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Jarosława Matwiejuka

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UKRAINIAN RAIL TRANSPORT ON THE WAY TO THE EU: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION, REFORMS AND PROSPECTS

Abstract

- *Goal* – The purpose of the study is to analyse the process of implementing EU legislation in the field of the rail transport in Ukraine as a key instrument for adapting the national transport system to the requirements of the single European market.
- *Research methodology* – The article applies a comprehensive analytical approach that includes regulatory and legal analysis, institutional analysis, project analysis, and empirical data.
- *Score/results* – The results of the study demonstrate Ukraine's significant achievements in harmonising transport legislation with EU law, but at the same time, the study points to significant challenges. Thus, the assessment is balanced: successes are recognised, but systemic problems that need to be addressed are highlighted.
- *Originality/value* – The value of the article is reflected in its comprehensive, interdisciplinary examination of the issue, combining regulatory, managerial, technical, and socio-economic aspects of the reform.

Keywords: implementation, European integration, rail transport, EU directive, Ukrainian Railways, modernisation, solidarity routes, European gauge, traffic safety, reform

1. Introduction

The implementation of the European Union's railway legislation is a key element in the modification of Ukraine's transportation system to the requirements of the European Single Market. European legal norms establish an integrated approach to ensuring a high level of safety, market transparency, equal access to infrastructure and the development of a competitive environment. In the Ukrainian context, this process is accompanied by both regulatory changes, including the adaptation of the basic EU directives (as part of the Association Agreement), and structural challenges related to the public administration reform, corporatisation of the operator, and the introduction of the principles of separation of infrastructure and transportation management functions. At the same time, in practice, the implementation of these norms faces a number of challenges, including institutional incompleteness of reforms, insufficient level of technical compatibility of infrastructure, limited financial resources, and legal uncertainty of certain procedures [www 1]. The existing gap between the regulatory adoption of European acts and their practical implementation slows down the progress of reforms in the railway sector and makes it difficult to achieve certain EU standards. This necessitates an in-depth analysis of the actual state of implementation, identification of key barriers, and creation of effective mechanisms to accelerate the process of harmonisation of the legislative framework and management practices in the railway sector.

2. Transport security and European integration amid geopolitical instability

Transport serves as a vital foundation for the economy, facilitating the movement of persons and products, granting access to services, and contributing to trade expansion and economic progress. Since 2014, Ukraine's trade flow dynamics has undergone considerable transformation: previously, trade with Russia and transit through the Ukrainian territory played a prominent role, whereas today the increasing trade with the European Union has elevated the significance of the western transport corridors [www 2].

The escalation of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has underscored the critical importance of safeguarding supply chains, while transportation remains a key pillar of national resilience. The rapid repair of the damaged infrastructure and the implementation of the joint EU–Ukraine Solidarity Lanes

project allowed Ukraine to export more than 122 million tons of goods and import about 45 million tons of essential goods between May 2022 and February 2024 via Danube ports and road and rail connections (according to the European Commission). Since Russia's decision to terminate the Black Sea Grain Initiative on July 17, 2023, and the bombing of ports and infrastructure necessary for the Ukrainian grain exports, the development of the EU's Solidarity Lanes initiative has been important to support the national economy of Ukraine. Additionally, the Solidarity Lanes help establish the foundation for Ukraine's prospective integration into the European Union's Single Market and transport infrastructure. Enhanced connectivity between the EU and Ukraine is also important as it provides secure trade routes [www 2].

Ukraine's transport system has a pivotal function in ensuring the mobility of the population and economic development, including rail transport, which is one of its most important segments. As of August 2024, the operational length of railway tracks in Ukraine, including the temporarily occupied territories, was 19 759.8 kilometers. An extensive network of railways ensures the efficient movement of goods and passengers both within the country, and abroad, playing an important role in ensuring logistics chains, access to markets and increasing the transport accessibility of regions [www 3].

In the context of economic resilience and adaptation to new geopolitical conditions, the modernisation of logistics infrastructure is of strategic importance. Restoring and expanding the capacity of key transportation corridors, along with diversifying export routes, creates the preconditions for ensuring continuous supply of products to foreign markets. This, in turn, strengthens the competitiveness of Ukrainian exports, reduces dependence on certain destinations, and facilitates integration into the European and global economic space.

Ensuring the sustainable growth of the railway industry is a vital aspect of the national economic strategy, facilitating the country's integration into international and European transport systems. Due to its European integration commitments and the need to intensify the foreign economic activity, the rail transportation sector is facing new requirements in terms of service quality, competition, and infrastructure efficiency. In the context of globalisation and incorporation into the European Union, Ukraine must adjust its transport infrastructure to the European norm, which includes market openness, equal conditions for all participants and transparent tariff setting.

The implementation of European standards in the railway sector involves reorganising the infrastructure management system, separating the management

and service provision functions on the railways, and creating conditions for competition between different operators. One of the most important aspects is the creation of transparent tariff-setting mechanisms that ensure a fair price for services for consumers and stimulate investment in the infrastructure modernisation.

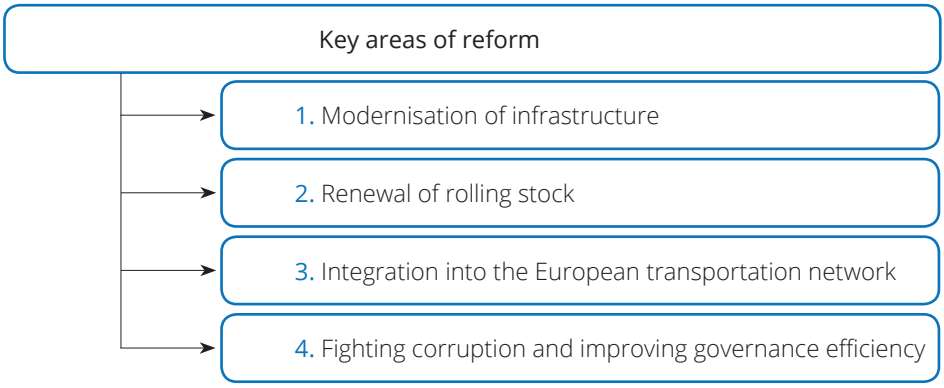
3. Infrastructure reforms as a condition for integration with the European transport network

Ensuring the efficient use of infrastructure resources is a key task for improving the economic efficiency of the rail transportation. At the same time, the adaptation of national legislation to the European levels, which provide for the introduction of modern technologies and innovations in traffic management, as well as the development of digital platforms to optimise the transportation processes and safety control [www 4], is an important aspect.

Thus, ensuring the competitiveness of Ukrainian railways in international markets and integration into the European transport network is only possible if the industry is comprehensively reformed to meet high European standards of safety, service quality and economic efficiency.

This approach will not only contribute to the development of Ukraine's economy, but will also ensure its stable and effective integration into the single European transport space, which is critical for long-term sustainable development.

Figure 1. Key areas for reforming the Ukrainian railway industry



Source: the authors' own work.

The key areas of reforming the railway industry in Ukraine Fig. 1, include the following main blocks:

1. Modernisation of infrastructure – the restoration and increase of the capacity of key transport links are necessary to ensure the efficient operation of rail transport. In particular, in 2024, the overhaul of 459 km of tracks began, which is a significant improvement compared to the previous years.

In 2025, as part of an intergovernmental agreement between Ukraine and France, the JSC Ukrainian Railways received a batch of rail products manufactured by the company from France Saarstahl Rail SAS. The first shipment amounted to 1 083 thousand tons of broad gauge rails out of a total of 19 thousand tons to be delivered by the early fall of 2025.

Table 1. Key parameters of the rail supply project from France

Indicator	Meaning
Supplier	Saarstahl Rail SAS (France)
Total volume of deliveries	19 000 tons of rails
First batch (spring 2025)	1 083 tons
Delivery completion date	By early fall 2025
Expected volume of reconstructed tracks	About 145 km
Main areas of reconstruction	Lviv–Uzhhorod, Kyiv–Lviv–EU border, Kyiv–Odesa, Kyiv–Dnipro, Kyiv–Kharkiv
Financing	Loan of EUR 37.6 million for 35 years at 0.0161% per annum
Grace period	14 years without the repayment of the loan principal

Source: the authors' own work.

This project is critical to ensuring the resilience of the railway infrastructure in the face of the armed aggression: the supply of rails allows for prompt the repair of the damage caused by hostilities, maintaining the continuity of logistics flows, and ensuring transport links between regions. According to the Deputy Minister of Communities, Territories and Infrastructure Development of Ukraine, active

cooperation with international donors is also underway to attract additional resources for recovery projects.

The total volume of rails supplied under the agreement will allow for the construction or overhaul of approximately 145 km of railway tracks. Particular attention will be paid to high–speed railways: Lviv–Uzhhorod, Kyiv–Lviv–EU border, Kyiv–Odesa, Kyiv–Dnipro, and Kyiv–Kharkiv.

The supply is financed by a preferential long-term loan in the amount of EUR 37.6 million provided for 35 years at 0.0161% per annum. According to the terms of the agreement, the JSC Ukrainian Railways is exempt from paying the principal amount of the loan for the first 14 years, which allows it to use the materials virtually free of charge. This was the first successful example of the JSC Ukrainian Railways attracting long-term concessional financing for the modernisation of the railway infrastructure [www 5].

2. Renewal of rolling stock – depreciation of rolling stock remains one of the main problems. It is estimated that 90% of passenger cars need to be replaced or repaired.

The State Budget of Ukraine for 2025 provides for comprehensive financing of measures aimed at modernising and developing the railway industry. The total expenditures for the needs of the JSC Ukrainian Railways cover both the rolling stock renewal and the infrastructure development in accordance with the strategic priorities of the state.

In particular, UAH 4.42 billion was allocated for the purchase of passenger railcars. These funds are used to continue the realisation of the government program for the renewal of passenger rolling stock using the capacities of the domestic machine building industry. As part of this program, 100 passenger railcars have already been delivered, and another 66 are in the process of being manufactured.

UAH 1.83 billion have been allocated for the purchase of rail products, which will help to further upgrade the track infrastructure and ensure safe and uninterrupted train traffic.

A separate area is the financing of development projects in the amount of UAH 1.217 billion. These funds are allocated for strategically important infrastructure initiatives, including the construction of intermodal terminals and the development of a European standard gauge (1435 mm), which is a key element of the incorporation of the Ukrainian transport system into the pan-European space.

It also provides UAH 128 million for co-financing of infrastructure projects in partnership with international financial institutions, which will attract additional resources and expertise to implement the industry's priorities [www 6].

This funding reflects Ukraine's strategic focus on modernising rail transport, improving its efficiency, environmental friendliness and integration into the European transport network.

3. Integration into the European transport network – in the context of the government's strategy aimed at developing railway infrastructure focused on the European integration, the construction of the European railway Chop-Uzhhorod began in 2024. The project involves laying 22 km of railroad track with a gauge of 1435 mm, which meets the EU standards, to replace the traditional 1520 mm gauge used in Ukraine and a number of post-Soviet countries. The infrastructure component of the project includes the reconstruction of artificial structures and engineering support facilities. In addition, the newly constructed section is to be equipped with two-way semi-automatic interlocking systems and modern microprocessor-based dispatching centralisation facilities.

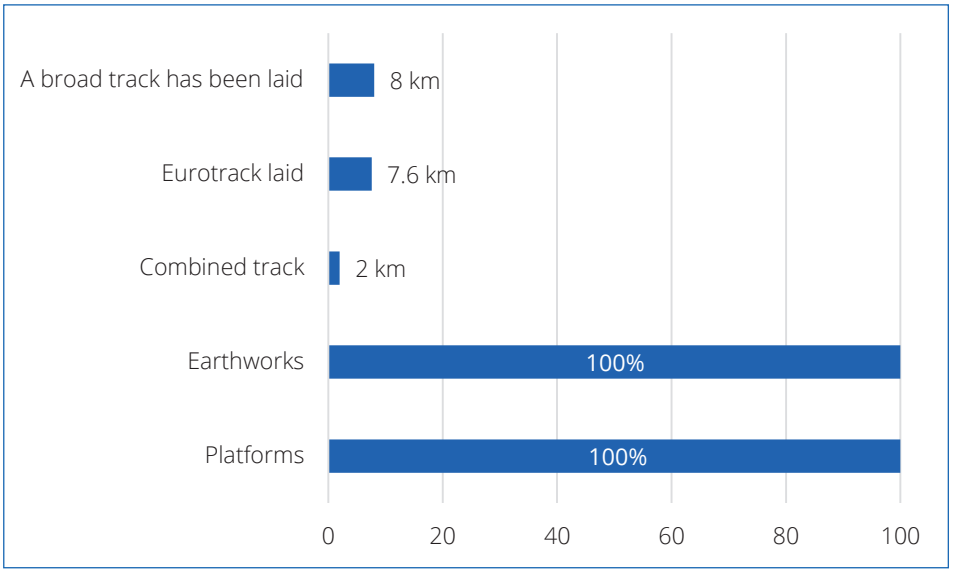
The implementation of this project will create the conditions for launching direct European-format passenger routes from Uzhhorod to EU countries, as well as provide convenient transfers from domestic trains in all regions of Ukraine for further international travel. This will contribute to enhancing cross-border mobility, integration into the European transport space, and the development of Ukraine's transit potential.

According to the Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine, as of spring 2025, significant progress has been made in the implementation of construction works, in particular: 8 km of broad gauge (1520 mm) were completed and 7.6 km of European standard gauge were laid (over 40% of the planned volume); 100% of the work on preparing 2 km of combined track was completed; all the planned earthworks have been completed; electrification, cable networking, construction of engineering infrastructure and reconstruction of passenger platforms are ongoing.

A separate area of the project is the modernisation of the railway station complex in Chop, which is considered an important transit hub on the way to the EU.

The project is approaching its final phase, with a planned completion date of August 2025. In addition to technical progress, attention is being paid to the social dimension of implementation, in particular, to ensuring decent working conditions for railway workers and the need to increase the level of mechanisation of the performed work [www 7].

Figure 2. Progress in the construction of the European railway from Chop to Uzhhorod (as of spring 2025)



Source: the authors' own work.

4. Fighting corruption and improving management efficiency – according to polls, 88% of Ukrainians believe that without reform and fighting corruption, the JSC Ukrainian Railways and passenger transportation will collapse. The main changes expected by citizens include: improved travel conditions, renewal of rolling stock, and increased passenger safety.

An analysis of the key areas of reform in Ukraine's railway industry shows that there is a systematic approach and data on the progress of individual infrastructure projects confirm the actual progress in implementing the planned changes.

The large-scale track modernisation program not only allows for a prompt response to the challenges posed by military threats, but also creates the preconditions for the implementation of high-speed rail projects, which is critical for the development of interregional mobility and strengthening economic integration. The financing model is also extremely important and can serve as a model for future infrastructure agreements.

Another key vector of development is the renewal of rolling stock and it is worth noting the progress in the implementation of the strategic project of laying the European gauge Chop-Uzhhorod, which will directly contribute to physical

integration into TEN-T. At the same time, reforms remain incomplete without systematic efforts to fight corruption.

Thus, the current policy in the field of railway transport demonstrates a transition from fragmented initiatives to comprehensive reforms with a focus on the European standards. Further effective implementation of the planned measures requires coherence of intergovernmental cooperation, stable financing, transparency of decision-making and systematic interaction with civil society. This is a prerequisite for the transformation of the railway industry into an innovative, competitive and integrated segment of the European transport space.

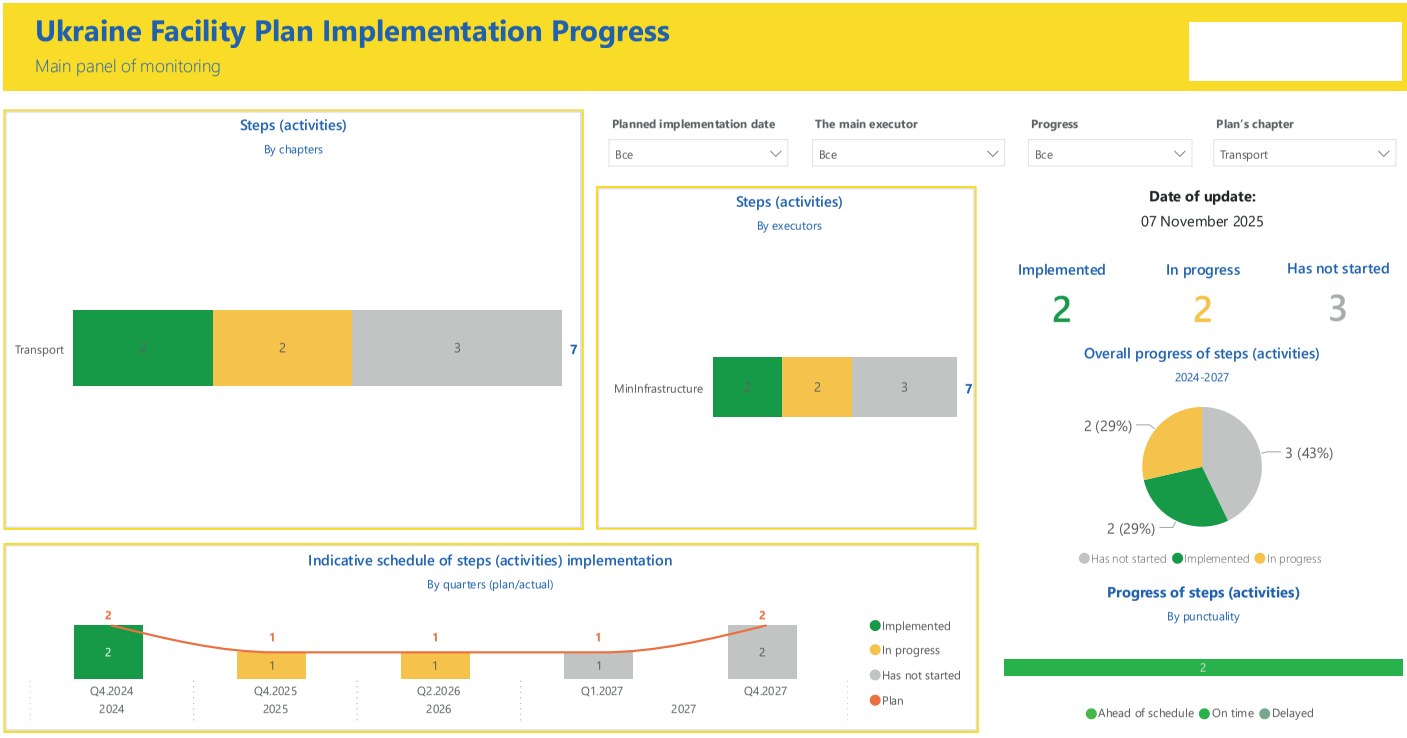
4. Implementation of the acquis EU in the field of rail transport: status, instruments, challenges

In June 2022, Ukraine was granted candidate status for the EU membership by the European Council, followed by the Council's decision in December 2023 to launch accession talks. This implies the implementation of not only the acts of legislation defined by the Association Agreement, but also of all relevant acts of the European Union legislation, in particular in the area of rail transport [www 8].

As part of the EU's Ukraine Facility, approved by the EU for 2024–2027, Ukraine has developed an Action Plan aimed at implementing structural reforms in key areas of the economy and public administration, including the transport sector. In particular, in the field of railway transport, it is envisaged to harmonise the national legislation with the requirements of the EU acquis, in particular, transparent management of infrastructure, ensuring non-discriminatory access to it and stimulating competition in the railway transportation market. One of the objectives of the Plan is to create an effective tariff setting system and introduce mechanisms to oversee market regulation by an independent body. The execution of these measures will not only help to improve the operational efficiency of the JSC Ukrainian Railways, but also ensure Ukraine's consistent progress towards integration into the Single European Transport Area [www 2].

The progress in implementing the Ukraine Facility Plan is an important indicator of Ukraine's ability to effectively implement structural reforms in line with the European standards. In particular, in the transport sector, the implementation of the envisaged measures demonstrates gradual integration into the Single European Transport Area and adaptation of legislation to the EU acquis.

Figure 3. Progress in the implementation of the Ukraine Facility Plan (Transport)



Source: [www 2].

The analysis of the information in Figure 3 shows that as of April 2025, the Ukraine Facility Plan envisages the implementation of 7 measures in the transport sector, of which only 2 have already been implemented (29%), 2 are in the process of implementation (29%), and 3 remain unimplemented (43%). An analysis of the distribution of measures by implementers shows that all initiatives are coordinated by the Ministry of Infrastructure of Ukraine.

The indicative implementation schedule demonstrates the uneven dynamics of fulfillment of commitments: a surge in activity was recorded in the fourth quarter of 2024, while in subsequent periods there is a gradual decline in the pace of implementation of measures. This situation points to the potential challenges related to administrative, financial or institutional barriers.

Therefore, the effective implementation of the Plan in the transport sector requires increased attention from the state, in particular, in terms of timely launch of the planned measures that are key to infrastructure modernisation, harmonisation of the regulatory framework with EU law, and the overall progress in the European integration.

Rail transport reform is a priority for Ukraine as part of its European integration course and a prerequisite for strengthening the country's economic potential. The harmonisation of the Ukrainian legislation in accordance with Directive 2012/34/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a single European railway area is a key condition for Ukraine's integration into the European transport area. The Directive establishes rules for the creation of a single European railway area. Its goal is to make rail transport in the EU more open, competitive and efficient [www 9]. In other words, the Directive establishes unified conditions for railway operators across the European market.

Another important vector of European integration in the field of railway transport is the harmonisation of the national legislation with the key provisions of Directive 2016/797/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on the interoperability of the railway system within the European Union and Directive 2016/798/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on the safety of railway transport [www 9]. The implementation of these acts provides, in particular, for the introduction of a European model of the traffic safety system, the creation of legal mechanisms for the technical investigation of accidents on the railway, as well as for the formation of a regulatory framework for the technical regulation of interoperability, i.e. the ability of railway infrastructure and rolling stock to interact within a single system under safe conditions.

In the context of the negotiating chapter 14 “Transport Policy”, an initial assessment of the state of implementation of the EU acquis in the field of railway transport was carried out. The assessment was carried out in accordance with the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine of February 28, 2023 No. 189 “On Approval of the Procedure for Conducting an Initial Assessment of the Implementation of the European Union (EU) Acquis” [Response, www 10]. The analysis determined the current level of approximation of national legislation to the EU and outlined further steps to harmonize the legal framework.

In 2024, a bilateral meeting was held between Ukraine and the European Commission to conduct a press screening of Ukrainian legislation in the field of railway transport. This is one of the first steps in preparing for the official screening under negotiating Title 14 “Transport Policy”, which will determine the further negotiation process on harmonisation of Ukrainian legislation with the requirements of European directives, in particular on rail transport [www 14]. The discussion focused on legislative initiatives that are currently being developed by the Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine. In particular, it was about the draft Law of Ukraine “On the System and Peculiarities of the Functioning of the Railway Transport Market of Ukraine” (Reg. No. 12142 of 21.10.2024), which is currently under consideration by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. This draft law envisages the introduction of a new model for organising the railway transportation market, focused on the principles of functioning of the European railway systems, in particular by: introducing a system of state railroad management bodies; defining the basic requirements, obligations and rights of the infrastructure operator, carrier, basic requirements for railway rolling stock, regulating the activities of railway rolling stock operators and owners of the rolling stock; enshrining the principle of equal access to infrastructure services; establishing a railway safety management system in accordance with the requirements of the European Union legislation; establishing the legal framework for technical regulation and approval of railway transport subsystems for operation [www 8].

The adoption of this draft law will ensure the fulfillment of the state’s obligations within the framework of the EU accession process and will create organisational, legal and economic frameworks for the functioning of a competitive rail transportation market in Ukraine.

The Law of Ukraine “On the System and Peculiarities of the Functioning of the Railway Transport Market of Ukraine” has a different impact on key stakeholders. Below is an infographic showing the nature of the impact and brief explanations Figure 4.

Figure 4. Impact of the Law on key stakeholders

Stakeholder	Impact of the Law Implementation	Explanation
Railway Transport Workers	Positive	New jobs will be created in the railroad sector.
JSC Ukrainian Railways	Negative	Competition → potential loss of market share.
Maintenance Operators, Educational Institutions	Positive	Conditions for competition in maintenance and training sectors.
Owners of Access Roads	Positive	Clarification and regulation of rights and responsibilities.
Potential Carriers	Positive	Equal access to infrastructure → end of monopoly.
Passengers	Positive	Defined rights and quality management system → better service.
Shippers	Positive	Competition among carriers → improved service quality and options.
Impact of the law's implementation		

Source: the authors' own work.

Thus, as can be seen from Figure 4 above, the overall balance of impacts is positive: 6 out of 7 stakeholders benefit from the implementation of the Law. The Law opens up market opportunities, promotes competition, investment, and improves the quality of services in the freight and passenger segments. The JSC Ukrainian Railways is the only party that will potentially suffer losses, but this is a natural stage of reforming the sector in the context of the European integration.

From a public policy perspective, the reform is aimed at adapting to EU standards, increasing the efficiency of the industry, and improving the consumer experience.

It should also be noted that the Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine is currently preparing for a bilateral meeting between Ukraine and the European Commission within the framework of the official screening of the compliance of Ukrainian legislation with EU law under negotiating chapters 14 “Transport” and 21 “Trans-European Networks”, which is to take place on June 24–27, 2025 in Brussels (Royaume de Belgique), and which will result in a report by the European Commission on the official assessment of the level of implementation of European legislation [Response, www 10].

5. Conclusions

Rail transport remains a strategically important sector for Ukraine, especially in times of war. Sustainable development of the railway industry has been recognised as a national policy priority, which means opening the market to competition, improving the quality of services and ensuring equal access to infrastructure. The European integration process requires Ukraine to harmonise its railway legislation in line with the key EU directives

The initial assessment of the implementation of the acquis EU showed partial compliance of the Ukrainian legislation with the European standards and identified areas for further harmonisation. According to the Ministry of Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine, as of the end of 2024, the overall progress in implementing the Association Agreement in the areas of transport, transport infrastructure, postal and courier services was only 58 percent.

It is expected that the results of the official screening in 2025 will form the basis for a roadmap for further reforms in the Ukrainian railways sector.

