policy in the EU. Yet, trust is something that needs time to be established and it is easily lost. With the number of stakeholders and competing interests, it is even harder to establish. Therefore, trust is a concept that should shape the following policy reforms but in a complex system of its design and implementation and with a huge number of beneficiaries operat-

ing in different legal framework, it is impossible to allow for total freedom in spending but the simplification of rules and regulations can be achieved despite the difficulty of reconciling simplicity with the need for public scrutiny on spending public funds. If this can be achieved, then the EU cohesion policy can play a vital role in increasing the identification of its citizens with the EU project and its values. Moreover, it can have a significant impact on the resilience of the regions so essential given the climate change challenges.

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