The implementation of the European legislation in the field of rail transport is not only an international obligation of Ukraine, but also a strategic tool for modernising the national transport system. The complexity of the reform process, from harmonising legislation to modernising infrastructure and changing the management model, demonstrates the gradual transition of the railway industry to the EU standards.

The results of the study show that Ukraine has taken a number of key steps towards integration into the European Transport Area: a new legislative framework has been adopted, large-scale infrastructure projects are being implemented, cooperation with international donors has intensified, and the modernisation of rolling stock and the development of new European-style routes have begun. At

the same time, a number of systemic legal, technical, managerial, and financial challenges have been identified that slow down the implementation of European integration measures.

The factor of institutional capacity and effective public administration in implementing reforms is of particular importance, in particular, in terms of ensuring transparent access to infrastructure, introducing common safety standards, and creating a competitive environment. An analysis of the impact of the new market model on stakeholders shows mostly positive expectations in the freight, passenger, and service segments. Negative consequences are possible only for the current monopolist the JSC Ukrainian Railways, but this opens up prospects for its transformation in a competitive environment.

In the context of the European integration, the reform of the rail transport in Ukraine is not only a sectoral task, but also a key element of the macroeconomic stability, national security and the development of the country's logistics potential. Further deepening of integration depends on the pace of implementation of the Ukraine Facility Plan, the coherence of government policy, stable financing, anti-corruption initiatives, and active participation of the civil society.

Thus, the transformation of the Ukrainian rail transport in the European direction is not only a necessity, but also a realistic prospect, provided that political will, institutional stability and consistent implementation of reforms in accordance with the acquis EU are maintained.

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THE ANALYSIS OF THE POLISH-GERMAN COOPERATION WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF INTERREG COOPERATION PROGRAMS IN THE FINANCIAL PERSPECTIVES 2014–2020 AND 2021–2027: CASE STUDIES

Abstract

- *Goal* – The article aims to provide a comprehensive comparative assessment of the Polish-German cross-border cooperation within the Interreg framework across the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 financial perspectives. Its purpose is to identify thematic continuities and shifts, to evaluate the strategic role of the selected flagship projects, and to analyse how evolving EU priorities – particularly innovation, climate transition, digitalisation, and trust-building – shape cooperation along the Polish-German border.
- *Research methodology* – The study applies a qualitative research design based on the in-depth content analysis of programme documents, official data published by Interreg managing authorities, project descriptions, evaluation reports, and complementary academic sources. A comparative analytical framework is used to examine the three Interreg A programmes (Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland, Brandenburg–Poland, Poland–Saxony) across two programming periods. Three model projects from 2014–2020 were selected using criteria related to representativeness, data availability, and thematic diversity.
- *Score/results* – The analysis demonstrates strong continuity in the areas of natural and cultural heritage, education, tourism, and institutional cooperation, which remain the backbone of the Polish-German cross-border partnerships. At the same time, the 2021–2027 programmes show a qualitative shift toward innovation, climate adaptation, biodiversity protection, and enhanced social trust. Case studies confirm tangible cross-border impacts: improved mobility infrastructure, strengthened management of joint natural heritage, and increased interoperability of emergency services. Evaluation reports referenced in the study indicate measurable outcomes,

including increases in tourist flows (up to 15%), strengthened community contacts (up to 25%), improved crisis-response capacity (approx. 30%), and persistent administrative and linguistic barriers affecting long-term sustainability.

- *Originality/value* – The article offers one of the few systematic comparisons of all the Polish-German Interreg A programmes across two programming periods, enriched with empirical evidence from evaluation studies and project-level analysis. It highlights the maturation of cross-border cooperation as a policy laboratory for the EU, showing how investment in infrastructure, environment, culture, and crisis management generates broader social and institutional cohesion. The findings provide practical value for policymakers, programme managers, and regional stakeholders, offering guidance for designing next-generation cross-border initiatives aligned with EU priorities such as the European Green Deal and digital transformation.

Keywords: Polish German cooperation, Interreg, cross-border cooperation, territorial cohesion, regional development, EU cohesion policy, financial perspective, innovation, climate change, trust-building

1. Introduction

The Polish German cooperation, shaped by complex historical processes and geographical proximity, constitutes a vital element of the political, economic, and social landscape of Central Europe. Following Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, these relations gained a new dimension, with border regions becoming a testing ground for initiatives aimed at overcoming barriers and building a shared future – often on the foundation of the challenging past. In this context, the European Territorial Cooperation programmes, known as Interreg, play a pivotal role by providing financial and organisational frameworks for cross-border projects. These initiatives go beyond mere financial transfers; their fundamental importance lies in fostering dialogue, establishing lasting partnerships, and driving social and institutional changes in border regions. The programmes compel partners on both sides of the border to jointly identify challenges, to seek solutions, and to implement specific initiatives, naturally leading to deeper integration and mutual understanding [Interreg Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015].

As one of the objectives of the EU's cohesion policy, Interreg programmes are specifically designed to support border regions in addressing the shared developmental challenges and leveraging their unique potential. Along the Polish German border, which spans three distinct programme areas – Mecklenburg–Vorpommern /

Brandenburg–Poland, Brandenburg–Poland, and Poland–Saxony – these initiatives focus on a wide range of activities, from preserving shared cultural and natural heritage to developing infrastructure and mobility, and supporting education, innovation, and institutional cooperation[Interreg Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015].

This article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the Polish German co-operation within the framework of Interreg programmes, covering two financial perspectives: the completed 2014–2020 period and the ongoing 2021–2027 period. The analysis will focus on the characteristics of individual operational programmes, their objectives, priorities, and budgets. Particular attention will be given to three selected projects implemented in the 2014–2020 period, which can serve as models of effective and valuable cross-border cooperation. The territorial scope of the analysis encompasses the Polish German border area covered by the programmes, while the thematic scope focuses on activities co-financed by Interreg funds. The structure of the article includes an introduction, a presentation of the programme frameworks for both financial perspectives, a description of the research methodology, a detailed analysis of the selected projects, a comparative analysis with conclusions, and a conclusion summarising key findings and outlining prospects for further cooperation.

2. Research methodology

The preparation of this article relied on a qualitative analysis of the available source materials. The method of content analysis was applied to programme documents for the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 financial perspectives, project descriptions, information published on the official websites of Interreg programmes, and other related publications and communications [Interreg Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015]. The objective of this study was to gain a thorough understanding of the goals, implementation mechanisms, thematic priorities, and the expected and achieved outcomes of the Polish German cross-border cooperation.

A comparative analysis of the individual programmes and selected projects was also conducted to identify patterns, specific characteristics, and the evolution of approaches to cooperation across both financial perspectives.

The selection of three exemplary projects from the 2014–2020 perspective was guided by several criteria. Firstly, the aim was to present one project from

each of the three main Polish German cross-border cooperation programmes under Interreg V A: Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland, Brandenburg–Poland, and Poland–Saxony. Secondly, the availability of detailed information within the research materials accessible to the author was crucial to enable an in-depth analysis. Thirdly, the selected projects had to demonstrate effective, model cross-border cooperation, involving partners from Poland and Germany and delivering tangible benefits to the border region. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure thematic diversity among the chosen examples to illustrate the wide range of activities within Interreg.

3. Program framework for the Polish German cooperation under Interreg

3.1. General overview of the Interreg initiative

The Interreg initiative, a cornerstone of the European Territorial Cooperation, aims to promote harmonious economic, social, and territorial development across the European Union by supporting cooperation between regions and member states. Interreg programmes focus on addressing shared challenges and harnessing common potential in border regions (Interreg A), transnational areas (Interreg B), and interregional contexts (Interreg C). A fundamental principle underlying all the Interreg projects is the principle of partnership, which requires the active involvement of entities from at least two participating countries in the preparation and implementation of joint initiatives. Along the Polish German border, this cooperation is implemented through three distinct Interreg A programmes.

3.2. Financial perspective 2014–2020

During the 2014–2020 programming period, the Polish German cross-border cooperation was supported by three Interreg V A programmes, each dedicated to a specific section of the border and addressing local needs and challenges.

The Interreg V a Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 Cooperation Program covered the northern section of the Polish German border. On the Polish side, the programme supported the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, while on the German side, it included the districts of Vorpommern–Greifswald, Vorpommern–Rügen, and Mecklenburgische Seenplatte in Mecklenburg–Vorpommern, as well as the districts of Uckermark, Barnim, and

Märkisch–Oderland in Brandenburg. The main priority axes focused on shared cultural and natural heritage, cross-border transport infrastructure and mobility, cross-border education, and deepening cooperation [Interreg V A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015]. The specific priorities of the programme included:

- Preservation and development of the shared natural and cultural heritage, including biodiversity conservation and the promotion of natural resources (e.g., through activities in Natura 2000 areas).
- The improvement of cross-border transport infrastructure and mobility, including the development of communication links and sustainable transport.
- Strengthening cross-border education, including the development of joint educational programmes and language learning of the neighboring country.
- Enhancing institutional cooperation, including support for partnerships between public administrations and citizens to build institutional capacity and foster trust [Interreg V A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015].

The Managing Authority for the programme was the Ministry of Economy, Construction, and Tourism of Mecklenburg–Vorpommern (later renamed the Ministry of Economy, Infrastructure, Tourism, and Labor of Mecklenburg–Vorpommern). The national coordinators were the Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy and the Ministry of Finance and European Affairs of the State of Brandenburg. The programme concluded in 2020, though the eligibility period for expenditures extended until the end of 2023. Its experiences and outcomes provide valuable input for shaping the current financial perspective [Interreg V A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015].

The Interreg V A Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 Cooperation Program aimed to deepen the integration of residents and to enhance the attractiveness and accessibility of the border region [Interreg V A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015]. The area of support on the Polish side included the Lubuskie Voivodeship (Gorzów and Zielona Góra subregions), while on the German side, it covered three districts in the State of Brandenburg: Märkisch–Oderland, Oder–Spree, and Spree–Neiße, as well as the independent cities of Frankfurt (Oder) and Cottbus [Interreg V A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015]. The programme's budget amounted to €100 million from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The programme's priorities included:

- Joint preservation and utilisation of natural and cultural heritage (€32 million).
- Connection to Trans-European Networks and sustainable transport (€19 million).
- Strengthening cross-border capacities and competencies (€10 million).
- Integration of residents and administrative cooperation (€33 million, including funds for the Small Projects Fund) [Interreg V A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015].

The program was intended to serve as a foundation for a shared Polish German border region [Interreg V A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015].

The Managing Authority was the Ministry of Finance and European Affairs of the State of Brandenburg, with the Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy and the Ministry of Economy, Labor, and Health of Mecklenburg–Vorpommern (later renamed the Ministry of Economy, Infrastructure, Tourism, and Labor of Mecklenburg–Vorpommern) acting as national coordinators.

The Interreg Poland–Saxony 2014–2020 Cooperation Program aimed to deepen cooperation to overcome developmental barriers in the Polish-Saxon border region [Interreg V A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015]. On the Polish side, the area of support included nine districts in the Jelenia Góra subregion of the Lower Silesian Voivodeship (Bolesławiec, Jawor, Jelenia Góra, Kamienna Góra, Lubań, Lwówek Śląski, Zgorzelec, Złotoryja, and the city of Jelenia Góra) as well as the Żary district in the Lubuskie Voivodeship. On the German side, the programme covered two districts in Saxony: Görlitz and Bautzen [Interreg V A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015]. The programme's budget was €70 million from the ERDF [Interreg V A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015]. The programme's priority axes were:

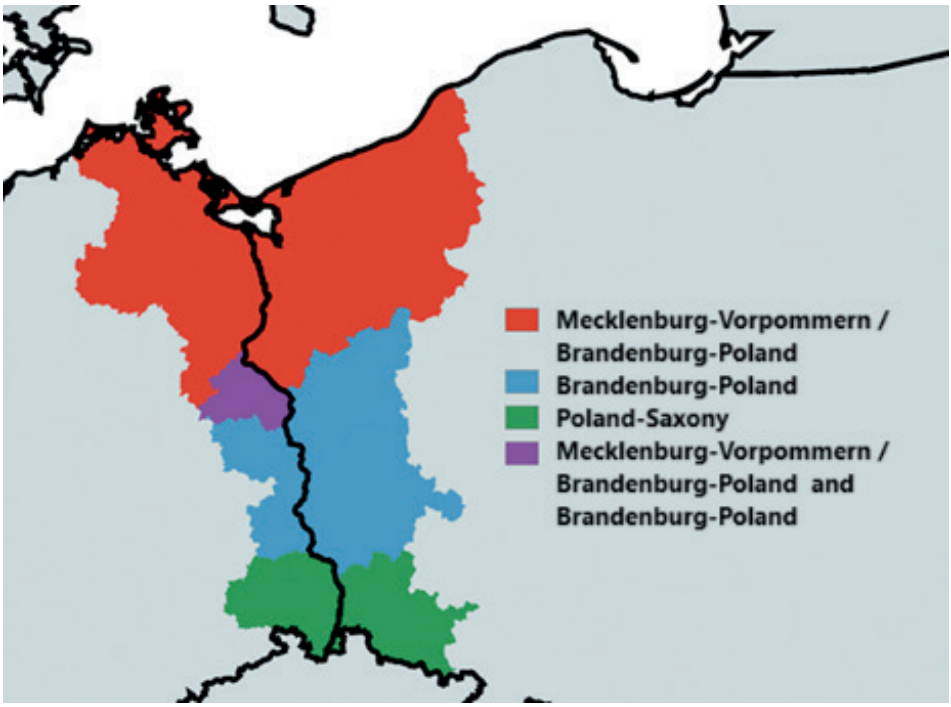
- Shared natural and cultural heritage (€21.7 million).
- Regional mobility (€13.6 million).
- Cross-border education (€10.14 million).
- Partnership cooperation and institutional capacity (€20.36 million).

A Small Projects Fund also operated within the programme. The Managing Authority was the Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, with the Saxon Ministry of Regional Development serving as the national coordinator on the German side.

Further in the article, a map is presented, illustrating the area of support along the Polish German border, divided into the analysed programmes. It shows

the geographical division of the Polish German border region into three main Interreg programme areas. Each area is marked with a different color to facilitate identification of the scope of individual programmes:

Map 1. Map of the support area along the Polish-German border divided by Programmes



Source: the author's elaboration based on documents of the analysed programmes.

The support area of the Interreg Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Program (marked in red) covers the northern section of the border. On the Polish side, this includes the West Pomeranian Voivodeship. On the German side, the map highlights the districts of Vorpommern–Greifswald, Vorpommern–Rügen, and Mecklenburgische Seenplatte in Mecklenburg–Vorpommern, as well as the districts of Uckermark, Barnim, and Märkisch–Oderland in Brandenburg.

The support area of the Interreg Brandenburg–Poland Program (marked in blue) covers the central section of the border. On the Polish side, this includes the Lubuskie Voivodeship (Gorzów and Zielona Góra subregions). On the German side, the map shows the districts of Märkisch–Oderland, Oder–Spree, and Spree–Neiße, as well as the independent cities of Frankfurt (Oder) and Cottbus in Brandenburg.

Purple indicates the overlapping area of the Interreg Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland and Interreg Brandenburg–Poland programmes. This is the Märkisch–Oderland district in Brandenburg, which is covered by both programmes.

The support area of the Interreg Poland–Saxony Program (marked in green) is in the southern section of the border. On the Polish side, it includes nine districts in the Jelenia Góra subregion of the Lower Silesian Voivodeship (Bolesławiec, Jawor, Kamienna Góra, Lubań, Lwówek Śląski, Zgorzelec, Złotoryja, the city of Jelenia Góra, and in the new perspective, the Karkonosze district instead of Jelenia Góra) as well as the Żary district in the Lubuskie Voivodeship. On the German side, the map shows the districts of Görlitz and Bautzen in Saxony.

3.3. Financial perspective 2021–2027

The new financial perspective for 2021–2027 continues the Polish German cooperation under the Interreg VI A programmes, while introducing new emphases and adjusting priorities to address current challenges.

The Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 Program was approved by the European Commission on September 21, 2022. It continues the efforts of previous editions [Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Programme 2021–2027, 2022]. The area of support remains the same as in the 2014–2020 period: the West Pomeranian Voivodeship on the Polish side, and the districts of Vorpommern–Greifswald, Vorpommern–Rügen, and Mecklenburgische Seenplatte in Mecklenburg–Vorpommern, as well as the districts of Uckermark, Barnim, and Märkisch–Oderland in Brandenburg on the German side[Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Programme 2021–2027, 2022]. The programme's budget is €124.5 million from the ERDF. The programme supports innovation, mitigating the effects of climate change and nature conservation, language learning, culture and tourism, and cross-border development. The programme's priorities are:

- Activating cross-border innovation potential.
- Jointly addressing the impacts of climate change and protecting nature.
- Enabling better participation in cross-border daily life through language, culture, and tourism.
- Strengthening trust and jointly shaping cross-border development [Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Programme 2021–2027, 2022].

The Managing Authority is the Ministry of Economy, Infrastructure, Tourism, and Labor of Mecklenburg–Vorpommern, with the Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy and the Ministry of Finance and European Affairs of the State of Brandenburg serving as national coordinators [Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Programme 2021–2027, 2022].

The Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 Cooperation Programme, with a budget of €88.3 million from the ERDF [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022], continues support for projects in the Brandenburg–Poland border region. The area of support includes the Lubuskie Voivodeship on the Polish side and the districts of Märkisch–Oderland, Oder–Spree, and Spree–Neiße, as well as the cities of Frankfurt (Oder) and Cottbus on the German side. The thematic priorities are:

- Innovative border region – knowledge and technology transfer.
- Resilient and sustainable border region – climate change and biodiversity.
- Attractive border region – education, culture, and tourism.
- Border region of dialogue – cooperation between residents and institutions [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022].

The Managing Authority is the Ministry of Finance and European Affairs of the State of Brandenburg, with the Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy as the national institution in Poland [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022]. The Ministry of Economy, Infrastructure, Tourism, and Labor of Mecklenburg–Vorpommern continues to act as the national coordinator on the German side.

The Interreg Poland–Saxony 2021–2027 Cooperation Program, with a budget of €60.275 million from the ERDF, aims to further deepen cooperation to overcome developmental barriers [Interreg VI A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022]. On the Polish side, the area of support includes nine districts in the Jelenia Góra subregion of the Lower Silesian Voivodeship (Bolesławiec, Jawor, Kamienna Góra, Karkonosze, Lubań, Lwówek Śląski, Zgorzelec, Złotoryja, and the city of Jelenia Góra – notably, the Jelenia Góra district was replaced by the Karkonosze district compared to the 2014–2020 period) as well as the Żary district in the Lubuskie Voivodeship. On the German side, the districts of Görlitz and Bautzen remain covered. The programme's priorities are:

- Environmentally friendly border region – climate change mitigation and adaptation.

- Border region open to education, culture, and tourism.
- Border region open to dialogue between residents and institutions (including the Small Projects Fund) [Interreg VI A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022].

The Managing Authority is the Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy with the Saxon Ministry of Regional Development as the national institution in Germany [Interreg VI A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022]. The Saxon Ministry of Regional Development continues as the national coordinator on the German side, unchanged from the previous perspective.

4. Key changes and areas of continuity between financial perspectives

The analysis of the Interreg programmes along the Polish German border across the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 perspectives reveals both continuity in certain support directions and an evolution of priorities, reflecting changing conditions and a growing awareness of global challenges. This adaptability of the programmes demonstrates the maturation of cross-border cooperation, which is becoming increasingly responsive to the needs of regions and the current priorities of the European Union.

Comparing the priorities of the two financial perspectives [Interreg V A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015], there is a noticeable strengthening of themes related to innovation and climate change mitigation, as well as environmental protection [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022]. This is a direct response to strategic EU policy directions, such as the European Green Deal and digital transformation, which are also reflected in the recent programmes, for instance, through support for digital technologies in education [Interreg VI A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022].

At the same time, the 2021–2027 programmes continue to support areas that have long been the foundation of cross-border cooperation, such as cultural and tourism development, education, and institutional cooperation, as well as the integration of residents [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022]. The continuation of these directions underscores their enduring importance for fostering cohesion and overcoming barriers in the border region.

Notably, the new perspective places greater emphasis on priorities focused on building trust and dialogue, such as "Strengthening trust, jointly shaping cross-border development" in the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Programme [Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg – Poland Programme 2021–2027, 2022] and "Border region of dialogue – cooperation between residents and institutions" in the Brandenburg–Poland Programme [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022]. This suggests that, despite years of experience of cooperation, there remains a need to invest in social capital, overcome mental and administrative barriers, and build deeper, partnership-based relationships. This is a hallmark of mature cooperation that does not shy away from addressing challenging issues and strives for continuous improvement of cooperative mechanisms.

The analysis of the Interreg programmes along the Polish German border in the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 financial perspectives reveals both continuity in key support areas and an evolution of priorities, reflecting changing conditions and a growing awareness of global challenges. This adaptability of the programmes demonstrates the maturation of cross-border cooperation, which is becoming increasingly responsive to the needs of regions and the current priorities of the European Union.

In both financial perspectives, the Interreg programmes along the Polish German border consistently support areas that have long been the foundation of cross-border cooperation. The key areas of continuity include:

- Shared Natural and Cultural Heritage / Culture and Tourism: Across both the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 perspectives, the preservation, conservation, and utilisation of the shared natural and cultural heritage remain a significant priority. Projects in this area aim not only to protect unique resources but also to develop cross-border tourism, fostering integration and mutual understanding. For example, the Interreg V A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 programme focused on shared cultural and natural heritage. In the new perspective, the Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 programme supports "language, culture, and tourism." Similarly, the Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 programme included "joint preservation and utilisation of natural and cultural heritage," while in 2021–2027, it focuses on an "attractive border region – education, culture, and tourism." The Poland–Saxony programme also maintains this direction, transitioning from "shared natural and cultural heritage" to a "border region open to education, culture, and tourism."

- Cross-Border Education: Supporting education, including learning the language of the neighboring country, remains a consistently crucial element of cooperation. This aims to overcome language barriers and foster mutual understanding among border region residents. The Interreg V A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 programme focused on cross-border education, as did the Interreg V A Poland–Saxony 2014–2020 programme with its priority axis "cross-border education." In the new perspective, the Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 programme supports language learning, while the Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 programme focuses on an "attractive border region – education, culture, and tourism." The Interreg Poland–Saxony 2021–2027 programme also promotes the "border region open to education, culture, and tourism."
- Institutional Cooperation and Resident Integration: Building lasting partnerships, strengthening institutional cooperation, and integrating local communities form the core of the Interreg programmes in both periods. This is crucial for overcoming mental and administrative barriers and creating a cohesive border region. The Interreg V A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 Cooperation Program had a priority axis for "deepening cooperation." The Interreg V A Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 Cooperation Program included "integration of residents and administrative cooperation," while the Interreg Poland–Saxony 2014–2020 Cooperation Program supported "partnership cooperation and institutional capacity." In the 2021–2027 perspective, the Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 programme has a priority for "strengthening trust, jointly shaping cross-border development," and the Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 Cooperation Program promotes "border region of dialogue – cooperation between residents and institutions." The Interreg Poland–Saxony 2021–2027 programme also focuses on a "border region open to dialogue between residents and institutions."

Comparing the priorities of both periods, a clear strengthening of certain themes is evident, directly responding to the strategic EU policy directions such as the European Green Deal and digital transformation:

- Innovation and Knowledge/Technology Transfer: In the new perspective, priorities related to innovation gain prominence. The Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 programme introduces

the priority "activating cross-border innovation potential." Similarly, the Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 Cooperation Program includes the priority "innovative border region – knowledge and technology transfer." This is a novelty compared to the previous perspective, in which this theme was not as distinctly highlighted as a separate priority.

- Climate Change Mitigation and Nature/Biodiversity Protection: Environmental and climate change-related themes are significantly strengthened in the 2021–2027 perspective. The Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 programme includes the priority "jointly addressing the impacts of climate change and protecting nature." The Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland 2021–2027 Cooperation Program focuses on a "resilient and sustainable border region – climate change and biodiversity," while the Interreg Poland–Saxony 2021–2027 programme promotes an "environmentally friendly border region – climate change mitigation and adaptation." In the previous perspective, these issues were often incorporated within the framework of natural heritage but did not constitute such a clear, distinct pillar.
- Digital Transformation: Although not always a separate priority, digital transformation is reflected in recent programmes, for example, through support for digital technologies in education. An example is the development of a mobile app for the Muskau Arch Geopark, which aligns with this trend.
- The increased emphasis on "Trust" and "Dialogue": Notably, the new perspective introduces or emphasises priorities focused on building trust and dialogue. Examples include "strengthening trust, jointly shaping cross-border development" in the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland programme and the "border region of dialogue – cooperation between residents and institutions" in the Brandenburg–Poland programme. This suggests that, despite years of experience of cooperation, there remains a need to invest in social capital, overcome mental and administrative barriers, and build deeper, partnership-based relationships. This is a hallmark of mature cooperation that does not shy away from addressing challenging issues and strives for continuous improvement of cooperative mechanisms.

The tables below summarise the key information about the Interreg programmes along the Polish German border in both analysed financial perspectives.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Interreg Poland-Germany Programmes in the 2014–2020 perspective

Programme	Budget (ERDF) in EUR	Priority axes	Support area
Mecklenburg–Vorpommern/ Brandenburg–Poland	€134 million	• Preservation and development of the shared natural and cultural heritage • The improvement of cross-border transport infrastructure and mobility • Strengthening cross-border education • Enhancing institutional cooperation	• PL: the West Pomeranian Voivodeship • DE: Districts: Vorpommern–Greifswald, Vorpommern–Rügen, Mecklenburgische Seenplatte (Mecklenburg–Vorpommern); Uckermark, Barnim, Märkisch–Oderland (Brandenburg)
Brandenburg–Poland	€100 million	• Joint preservation and utilisation of natural and cultural heritage (€32 million) • Connection to Trans-European Networks and sustainable transport (€19 million) • Strengthening cross-border capacities and competencies (€10 million) • Integration of residents and administrative cooperation (€33 million, including the Small Projects Fund)	• PL: the Lubuskie Voivodeship (Gorzów and Zielona Góra subregions) • DE: Districts: Märkisch–Oderland, Oder–Spree, Spree–Neiße; independent cities: Frankfurt (Oder), Cottbus (Brandenburg)
Poland–Saxony	€70 million	• Shared natural and cultural heritage (€21.7 million) • Regional mobility (€13.6 million) • Cross-border education (€10.14 million) • Partnership cooperation and institutional capacity (€20.36 million)	• PL: 9 districts of the Jelenia Góra subregion (the Lower Silesian Voivodeship): Bolesławiec, Jawor, Jelenia Góra, Kamienna Góra, Lubań, Lwówek Śląski, Zgorzelec, Złotoryja, city of Jelenia Góra; Żary district (the Lubuskie Voivodeship) • DE: Districts: Görlitz, Bautzen (Saxony)

Source: the author's elaboration based on documents of the analysed programmes.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Interreg Poland-Germany Programmes in the 2021–2027 perspective

Programme	Budget (ERDF) in EUR	Priority axes	Support area
Mecklenburg–Vorpommern/ Brandenburg–Poland	€124.5 million	• Activating cross–border innovation potential • Jointly addressing the impacts of climate change and protecting nature • Enabling better participation in cross–border daily life through language, culture, and tourism • Strengthening trust and jointly shaping cross–border development	• PL: the West Pomeranian Voivodeship • DE: Districts: Vorpommern–Greifswald, Vorpommern–Rügen, Mecklenburgische Seenplatte (Mecklenburg–Vorpommern); Uckermark, Barnim, Märkisch–Oderland (Brandenburg)
Brandenburg–Poland	€88.3 million	• Innovative border region – knowledge and technology transfer • Resilient and sustainable border region – climate change and biodiversity • Attractive border region – education, culture, and tourism • Border region of dialogue – cooperation between residents and institutions	• PL: the Lubuskie Voivodeship (Gorzów and Zielona Góra subregions) • DE: Districts: Märkisch–Oderland, Oder–Spree, Spree–Neiße; independent cities: Frankfurt (Oder), Cottbus (Brandenburg)
Poland–Saxony	€60.3 million	• Environmentally friendly border region – climate change mitigation and adaptation • Border region open to education, culture, and tourism. • Border region open to dialogue between residents and institutions (including the Small Projects Fund)	• PL: 9 districts of the Jelenia Góra subregion (the Lower Silesian Voivodeship): Bolesławiec, Jawor, Kamienna Góra, Karkonosze, Lubań, Lwówek Śląski, Zgorzelec, Złotoryja, city of Jelenia Góra; Żary district (the Lubuskie Voivodeship) • DE: Districts: Görlitz, Bautzen (Saxony)

Source: the author's elaboration based on documents of the analysed programmes.

Further on, the article presents a chart comparing the budgets of the Interreg programmes related to the Polish German cooperation in the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 periods (in million €). The chart shows the budgets of the three Interreg programmes along the Polish German border across the two financial perspectives. In the 2014–2020 perspective, the total ERDF budget for these programmes amounted to approximately €304 million. In the 2021–2027 perspective, the total ERDF budget for these programmes slightly decreased to around €273.1 million.

For the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Program, the total budget in the 2014–2020 perspective was €157.6 million, of which €134 million came from the ERDF. In the 2021–2027 perspective, the total budget increased slightly to €155.7 million, with €124.5 million from the ERDF. The program's value across both perspectives is comparable. The Brandenburg–Poland Program had a budget of €118 million in the 2014–2020 perspective, including €100 million from the ERDF. In the new 2021–2027 perspective, the total budget decreased to €110.3 million, with €88.3 million from the ERDF. Similarly, the Interreg Poland–Saxony Program had a budget of €82.3 million in the 2014–2020 perspective, including €70 million from the ERDF. In the 2021–2027 period, the budget decreased to €75 million, with €60.3 million from the ERDF. Like the Brandenburg–Poland programme, there was a reduction in financial allocation in the new programming period.

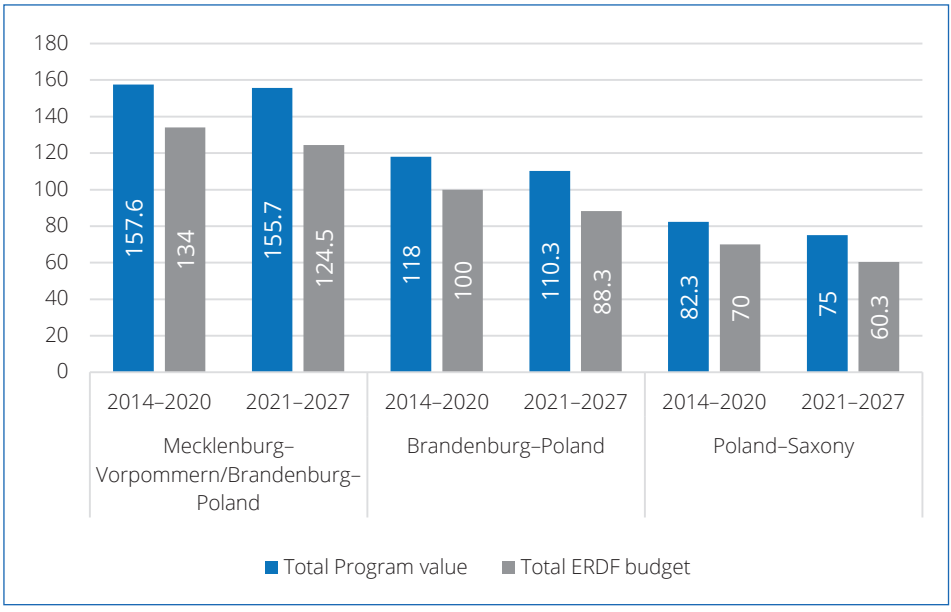
The analysis of the budgets of the Interreg programmes along the Polish German border in the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 financial perspectives reveals varied trends in resource allocation, which may reflect shifting political and economic priorities of the European Union as well as the specific characteristics of individual border regions. This could stem from broader shifts in the EU's cohesion policy, which may prioritise other forms of territorial cooperation (e.g., macro-regional), or from strategic decisions at the member state level regarding the allocation of Interreg funds.

In both financial perspectives, the Interreg Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland Program maintains its position as the programme with the largest ERDF budget. Despite a slight decrease in budget size in 2021–2027 compared to 2014–2020, it remains the largest in terms of funding allocation among programmes along the Polish German border. This is due to the programme covering the largest geographical area, stretching from the Baltic Sea in the north, through the West Pomeranian Voivodeship on the Polish side, to significant parts of Mecklenburg–Vorpommern and Brandenburg on the German side. The

increase in the budget for the Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland program in the new perspective, despite the overall downward trend, may also reflect the strategic importance of this region for cross-border cooperation, possibly due to its innovation potential, tourism opportunities, or specific climate and environmental challenges that have gained prominence under the European Green Deal. The large territorial scope correlates with the largest ERDF budget, which may be justified by the developmental needs of such an extensive region. Conversely, the Interreg Poland–Saxony Program consistently has the smallest budget among the analysed programmes. This programme covers the smallest area, focusing on the Jelenia Góra subregion in Poland and two districts in Saxony. Its smallest ERDF budget appears proportionate to the smaller geographical area, though it still requires significant investments to overcome developmental barriers in this border region.

In summary, the budgets of the Interreg programmes along the Polish German border reflect both continuity and evolution in the funding of cross-border cooperation, with some shifts in allocation that may stem from adjustments to changing EU priorities and regional challenges.

Chart 1. Comparison of budgets of the Interreg Programmes related to the Polish German cooperation in 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 (in million €)



Source: the author's elaboration based on documents of the analysed programmes.

5. Exemplary Polish German cooperation projects (2014–2020 perspective)

The 2014–2020 financial perspective enabled the implementation of numerous cross-border projects along the Polish German border. Below, there are three selected examples, one from each of the main programmes, which illustrate the diversity and potential of this cooperation.

5.1. Project 1: "Adaptation of the European Bridge Siekierki-Neurüdnitz for tourism purposes"

This project was implemented under the Interreg V A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 Program. The Lead Partner on the Polish side was the Association of Landscape Parks of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, while on the German side, it was the Amt Barnim-Oderbruch [www 1]. The total project value was € 8 534 441.00, with funding from the European Regional Development Fund amounting to € 6 049 552.00 [www 1, www 2]. The project was carried out from January 1, 2019, to December 31, 2022 [www 2].

The main objective of the project was to permanently open the historic railway bridge to the community of the support area as a cross-border infrastructure linking both banks of the Oder River, as well as a unique tourist and natural attraction and a cultural monument [www 2]. The project also aimed to address a gap in the communication system, to facilitate border crossing, and to integrate Polish and German cycling routes. The key activities included adapting the 660-meter-long bridge for pedestrian and bicycle traffic. A two-level viewing platform was constructed, along with tourist and educational infrastructure, including a symbolic shared recreational space on the border embankment [Adaptation of the Siekierki – Neurüdnitz European Bridge]. Conservation measures were also implemented, such as a nature analysis and the installation of platforms for the eagle owl, as well as organising joint workshops for local communities and promotional activities [Adaptation of the Siekierki – Neurüdnitz European Bridge].

As a result of the project, a new, attractive tourist route and cross-border connection were created, contributing to the integration of the cycling route systems and potentially increasing tourist traffic. An important outcome was also the strengthening of ties between local communities on both sides of the border and the promotion of shared natural heritage, given the bridge's location

in the valuable Natura 2000 area [Brücke Neurüdnitz – Siekierki wird mit Mitteln des Kooperationsprogrammes INTERREG V A saniert, 2017]. The Siekierki-Neurüdnitz bridge project is an excellent example of how investment in "hard" infrastructure can generate significant "soft" outcomes. The construction and adaptation of the bridge represent a concrete, measurable action, but its goals and impacts extend far beyond the structure itself. The bridge has become a symbol of connection, a "cross-border unifying infrastructure" that facilitates interpersonal contacts and cooperation [Adaptation of the Siekierki – Neurüdnitz European Bridge]. The organisation of joint workshops and the creation of a shared recreational space directly contribute to community integration. Moreover, the project skillfully combines tourism development with the protection of valuable natural heritage, encompassing the Natura 2000 area and eagle owl conservation, as well as cultural heritage, treating the bridge as a historical monument [Adaptation of the Siekierki – Neurüdnitz European Bridge]. This multifaceted approach, where infrastructure investment becomes a platform for social integration, environmental education, and heritage conservation, makes it a model example of an integrated approach to cross-border development. The success of the project was underpinned by the Polish German partnership (the Association of Landscape Parks of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship and Amt Barnim-Oderbruch), which was essential for managing such a complex border-spanning structure.

5.2. Project 2: "UNESCO Global Geopark Muskau Arch as an Opportunity for Regional Development"

This project was implemented under the Interreg V A Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 Program. The Lead Partner on the Polish side was the urban municipality of Żary, with other Polish partners including the municipalities of Brody, Łęknica, Przewóz, and Trzebiel. On the German side, the project involved the Förderverein Geopark Muskauer Faltenbogen e.V. (Association for the Support of the Muskau Arch Geopark) and the Ziegeleibahnverein Klein Kölzig e.V. (Klein Kölzig Brick Railway Association). The ERDF funding for the project amounted to €324 276.73, and the project was implemented from January 1, 2020, to March 31, 2023 [www 4].

The main objective was to strengthen cooperation among all municipalities and institutions operating in the Muskau Arch area and its vicinity, aiming for broader, more effective promotion of the region to attract more tourists,

particularly on the Polish side of the Geopark. The project also sought to promote the region in major Polish cities such as Poznań, Wrocław, and the Silesian region. The partners organised events and attractions for visitors, developed a bilingual Geopark website with an events calendar, and created a mobile app. New recurring event were introduced, such as the "From Tower to Tower" relay race and a cross-country cycling event. The scientific cooperation, which involved analysing the potential of the Geopark and Zielony Las (Green Forest) areas for future expansion of the Geopark and maintaining its UNESCO Global Geopark status [www 6; www 7], was a significant component.

The project was expected to result in an increase in the number of tourists visiting the region, in better coordination of promotional activities, and in a richer tourism offer. It also aimed to enhance the Geopark's visibility and provide a scientific foundation for its further development. The Muskau Arch Geopark project perfectly illustrates how cross-border cooperation is essential for the effective management and promotion of a unique natural and cultural resource that naturally transcends state borders. The Muskau Arch, as a geological formation of global significance, requires coordinated efforts on both sides of the border. The involvement of numerous partners, including Polish municipalities and German associations, reflects the complexity but also the strength of such cooperation. The project's goal was not only tourism promotion but also "strengthening cooperation among all municipalities and institutions" and "coordinating efforts" [www 6]. The pursuit of maintaining and potentially expanding the prestigious UNESCO Global Geopark status [www 7] gives this cooperation a strategic, long-term dimension and sets ambitious shared goals for the partners. Joint promotional tools, such as the website, mobile app, and cross-border events [www 6], are crucial for building a cohesive image of this international tourism product and effectively reaching potential audiences.

5.3. Project 3: "Kom(m)ando 'Zur Hilfe! / Na pomoc!'"

This project was implemented under the Interreg Poland–Saxony 2014–2020 Program [www 5]. The Lead Partner on the German side was the city of Löbau (Stadtverwaltung Löbau), while the Polish partner was the Lubań County. The total project value was €1 664 836.40, with the city of Löbau receiving €427 786.30 in ERDF funding and Lubań County receiving €483 168.35. In 2019, Lubań County incurred investment expenses of PLN 1 776 083.50, including PLN 1 509 670.96 from EU funds, primarily for the purchase of specialised

equipment. The total planned cost of the project on the Lubań County side from 2016 to 2019 was PLN 2 412,013. The project was implemented until June 30, 2019 [www 5].

The main objective of the project was to establish and intensify cross-border cooperation between emergency services, particularly the Löbau city fire brigade and units from Lubań County, in the areas of disaster protection and joint crisis response [www 5]. The project aligned with the Priority Axis IV of the programme, which focused on intensifying partnership cooperation and institutional capacity. The project included the purchase of specialised rescue equipment for both partners, the organisation of joint exercises and training for emergency services, and language courses (German for Polish firefighters and Polish for German firefighters) to improve communication during joint rescue operations. Additionally, there was an exchange of experiences in crisis management [www 5].

The project contributed to enhancing crisis response capabilities on both sides of the border, improving the interoperability of emergency services, enhancing firefighters' language skills, and strengthening institutional cooperation between partners. The *Kom(m)ando 'Zur Hilfe! /Na pomoc!* project demonstrates that cross-border cooperation in public safety and crisis management is not only possible but essential in border regions. Natural disasters, such as floods, or other crisis situations do not respect state borders, making coordinated actions by services from neighboring countries crucial for ensuring the safety of residents. The Interreg programme provided not only financial resources but also an organisational framework for building trust and practical operational capabilities. The project directly addressed the need for cooperation between fire brigades. Activities such as joint exercises, the purchase of compatible equipment, and, crucially, language courses were aimed at eliminating communication and procedural barriers that could hinder effective cooperation during real emergencies. The involvement of local authorities (the city of Löbau and Lubań County) [Trzymamy się razem, 2022] provided institutional support for the operational activities of the services. Such initiatives lay the foundation for long-term, effective cooperation in crisis situations, often extending beyond the formal end of the project, directly contributing to an increased sense of security for border region residents.

The table below provides a concise summary of key data regarding the exemplary described projects.

Table 3. Detailed data on the selected exemplary projects (2014–2020 perspective)

Program	Interreg V A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland	Interreg V A Brandenburg–Poland	Interreg Poland–Saxony
Project name	Adaptation of the European Bridge Siekierki-Neurüdnitz for Tourism Purposes	UNESCO Global Geopark Muskau Arch as an Opportunity for Regional Development	Kom(m)ando "Zur Hilfe! / Na pomoc!"
Partners	Lead Partner (Poland): Association of Landscape Parks of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship; Lead Partner (Germany): Amt Barnim-Oderbruch	Lead Partner (Poland): Urban Municipality of Żary; Other Polish Partners: Municipalities of Brody, Łęknica, Przewóz, Trzebiel; German Partners: Förderverein Geopark Muskauer Faltenbogen e.V., Ziegeleibahnverein Klein Kölzig e.V.	Lead Partner (Germany): City of Löbau (Stadtverwaltung Löbau); Partner (Poland): Lubań County
Total value (EUR)	€8 534 441.00	Not specified	€1 664 836.40
ERDF funding (EUR)	€6 049 552.00	€324 276.73	Löbau: €427 786.30; Lubań: €483 168.35
Implementation Period	January 1, 2019 – December 31, 2022	January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2023	Until June 30, 2019
Main objective	Permanently opening the historic railway bridge as a cross-border infrastructure linking both banks of the Oder River, a tourist and natural attraction, and a cultural monument; facilitating border crossing and integrating cycling routes.	Strengthening cooperation among municipalities and institutions in the Muskau Arch area to promote the region and attract more tourists, particularly on the Polish side; enhancing the Geopark's visibility and providing a scientific foundation for its development.	Establishing and intensifying cross-border cooperation between emergency services (Löbau fire brigade and Lubań County units) in disaster protection and joint crisis response; improving interoperability, language skills, and institutional cooperation.

Source: the author's elaboration based on documents of the analysed programmes.

6. Comparative analysis and conclusions

The analysis of the Interreg programmes along the Polish German border and of the selected projects from the 2014–2020 perspective allows for several conclusions regarding the nature, scope, and evolution of this cooperation. The cooperation spans a wide range of fields, from the preservation and promotion of shared natural and cultural heritage to the development of transport and tourism infrastructure, as well as activities in education, the labor market, public safety, and the enhancement of institutional capacity and community integration. The dominant beneficiaries and partners in the projects are local government units, non-governmental organisations, public institutions (including emergency services, educational, and cultural institutions), and, to a lesser extent, universities, and economic entities [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022]. The scale of the implemented initiatives varies – from small, grassroots projects funded under the Small Projects Fund, which play a significant role in building interpersonal contacts and trust [Interreg VI A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022], to large, strategic infrastructure investments, such as road modernisation or the adaptation of structures for tourism purposes [Interreg V A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015].

The key success factors in cross-border cooperation, evident in the analysed examples, include strong and committed partnerships based on mutual trust and the shared commitment to achieving project goals. Active engagement of local communities is also crucial, as it ensures project legitimacy and increases the likelihood of sustainable outcomes. Clearly defined objectives, adequate funding, and support from the managing authorities and regional contact points also play a significant role. On the other hand, cross-border cooperation faces several barriers and challenges. These include differences in the legal and administrative systems of both countries, which can complicate the implementation of joint initiatives [Interreg V A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015]. Language barriers, despite numerous initiatives supporting language learning of the neighboring country, remain an obstacle [Interreg V A Poland–Saxony Cooperation Programme 2014–2020, 2015]. Persistent stereotypes or differences in organisational culture among partners can also pose challenges. Ensuring the sustainability of project outcomes after the end of EU funding is another significant challenge, requiring strategic planning at the project proposal stage.

In the context of evaluating the Interreg programmes along the Polish German border, it is worth referring to reports and academic studies analysing the

effectiveness and impact of these initiatives. The evaluation report of the Interreg V A Poland–Saxony 2014–2020 Program, commissioned by the Polish Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, indicates that the programme significantly increased the number of joint cultural and educational initiatives, with a 35% increase in cross-border cultural events compared to the previous financial perspective (2007–2013). The programme's particular added value was noted in cross-border education – 72% of beneficiaries of educational projects reported improved language skills among participants, which translated into better relations between border region residents. However, the report highlights that administrative barrier, such as differences in fund settlement procedures, extended the implementation time of some projects by up to 20% compared to initial assumptions [Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy, 2021]. Similar conclusions arise from a study conducted by the University of Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), which analysed the Interreg V A Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 Program. The study found that projects related to tourism and heritage preservation, such as the Muskau Arch Geopark, increased tourist traffic in the region by 15% between 2018 and 2022, but the lack of long-term funding mechanisms after project completion limited the sustainability of these effects. The study authors recommend establishing cross-border stabilisation funds to support the maintenance of results after the end of ERDF funding [Viadrina University, 2022].

Regarding institutional cooperation and safety, the evaluation report of the Interreg V A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg–Poland 2014–2020 Program, published by the Ministry of Economy of Mecklenburg–Vorpommern, indicates that projects such as the adaptation of the Siekierki-Neurüdnitz bridge had a positive impact on community integration, increasing cross-border social contacts by 25% during the project's implementation. However, the report notes that the lack of unified technical standards for cross-border infrastructure (e.g., differences in bridge safety standards) hindered implementation and generated additional costs, reaching up to 10% of the project budget. The document recommends introducing common technical standards for future infrastructure projects. In the context of crisis management, an analysis conducted by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) in 2023 on projects such as *Kom(m)ando 'Zur Hilfe! / Na pomoc!* highlights that joint training and the purchase of compatible equipment increased the operational capabilities of emergency services by 30%, but language barriers remain a challenge – only 40% of firefighters participating in the training achieved

a communicative level in the neighboring language. The report suggests increasing the number and intensity of language courses in future programmes [Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2023].

The evolution of Interreg programmes between the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 perspectives indicates an adaptation to changing EU priorities and global challenges. There has been a clear increase in the importance of activities related to climate change adaptation, biodiversity protection, digital transformation, and innovation support [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022]. At the same time, support continues for traditional areas of cooperation, such as tourism development based on cultural and natural heritage, cross-border education, and social integration, underscoring their ongoing relevance for border regions. New emphases, such as the explicitly stated goals of "strengthening trust" [Interreg VI A Mecklenburg–Vorpommern / Brandenburg – Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022] or creating a "border region of dialogue" [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022] suggest a pursuit of deeper, more qualitative integration.

Interreg programmes along the Polish German border can be seen as "laboratories" of European cooperation. Here, in the direct interaction of different systems, cultures, and communities, innovative solutions to cross-border challenges are tested. The experiences gained – both successes and failures – and the developed cooperation models can be transferred to other European regions or influence the shaping of future EU policies. Initiatives like the European Territorial Cooperation [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022] are inherently spaces for generating knowledge and practical solutions. Innovative projects, such as those implemented by the University of Zielona Góra under the Brandenburg–Poland Programme [Interreg VI A Brandenburg–Poland Cooperation Programme 2021–2027, 2022] or projects related to integrated medical rescue (e.g., InGRiP) [www 1] or the management of shared heritage (Muskau Arch Geopark) [UNESCO Global Geopark Muskauer Faltenbogen], provide valuable case studies. Even smaller initiatives supported under the Small Projects Fund enable the testing of numerous grassroots ideas and building of social capital. Institutions involved in Programme management collect these experiences, which, through platforms such as keep.eu, can contribute to improving cohesion policy and territorial cooperation across the European Union.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the Polish German cooperation within the framework of Interreg programmes in the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 financial perspectives clearly demonstrates the dynamic and multifaceted nature of this collaboration. These programmes are a key instrument for supporting the development of border regions, contributing not only to the implementation of specific investments but also to building lasting institutional, social, and interpersonal connections. The main goals and priorities of the programmes evolve, reflecting changing global challenges and EU priorities, with an increasing focus on innovation, green transformation, and digitalisation, while maintaining support for cultural heritage, tourism, education, and social integration.

The presented exemplary projects – the adaptation of the Siekierki–Neurüdnitz bridge, the development of the Muskau Arch Geopark, and the cooperation of emergency services under the *Kom(m)ando 'Zur Hilfe! / Na pomoc!* project – illustrate the wide range of possible activities and their positive impact on the border region. They demonstrate how, through partnership cooperation, historical barriers can be transformed into unifying elements, unique resources can be jointly managed, and the safety of residents can be enhanced. The success of these and many other initiatives depends on the commitment of partners, institutional support, and the ability to overcome administrative and language barriers.

The prospects for further Polish German cross-border cooperation under the Interreg programmes are promising. The new 2021–2027 financial perspective provides opportunities to continue the existing activities and to undertake new initiatives, particularly in the context of the European Green Deal and digital transformation. It is important to continue the investment into building social capital, strengthening trust, and developing innovative forms of cooperation that fully leverage the potential of the Polish German border region as an area of dynamic development and model European integration. Overcoming barriers – both physical and mental – remains a critical task for all actors involved in this cooperation.

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GRANDPARENTS AS SIGNIFICANT PERSONS IN THE EXPERIENCE OF ACADEMIC YOUTH (POLISH-BULGARIAN PILOT STUDY)

Abstract

- *Goal* – The main objective of the study was to diagnose the perception of grandparents as significant persons in the lives of academic youth. An attempt was also made to determine what environmental factors influenced the declarations of the surveyed students.
- *Research methodology* – The study included 219 students from Poland and Bulgaria. A diagnostic survey method was used, employing a questionnaire technique. The research tool was an online Google survey questionnaire (prepared in Polish and Bulgarian, respectively). The basic statistics were calculated using the χ^2 test. The statistical assumptions were verified at a significance level of $p = 0.05$. The correlation coefficient C_{kor} was also taken into account.
- *Score/results* – 1. The results of the research among the Polish group of students illustrate the phenomenon of socialisation shift and prefigurativeness. 2. The relations with grandparents on both the mother's and paternal sides are definitely positive, although the frequency of such declarations was higher among the Bulgarian students. 3. None of the analysed environmental factors significantly differentiate the perception of grandparents as significant persons in both studied groups. There are certain tendencies that assume a weak relationship between individual variables. Given that the study was a pilot study, the results should not be considered definitive. They should be perceived as certain signals, tendencies that require empirical development and are a contribution to further scientific exploration in terms of intercultural differences in the perception of grandparents as significant persons, how the role of grandparents differs in different countries or social environments.
- *Originality/value* – It can be expected that the presented results will fill a research gap in the field of the significance of mutual relations between adult grandchildren and

grandparents and will contribute to the revitalisation and strengthening of preventive measures that pose challenges for the social policy and education in the area of strengthening intra-family and intergenerational relations.

Keywords: grandparents, significant others, intergenerational relations, academic youth

1. Introduction

Despite the social, economic, and cultural changes that are transforming the family and its environment, it is difficult to identify a moment in a person's life when, for whatever reason (external or resulting from individual development), they would be isolated from their family environment. The family is the main space for human life and functioning, starting from childhood, through youth and maturity, to the period of involution and old age. "From birth to death, the individual is influenced by what their parents and other family members think, what they value, what they strive for, what they believe in, what they consider most important, what principles they follow" [Kawula, Brągiel, Janke, 2007: 14]. Despite the difficulties currently being experienced, the family remains a lasting community, irreplaceable in meeting the needs of its members. It can be stated that the family has always been and still remains a special place of communion between emotionally closest people. The essence of these relationships is the intergenerational nature of the family bond, which boils down to the mutual satisfaction of psychological and social needs, a sense of recognition, trust, security and love [Małecka, 1997; Napora, 2016].

2. Socialisation shift. Prefigurativeness. Intergenerational distance

The volatility of the modern world is reflected in the structure of the family and in the functioning of its individual members (including generations). A characteristic feature of the family in the postmodern perspective is the explosion of individualism among its members in various areas of their lives. It is natural for both parents and children to negotiate or renegotiate family roles, and in a multigenerational family, this also applies to the grandparents' generation. The mechanism **of socialisation shift** towards non-family institutions, peer group, media and multimedia is significant. The dominant type of culture is the **prefigurative**

type. There is a loss of authority, uniqueness, irreplaceability of the experiences of the older generation, the canon of values, norms, and social rules that have been in force for generations in the family. Alternative forms of marriage and family are emerging. There is a reduction (narrowing) of many functions of the family in favour of non-family institutions, peer group, media and multimedia. The activity of family members in non-family relationships and social arrangements is increased [Iashkova, 2002; Czykier, 2013a; Ferenz, 2015; Pachkova, 2018].

In modern societies, the prestige of the elderly is much lower compared to their situation in traditional societies, in which the generation of grandparents enjoyed social and cultural authority as an active source of knowledge and collective experience. According to M.W. Smereczyńska, "in many of today's societies, where the cult of productivity reigns supreme, there is a risk of considering the older people as useless or even a burden on others; (...) meanwhile, the age-old truth that older people bring with them a wealth of experience and knowledge is fading into oblivion" [Smereczyńska, 2000: 84]. It is a fact that with age there is a weakening of vital forces, a biological regression characterised by contexts of degradation. These are natural phenomena that are a consequence of biological programming. However, contemporary changes mean that older people also face many non-biological problems – social, economic, technological, and others. Currently, we can see a disruption of the hierarchy in which socialisation and upbringing in the family took place until recently: grandparents (parents) – parents (children) – children (grandchildren). Referring to the phenomenon of "socialisation shift" [Kwieciński, 1998], it should be noted that it is not the older generations that are today's determinants of norms, rules, and values that are universally accepted and considered appropriate for young people. The sources of the "socialisation shift" mechanism should be sought in macro-causes operating in the world space, i.e. globalisation, an integral part of which is the enormous increase in the importance of electronic media in popular culture, and in micro-causes, among which excessive paternalism of adults, i.e. their attitude of superiority over the younger generation, is often pointed out. The socialisation (and inculturation) shift manifests itself in the loss of educational influence by the family, school, and Church in favour of electronic media and peer groups.

Considering the transformations associated with the development of computers, the Internet, mobile technologies, intelligent GPT chats, and artificial intelligence (AI), it can be said that we are currently on the threshold of another civilisational change. In the context of the digitalisation of the world and the images through which it is represented, the parcellation noticed already in the 1970s and

defined by M. Mead [2000] as the intergenerational distance, is gaining dangerous dynamics. According to M. Mead, changes in prefigurative cultures occur so rapidly that the attributes of the older generation – experience, knowledge, wisdom – formerly testifying to their superiority and value, lose their significance because knowledge is devalued very quickly. It can therefore be said that there has been a reversal of the traditional rules of upbringing and socialisation: it is young people who teach adults, for example, instrumental skills and how to use electronic media. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the necessary conditions of social isolation, we all completed a crash course in media education, including family education. We learned from one another how to use multimedia, discovered the previously unused possibilities of the Internet and our equipment. We have learned to work on-line, study, participate in scientific conferences, take exams, "meet" on the occasion of holidays and family celebrations. Our parents or grandparents asked us when we would be online to connect with us via a multimedia communicator.

3. Significant persons in early adulthood. The novitiate phase

In the development of every human being, regardless of their stage of development, other people and interactions with others play an important role. Due to the presence of other people and relationships with them, we are equipped with a sense of security, autonomy, freedom in action, control over the situation, awareness of closeness, belonging to someone, readiness to act independently [Brzezińska, 2013: 34]. A person whose opinion and views are particularly important in the development of self-knowledge and personality formation is a significant person. This is an important person owing to the frequency and significance of their interactions, someone with whom a person shares a unique emotional bond, built on closeness, mutual trust, and understanding. This person is also a source of identification in terms of values, views, and perspectives on the surrounding reality. He is an authority figure, a role model, a moral compass [Brzezińska, 2013: 35–36]. A significant person is fundamental for the psychosocial development, both in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood [Bakiera, Harwas-Napierała, 2016]. Depending on the stage of development, the significant person and the repertoire of functions, they perform change. The period of intensive, independent search for an important and significant person is the phase of early adulthood. In his concept explaining the developmental patterns of human beings, Daniel Levinson [1978] distinguished four stages: childhood and adolescence, early adulthood, middle age

and late adulthood (old age). Early adulthood (the second stage; between 17–22 and 40–45 years of age) is a period of full physical strength and intellectual fitness, a period of life independence and creative expansion leading to self-fulfilment in professional work, marriage, and raising children. During this period, young adults make the most important decisions and establish their place in society. He/She is starting his/her professional career, often reaching its peak. Opportunities for development are mainly related to physical maturation, play, and upbringing (in earlier stages), but also to practical life activities, such as taking up and performing professional work, starting a family, raising children, and participating in social life. According to Levinson, this is the period of greatest vitality, but also the greatest accumulation of many tasks, responsibilities, and ambitions that are difficult to reconcile (e.g., the dilemma of career versus family life). It is a very dynamic and dramatic era, in which successes as well as failures are present. This is because in all roles, the individual appears as a novice. For this reason, Levinson specified the phase of the novitiate (17–28 years of age) in early adulthood.

The main task here is for the individual to form a suitable life structure for themselves, capable of functioning in a given environment. The means to this end include such steps as learning about the adult world, identifying with adults, developing interests, assimilating the value system of adults, and making important decisions about work, marriage, and family. This requires a lot of action and trials. This is a very difficult stage, which is why Levinson attaches great importance to young people finding a mentor, who is a very important figure in their development during this period. He (or she) is a kind of "master", an object of identification, a person whom the mentee believes in, befriends, admires, and imitates [Hlebovy, Gitimu Waithaka, Gitimu, 2016]. For the development of an adult person, it is important to specify the superior goal he wants to achieve – *the "dream of life",* without which life may turn out to be not only less fruitful, but also more burdensome in its monotony. In this context, the main role of the mentor is to provide moral and material assistance in the realisation of the "dream of a lifetime", as well as to inspire the ambitious dreams of the young adult. The main developmental task of this period is to establish contact with a mentor.

4. Research methodology

The main objective of the study was to diagnose the perception of grandparents as significant persons in the lives of academic youth. An attempt was also made

to determine which environmental factors influence the declarations of the surveyed students. The research was a pilot study serving as a reconnaissance and basis for the preparation of international research on universal design, including the social inclusion of older people as a disadvantaged group. The advantage of pilot studies is that they serve as a starting point for more detailed research. They provide preliminary data that can help in the better understanding of the studied issues and of the formulated hypotheses. They help to assess whether the selected variables are appropriate and whether they provide valuable data for statistical analysis. They help identify trends and hypotheses that can later be verified in more representative studies. They also allow you to test whether the research tool works correctly and is understandable to the respondents.

As part of bilateral cooperation, students from the Faculty of Education at the University of Białystok (Poland) and students from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University "Prof. Hab., PhD. Asen Zlatarov" in Burgas (Bulgaria) participated in the research.

In demographic terms, the societies of Poland and Bulgaria (like many others) are ageing societies [Eurostat, 2020; 2022; 2025]. In 2024, the proportion of people 65+ in the total population exceeded 20.0 percent in both countries (Poland 20.5 percent; Bulgaria 23.8 percent; EU 21.6 percent). The mechanism of the so-called double ageing of societies is noticeable, i.e. the appearance of an increasing number of the oldest among the old. The percentage of people aged 80+ was 4.4 percent in Poland and 5.2 percent in Bulgaria (6.1 percent in the EU). Between 2014 and 2024 increase in the share of the population aged 65 years or over in Poland 5.6 p.p. (percentage points), in Bulgaria 3.9 p.p. (in EU 2.9 p.p.). In 2024, the share of people aged 15–24 in the total population in Poland was 9.8 percent, in Bulgaria 9.2 percent (in the EU 10.7 percent). In both countries, the percentage of older people living alone is high: in Poland 28.2 percent, in Bulgaria 33.8 percent (in the EU 32.1 percent). Compared to the EU as a whole, the percentages of older people who travel (Poland 38.0 percent, Bulgaria 11.0 percent, EU 48.4 percent) or use the Internet at least once a week (Poland 23.0 percent, Bulgaria 12.0 percent, EU 45.0 percent) are low.

A diagnostic survey method was used to collect data, employing a questionnaire technique. The research tool was an online Google survey questionnaire (prepared in Polish and Bulgarian, respectively). The students were given access to the form using the submitted web address. It was sent to students by employees of the relevant dean's offices. One entry from a given record was possible. The students were informed about the purpose of the study and were equipped with

instructions on how to complete the tool. The data was analysed using Microsoft Office Excel. The basic statistics were calculated using the χ^2 test. The verification of statistical assumptions was carried out at the significance level of $p = 0.05$. The correlation coefficient C_{kor} was also taken into account.

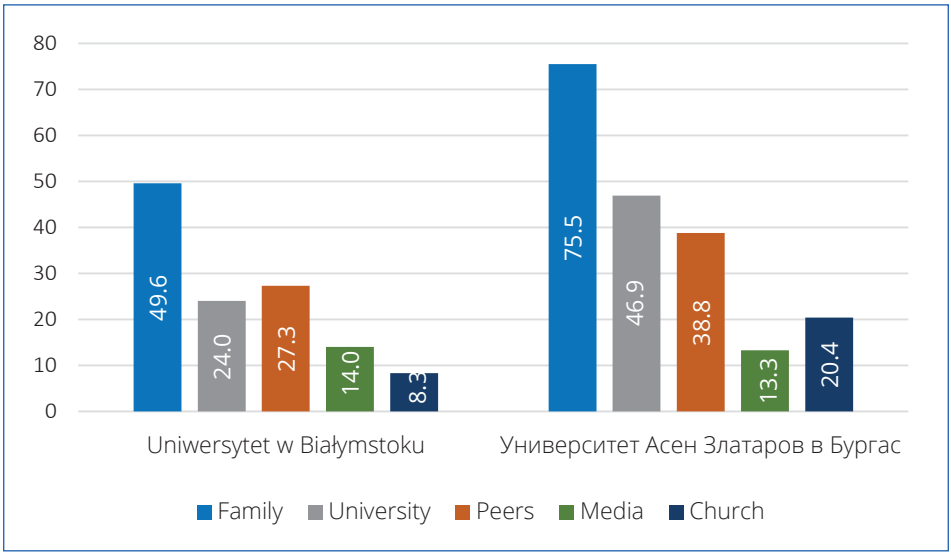
5. Research results

A purposive-random selection of the study group was used. The study included 219 full-time students (PL 55.3%; n = 121; BG 44.7%; n = 98)[1], who had a grandmother and/or grandfather. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. 180 women (82.2%) and 39 men (17.8%)[2] from all years of study took part in the surveys: 1st year 19.6%, 2nd year 22.4%, 2nd year 24.7%, 4th year 18.7%, 5th year 14.6%. The largest group of students were those aged 21–23 (49.3%). Every third respondent was 24 years old and older (38.8%). The smallest group were the youngest students aged 18–20 (11.9%). Most of the surveyed students come from urban areas (78.5%), most often from two-parent families (76.3%). Every fifth respondent (20.1%) comes from a single-parent family as a result of divorce or death of one of the parents. During their studies, most students lived in the city (89.5%), in a single-generation family (61.2%) or alone (24.2%). Every seventh respondent (14.6%) indicated that their family with whom they live is a multigenerational family. Most respondents declared their mothers' level of education as secondary (45.2%) or higher (33.8%). In the case of fathers, secondary education (44.7%) and vocational education (27.4%) were indicated. Most of the surveyed students have siblings (78.1%). Among the surveyed students, 65.3% were religious.

In both groups of surveyed students, family was the most frequently indicated among the most important factors shaping their attitudes (Figure 1). High indications are visible among students from Bulgaria (75.5%). Half of the respondents from Poland (49.6%) think similarly.

[1] In the results section, I use the following abbreviations: University in Bialystok – PL; University "Prof. Hab. PhD. Asen Zlatarov" in Burgas – BG.
[2] The gender proportion resulted from the specificity of pedagogical studies.

Figure 1. Factors shaping attitudes in the opinion of the surveyed students (in %)



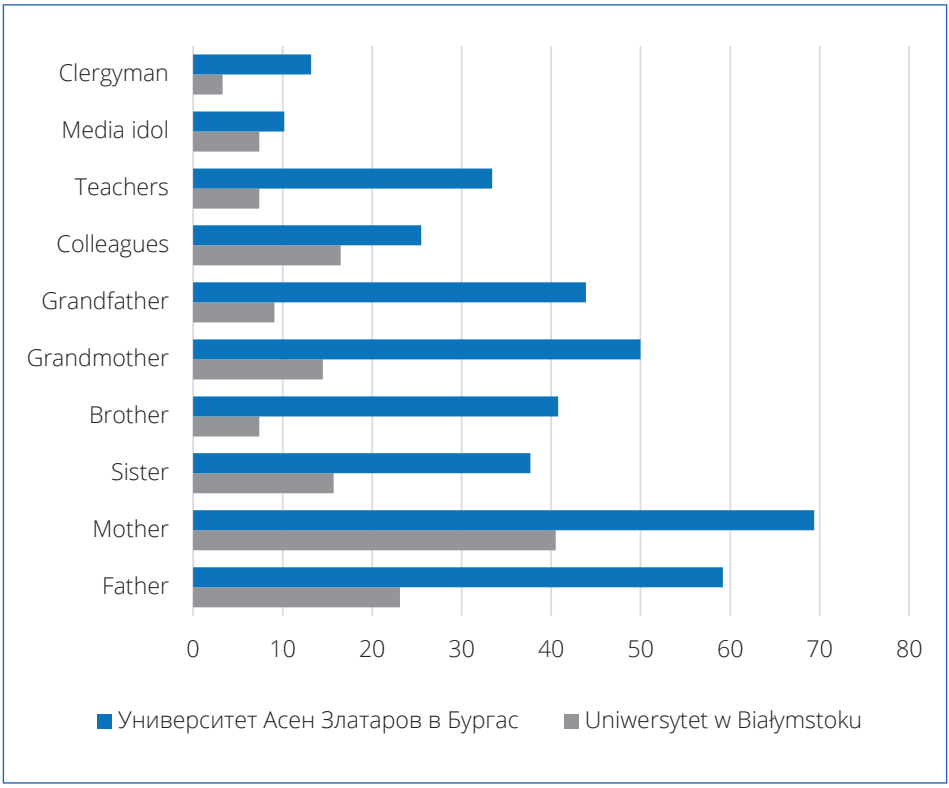
Source: the author's own research.

The high rank of the university's indications is interesting – among students from Burgas, it regards almost half of the respondents (46.9%). The data show that among the Polish students, the university was indicated by every fourth student surveyed (24.0%), lower than the peer group (27.3%). It is also worth noting the high importance of the Church in the group of students from Bulgaria. Every fifth respondent (20.4%) declared so.

Among the significant people in the lives of the respondents (Figure 2), parents were the most frequently indicated. It is interesting, however, that in the group of students from Bulgaria, they achieved much higher indications compared to students from Poland, respectively: BG mother (69.4%) and father (59.2%); PL mother (40.5%) and father (23.1%).

A similar situation also applies to the perception of grandparents as significant people in the lives of the respondents. For students from Bulgaria, the indications are much higher. Grandma was appreciated by 50.0% of the respondents, and grandfather by almost half (43.9%). Among the Polish students, one in seven indicated a grandmother (14.5%) and one in ten grandfathers (9.1%) as significant persons (higher indications were achieved by peers – 16.5%). Every third surveyed student from Burgas indicated a teacher (33.4%).

Figure 2. Significant persons in the lives of the respondents (in%)

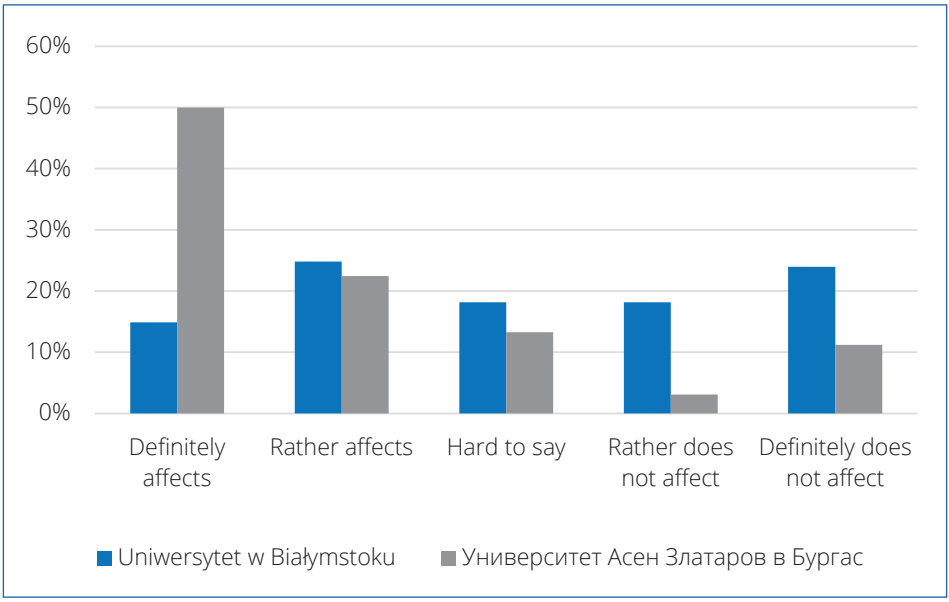


Source: the author's own research.

It should be emphasised here that for both groups of the surveyed students, the relationships with grandparents are a valued asset. The relations with grandparents on the mother's side are definitely positive (BG 67.3%; PL 38.0%) or rather positive (BG 16.3%; PL 28.9%). Similarly, the relations with paternal grandparents are also decidedly positive (BG 52.0%; PL 27.3%) or rather positive (BG 18.4%; PL 32.2%).

Every second student from Bulgaria (50.0%) believes that grandmother definitely influences the shaping of his attitudes (Figure 3). In the group of the Polish students, almost every seventh respondent (14.9%) thought so. In this group of respondents, the highest percentage of indications concerns the category "rather affects". Every fifth respondent (24.8%) thought so.

Figure 3. Grandma as a significant person in the experience of academic youth



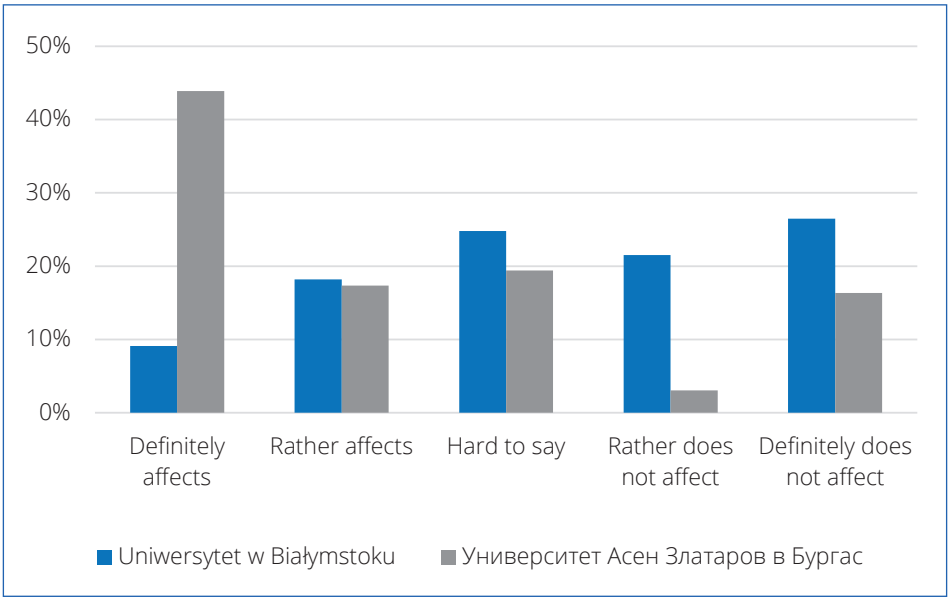
Source: the author's own research.

In the group of the Polish students, compared to the Bulgarian students, much higher indications were given to the categories "hard to say" (18.2%), "rather does not affects" (18.2%) and "definitely does not affects", which was indicated by every fifth student (24.0%). Among the Bulgarian students, one in nine respondents (11.2%) stated categorically that the person of a grandmother definitely does not influence their attitudes.

According to every second respondent (43.9%) from the group of the Bulgarian students, the grandfather is an important person influencing his or her attitudes to life (Figure 4). Among the Polish students, every eleventh respondent (9.1%) thought so. Twice as many respondents believed that it "rather affects" (18.2%). The category "definitely does not affect" received the most indications (26.4%). Among students from Bulgaria, 16.3% thought so.

It is worth noting that every fourth Polish student (26.4%) and every fifth Bulgarian student (19.4%) did not give a clear answer, ticking the category "difficult to say".

Figure 4. Grandfather as a significant person in the experience of academic youth



Source: the author's own research.

5.1. Selected environmental conditions and the perception of grandma and grandpa as significant persons

Individual independent variables were subjected to the basic statistical verification based on the χ^2 test with a variable concerning the declaration of grandparents as significant persons in the experience of academic youth. The analysis covered selected environmental factors, i.e., the gender of the respondents, their age, year of study, origin (urban, rural), family structure (complete, incomplete, reconstructed, informal relationship between parents), family type (single-generation, multi-generation), and religiosity. Statistical inference was used to establish relationships and correlations (or lack thereof) between the mentioned variables and the statements made by the surveyed students.

The gender of the respondents does not significantly differentiate the perception of grandmothers and grandfathers as significant persons. There is also no correlation between the variables. In the group of the Polish students, both women and men attributed little importance to their grandmothers and grandfathers. Students from Bulgaria (both women and men) attributed great importance to their grandmothers and grandfathers.

Similarly, the age of the respondents does not significantly differentiate the perception of grandmothers and grandfathers as significant persons. In the group of the Polish students, there is also no relationship between variables. Among the Bulgarian students, however, the value of the C_{kor} coefficient (grandmother $C_{kor} = 0.28$; grandfather $C_{kor} = 0.28$) indicates a weak relationship between the variables. In all age groups, grandmothers and grandfathers were most often considered to be very important, but the youngest students (aged 18–20) gave them the highest ratings (grandmother 87.5%; grandfather 75.0%).

The year of study also does not significantly differentiate between the perception of grandmothers and grandfathers as significant persons. In both groups, there is a weak correlation between the variables. Among the Polish students, older students were more likely to attribute little importance to their grandparents (4th year: grandmother 54.2%, grandfather 62.5%; 5th year: grandmother 52.6%, grandfather 63.2%). Among the Bulgarian students, the second-year students most often attributed great importance to their grandmothers (90.9%, $C_{kor} = 0.28$) and grandfathers (77.3%, $C_{kor} = 0.25$).

No statistically significant differences were found, with a weak correlation observed for the variable of origin. In the group of the Polish students, the respondents living in the city more often attributed little importance to their grandmothers (47.4%, $C_{kor} = 0.26$) and grandfathers (55.1%, $C_{kor} = 0.25$). In the group of the Bulgarian students, the respondents living in the city more often attributed great importance to their grandparents (61.7%, $C_{kor} = 0.22$).

Similarly, in the case of family structure, no statistically significant differences were found, with a weak correlation between the variables. In the case of the students from Poland, the low importance of grandmothers and grandfathers was most often declared by both students from two-parent and single-parent families. In the group of respondents from Bulgaria, grandmothers and grandfathers were most often considered important by the respondents from two-parent families (grandmother 73.1%, $C_{kor} = 0.21$; grandfather 61.5%, $C_{kor} = 0.29$). A weak relationship between variables without statistically significant differences was found in the case of the family structure variable in the group of students from Bulgaria. The respondents from multigenerational families most often attributed great importance to both their grandmothers (86.7%, $C_{kor} = 0.23$) and grandfathers (80.0%, $C_{kor} = 0.23$).

A weak relationship between the variables (without the presence of statistically significant differences) was found in the case of the variable religiosity. Among the Polish students, the most common responses concerned the low importance

of grandmothers (58.8%, $C_{kor} = 0.31$) and grandfathers (64.7%, $C_{kor} = 0.30$) among the respondents who declared themselves to be non-believers. The picture is different among the Bulgarian students. In this case, the most common indications concerned the great importance of the grandmother (70.7%, $C_{kor} = 0.21$) and grandfather (60.0%, $C_{kor} = 0.23$) among the respondents who declared themselves to be believers.

Due to the fact that the research was of a pilot nature, the obtained results should not be treated as definitive. They should be seen as certain signals, trends requiring empirical development and contributing to further scientific exploration of intercultural differences in the perception of grandparents as significant persons, how the role of grandparents differs in different countries or social environments [cf. Gardiner, 2020].

6. Conclusions

1. The results of the research among the Polish group of students illustrate the phenomenon of socialisation shift and prefigurativeness.
2. The relations with grandparents on both the mother's and father's sides are definitely positive, although in the group of the Bulgarian students the frequency of such declarations was higher [cf. CBOS, 2012].
3. None of the analysed environmental factors (i.e., gender, age, year of study, origin, family structure, family type, and religiosity) significantly differentiate the perception of grandparents as significant persons in both groups studied. There are certain trends indicating a weak relationship between individual variables.
4. The multigenerational nature of the family of origin among the Bulgarian students clearly determines the more frequent perception of grandmothers and grandfathers as significant persons.
5. The recognised ways of perceiving grandma and grandpa and their importance in the lives of academic youth, the nature of the obtained declarations are a kind of opportunity to build proper intergenerational relations, symbiotic functioning in a common, dynamically changing reality through educational and educational interactions.

7. Discussion

Postmodern processes have led to the disappearance and breakdown of kinship relations and the independence of the nuclear family from the extended family. The multigenerational family has been replaced by the small family [cf. CBOS, 2019]. Traditional multigenerational families, in which three (or more) generations lived together under the leadership of a patriarchal father, are becoming increasingly rare. As the nuclear family became more independent, emotional ties intensified, manifesting themselves in the maintenance of extensive personal relationships between generations. Therefore, the modern multigenerational family should be interpreted as a modified extended family (large, also known as a family circle), which is a union of nuclear families that are partially dependent on each other. Their members exchange services with each other, while maintaining their economic independence. Sometimes they are spatially dispersed, while maintaining an intense family bond. There is also no hierarchical structure of authority in them [cf. Czykier, 2013a]. The social, economic and cultural transformations of the modern world are clearly visible in the transformations of the external and internal structure of the family and the functions it performs. The roles of its individual members are also being redefined and reinterpreted.

The available research results indicate that grandparents are important to their grandchildren (regardless of their age) primarily because of the unique bond that develops between them. The intergenerational nature of the bond places young people in the past of the family and allows them to shape their individual identity [Wawrzyniak, 2011]. Grandparents are an important link in the intergenerational transmission of culture within the family [Dyczewski, 2003; Czykier, 2013b; Stepaluk, 2014]. The frequency of contact and their life experience make them authority figures and role models for their grandchildren [Pieńkos, 2015].

The relationship with grandparents is a protective factor for grandchildren experiencing a reversal of family roles, as it compensates for deficits in the family system [Kozerska, Miszczak, Napora, 2015; Napora, 2016]. People who experienced parentification in childhood perceive their grandparents as significant figures [Chojnacka, 2023]. Grandparents are perceived by young people as individuals who influence their choices regarding values and life goals [Franks i in., 1993].

Grandparents are significant people in the lives of their grandchildren because they are reference points, a kind of “anchors” who care about family relationships, unite the family, are the source of life wisdom, meaning of life and values. Grandparents are also guardians (“protectors”) who support parents (their

children) in raising and caring for their children (grandchildren) [Przygoda, 2015]. Grandparents are also a source of economic support [Botcheva, Feldman, 2004]. They are a source of closeness and unconditional acceptance for grandchildren. Grandparents often become negotiators (mediators) between parents and children in conflict situations, helping them to understand each other. Grandparents are also "historians", a source of generational continuity, a guarantee of the durability of family history [Pikuła, 2010], cherish tradition and family values [Appelt, 2007: 89].

It is also important that for grandparents, contact with their grandchildren gives them a sense of fulfilment, being loved, belonging. It also contributes to harmony in their mental health [Napora, Jakowska-Suwalska, 2020; Jahangir, Patil, Gangopadhyay, Vogt, 2025]. The cultural heritage of the family and the local community, developed by older generations, is also significant here. Customs, family traditions, behaviours, and symbols are the determinants without which a family would be nothing more than a group of people sharing a common space, running a common household, and exchanging services, mainly focused on satisfying basic needs [Czykier, 2013b].

8. Summary

Despite the appeal of today's digital world and the devaluation of the position and value of the older generation, this generation remains a valuable source of knowledge and an important element in the socialisation and upbringing of young people.

Therefore, there are challenges for social policy and education in the field of strengthening intra-family and intergenerational relations. In the academic sphere, efforts should be made to obtain transdisciplinary diagnoses and practical implementations. Attention should be paid to the mechanism of ageing societies. Many countries are grappling with a growing elderly population, which brings with it the need to create support programs and to promote intergenerational integration. Migration and mobility are an important issue. Increased migration can lead to family separation, making it difficult to maintain strong family ties. Family models are changing. Modern families take various forms (single-parent families, patchwork families), which requires the adaptation of social policies to the different needs of its members. In the area of intercultural education, it is necessary to introduce educational programs that promote family values and

communication skills, taking into account cultural diversity. Programs focused on relationships also seem to be important. Education often overlooks the importance of life and interpersonal skills, which are crucial for building relationships within the family and between generations. Integration programs are also important, as is the creation of programs that engage different generations in community activities, supporting the building of stronger relationships. A prerequisite is to understand the needs of different groups. Social policies should be developed in cooperation with NGOs, schools and local communities to better respond to the needs of families. Counteracting stereotypes should be an essential activity. It is important that education policy does not support stereotypes about roles in families and intergenerational interactions. In the course of her research, Z. Szarota [2004] proved that the inclusion of gerontological content in the curriculum of students increases the level of attitudes approving old age and has a positive impact on breaking the negative stereotypes shaping the attitude of ageism. In this spirit, education should be pursued into old age, beginning from the earliest years [Zawada, 2009].

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THE ROLE OF NON-PROFIT ORGANISATION IN THE LITHUANIAN'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN YEARS 2004–2025

Abstract

- *Goal* – This study aims to examine the role and significance of non-profit organisations in Lithuania's economic development between 2004 and 2025. The research focuses on evaluating the contribution of the non-profit sector to local development, job creation, social innovation, and the activation of civil society.
- *Research methodology* – The study employs statistical data analysis, a literature review, and comparative analysis of indicators related to the activities and funding of non-profit organisations. Selected case studies of non-profit initiatives and regional development programs in Lithuania were also analysed to identify their economic impact.
- *Score/results* – The research revealed that non-profit organisations play an increasingly important role in addressing social and economic challenges. Their activities contribute to improving employment opportunities, social cohesion, and the implementation of innovative solutions at the local level. The data indicate a growing number of such organisations and the diversification of their funding sources, especially after Lithuania accedes to the EU.
- *Originality/value* – The study highlights the growing importance of the third sector in Lithuania's economic ecosystem and emphasises the need for stronger cooperation between the public sector and non-profit institutions. Policy recommendations include the development of supportive legal frameworks and the promotion of sustainable financing mechanisms to strengthen the economic role of non-profit entities.

Keywords: non-profit organisations, economic development, third sector

1. Introduction

In the modern world, every country needs to ensure economic development; therefore, efforts are made to help businesses in various ways. It is precisely the successful results of business activities that are the main component of economic development. However, when it comes to the essence of business, it is known that there are various forms of business, i. e. not only a joint-stock company, an individual enterprise, a small partnership, but also a public institution, a non-commercial (non-profit) organisation, and others [Benson et al., 2025]. It is non-commercial organisations that are most often undeservedly undervalued when it comes to successful economic development; therefore, the article attempts to assess the role of non-commercial organisations in Lithuania's economic development [Mironova et al., 2025].

This topic was chosen not by chance because non-profit organisations play an extremely important role in both the social and economic activation of society [Forgács-Fábián et al., 2024; Gee et al., 2024]. This is especially relevant in regions where the level of development is lower, and the spectrum of public services and economic activities is limited. In such areas, non-governmental organisations often become the main providers of social services, promoters of community activity, and even creators of jobs [Desai, 2024; Hu et al., 2025]. They give rise to numerous initiatives that contribute to improving the quality of life of residents, solving cultural expression, education, health protection, and environmental problems.

The topic is particularly relevant at a time when the role of civil society is increasing and the need to involve communities in social and economic transformation is growing. In addition, the activities of non-profit organisations are becoming even more significant, given that the European Union is increasingly paying attention and providing financial support to the development of the third sector, to social entrepreneurship and to strengthening local communities. The European Structural and Investment Funds provide opportunities not only to develop specific projects, but also to create long-term, sustainable changes in the regions where public and private sector activities are limited.

In Lithuania, quite different levels of involvement of non-profit organisations in the social and economic life of individual regions are observed. In some regions, these organisations are active, consistently cooperating with municipalities, creating jobs and implementing significant projects, while in others their activities are still in the process of formation or facing challenges due to a lack of financial,

human or organisational resources. Therefore, it is necessary not only to study the spectrum of activities of these organisations, but also to find ways to encourage their more even development throughout the country.

It is extremely important to analyse how the non-profit sector contributes to the development of local initiatives, the promotion of social entrepreneurship and the improvement of the quality of life of residents. The initiatives of non-profit organisations often become a source of innovative social solutions that can help reduce poverty, social exclusion, develop community spirit and promote civic activism. These activities not only improve people's living conditions but also strengthen the economic base in the regions – indirectly, local consumption grows, small businesses are promoted, and new services appear.

The results of research analysing the contribution of the non-profit sector to regional development can significantly contribute to the formation of public policy. Based on such data, it is possible to plan state support more precisely, form regional policy priorities and create more effective support programs that would meet the needs of specific territories. In addition, such a study would contribute to the implementation of the concept of sustainable regional development, which includes not only economic, but also social, cultural and environmental aspects. In this context, non-commercial organisations can become strategic partners at both the national and local levels, helping to create a more harmonious, inclusive and responsible society.

The objective of this study is to examine the role and significance of non-profit organisations for the development of the Lithuanian economy in 2004–2025. The study focuses on assessing the contribution of the non-profit sector to local development, job creation, social innovation and activation of civil society. The study uses statistical data analysis, literature review and comparative analysis of indicators related to the activities and financing of non-profit organisations. Selected case studies of non-profit initiatives and regional development programmes in Lithuania were also analysed to determine their economic impact. The study revealed that non-profit organisations play an increasingly important role in addressing socio-economic challenges. Their activities contribute to improving employment opportunities, social cohesion and implementing innovative solutions at the local level. The data show a growing number of such organisations and the diversification of their funding sources, especially after Lithuania joined the EU. The study highlights the growing importance of the third sector in the Lithuanian economic ecosystem and highlights the need for closer cooperation between the public sector and non-profit institutions. Policy

recommendations include the creation of favorable legal frameworks and the promotion of sustainable financing mechanisms to strengthen the economic role of non-profit entities.

2. Literature review

A non-profit organisation, often abbreviated as NPO, is an entity the primary purpose of which is to serve the public or social good rather than to generate profit for its owners or shareholders [Lee et al., 2023; Möslein, 2024]. These organisations play a crucial role in addressing a variety of societal needs, such as education, healthcare, environmental protection, human rights, and poverty alleviation [Walter et al., 2024]. Unlike for-profit businesses, non-profit organisations reinvest any excess profits back into the organisation to continue its mission, rather than distributing profits to stakeholders [Basu et al., 2022; Akhtar, 2024].

Non-profit organisations are an important part of the fabric of modern society, often classified as the so-called "third sector." This sector includes institutions that operate between the boundaries of the public and private sectors and often implement functions that neither the state nor the market adequately performs.

As Salamon and Anheier [1997] point out, non-profit organisations are described as private, formally organised, autonomous and voluntary institutions that do not seek profit and operate for the benefit of the public interest. Evers and Laville [2004] note that these organisations are often closely related to the social economy and are oriented not to profit maximisation, but to the implementation of a social mission. Rymsza [2005] adds that such organisations not only do not seek to distribute profits among members but also reinvest all the received resources in the implementation of statutory goals.

Lithuanian researchers, such as Navickas and Kontautienė [2015], also recognise the importance of non-profit organisations as socioeconomic entities, especially emphasising the goals of their activities – to solve social, educational, cultural or environmental problems.

It is important to emphasise that research data on non-profit organisations show that non-profit organisations are increasingly becoming the subject of attention in various scientific disciplines, from economics to sociology or public administration. Čiburienė [2010], Čiburienė & Guščinskienė [2013] and Navickas and Kontautienė [2015] emphasise that the activities of these organisations are

significant not only for the creation of social capital but also for the economic development of regions, especially by promoting local initiatives and citizen involvement.

Researchers Pooyan & Hokugo [2025] highlight the importance of non-profit organisations in creating social capital, developing community resilience and strengthening social inclusion. They also emphasise the contribution of this sector to social entrepreneurship, which is becoming an innovative response to public policy gaps and social problems.

Polish authors such as Hausner & Laurisz [2008], Herbst & Prüfer [2005], Sienkiewicz [2017] emphasise the importance of non-profit organisations in local development processes and job creation, especially in peripheral areas where economic opportunities are limited. The findings of these studies are in perfect harmony with the situation in Lithuanian regions, where non-profit organisations often become one of the few centers of activity. Other authors such as Klonowski [2014], Stankiewicz & Seiler [2012] and Schmidt [2011] analyse how effective intersectoral cooperation between state institutions, private companies and non-governmental organisations can contribute to strengthening the local economy. They also evaluate how EU funds help develop social infrastructure and to promote regional development.

Non-profit organisations have a significant impact on society. They often fill gaps in social services, advocate for marginalised communities, and raise awareness about important issues [Islam, 2024; Kumar et al., 2025]. By mobilising resources and engaging communities, they drive positive changes both locally and globally.

However, non-profit organisations also face unique challenges. Limited funding, reliance on donations, and intense competition for grants can limit resources [Spanouth and Urbano, 2024; Jeong and Siegel, 2025]. In addition, it can be difficult to measure impact and demonstrate effectiveness, especially when addressing complex social problems. Volunteer burnout and volunteer retention are other common issues [Uznańska-Kuś, 2024].

Despite these challenges, the non-profit sector continues to grow and evolve. Technological advances, increased focus on impact measurement, and new fundraising strategies such as crowdfunding and social enterprise models are helping non-profit organisations to adapt and grow [Deepalakshmi and Lakshmi, 2024; Santos, 2025].

In summary, non-profit organisations are an important analytical unit for studying regional development, social capital, and public administration

transformations. Their potential is revealed through their ability to mobilise local communities, respond to social challenges, and create alternative service delivery models.

Both international and Lithuanian research emphasise the importance of the non-profit sector not only as a provider of public services, but also as a promoter of innovation, participatory democracy and economic inclusion. Therefore, researching the activities of non-profit organisations, analysing their role and improving their conditions can have a direct impact on the quality of public policy, especially in the context of regional development.

3. Research methodology

The research was conducted using quantitative methods based on publicly available statistical data. The primary data sources were the Official Statistics Portal (OSP) of Lithuania and Eurostat. The analysis spanned the period from 2004 to 2025, focusing on selected economic and organisational aspects of non-profit entities operating in Lithuania.

For this study, the following research hypothesis was formulated: *The activities of non-profit organisations contribute to Lithuania's economic development by promoting social engagement, supporting employment, and implementing initiatives for local communities, which in the long term positively influence the country's socio-economic development indicators during the analysed period.*

In the study, basic statistical methods were applied to enable a quantitative assessment of socio-economic phenomena [Młodak, 2006: 23–24]:

- Measures of central tendency – minimum, maximum, and arithmetic mean – were used to assess the level and range of variation in the analysed indicators over time.
- The coefficient of variation was employed to determine the degree of dispersion of the examined variables, while the coefficient of skewness was used to identify the direction and nature of the data distribution.
- Pearson's correlation coefficient was applied to analyse the relationship between the entrepreneurship rate, GDP per capita, and the non-profit indicator. This made it possible to determine the strength and direction of these correlations.

Additionally, structural indicators were analysed to evaluate the distribution and activity of non-profit organisations across time. The selected indicators included:

- the number of registered non-profit organisations,
- the number of active non-profit organisations
- sectoral and regional distribution.

Where possible, data were supplemented with interpretative insights from national reports and academic literature.

For the purposes of the study, an entrepreneurship index was developed. The entrepreneurship index is expressed as the number of business entities registered in the Registrucentras system per 1.000 people of working age. The formula is expressed as follows:

$$W_p = \frac{P}{L_{prod}} \times 1000$$

where:
W_p – entrepreneurship index
P – number of registered business entities
L – number of working-age population

The next indicator concerned non-profit organisations. The non-profit index is expressed as the number of selected non-profit entities registered in the Registrucentras system per 1.000 inhabitants. The formula is expressed as follows:

$$W_n = \frac{P_{non}}{L_{lud}} \times 1000$$

where:
W_p – entrepreneurship index
P_{non} – number of registered business entities
L_{lud} – number of population

In order to determine the relationship between the value of the entrepreneurship index and the non-profit index and GDP per capita, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted.

Incomplete data availability for certain years limited the possibility of a full analysis.

4. An analysis of the selected non-profit organisations in Lithuania

An analysis of the share of selected registered non-profit entities in the total number of business entities in Lithuania between 2005 and 2025 reveals significant changes in the structure of the civil society sector. The data presented in the chart 1 indicate the dominant position of associations (*asociacija*), the share of which increased from 5.6% in 2006 to a peak of 8.5% in 2011–2012. Despite a slight decline in the following years, associations remain the most numerous types of non-profit organisation, accounting for nearly 6% of all business entities in 2025. This high share reflects the activity of civil society and the strong rootedness of the membership-based organisational model in Lithuanian social life.

The second most numerous categories is public institutions (*viešoji įstaiga*), the share of which shows a steady increase over the analysed period – from 2.0% in 2005 to nearly 5.0% in 2020–2022. This growth may indicate the increasing professionalisation of the non-profit sector and a greater role of organisations providing public services, often in cooperation with governmental and municipal institutions.

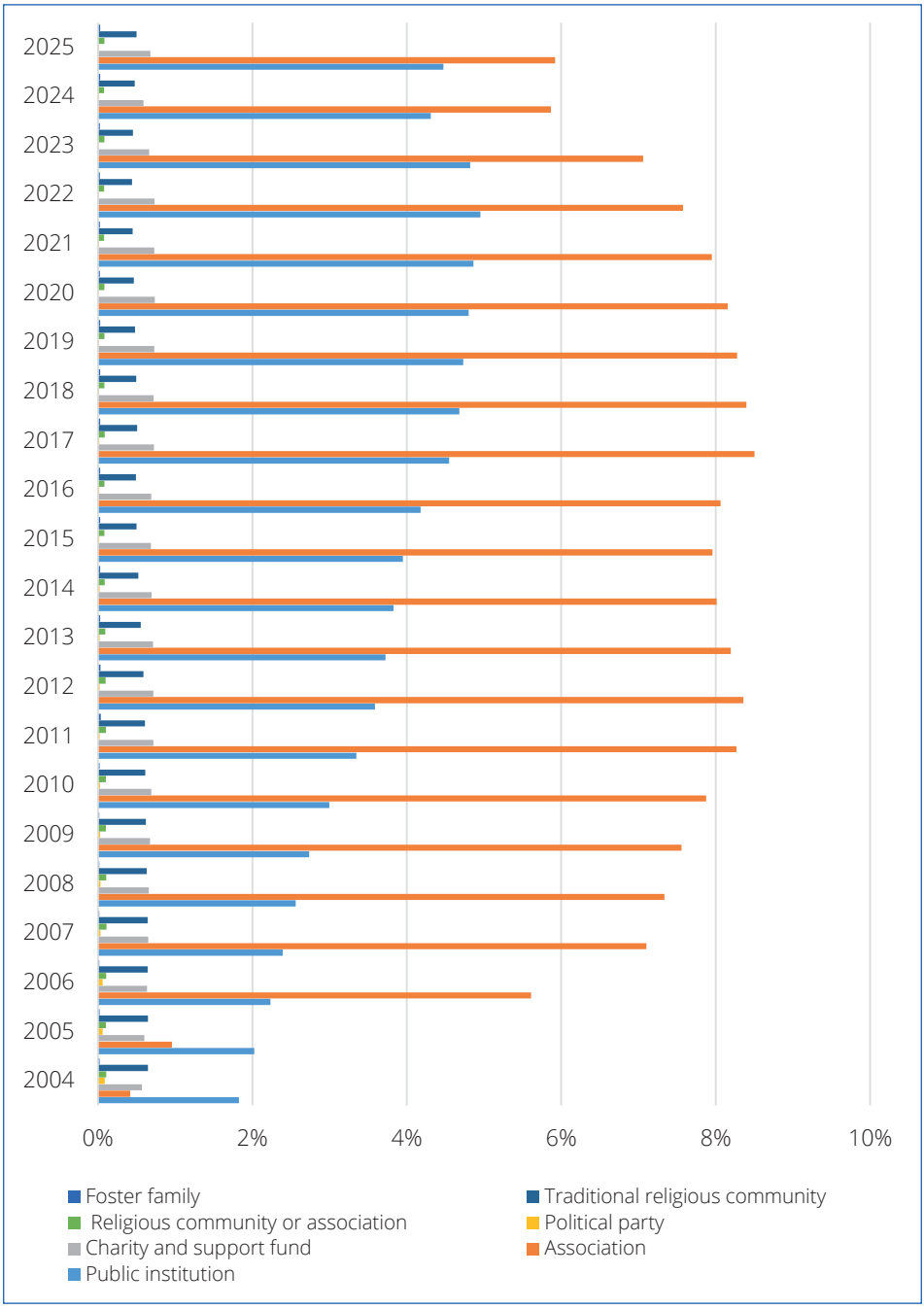
Charity and support funds (*labdaros ir paramos fondas*) maintained a stable share of around 0.6–0.8% throughout the period, with a slight increase after 2016. This may reflect the growing importance of philanthropic activities and the development of organisations providing social assistance and support to vulnerable groups.

Much smaller shares are held by religious communities, political parties, and institutional foster families. Traditional religious communities (*tradicinė religinė bendruomenė*) initially maintained a share of around 0.6–0.7%, which gradually declined to below 0.4%. Political parties (*politinė partija*) and foster families (*šeimyna*) remained on the margins of the sector, with a share not exceeding 0.1%.

The results indicate a clear dominance of two organisational forms, associations and public institutions, which account for the largest share of non-profit entities in the country. This structure highlights the social and organisational preferences of Lithuanians and may also reflect the strategic directions of state policy towards the non-governmental sector.

An analysis of the number of active non-profit organisations at the beginning of each year from 2004 to 2025, considering the administrative division into counties, allows for an assessment of the dynamics of the third sector development in both temporal and spatial perspectives. The data reveal significant changes in the structure and intensity of non-profit organisation activities during the analysed period.

Chart 1. The share of registered non-profit entities in the total number of business entities at the beginning of the year in Lithuania, in the years 2004–2025



Source: the author's work based on data from OSP: [www 1].

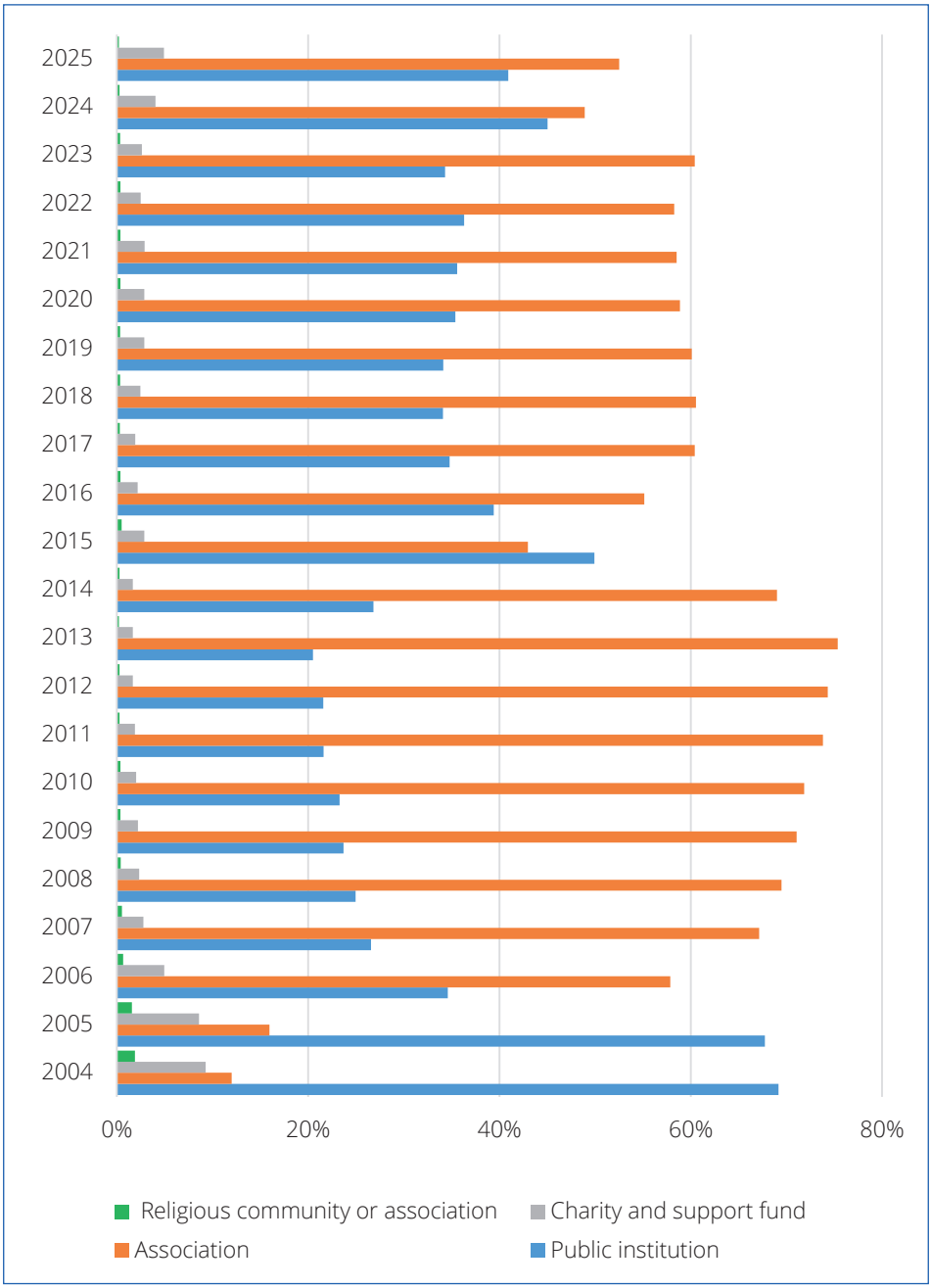
At the national level, a systematic increase in the number of active non-profit organisations has been observed – from 2 098 entities in 2004 to a projected 16 853 in 2025. Particularly intensive growth occurred up to 2014, during which the number of organisations increased more than sevenfold. In 2015, a noticeable decline was recorded (to 8 419), which may be attributed to a revision of registration data, legislative changes, or updates in data collection methodology. Since 2016, the number of organisations has been gradually increasing again, which may indicate a revival in the social sector.

Throughout the analysed period, Vilniaus County clearly dominates, consistently reporting the highest number of non-profit organisations – from 932 entities in 2004 to 6 456 in 2025. This high concentration may be linked to the presence of the state capital, higher population density, better institutional infrastructure, and strong social capital. On the other hand, the lowest numbers of organisations are recorded in Tauragės and Telšių counties, where the figures fluctuate around a few hundred. This distribution indicates significant regional disparities in the development of the non-profit sector. Basic statistical measures confirm the observed variation. The average number of non-profit organisations per county increased from 209.8 in 2004 to 1 685.3 in 2025, indicating dynamic sector growth. The coefficient of variation decreased from 134% in 2004 to around 100–110% in recent years, suggesting partial stabilisation in the relationship between the mean and data dispersion. The skewness coefficient remained above 2 for most of the period, indicating a strongly right-skewed distribution – with a few counties significantly exceeding others in the number of organisations.

Chart 2 presents changes in the share of selected types of non-profit organisations in the total number of active entities in this sector at the beginning of each year from 2004 to 2025. The analysis includes four main forms: public institutions, associations, charitable foundations, and religious communities.

Throughout the analysed period, associations maintained a dominant position, consistently constituting the largest share of non-profit organisations. Their share increased steadily until 2014, reaching a peak of over 70%, and then declined noticeably in 2015 – possibly due to registry updates or legal changes. Since 2016, the share of associations has stabilised, remaining at approximately 60%. The second most numerous organisational forms are public institutions, the share of which has gradually increased since 2004, although it remains significantly smaller than that of associations. Their presence in the structure of the non-profit sector indicates the growing importance of professional, often service-oriented, non-governmental organisations.

Chart 2. The share of selected active non-profit entities in the total at the beginning of the year, 2004–2025



Source: the author's work based on data from OSP: [www 1].

Charitable foundations have maintained a relatively small but stable share of around 5% throughout the entire analysed period. The continued presence of this form suggests the enduring importance of philanthropic and support-oriented activities in Lithuania's social sector. The smallest group consists of religious communities, whose share hovers around 1% and shows no significant fluctuations over time. This may indicate a sustained but limited role of religious organisations within the formal structure of the non-profit sector.

Overall, the structure of the non-profit sector in Lithuania is characterised by the clear dominance of membership-based organisations (associations), with a growing role of public institutions and a stable yet limited presence of other organisational forms. The dynamics of these shares reflect both changing organisational preferences within civil society and the influence of regulatory and administrative factors on the registration and operation of organisations.

The next step in the study was the calculation of the entrepreneurship index and the non-profit index.

The table 1 presents the non-profit index broken down by Lithuanian counties for the years 2004–2025. This index was calculated as the number of the selected non-profit organisations per 1 000 inhabitants at the beginning of each year. The comparison reveals both a nationwide upward trend and significant regional disparities in the development of the non-profit sector. The data confirms a clear upward trend at the national level. In 2004, the average non-profit index for Lithuania was approximately 0.6, while by 2025 it is projected to reach 5.88. The most dynamic growth occurred between 2004 and 2014, which may be attributed to regulatory liberalisation, increased civic engagement, and institutional development of the third sector. A decline is observed in 2015, followed by a gradual increase continuing through 2025.

Throughout the entire period, Vilniaus County stands out, consistently recording the highest non-profit index values, from 2.71 in 2004 to 13.68 in 2025. This high level suggests a strong concentration of non-governmental organisations, likely due to the presence of the capital, a larger population, and well-developed social and civic infrastructure. In contrast, the lowest index values are reported in most years in Tauragės, Telšių, and Marijampolės Counties, where in many cases the values do not exceed 3.0 during the entire period under study. These differences may reflect lower levels of civic engagement, lower population density, or limited access to institutional resources and support.

Table 1. Non-Profit Index per 1000 inhabitants in Lithuanian Counties in 2004–2025

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total for Lithuania	0.6	0.8	1.7	2.5	3.0	3.3	3.5	3.9	4.2	4.4	4.9	2.9	3.8	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.7	4.9	5.8
Vilniaus County	1.1	1.4	2.3	3.1	3.5	4.0	4.1	4.5	4.7	4.8	5.8	4.6	5.3	5.6	5.5	5.1	5.2	5.3	5.2	5.5	6.4	7.4
Alytaus County	0.4	0.5	2.0	2.1	2.5	2.8	3.0	3.4	3.8	4.0	4.4	2.0	3.1	3.8	3.8	3.8	4.0	3.9	4.0	4.4	4.4	5.3
Kauno County	0.7	0.8	2.1	2.3	2.8	3.1	3.3	3.7	4.1	4.3	4.8	2.9	4.0	4.5	4.5	4.4	4.3	4.3	4.2	4.5	4.6	5.4
Klaipėdos County	0.5	0.6	0.9	2.2	2.6	2.9	3.1	3.5	38	3.9	4.3	2.2	3.2	3.7	3.7	3.5	3.5	3.4	3.5	3.8	3.8	4.6
Marijampolės County	0.4	0.5	2.6	2.8	3.1	3.4	3.7	3.9	4.3	4.5	4.8	2.0	3.0	3.9	3.9	4.5	4.6	4.4	4.4	5.0	4.5	5.5
Panevėžio County	0.3	0.4	0.7	2.6	3.0	3.3	3.4	3.8	4.0	4.3	4.3	1.7	2.7	3.3	3.4	3.7	3.9	3.7	3.8	4.3	3.7	5.1
Šiaulių County	0.4	0.4	0.8	2.1	2.6	2.9	3.2	3.5	3.9	4.4	4.5	2.1	3.2	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.1	4.1	3.9	4.4	3.9	4.8
Tauragės County	0.3	0.4	0.5	2.0	2.4	2.8	3.1	3.4	3.8	4.1	4.2	1.5	2.4	3.0	3.0	3.2	3.5	3.6	3.7	4.3	4.2	5.1
Telšių County	0.3	0.4	1.8	2.3	2.7	3.0	3.2	3.4	3.7	3.9	3.8	1.6	2.4	3.1	3.1	3.2	3.4	3.4	3.5	4.0	3.5	4.6
Utenos County	0.4	0.5	2.8	3.0	3.5	3.8	4.2	4.5	4.8	5.3	5.4	2.4	3.5	4.3	4.4	4.4	4.6	4.5	4.6	5.5	4.9	6.5

Source: the author's own work based on data from OSP: [www 1].

The results clearly confirm the existence of significant regional disparities in the development of the non-profit sector in Lithuania. The Vilniaus County demonstrates the highest growth dynamics and the highest index values throughout the analysed period. The persistent gap between regions with the highest and lowest index values suggests the need for a differentiated approach in public policies aimed at supporting non-governmental organisations, particularly in less developed areas.

The data presented in table 2 illustrate changes in the entrepreneurship index, defined as the number of registered business entities per 1 000 working-age inhabitants. The analysis covers the period 2006–2024 and includes all ten Lithuanian counties. The entrepreneurship rate for Lithuania demonstrates a stable and clearly upward trend – increasing from 28 entities in 2006 to 66 entities in 2024. The most dynamic growth occurred after 2014, which may be attributed to the improvements in the business environment, the development of the SME sector, and policy reforms supporting entrepreneurship. In particular, the increase between 2014 (37) and 2015 (42), followed by a steady rise through to 2024, reflects the growing economic activity of the Lithuanian population. The Vilniaus County consistently records the highest entrepreneurship rate, reaching 95 business entities per 1 000 working-age inhabitants in 2024. This value significantly exceeds the national average, likely due to the concentration of institutions, well-developed infrastructure, better access to capital, and the presence of the state's capital city. High rates are also recorded in Kauno (68), Klaipėdos (64), and Šiaulių (42) counties, confirming their strong economic base and favorable conditions for business development. In contrast, the lowest values throughout most of the analyaed period appear in Utenos, Tauragės, and Marijampolės counties, which in 2024 reached 38, 40, and 37 entities per 1 000 working-age inhabitants, respectively. These disparities may be explained by structural factors such as lower population density, limited access to capital, weaker infrastructure, and less developed business ecosystems. The data confirm persistent regional disparities in entrepreneurship levels across Lithuania. The Vilniaus County stands out with the highest level of economic activity, while peripheral regions remain below the national average. The upward trend in all counties suggests a general improvement in the business climate, yet the differing rates of development point to the need for targeted public policies to support entrepreneurship in less developed areas.

Table 2. Entrepreneurship Index per 1 000 working-age inhabitants in Lithuanian Counties in 2004–2025

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total for Lithuania	28	30	32	33	33	35	34	35	37	42	44	47	47	48	50	50	53	56	66
Vilniaus County	37	40	43	45	45	48	47	50	53	63	67	69	69	70	71	73	77	80	95
Alytaus County	20	20	21	22	21	24	22	23	24	26	28	30	31	32	33	32	35	37	46
Kauno County	29	31	32	34	33	37	36	36	38	42	44	47	48	49	50	51	54	58	68
Klaipėdos County	31	33	36	37	37	40	38	38	40	43	45	47	49	49	50	51	53	55	64
Marijampolės County	20	20	21	20	20	21	20	20	20	22	23	25	26	27	28	28	29	32	37
Panevėžio County	25	26	27	28	26	28	26	26	27	30	31	34	34	35	36	36	38	40	46
Šiaulių County	22	22	23	24	24	27	26	26	26	29	30	33	33	34	35	35	36	38	42
Tauragės County	19	20	21	21	21	23	21	22	23	25	27	28	30	30	31	31	33	36	40
Telšių County	23	23	25	25	25	27	26	26	26	29	30	33	34	35	36	35	38	40	45
Utenos County	19	19	20	20	19	21	19	20	20	22	23	25	26	27	27	28	30	32	38

Source: the author's own work based on data from OSP: [www 1].

The literature increasingly emphasises the role of non-profit organisations as a factor supporting socio-economic development. Activities in the social, educational, or healthcare sectors can indirectly contribute to GDP per capita growth by promoting employment, providing social services, and supporting marginalised groups.

On the other hand, a higher level of economic development fosters the emergence of non-profit organisations – greater financial, time, and infrastructural resources, the availability of funds, and social capital create favorable conditions for their operation. This relationship is bidirectional: the development of the non-profit sector can support economic growth, while rising GDP facilitates the sector's expansion.

To analyse these relationships, three key indicators were used:

- GDP per capita, as a measure of economic development and societal well-being,
- non-profit index, indicating the intensity of social activity,
- entrepreneurship index, referring to the number of businesses per 1 000 people of working age.

These indicators allowed for an assessment of socio-economic dynamics and helped to identify regional and temporal relationships between economic, social, and civic activity. To analyse these relationships, the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the entrepreneurship index and GDP per capita, as well as for the non-profit index and GDP per capita, for the years 2006–2024 (table 3).

The results indicated a very strong positive correlation between the entrepreneurship index and GDP per capita. The coefficient values for the analysed ranged from 0.91 to 0.97, meaning that regions with higher levels of economic development had a greater number of business entities per 1,000 working-age inhabitants. This relationship confirmed the thesis that GDP growth fostered the development of the business sector, while also suggesting that increased economic activity might have contributed to higher productivity and social well-being. The correlation between the non-profit index and GDP per capita was also positive, but clearly weaker than in the case of entrepreneurship. The coefficients ranged from 0.49 to 0.66, indicating a moderate positive relationship. This suggests that the non-profit sector, although related to the level of socio-economic development, was not as closely linked to it as the business sector. At the same time, the results showed that as GDP increased, the number of non-profit organisations also grew, which supports previous conclusions about the bidirectional relationship between these phenomena.

Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficient for the Entrepreneurship Index and GDP per capita, and for the Non-Profit Index and GDP per capita in the years 2006–2024

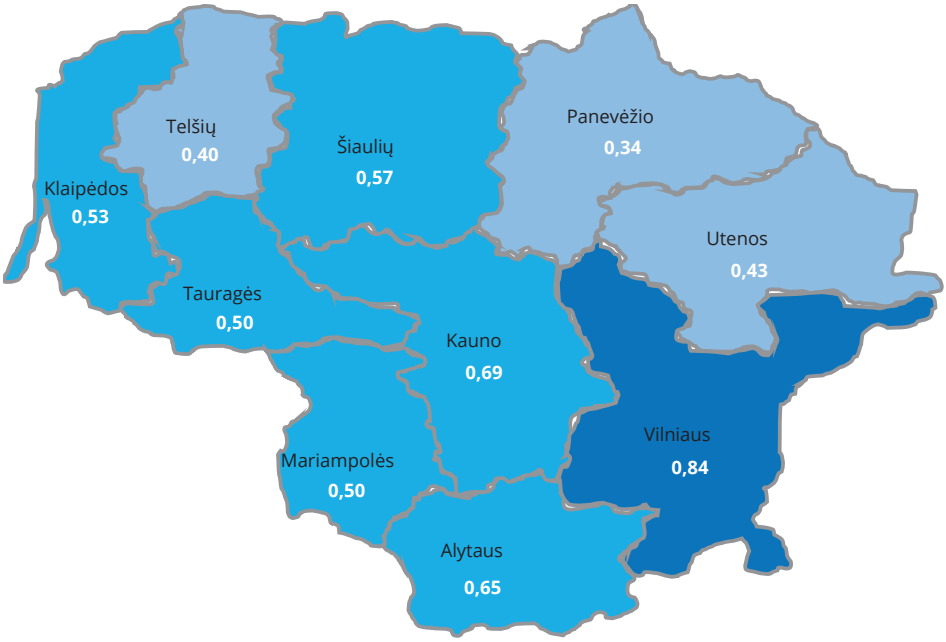
	Entrepreneurship index vs. GDP per capita	Non-profit index vs. GDP per capita
Total for Lithuania	0.95	0.65
Vilnisus County	0.91	0.66
Alytaus County	0.96	0.67
Kauno County	0.97	0.67
Klaipėdos County	0.96	0.53
Marijampolės County	0.94	0.62
Panevėžio County	0.95	0.46
Šiaulių County	0.96	0.62
Tauragės County	0.96	0.57
Telšių County	0.94	0.49
Utenos County	0.95	0.49

Source: the author's own work based on data from OSP: [https://osp.stat.gov.lt].

To analyse the relationship between entrepreneurship and non-profit sector activity, the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the indicators of these two phenomena across Lithuanian counties in the years 2006–2024 (chart 3).

At the national level, the correlation reached 0.64, indicating a moderate positive relationship – regions with higher economic activity also tended to have a greater number of non-profit organisations. The strongest correlation was observed in Vilniaus County (0.84), which may be attributed to the concentration of resources, social capital, and institutions in the capital city. High correlation values were also recorded in Alytaus County (0.68) and Kauno County (0.63). In contrast, the lowest correlation values were found in Utenos (0.43), Telšių (0.45), and Tauragės (0.47) counties, which may reflect limited socio-institutional capacity and a weaker link between the economic and civic sectors.

Chart 3. Pearson Correlation coefficient between the entrepreneurship index and the non-profit index in the years 2006–2024



Source: the author's own work based on data from OSP: [www 1].

These results confirm the existence of regional disparities in the interdependence between entrepreneurship and the development of the non-profit sector. Stronger correlations in more developed regions may indicate higher institutional maturity, while weaker correlations in peripheral areas suggest a need for targeted socio-economic support.

5. Conclusions

Based on the conducted analysis, several important conclusions can be drawn regarding the relationship between the development of the non-profit sector and the economic activity in Lithuania during the years 2006–2024. First and foremost, a systematic increase in the number of non-profit organisations was observed, which may indicate the growing role of civil society and the effectiveness of efforts supporting the third sector.

The highest values of the non-profit index were recorded in the regions with a higher level of socio-economic development. This may result from stronger social capital, greater civic engagement, and better institutional infrastructure. Furthermore, the Pearson correlation coefficient analysis revealed a moderately positive relationship between non-profit sector activity and both entrepreneurship and GDP per capita. This suggests that the development of non-profit organisations occurs more frequently in regions with a more favorable economic situation.

The relationship between the non-profit sector and economic growth appears to be mutually reinforcing social activity improves quality of life, facilitates labour market activation, and increases access to services, all of which can contribute to economic growth. At the same time, a higher GDP level enables better financing of social initiatives.

Therefore, it can be concluded that supporting the non-profit sector especially in less developed regions can serve as an effective tool for strengthening social entrepreneurship, counteracting social exclusion, and improving the quality of life of local communities.

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BANKS' INVOLVEMENT IN FINANCIAL EDUCATION – THE CASE OF POLAND

Abstract

- *Goal* – the article aims to review and assess the compliance of educational initiatives implemented by the largest commercial banks in Poland with the priorities set out in the National Strategy for Financial Education for Poland (NSFE).
- *Research methodology* – the article contains a review of the literature on the subject and case studies of ten commercial banks operating in Poland involved in educational activities. Each bank was assessed using a set of criteria based on the key priorities indicated in the NSFE for Poland. The article presents synthetic conclusions from the analysis in terms of each criterion.
- *Score/results* – The educational activities of banks have gone into nationwide efforts to increase the financial awareness of society in accordance with the National Strategy for Financial Education for Poland. In general, these activities are in line with the priorities outlined in the Strategy. However, commercial banks have taken into account particular priorities to a different extent. Leading priorities can be indicated, such as consumer-centric financial education programmes targeted at children and teenagers or financial well-being through responsible personal financial planning. However, there are also key priorities in which no action has been taken by banks (for instance monitoring the impact of educational activities on the participants' knowledge) or those in relation to which only indirect actions can be indicated (e.g. education about saving for retirement). Banks also avoid teaching consumers at risk of over-indebtedness or over-indebted. Only some banks even address the issue of avoiding over-indebted. It means that the involvement of banks in one of the most problematic issues, i.e. over-debt, is relatively small. Banks usually educate in line with these key priorities of NSFE for Poland, which are beneficial for banks as well.

- *Originality/value* – The review of banks' educational activities, together with the results of various studies on financial education, allowed to indicate further directions, which will help banks to contribute to the implementation of the National Strategy for Financial Education to a greater extent and to meet their own goals. Education against the over-indebted is favourable as it helps banks indirectly to increase their stability. It is recommended to educate more about investing and financial markets, but this must go in line with expanding the target groups, beyond the leading children and teenagers and include e.g. to include people of working age. Banks are also expected to provide intense senior education and continue cybersecurity educational activities.

Keywords: financial education, financial literacy, National Strategy for Financial Education for Poland (NSFE), commercial banks

1. Introduction

The National Strategy for Financial Education (NSFE) for Poland acted in 2024 and presents the foundation on which a co-ordinated approach to financial education in Poland will be built [OECD, 2023: 2]. The strategy was created after an earlier analysis of the financial literacy of Poles [OECD, 2022] and is a response to the growing complexity of economic processes and the increase in financial frauds, which require raising the financial competence of the Polish society. The NSFE is tailored to respond to the financial education needs of people living in Poland. Many types of stakeholders are involved in the financial education provision in Poland, including for-profit institutions providing financial services like banks. Their involvement is essential in ensuring a wide reach of the population and hard-to-reach communities. However, this involvement should be carefully handled to avoid a potential conflict of interest [OECD, 2022: 65].

Banks' involvement in financial education is an important element of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) ideas. The banks' participation in the financial education of the society is important as banks are public trust institutions. Financial education provided by banks can increase their credibility in the opinion of customers and society. This is important for building a positive reputation and attracting new customers [Ziemba, Świeszczak, 2014: 316]. In addition, the issue of responsible education of the public by banks has gained importance as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, the continuous increase in the complexity of financial products and the growth of social inequality [Bednarska-Olejniczak, 2017: 42–43]. Banks include financial education in ESG reports in the context of broader sustainability goals.

The article aims to review and assess the compliance of educational initiatives implemented by the largest commercial banks in Poland with the priorities set out in the National Strategy for Financial Education for Poland. It is an attempt to answer the question of whether banks contribute to the implementation of this Strategy through their educational activities.

2. What is financial education and why is it important?

There is no one commonly accepted definition of financial education. On the contrary, as the literature review showed, financial education is widely defined in Polish and foreign literature. In Poland, the issue of financial education was taken up by, among others, Iwanicz-Drozdowska [2011], Kuchciak, Świeszczak M., Świeszczak K., Marcinkowska [2014], Świecka [2016], Solarz et al. [2018], Cwynar [2021], Suska [2023] and others. Many studies on financial education have also been conducted at the international level, with OECD studies at the forefront. Financial education in various aspects was analysed by, among others, Kaiser and Menkhoff [2017] Habschick, Seidl, Evers [2007], Hastings, Madrian, Skimmyhorn [2013] and others. Selected definitions of financial education are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Definition of financial education

Author/authors	Definition of financial education
Solarz et al.	The process by which citizens improve their understanding of the world of finance, products, language and risk culture.
Świecka	All the activities aimed at increasing financial knowledge to rationalise financial decisions, which may be both systemic and ad hoc activities.
Iwanicz--Drozdowska	Taking broad-based actions to disseminate knowledge and develop positive habits among citizens, leads to making the right decisions in managing personal finances and effectively managing their financial resources, in line with current and future needs.
OECD	The process by which financial consumers and investors improve their understanding of financial products, concepts and risks and, through information, instruction and/or objective advice, develop the skills and confidence to become more aware of financial risks and opportunities, to make informed choices, to know where to go for help, and to take other effective actions to improve their financial well-being.

Source: the author' own elaboration based on [Solarz et al, 2018: 9; [Świecka, 2016: 92–93; Iwanicz-Drozdowska, 2011: 13, OECD, 2023: 11].

All these definitions of financial education emphasise that financial education is a process that is supposed to lead to the increased financial knowledge. In turn, some of them indicate that in addition to increasing knowledge, education should create appropriate habits and behaviours in the financial area. Świecka stated that financial education can be formal when it is acquired during school education. However, she notes that informal activities complementing school education play a significant role in promoting financial education, and in many cases play an even greater role than formal education [Świecka, 2016: 92–93]. Numerous short workshops bring better results than few and long-term training sessions [Kaiser, Menkhoff, 2017].

Financial education is of particular concern to international organisations such as the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). European Commission announced financial education "as an essential component of its efforts to ensure that the Single Market can bring direct benefits to Europe's citizens" and therefore encourages people to acquire basic knowledge of personal finance [Commission of the European Communities, 2007a]. Additionally, European Commission underlined the importance of financial education in Green Paper on Retail Financial Services [Commission of the European Communities, 2007b], Communication from the Commission – Financial education [Commission of the European Communities, 2007a] and the European Parliament resolution on financial services policy [European Parliament, 2007]. In turn, the Council of ECOFIN invites Member States "to significantly step up their efforts to raise households' awareness on the latter's need to obtain proper information and education, in combination with the financial industry's own responsibilities and initiatives as appropriate, so as to increase households' preparation whilst maintaining adequate investor protection"[Commission of the European Communities, 2007a].

The OECD not only defined financial education (see Table 1), but also set up International Network on Financial Education (INFE) in 2008, the aim of which is to create an international platform for promoting financial education activities. The INFE's is to support policy makers and public authorities in designing and implementing national strategies for financial education. What is more, the OECD emphasised the importance of financial education by publishing the Recommendation of the Council on Financial Literacy, which encourages adherents to establish and implement national strategies for financial literacy that take a sustained, co-ordinated approach to financial literacy [OECD, 2020]. The National Strategy for Financial Education (NSFE) for Poland and its first Implementation Roadmap was adopted in June 2024. The NSFE is in line with the OECD Recommendation

on Financial Literacy. Poland adopted the definition of financial education that was originally developed by the OECD. What is more, the NSFE is tailored to respond to the financial education needs of Poles and takes into consideration the existing Polish financial education environment. [OECD, 2023: 2].

The concept of financial education is closely related to the concept of financial literacy defined by OECD as "a combination of financial awareness, knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours necessary to make sound financial decisions and to ultimately achieve individual financial well-being" [OECD, 2023: 11]. The use of the word "literacy" indicates that the lack of it has an impact on the society as a whole. "The absence of financial knowledge and skills is likely to divide society in a way which is comparable to the effect of illiteracy in reading and writing" [Habschick, Seidl, Evers, 2007: 8].

Financial literacy has taken on a variety of meanings. It has referred to the knowledge of financial products and concepts as well as to having numeracy skills required to make effective financial decisions and being involved in such activities as financial planning [Hastings, Madrian, Skimmyhorn, 2013: 349–350]. There is an opinion that the process of acquiring financial literacy begins with the acquisition and deepening of financial knowledge and contributes to the growth of financial skills. However, it may also happen that this process ends with the acquisition of theoretical financial knowledge and is not reflected in the financial behaviour or financial attitude [Suska 2023: 50].

Financial education is beneficial for individuals, for the economy and society [Commission of the European Communities, 2007a]. The European Commission stated that financial education brings benefits to individuals across all life stages. While it can help children understand the value of money and teach them about budgeting and saving, it can give students and young people important skills for independent living. Financial education can assist adults in planning e.g. homeownership or parenthood. It can help citizens make better financial provision for unforeseen situations, invest wisely and save for their retirement. Knowledgeable individuals make informed financial service choices, heed warnings, and avoid unnecessary purchases or risky commitments, reducing financial vulnerability. Financial education is beneficial for the society too as it has reduced the risk of financial exclusion and has encouraged consumers to participate in social security and to save. Financial education has a positive effect on the economy as it promotes reasonable behaviours and can contribute to financial stability by helping consumers choose appropriate products and services, leading to lower default rates and o more diversified and therefore safer savings and investments.

Financial literacy is a must for living a greatly satisfactory and autonomous life that contributes to the sustainable development of economies and societies [Ulbinaitė, Gudaitis, Baranauskas 2023: 18]. Financial education is a win-win process for all stakeholders. Households win because they can better allocate their financial resources. Banks and other financial institutions are also winners when they have educated customers, which increases mutual trust. Financial education significantly reduces information asymmetry and encourages the design of financial products that better meet the customers' realised needs [Solarz et al, 2018: 116].

3. Educational activities of banks in Poland

The article aims to review and assess the compliance of educational initiatives implemented by the largest commercial banks in Poland with the priorities set out in the National Strategy for Financial Education for Poland. It is an attempt to answer the question of whether banks contribute to the implementation of this Strategy through their educational activities.

The educational activities of the 10 largest commercial banks operating in Poland were assessed: PKO BP SA, Pekao SA, Santander Bank Polska SA, ING Bank Śląski SA, mBank SA, BNP Paribas SA, Bank Millennium SA, Alior Bank SA, Bank Handlowy w Warszawie SA and Velobank SA. The assessment used a set of criteria created by the author based on the priorities indicated in the NSFE for Poland. Key priorities of the NSFE for Poland together with the assessment criteria assigned to them are included in Table 2. Each bank was analysed in terms of meeting specific criteria, and the article presents synthetic conclusions from the analysis in terms of each criterion. The analysis of banks was made based on banks' ESG reports, materials available on their websites, on social media as well different industry reports, including studies on Poles' financial knowledge.

Budgeting, managing personal finances, saving and general responsible use of money are basic topics in financial education implemented by banks in Poland, regardless of the target group (children/youth or adults). These issues are addressed in the flagship educational banks' programs: for example, PKO BP SA and the SKO program, Santander Banks Polska SA and the Finansiaki program, or ING Bank Slaski and the "Financial Health" project. Banks educate using a variety of tools and programs. Among other things, they offer several educational components in mobile applications (e.g., a financial manager to help with budget planning), as well as provide educational materials through the website and/or media.

Table 2. Criteria for assessing banks

Key priorities of the National Strategy for Financial Education for Poland	Defined criteria for assessing banks
1.Increase and sustain the financial resilience and financial well-being of people living in Poland through responsible personal financial planning, avoiding over-indebtedness and improving risk management skills.	• Do banks' educational activities include the development of financial competencies in the areas of budget management, saving, avoiding over-indebtedness and risk management? • Do banks address issues related to protection against financial fraud and cyber threats, data protection, and safe use of online and mobile banking in their educational activities? • Do banks teach how to recognise common online financial fraud and scams or fraudulent financial practices?
2. Improve the ability of people living in Poland to make long-term financial decisions and to secure their financial well-being in the long-term and in old age.	• Do the banks' educational activities include raising awareness of the importance of having sufficient savings for old age and long-term planning (regular savings, retirement planning)? • Do the banks' educational activities include promoting awareness of the importance of insurance and retirement security?
3. Improve the understanding and ability of people living in Poland to take advantage of opportunities related to investments in the financial market, while managing risks	• Do banks' educational activities include the topics of financial markets and investing, including understanding and managing investment risk?
4.Raise awareness on the importance of financial education for people living in Poland and their knowledge of where to find reliable and unbiased financial information, education, or assistance	• Do banks teach people to look for reliable and unbiased financial information?
5.Ensure that financial education programmes are consumer-centric.	• Are the banks' educational programs designed with specific target groups (e.g. children, young people, parents and teachers, the elderly population, consumers at risk of over-indebtedness or over-indebted, working-age people, especially those approaching retirement age)
6.Ensure that financial education programmes are based on evidence, including results from monitoring and evaluation.	• Do banks monitor the impact of their educational activities on the financial knowledge of participants? (e.g. surveys, measurement of knowledge/competence growth, analysis of actual financial behaviour over a longer period)
7. Ensure the participation of relevant stakeholders in financial education is broad-based and impartial.	• Is the financial content provided by banks agreeable to objective standards, free from the aggressive promotion of specific financial products and focused on developing financial awareness? • Do banks cooperate with social, educational organisations, local institutions (e.g., schools, universities, foundations) to increase the reach and quality of their activities?

Source: the author's own work based on [OECD, 2023: 13–19].

While many banks have educated about the need to save, only a few have educated about avoiding over-indebtedness. For instance, mBank SA promotes a credit-conscious approach and in 2023 launched an educational project aimed primarily at young customers and related to building a positive credit history [mBank ESG Report, 2023: 49]. The bank's website explains terms related to the process of obtaining a credit loan. mBank provides the educational website TwojaSpokojnaGlowa.pl, which is a source of knowledge about finance, including credit as well. mBank is a co-implementer of the "Kidnapped by Economics" project, which includes lessons on sensible credit. The goal is to make young people aware that credit decisions should be well thought out to avoid unnecessary debts [www 1]. The subject of credit is also taken up by Pekao SA, which has prepared a "Credit ABC" guide aimed at young customers, explaining such concepts as creditworthiness and credit history, and teaching how to plan financing to avoid over-indebtedness [www 2].

Cybersecurity has emerged as one of the leading and desired issues in banks' financial education. All banks are undertaking activities in this area, although they are varied. Some banks (i.e. PKO BP, Pekao SA, Santander Bank S.A, mBank SA) conduct regular educational campaigns on cybersecurity. Other banks, e.g. Alior Bank SA, limit themselves to posting key threat information on their websites. All banks also keep up-to-date on emerging attacks on their customers to warn them and strengthen their vigilance using various channels, including social media and mobile applications. A review of banks' cybersecurity initiatives shows that each bank warns against the most popular threats, which are phishing, vishing and spoofing, but also against many others. Banks also undertake joint initiatives with the Polish Bank Association (ZBP), which includes the ZBP Bank Cyber Security Committee. Its members include banks representing more than 97% of the assets of all banks in Poland [www 3]. Banks are addressing issues related to protection against financial fraud and cyberthreats, security in the use of online and mobile banking, as well as teaching how to recognise typical online scams and fraudulent financial practices.

The second key priority of NSFE refers to financial well-being in the long-term and in old age. Although educating about saving is popular among banks, they do not directly focus on education about the importance of saving for old age and retirement planning. Probably the reason for this is the implementation of most initiatives among children and young people, for whom saving for old age is too distant a prospect and taking it up would reduce the attractiveness of educational activities. However, educational activities undertaken by banks

promote systematic saving, which can indirectly have a positive impact on long-term financial plans, including retirement.

The third priority of the NSFE refers to understanding investments in the financial market while managing risks. Investment-related issues are not often addressed in banks' educational initiatives. Many banks do not have explicit educational activities focused on the financial market and investment risk management (e.g. PKO BP SA, Pekao SA, Millennium SA, or Alior Bank SA). The educational programs of most banks are general in nature, focusing on basic financial education and developing skills necessary for everyday life, rather than advanced topics related to financial markets and investing.

ING Bank Slaski SA is one of the few banks, which educate about financial markets. It has an educational section on its website [www 4] called "Learning to Invest", which includes information on the basics of investing, building an investment portfolio and advanced investment strategies, including investing in stocks and ETFs. mBank's educational activities cover the subject of financial markets as well, although not necessarily in detail, touching on investment risk and its management. Education takes place through the twojaspokojnaglowa.pl platform, which includes, among other things, pieces of advice on investing. At the same time, mBank educates while encouraging investment in their products, an example of which is the promotion "Regular Investing 2025 edition 1. In turn, Bank Handlowy w Warszawie SA, as part of its website https://www.citibank.pl/inwestycje/analizy-rynkowe, publishes analyses of financial markets, which provides information about the current situation in the markets and can help understand the risks associated with investing. In addition, educational materials are posted in the form of brochures on various investment topics.

Poles' knowledge of financial markets and investing is relatively poor, while the range of investment products in banks is increasing. In a survey conducted by The Warsaw Institute of Banking (WIB) and Foundation Warsaw Stock Exchange in 2024, 37% of Poles rated their financial knowledge as very or rather low, and investing was one of three areas where Poles felt knowledge deficits. Additionally, the more advanced the investment products are, the lower the knowledge is [Warszawski Instytut Bankowości, Fundacja GPW, 2024].

In reviewing the educational activities of banks, it was not identified that banks educate directly on how to seek reliable and unbiased financial information. Specially dedicated trainings or materials about the conscious use of information were not conducted. This topic appeared only indirectly in the context of other issues, e.g. cybersecurity.

The NSFE has identified target groups that should be prioritised in financial education programs in Poland. When providing financial education, banks focus only on the few selected groups. The leading group includes children, young people, parents and teachers, and, to a lesser extent, the elderly people. However, no educational activities were found dedicated to the remaining groups, which according to NSFE are [OECD 2023: 19–20]:

- low-income households;
- people with precarious labour market positions, including the unemployed and people working under unstable or temporary contracts;
- people living in rural areas or small towns;
- migrants and refugees;
- working-age people, especially those approaching retirement age;
- consumers at risk of over-indebtedness or over-indebted.

Children and young people are the most important target group in banks' educational activities and banks' flagship educational programs are precisely directed at them (e.g. SKO at PKO BP SA, Finansiaki at Santander Bank Polska SA, Misja Edukacja at BNP Paribas). Parents and teachers, who are involved in the education of the youngest generation, are indirect receivers of banks' educational initiatives as well. Banks have particular reasons to educate children and teenagers. Firstly, their financial education creates the opportunity to build long-term relationships with them as future customers. Those children and teenagers, who come into contact with banks early in the context of education, are likely to use their services in the future. Secondly, there are studies presenting parents' expectations to provide educational activities to their children by banks. Although almost three-quarters of the surveyed parents (74%) believe that they are primarily responsible for the financial education of their children, two-fifths of respondents (43%) claim that this is also the role of financial institutions [Santander Bank Polska SA, 2024]. In turn, Pekao SA survey showed that 59% of parents indicated the important role of the banking sector in financial education for children [Pekao SA, 2023]. Financial education of children and teenagers is an expression of the implementation of corporate social responsibility and plays an important role in building a positive reputation and attracting new customers.

Senior-targeted educational activities have been undertaken on an incomparably smaller scale than children-targeted ones. They are mainly concerned with cybersecurity education including how to use Internet safely and protection against online financial fraud and scams. As an example, the project implemented

by the Santander Foundation entitled "Senior Independent and Safe on the Web" is given. The project includes a series of workshops on safe use of the Internet and electronic banking services [Santander Bank Polska, ESG Report, 2022: 21]. It seems that the senior education by banks is insufficient not only in terms of the implementation of the NSFE, but also a bank's goals. The Warsaw Institute of Banking (WIB) and the Foundation Warsaw Stock Exchange research confirms the huge role of banks and financial institutions as a source of economic knowledge for seniors. This was indicated by 51% of respondents aged 55–65 and 42% over 65 [Warszawski Instytut Bankowości, Fundacja GPW, 2024].

No banks' financial activities dedicated specifically to over-indebted people and helping them deal with the financial problems they face have been identified. Banks provide only general educational programs that can be indirectly useful in debt management, e.g. how to properly manage the household budget so that there is enough money for instalments or teaching about systematic saving as an antidote to financial problems. Over-indebtedness is a serious problem which, on a larger scale, may threaten the stability of banks. Limited education on how to avoid over-indebtedness and the lack of educational activities aimed at indebted people is a serious gap given the data on Poles' indebtedness. According to the BIG InfoMonitor 2024 report, nearly 2.6 million Poles, one in 12 adults on average, have problems with timely payment of credit and non-credit obligations. According to BIG experts, although the number of people with financial problems is decreasing, it is still a large group [BIG InfoMonitor, 2024]. Poles' financial problems indicate the lack of practical financial management skills. This indicates that financial education should move in the direction of not only providing knowledge, but also financial literacy with a special focus on skills and attitudes.

As the review of banks' educational initiatives was made, no information was identified on monitoring the impact of banks' educational programmes on financial knowledge. Banks have not made systematic testing of the results in the form of participant surveys, measurement of knowledge/competence growth, or analysis of actual financial behaviour in the long term related to financial education. Some banks limit themselves only to providing, for example, the number of students attending educational meetings/classes held, the number of organised lessons, etc. Assessing the effectiveness and impact of banks' educational activities on improving the financial knowledge of Poles requires separate independent research done by the academic community.

In general, banks provide educational content in line with objective standards aimed at improving financial literacy. However, developing financial skills,

such as systematic saving in the youngest, requires the use of appropriate tools. Thus, education using banking products dedicated to children, such as children's accounts, savings accounts, debit cards and mobile applications, turned out to be inevitable. It is not an aggressive promotion, but rather the need to learn by doing. However, as mentioned earlier, banks have business interests in financial education itself, so they use their products as part of developing desirable financial habits. Banks support their educational activities with the banking products they offer. Educational content follows objective standards, but sometimes includes promotional elements related to banks' products.

The analysed banks cooperate with other institutions to increase the reach and quality of their educational activities. Since the banks' priority target group is children and young people, this cooperation primarily involves schools. This is not only beneficial for the banks, but also desired by Poles. The survey "Poles' 'attitude to banks' activities in the area of financial education" shows that 69% of Poles want schools to establish cooperation with banks in the area of economic education of children and young people, and only 14% of respondents are against it [Warszawski Instytut Bankowości, SW Research, 2024: 10].

The vast majority of banks included in the analysis participate in the Bankers for Education program. It has been implemented since 2016 on the initiative of the Polish Bank Association by the Warsaw Institute of Banking (WIB). The program aims to educate people about finance, banking, cyber-security and cashless trading, among other things. Banks participating in the program not only support the development of financial education in Poland but also improve their image as socially responsible institutions.

4. Conclusions

Commercial banks in Poland have undertaken several educational initiatives, both independently and by joining sector activities coordinated by the Polish Bank Association. The educational activities of banks have gone into nationwide efforts to increase the financial awareness of the society in accordance with the National Strategy for Financial Education for Poland. In general, these activities are in line with the priorities outlined in the Strategy. However, commercial banks have taken into account particular priorities to a different extent. Leading priorities can be indicated, such as consumer-centric financial education programmes targeted at children and teenagers or financial well-being through responsible personal

financial planning. However, there are also key priorities in which no action has been taken by banks (for instance monitoring the impact of educational activities on the participants' knowledge) or those to which only indirect actions can be indicated (e.g. education about saving for retirement). Banks also avoid teaching consumers at risk of over-indebtedness or over-indebted. Only some banks even address the issue of avoiding the over-indebted. It means that the involvement of banks in one of the most problematic issues, i.e. over-debt, is relatively small. Contrary to appearances, it will be beneficial for banks to intensify financial education on avoiding over-indebted. Customers with financial knowledge about loans can manage their budgets better, which reduces the risk of defaulted loans and increases the financial stability of banks.

It is recommended to increase banks' involvement in senior education. It is suggested not only by the process of ageing of the population but also by the expectations of elderly people, for whom banks are institutions in which they look for financial knowledge. This will strengthen the image of banks as institutions of public trust.

Banks should continue cybersecurity education due to the ever-growing financial threat. Additionally, bearing in mind the reputational aim of banks' operations, cybersecurity education is a necessity. This is not only an expression of concern for the interests of banks' customers, but also to minimise banks' financial, legal and reputational risks [BIK, 2023: 7].

Banks should consider including more investment topics in their educational activities. This seems necessary because of the increasing range of investment products offered by banks and Poles' still insufficient knowledge of investing. However, more intensive investing education must go in line with expanding the target groups beyond the leading children and teenagers. e.g. to include people of working age, so that the knowledge gained can be used to take action in investing.

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DIGITAL HERITAGE OF THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN MULTICULTURAL BORDERLAND: BETWEEN MEMORY PRESERVATION AND TOURISM COMMODIFICATION

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of the article is to analyse the digital use of multicultural heritage in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland, with particular attention to the balance between preserving authenticity and the risk of commodification in the context of cultural tourism.
- *Research methodology* – The analysis is based on a qualitative approach, combining case studies with the desk research method. Sources include project documentation, institutional reports, scientific literature, and online resources. Selected examples cover the activities of the Borderland Centre of Arts Cultures Nations in Sejny, the Tatar Trail in Kruszyniany, Lithuanian culture in Puńsk and the Polish culture in the Vilnius region, as well as cross border initiatives supported under the Interreg Poland–Lithuania Programme.
- *Score/results* – The findings show that digitisation strengthens the visibility of multicultural heritage and enhances its economic potential by supporting regional branding, tourism development and small business growth. At the same time, it exposes traditions to risks of simplification and market driven reinterpretation. Digital storytelling, mobile applications and online archives make heritage accessible globally, but they may also reduce its complexity to easily consumable narratives.
- *Originality/value* – The article contributes to the debate on digital heritage by linking it to the specific context of a multicultural borderland. It demonstrates that digitisation functions both as a memory preservation tool and as a mechanism of commodification. The analysis highlights the dual role of digital technologies, offering insights into how peripheral regions can use cultural resources for development without losing authenticity.

Keywords: digital heritage, borderland, cultural tourism, minority cultures

1. Introduction

The borderlands of Central and Eastern Europe are characterised by a high degree of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. The cultural heritage of Lithuanian, Polish, Tatar, Jewish and Belarusian communities constitute not only an essential part of the regional identity but also a valuable development resource. Over the last two decades, digitisation has gained particular importance as both a tool of cultural preservation and an engine for tourism and regional branding.

Digitisation secures fragile elements of heritage and makes them widely accessible. At the same time, it transforms traditions into cultural products consumed within the tourism market. Scholars emphasise that new technologies redefine notions of authenticity and alter the relationship between local communities and global audiences [Giaccardi, 2012; Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007]. This article poses a question whether digital heritage in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland primarily contributes to safeguarding collective memory, or whether it reinforces the processes of commodification.

2. Digital heritage

According to the UNESCO Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage [2003], digital heritage includes both materials originally created in digital form and analogue resources transformed into digital formats. This dual perspective stresses the need to protect born digital artefacts such as photographs, films and documents, while also highlighting the importance of digitising manuscripts, artworks or oral testimonies. The responsibility lies with institutions and communities to ensure the survival of fragile resources and their accessibility for future generations.

The literature highlights three principal functions of digital heritage: protective, educational and economic [Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007; UNESCO, 2003]. The protective role secures heritage against decay or destruction, ensuring that even when an original object disappears, its digital copy remains available. The educational role expands access to cultural knowledge, allowing individuals to experience, study and reinterpret heritage through online databases, virtual exhibitions or interactive platforms. The economic role underscores the potential of digitisation to support regional development, stimulate cultural tourism and foster innovation in creative industries.

Digital technologies turn heritage into a form of cultural capital that operates simultaneously on symbolic and economic levels [OECD, 2020]. Symbolically, digitisation strengthens cultural identity, reinforces collective memory and allows local communities to present their traditions to audiences far beyond their region. Economically, it opens new opportunities for tourism development, regional branding and the growth of small and medium sized enterprises. In this way, digital heritage emerges not only as a method of preservation but also as a catalyst for innovation and a driver of competitiveness in peripheral areas.

3. Multiculturalism of the Polish-Lithuanian borderland

The Polish-Lithuanian borderland is one of the most diverse cultural spaces in Central and Eastern Europe. For centuries it has been home to communities with distinct languages, religions and traditions, each leaving its own imprint on the region. The Lithuanians of Puńsk continue to preserve their language and cultural practices through schools, theatre and festivals that are increasingly broadcast or archived online [Sadanowicz, 2018: 98]. Sejny also are considered one of the most important centres of the Lithuanian minority in Poland. The presence of this community is visible in the activity of Lithuanian schools, cultural associations and religious institutions, which play a key role in preserving language and traditions. Events such as Lithuanian theatre performances, choral concerts or festivals organised in Sejny strengthen the identity of the minority and maintain cross-border cultural ties with Lithuania [Barwiński, 2014: 138]. The city thus functions not only as a local centre of Lithuanian culture, but also as a symbolic space of dialogue between the majority and minority populations.

Sejny adds another dimension. Once a town of many cultures, it was deeply marked by the presence of the Jewish community before the Holocaust. Today, the initiatives of the Borderland Centre revive this heritage by using digital archives, films and storytelling projects to present it to global audiences [Czyżewski, 2019].

The Tatars of Kruszyniany and Bohoniki enrich the cultural mosaic with religious and culinary traditions. Their wooden mosques and cemeteries are distinctive landmarks, while Tatar cuisine has become a regional attraction promoted through the Tatar Trail and digital tools such as mobile guides and social media.

The Belarusian Orthodox culture, visible in icons, churches and rituals, also contributes to the multicultural character of the area. Many of these practices are gradually being recorded and shared online, ensuring their survival in the digital sphere.

Across the border in Lithuania, the Polish minority provides an important counterpart. In the Vilnius region and in the area of Šalčininkai, Polish schools, media and cultural associations keep alive the use of the language and traditions. Digital platforms play a key role here, allowing events to be livestreamed and communities to connect across borders [Interreg Poland–Lithuania, 2021–2027].

Together these communities illustrate that multiculturalism in the borderland is not static but dynamic. It is constantly reinterpreted and reshaped, and digital technologies amplify this process. They give visibility to traditions that might otherwise remain confined to the local contexts and allow different groups to share their heritage with international audiences. New technologies also generate opportunities for dialogue and cooperation across the Polish-Lithuanian border.

4. Digital forms of heritage protection and promotion

Digitisation has taken many forms in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland. One of the most visible forms is the creation of digital archives and libraries. The Podlasie Digital Library and the Lithuanian platform ePaveldas provide free access to documents, manuscripts and photographs, allowing both scholars and the general public to explore the multicultural past of the region [Paveldas, 2023; Podlaska Biblioteka Cyfrowa, 2023]. By making these resources accessible online, cultural institutions ensure that fragile materials are protected and widely shared.

One of the innovative dimensions of the cross-border cooperation within the Interreg Poland–Lithuania Programme has been the development of mobile applications designed to promote the cultural and natural heritage. These tools integrate digital maps, audio guides and interactive functions that allow users to explore tourist routes independently, including the Tatar Trail and the thematic cross-border paths. The emphasis on digital technologies reflects a broader EU policy of supporting ICT solutions for the regional development and cultural accessibility [Interreg Poland–Lithuania, 2021–2027]. The previous programme editions also demonstrated this trend [Interreg Poland–Lithuania, 2014–2020]. Such initiatives illustrate how digitisation contributes to increasing the visibility of multicultural borderland heritage while simultaneously adapting it to the expectations of contemporary audiences [Interreg Poland–Lithuania, 2021–2027]. One of the result of the project is also online guide: Towns of Borderland – Marijampole and Sejny: Journey through history until today. The guide is published in three languages: Polish, Lithuanian, and English and offers a comprehensive and

well-crafted account of the town's history. The descriptions reflect the perspectives of both nations and serve as an expression of the cultural and historical dialogue [Burczewski, 2017].

In Sejny, also the preserved synagogue has become a cultural centre where digital tools such as 3D modelling, online archives and multimedia exhibitions are used to complement its function as a space of memory and education. These initiatives allow broader audiences to engage with the history of the Jewish community, combining the authenticity of the existing building with innovative methods of interpretation [www 1]. A similar initiative in Vilnius, the "Virtual Jewish Vilnius" project, enables users to experience the entire districts destroyed during the war through virtual reality [Vilnius University, 2021]. Such initiatives show that even what has been lost physically, can still be experienced by new technologies.

Social media and digital storytelling have also become powerful tools. Restaurants in Kruszyniany, the Lithuanian cultural festivals in Puńsk and the Polish organisations in the Vilnius region use platforms like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube to promote their activities [www 2]. Livestreamed concerts, short videos and podcasts extend local traditions to international audiences, transforming them into cultural spectacles adapted to digital consumption [Giaccardi, 2012].

These varied forms of digitisation reveal how heritage can be protected and promoted at the same time. They secure fragile traditions for future generations while also reintroducing them to the global cultural landscape, often in formats that appeal to tourists, researchers and diaspora communities alike.

5. Economic aspects of the digital heritage

Digitisation not only safeguards heritage but also redefines its role within local and regional economies. As highlighted in the OECD report on culture and local development [OECD, 2020], digital heritage can strengthen competitiveness, particularly in the peripheral and borderland regions where large-scale industries or advanced service sectors are often absent. By transforming cultural resources into accessible and marketable digital content, communities gain an additional tool to emphasise their uniqueness and attract visitors.

The protective aspect of digital heritage also has clear economic implications. Once stored in digital repositories, cultural objects can be reproduced and reused indefinitely for educational or promotional purposes, lowering costs and

expanding outreach. For instance, a digitised collection of manuscripts or historical photographs can be incorporated into school programmes, virtual exhibitions, tourist websites or marketing campaigns, without the risks associated with the deterioration of the original materials [OECD, 2020].

The educational function similarly generates measurable benefits. Making cultural resources widely available stimulates cultural tourism, encourages engagement in local initiatives and fosters innovation in creative industries. Interactive applications, online exhibitions and virtual reconstructions are particularly effective in reaching younger generations who may be less inclined to engage with heritage through traditional channels. This demand, in turn, encourages the development of new services such as mobile guides, multimedia platforms and locally produced souvenirs inspired by digital storytelling [Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007].

The economic function of digital heritage is perhaps most evident in the field of place branding and regional development. Heritage, as Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge [2007] argue, is central to the construction of place identity. Digitisation enhances this process by giving visibility to local communities far beyond their immediate geographic context. Villages such as Puńsk or Kruszyniany can now reach international audiences without investing heavily in conventional marketing. Through online platforms and social media, intangible cultural elements, including songs, languages and culinary traditions, become strong markers of regional identity that can attract both tourists and investors.

Yet, the economic use of digital heritage is not without its challenges. As Ashworth et al. [2007] observe, commodification often leads to the simplification and distortion of heritage. When traditions are reshaped primarily for tourist consumption, they risk losing their depth and meaning. In the Polish-Lithuanian borderland, this is visible in the digital promotion of Tatar cuisine, Lithuanian festivals or Polish cultural events in Vilnius. While these initiatives raise the visibility of multicultural traditions and create economic benefits, they also provoke questions about authenticity and the long-term resilience of local practices. For instance, in the public discourse, some practicing Tatars have voiced their disapproval of traditional religious dishes being consumed outside of their sacred context.

Digital heritage thus represents a paradox. It is both a guardian of cultural memory and a product shaped by market dynamics. Its economic value is undeniable, but it must be balanced with approaches that protect the integrity of traditions and prevent their reduction to commodified, superficial experiences [OECD, 2020].

6. Case Studies

6.1. Sejny: the borderland centre

Sejny has become a symbolic space for reflecting on multicultural heritage, largely owing to the work of the Borderland Centre of Arts Cultures Nations. The institution combines artistic activity, research and community engagement with digital documentation and dissemination. Oral testimonies, concerts and theatrical projects are recorded, archived and made available online, turning local memory into a resource that reaches far beyond the town itself [Czyżewski, 2019]. The digital element plays a double role here. It secures fragile narratives of the past, and at the same time, functions as a promotional tool, positioning Sejny as a reference point for multicultural dialogue. Questions, nevertheless, emerge about whether the digitised memory offered to global audiences still conveys the full complexity of local life, or whether it is reshaped into more universal cultural narratives.

6.2. Kruszyniany: the Tatar trail

Kruszyniany, together with the nearby Bohoniki, illustrates how digitisation can transform a local minority tradition into a widely recognised tourist brand. The Tatar Trail includes wooden mosques, cemeteries and culinary experiences, all of which are now promoted through digital guides and the extensive use of social media [www 3]. These tools allow visitors to navigate the trail independently and to personalise their experience, making the heritage more accessible and attractive. However, this process also exposes tensions. Religious and cultural practices, once reserved for the local community, are increasingly staged for visitors. While the visibility of the Tatar heritage has grown substantially, the line between the authentic cultural practice and the tourist performance is becoming blurred.

6.3. Puńsk: Lithuanian culture in digital form

The municipality of Puńsk, often referred to as the cultural capital of Lithuanians in Poland, demonstrates the potential of digital media to sustain minority identity [Cichocki, 2018]. Festivals, theatre performances and school events are increasingly broadcast online or archived in digital repositories, allowing them to reach audiences outside the local community. This has reinforced the visibility of Lithuanian culture in Poland and abroad, turning Puńsk into a symbolic centre

of diaspora identity. At the same time, the adaptation of cultural events to digital formats raises concerns similar to those in other parts of the borderland. The need to adjust to online audiences can influence the way traditions are presented, sometimes simplifying them for broader consumption.

6.4. Vilnius region: the Polish cultural presence

The Polish minority in Lithuania provides a reverse perspective, showing how digital tools are used to strengthen cultural identity across the border. The Polish schools and associations in the Vilnius region run websites, social media profiles and online broadcasts of festivals and religious celebrations [Interreg Poland–Lithuania, 2021–2027]. These practices help maintain the use of the Polish language and build a sense of cultural continuity with Poland. They also illustrate the political dimension of digital heritage. Digitisation is not only about cultural preservation, but also about visibility, representation and recognition in broader national and European contexts. The commodification dilemma is also present here, since Polish events promoted digitally to attract tourism can risk losing their community centred character in favour of more market oriented narratives.

6.5. Summary of case studies

Taken together, the case studies of Sejny, Kruszyniany, Puńsk and the Vilnius region demonstrate how digitisation operates as a double-edged instrument. It preserves and disseminates heritage but simultaneously transforms it into a product shaped by the expectations of distant audiences. The examples also reveal how digital heritage is entangled in wider dynamics of identity politics, cultural tourism and economic development. Each community benefits from increased visibility and potential income but also faces the challenge of maintaining authenticity and protecting traditions from being reduced to consumable cultural tokens.

7. Conclusions

The study of digital heritage in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland reveals a complex dynamics. Digitisation secures fragile cultural resources, strengthens local identities and allows traditions to be shared with a global audience. At the same

time, it introduces heritage into market circuits where it is reshaped to meet the demands of tourism and of the creative industries.

Several key findings emerge. Firstly, digital technologies have proved to be essential instruments for preserving multicultural traditions that might otherwise remain marginalised or invisible. They make it possible to archive oral testimonies, safeguard minority languages and document material heritage in formats accessible beyond the physical region.

Secondly, digitisation brings tangible economic advantages. It supports the growth of cultural tourism, stimulates small and medium sized enterprises and reinforces regional branding [OECD, 2020]. For peripheral areas, these processes create opportunities for development that are difficult to achieve through conventional industries.

Thirdly, the pursuit of visibility and revenue carries evident risks. As Ashworh, Graham and Tunbridge [2007] argue, commodification often simplifies or distorts complex traditions. In the case of Sejny, Kruszyniany, Puńsk and the Vilnius region, cultural practices are increasingly adapted to digital audiences and tourist markets, which challenges the authenticity and long term sustainability.

Finally, the borderland perspective demonstrates that digital heritage is not only a cultural or technical issue but also a political and social one. It influences how minority groups are represented, shapes cross-border relations and contributes to wider debates about identity and integration within the European Union.

In summary, the digital heritage in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland illustrates both the potential and the challenges of applying new technologies to multicultural contexts. It preserves memory and creates economic opportunities, yet it also risks transforming traditions into consumable images. The central task for policymakers, cultural institutions and local communities is to maintain a balance that enables heritage to remain a living practice while still benefiting from the possibilities offered by the digital age.

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THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION CASES IN THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND: A CASE STUDY OF THE BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST

Abstract

- *Goal* – The purpose of this article is to examine what role non-governmental organisations play in the environmental issues occurring in the Republic of Poland.
- *Research methodology* – The used methods include: literature analysis, case law analysis, case study, and comparative analysis.
- *Score/results* – The article demonstrates that non-governmental organisations play a very important role in matters related to environmental protection occurring in the Republic of Poland, and that through their activities they are able to exert a real influence on the shape of the state's environmental policy and on socially significant issues.
- *Originality/value* – The research undertaken in this article makes it possible to assess the role that non-governmental organisations play in matters related to environmental protection occurring in the Republic of Poland, and whether they can exert a real influence on the shape of the state's environmental policy and on socially significant issues. This subject has not yet been subjected to an in-depth analysis.

Keywords: non-governmental organisations, Białowieża Forest, environmental protection

1. Introduction

Environmental protection is one of the most significant challenges of the 21st century. We face many global crises in today's world, but the environmental crisis is becoming the most fundamental. It affects all aspects of our existence,

such as health, security, economy, quality of life and even the future of our planet [Lorey, 2003: XI]. In times of progressive climate change, degradation of ecosystems, massive extinction of species and increasing pollution, caring for nature is no longer just a choice, it is becoming a necessity. The current environmental problems require the active participation of civil society. Social organisations play an increasingly important role in mobilising public opinion monitoring the activities of the administration and enforcing national and EU laws. The 2016–2018 conflict over the Białowieża Forest was one of the best-known cases of the NGO involvement in the defence of the environment in Poland [Kula et al., 2024: 481–492].

The aim of this article is to examine whether the role of non-governmental organisations in environmental cases occurring in the Republic of Poland enables them to have a real impact on socially important issues. Due to the broadness of the proceedings that concern the examined scope, the considerations in this article are based on the example of the proceedings pending against the Republic of Poland in the Białowieża Primeval Forest case. The used methods included: the analysis of literature, jurisprudence, legal acts, position of doctrine, representatives of science and documents obtained from the European Commission through a request for public information. They take into account the legal status as of 12 June 2025.

2. Legal basis for non-governmental organisations participation in environmental matters

The activities of non-governmental organisations in the field of environmental protection in the Republic of Poland are based on solid legal foundations, both national and international.

It stems first and foremost from the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, which in Article 74(4) obliges public authorities to support the activities of citizens for the protection and improvement of the environment [The Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997: Article 74]. Whereas Article 86 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland further specifies that "everyone is obliged to care for the state of the environment and bears responsibility for any deterioration caused by themselves" [The Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997: Article 86]. Other more specific provisions can be found, inter alia, in the Act of 27 April 2001 – Environmental Protection Law, in which Article 4(1)

indicates that "the general use of the environment shall be granted by law to everyone…" [Environmental Protection Law, 2001: Article 4, paragraph 1] and in Articles 44 and 45 of the Act of 3 October 2008 on the provision of information on the environment and its protection, public participation in environmental protection and environmental impact assessments, which confer on environmental organisations the right to participate in proceedings and lodge appeals and to cooperate in the field of environmental protection with administrative authorities [on Access to Environmental Information, Environmental Protection, Public Participation in Environmental Protection, and Environmental Impact Assessments, 2008: Articles 44 and 45]. In addition, the Act of 14 June 1960 – the Code of Administrative Procedure in Article 31 allows the participation of a social organisation in administrative proceedings [Code of Administrative Procedure, 1960: Article 31].

In terms of the European Union law, non-governmental organisations are guaranteed access to information, participation in decision-making and the right to challenge decisions relating to the environment under the Convention ratified by the Republic of Poland in 2003, drawn up in Aarhus on 25 June 1998 on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters (the so-called Aarhus Convention) [Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, 1998]. Furthermore, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union itself requires the Republic of Poland, as a Member State of the European Union, to respect its provisions and to implement them in its legal order. From the point of view of environmental protection, Article 11 thereof is the most relevant; according to it "environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the definition and implementation of the Union policies and activities, in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development". [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2016: Article 11] It also regards Articles 191, 192 and 193, which set out the objectives of environmental policy, the measures designed to achieve them and the possibility of maintaining or introducing more stringent protective measures, provided that they are compatible with the Treaties and have been notified to the Commission [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2016: Articles 191–193].

All of the provisions indicated above provide a legal framework for NGOs to take action to protect the environment.

3. The significance of the Białowieża Forest

The Bialowieza Forest is one of the most valuable and oldest forest complexes in Europe. It is located on the border between Poland (in the Podlaskie Voivodeship) and Belarus (in the Brest Oblast). Its area covers about 1 500 km^2, including about 62 000 ha on the Polish side, which is more than 42% of its total area. It is the last of its kind preserved fragment of the original lowland forest [Jalinik, 2024: 5]. For centuries, this area served as hunting grounds for Polish and Russian rulers, which ensured its protection from human interference. Since the 1920s, some parts of the forest have been granted formal protection – initially as nature reserves, and later also as the Białowieża National Park [Palowski, 2002: 93], which covers about one sixth of the Polish part of the primeval forest and it is divided into partial and strict protection zones. The remaining areas are managed by the State Forests through the Białowieża, Browsk and Hajnówka Forest Districts. The Forest Service conducts conservation activities in the primeval forest areas to preserve habitats and endangered species. It should be noted that almost a quarter of the areas managed by the forest inspectorates have the status of nature reserves [Jalinik, 2024: 6].

Due to such measures, a large part of the primeval forest has avoided traditional forest management and this has allowed the ongoing natural ecological processes since the end of the last glaciation to continue undisturbed. In addition, the Białowieża Forest was one of the first natural sites in the world to be included on the UNESCO World Heritage List, which underlines its exceptional importance for nature conservation. There is no other area in the Republic of Poland of such key importance for the preservation of biodiversity. Due to its values, it was also inscribed on the UNESCO list of biosphere reserves [Yarmashevich, Kozak, 2022: 174] as the Białowieża Biosphere Reserve [Kujawa et al., 2016: 303], task of which is not only to protect unique natural resources, but also to conduct research on the functioning of natural forest ecosystems and build public awareness of the links between ecological and cultural diversity [Jalinik, 2024: 6]. In addition, the Bialowieza Forest is characterised by its exceptional natural uniqueness. It is home to rare and endangered plant and animal species. It is also of great importance to the world of science. For this reason, Białowieża Primeval Forest was included in the Natura 2000 network and protected as a Special Bird Protection Area (SPA) and Special Habitat Protection Area (SAC) [Olaczk, 2010: 33–42]. There is no doubt, therefore, that the Białowieża Forest is an extremely important area, not only for Poland, but also for the European Union and the whole world.

4. The problem of the massive gradation of the European spruce bark beetle

The European spruce bark beetles are a common species in Poland and in other European countries, and have also been recorded in countries such as China, Korea and Japan, among others. Their main host plant is Norway spruce, so it feeds mainly in forests with only spruce trees and in mixed stands with a high or significant proportion of spruce trees. The are prone to mass reproduction, especially when spruce stands are weakened or damaged by a variety of biotic and abiotic factors [Grodzki, 2013: 20–22].

When the normal ecological balance is maintained, this species serves as a natural selective agent, removing weakened trees from the stands. Regardless of the causes of the trees' weakening or the length of the chain of events leading to this condition, the spruce bark beetle usually represents the final stage, contributing to the death of the infested tree. In properly functioning ecosystems, its role is therefore entirely secondary, since the presence of the beetle (in all developmental stages) on living trees is always associated with reduced vitality and, in particular, with diminished resistance. The problem with the spruce bark beetle arises when it changes its role and shifts from being a secondary selective agent to a primary one, resulting in the elimination of trees that still show relatively high vitality. This shift occurs when the resistance of trees in a given stand rapidly decreases or when the beetle population suddenly increases – sometimes both phenomena happen simultaneously, mutually reinforcing their effects [Grodzki, 2022: 475–476].

There are several methods of protecting the forest against the bark beetle attacking healthy trees. These include measures such as the use of trap trees, pheromone traps, debarking, spraying felled trees or the use of insecticidal nets, but these only play a supporting or intervention role. The most effective method is to systematically search for and remove bark beetle-infested trees from the forest, before a new generation of insects has emerged. The key role in this method is to remove trees under the bark of which the larval stages of the bark beetle develop in good time to prevent them from transforming and leaving the tree. This action is an example of sanitary pruning, which is selective in nature – only trees actually controlled by the pest are eliminated. Failure to take such action, especially during a period of increasing infestation, encourages a rapid increase in the bark beetle population. A similar effect is achieved by leaving bark beetle-infested, fallen or broken trees in the forest, which provide an ideal breeding ground for them [Grodzki, 2016: 328].

5. The dispute over the method of protecting the Białowieża Forest

5.1. The position of the Ministry of the Environment and the State Forests

The Ministry of the Environment and the State Forests has played a key role in the dispute over the future and protection of the Białowieża Forest. Faced with a massive bark beetle gradation in the Bialowieza Forest, the Polish authorities decided on 25 March 2016 to approve an annex to the forest management plan for the Bialowieza Forest District. As a result, timber harvesting was tripled – from about 63 000 m^3 to 188 000 m^3 in the period 2012–2021 and forest management, including sanitary cutting, afforestation and deforestation, was allowed, also in the areas that had previously been completely excluded from human interference [Letter of Formal Notice – Infringement No. 2016/2072, 2016: 2]. The decision to approve an annex to the forest management plan for the Białowieża Forest District was not taken by chance and without any forethought; it made a certain sense from the point of view of the State Forests. The annex in question was prepared by the State Forests, namely by the Bureau for Forest Management and Geodesy, while the Minister of the Environment decided to sign it. Actions were taken on the basis of the provisions of the Forest Act [Act on Forests, 1991] and implementing regulations, and, in particular, on the basis of Article 10(1)(1) of the Forest Act, which indicates that "in the event of the occurrence of harmful organisms to the extent that the sustainability of the forests is threatened, the forest district manager (…) shall carry out eradication and protection measures", and according to paragraph 3 of that article, "in the event of the need to carry out eradication and protection measures on the area of two or more forest districts, the implementation of the measures referred to in paragraph 1(1) shall be ordered by the director of the regional directorate of the State Forests" [Act on Forests, 1991: Article 10]. The Polish authorities, in approving the annex to the forest management plan for the Białowieża Forest District, were therefore convinced that they were acting in the public interest and in a lawful manner.

The Ministry of the Environment and the State Forests indicated as reasons for taking such action mainly the huge gradation of the print bark beetle (Ips typographus), which, in their view, led to the mass death of spruce trees and posed a threat to the sustainability of the forest ecosystem. These institutions indicated that failure to intervene could lead to irreversible degradation of forest habitats and to a decline in biodiversity. Therefore, the Polish authorities promoted the model of "active nature conservation" as a form of nature management, i.e. a form

that allows actions such as removing dead trees or carrying out sanitary pruning. Another very important argument raised to justify the need to cut down trees in the Bialowieza Forest was the preservation of public safety. The Ministry of the Environment and the State Forests pointed out that the mass die-off of spruce trees caused by the bark beetle infestation leads to numerous dead and weakened trees, which can fall over onto forest roads, hiking trails and areas used by the local community. In this context, it was stressed that maintaining the safety of forest users, including tourists and forest workers, is an obligation of the land manager under national law, in particular the Civil Code [Civil Code, 1964:] and the Forest Act [Act on Forests, 1991]. In addition, it was pointed out that leaving dead trees on a large scale risks not only collapsing stands, but also blocking fire roads and posing a threat to emergency services and possible firefighting operations. In the view of the Ministry of the Environment, these actions were "to protect human life and health" and, therefore, in accordance with Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive [Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora, 1992] – did not require a prior environmental impact assessment as long as they were proportionate and justified. The Polish authorities also emphasised that restricting access to the Forest or closing off whole sections of it was not possible due to its social importance and its status as a recreational and tourist area. In their view, the rational removal of endangered trees was intended to serve both nature conservation and human protection [Reasoned Opinion addressed to the Republic of Poland – Infringement, No. 2016/2072, 2016: 6].

5.2. The position of non-governmental organisations

The problem occurring in the Białowieża Primeval Forest and the decisions taken on this issue have been recognised by NGOs such as, for example, the Greenpeace Polska Foundation, WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature), Dzika Polska Foundation, Strefa Zieleni Foundation, Greenmind, Klub Przyrodników, Pracownia na rzecz Wszystkich Istot, Polskie Towarzystwo Ochrony Przyrody "Salamandra" and Stowarzyszenie dla Natury "Wilk". Their position was strongly opposed to the increased felling of trees, and as a result, the decision by the Polish authorities to allow this was severely criticised by environmental organisations. They considered it incompatible with the opinions of the key scientific bodies in Poland, as well as a violation of Poland's international obligations, and advocated the preservation of the Forest as a natural forest [Wesolowski et al., 2016: 85]. They argued that

felling trees as a means of controlling the bark beetle is not a good solution. They pointed out that cutting down diseased trees could only be effective if the majority (at least 80%) of the spruce trees infested by the bark beetle could be removed from the entire forest complex in a short period of time, which is impossible in a place such as the Białowieża Forest, which includes extensive reserves and a national park. Therefore, invoking the need to "fight the bark beetle" to justify logging has no scientific justification, according to them. Furthermore, the NGOs argued that the Bialowieza Forest was naturally created and should remain so. In their view, the problem is not the extinction of the forest, but the interference with its natural processes. According to NGOs, dead spruce trees attacked by the bark beetle have an important role in the forest – as they decompose they enrich the soil and provide shelter for many animal species. Cutting down and removing these trees does not help but actually harms the ecosystem and leads to its depletion. Without human interference, new trees will grow on their own in place of the dead ones, and the Bialowieza Forest will only survive and retain all its values if it is allowed to function in accordance with natural processes [Wesolowski et al., 2016: 88–92].

In order to save the Białowieża Forest, seven NGOs (ClientEarth, Greenpeace Polska, Dzika Polska, WWF Polska, Greenmind, Ogólnopolskie Towarzystwo Ochrony Ptaków and Pracownia na rzecz Wszystkich Istot) filed a complaint with the European Commission reporting a breach of EU law by the decision to approve an annex to the forest management plan for the Białowieża Forest District. In this complaint, they pointed out, among other things, that the increased felling of trees does not protect the Forest and is ineffective in combating the bark beetle, which is a natural part of the Forest's ecosystem. In addition, they stressed that there had been no proper assessment, as required by European Union law, of the impact of the signed annex on protected habitats and species, that the annex was in breach of EU directives and that, under national law, there were no legal remedies which could change the decision taken by the Polish authorities [www 1].

In addition, NGOs carried out various educational activities, protests and information campaigns to raise public awareness of the natural values of the Bialowieza Forest and of the dangers of mass logging. They created petitions in defence of the Bialowieza Forest, which gathered very large numbers of signatures and publicised the issue not only in Poland, but also internationally. They created reports that were submitted to the European Commission. On a social initiative, a "Camp for the Forest" was set up in which activists, scientists and volunteers conducted field patrols where they documented logging in the Forest, including

the felling of trees in Natura 2000 protection zones and UNESCO areas. The camp also organised logging blockades, such as chaining themselves to equipment and machinery to prevent further work. It also conducted educational activities, workshops and media campaigns to inform the public about the effects of logging on biodiversity and the integrity of forest ecosystems [www 2; www 3].

The efforts of non-governmental and civil society organisations have led to the widespread public support for the protection of the Forest, and have also attracted the attention of the European Commission, which, on the basis of the received information, has initiated proceedings against the Republic of Poland under Article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2016: Article 258]. Information provided by NGOs about the progressive logging and its irreversible effects on the Forest led the Court of Justice of the European Union to issue proceedings on 20 November 2017 for an interim measure – an order to immediately halt forestry work in the Forest [Order of the Court of Justice of the European Union of 20 November 2017 in case C-441/17 R], and on 17 April 2018, a judgment was handed down in this case stating that Poland's actions were incompatible with the European Union law [Judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union of 17 April 2018 in case C-441/17].

6. Conclusions

The approach to the problem of protecting the Bialowieza Forest by NGOs and by the state authorities represented by the Ministry of the Environment and the State Forests is quite different. NGOs are in favour of minimal human interference and advocate leaving nature alone, even if this means natural transformations resulting in the disappearance of some habitats and species. State authorities, on the other hand, recognise that without human support, complex ecological processes could be disrupted, resulting in a decline in biodiversity and degradation of this unique ecosystem [Jalinik, 2024: 5–6]. On the surface, it might seem that nothing can be done about the decision taken by the state authorities to approve an annex to the forest management plan for the Białowieża Forest District, but the example of this situation shows how powerful NGOs are.

The carried out analysis showed that although environmental protection is today one of the key responsibilities of public authorities [Kiedrzynek, 2017: 105], NGOs play an important and influential role in this field.

The case study of the dispute over the Białowieża Forest showed that the activities of NGOs are not limited to educational or informational activities, but also enable them to have a real impact on the decisions of those in power. Although the approach to the problem of protection of the Białowieża Forest by NGOs and the state authorities represented by the Ministry of the Environment and the State Forests was quite different. NGOs were in favour of minimal human interference and advocated leaving nature alone, even if this meant natural transformations resulting in the disappearance of some habitats and species. State authorities, on the other hand, recognised that without human support, complex ecological processes could be disrupted, which could result in a decline in biodiversity and in degradation of this unique ecosystem [Jalinik, 2024: 5–6]. Although the decision approving the annex to the forest management plan for the Białowieża Forest District had already been made – and it might have seemed that it could no longer be changed – this situation demonstrates the tremendous power of non-governmental organisations. Due to their involvement, it was possible not only to draw public attention to the illegal logging, but also to actively participate in the proceedings before the Court of Justice of the European Union by initiating the case and providing information and evidence crucial to the matter. This contributed to the Court of Justice of the European Union issuing a judgment confirming that Poland had violated EU law. The actions of non-governmental organisations led to the suspension of the destructive practices taking place in the Białowieża Forest and drew public attention to the need to preserve it as one of Europe's most valuable natural areas.

This case highlights that contemporary challenges related to the natural environment are not the exclusive domain of state institutions but require the active involvement of various non-governmental organisations. The example of the Białowieża Forest demonstrates that these organisations, through their impact on environmental protection, can act as guardians of the public interest, and that their actions have a real influence on the shape of a country's environmental policy and on socially important issues. Moreover, this case shows that a strong civil society, represented by non-governmental organisations, is an essential element of the environmental protection system, and that the role of these organisations in enforcing regulations and shaping environmental policy should be strengthened both in national and European law.

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BARRIERS TO OBTAINING PUBLIC GRANTS BY NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN POLAND AND LITHUANIA

Abstract

- *Goal* – The objective of this publication is to analyse the barriers faced by non-governmental organisations in Poland and Lithuania in the process of applying for public grants. The study focuses on identifying factors that hinder the application for public funds.
- *Research methodology* – A comparative approach was used, including an analysis of national legislation, a review of literature, and empirical and statistical data on the functioning of the NGO sector in both countries. Particular attention was paid to the analysis of institutional, procedural, and competence barriers to access to funding.
- *Score/results* – The study showed that NGOs in Poland and Lithuania face similar difficulties in accessing public funds. The most important barriers include: lack of stable funding, lack of competence in applying for funds, complexity of grant procedures, and limited access to free educational support. These problems result in limited effectiveness and sustainability of social activities undertaken by NGOs.
- *Originality/value* – The publication adds value by comparing two national systems and identifying common challenges faced by NGOs in the context of public funding. The conclusions can serve as a basis for formulating policy and institutional recommendations aimed at increasing the availability of public funds and strengthening the potential of non-governmental organisations in Poland and Lithuania.

Keywords: non-governmental organisation, foundation, association, public funds, public institution, charitable and support foundation, grants, barriers

1. Introduction

In Poland and Lithuania, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector has been developing dynamically since the 1990s [Žuromskaitė, Zakrzewska, 2015: 303, 308–309]. Despite the growing importance of its role in both countries, its entities still face difficulties in obtaining funds to carry out their activities. External financing, including public grants, is the primary source of income for many of them and enables them to achieve their statutory objectives. However, the process of applying for these funds and their subsequent use is associated with barriers that significantly limit the potential of NGOs, negatively affecting their stability and ability to operate effectively. The aim of this article is to identify the barriers faced by NGOs in Poland and Lithuania in the process of obtaining grants from public funds and to determine their impact on the ability to achieve their objectives. The authors hypothesise that NGOs in Poland and Lithuania encounter similar difficulties in accessing public funds, which negatively affects the effectiveness and sustainability of their social activities.

2. Organisational forms and legal conditions for NGO activities in Poland and Lithuania

In the Polish legal system, the definition of a non-governmental organisation is set out in Article 2 of the Act of April 24, 2003, on public benefit activities and volunteering. According to this definition, an NGO is an entity that does not belong to the public finance sector (in accordance with the Public Finance Act) and it does not operate for profit. This definition covers both legal persons (e.g., foundations and associations) and organisational units without legal personality that have been granted legal capacity under separate acts [Dąbrowska, 2019: 98].

NGOs in Poland are distinguished by their formal status, voluntary establishment and operation, independence from state and economic structures, focus on achieving social goals, and voluntary nature [Wojtowicz-Dawid, 2011: 337]. Their activities are neither political nor commercial, and their main motivation is to work for the common good. Although they do not seek to exercise public authority, they may cooperate with public administration in the implementation of public policies, guided by the principles of solidarity, self-help, and civic responsibility [Swora, 2000: 457–458].

According to Article 2 of the Act of April 7, 1989, on Associations, an association is a voluntary, self-governing, and permanent form of association of persons, the essential feature of which is that it acts for non-profit purposes. The basis for its functioning is autonomy in setting goals, developing action programs, shaping its internal organisational structure, and adopting internal acts concerning its activities. Associations undertake activities mainly based on the social activity of their members, but in order to ensure the efficient conduct of their affairs, they may also employ staff from among their own members. Associations are divided into two basic forms: registered associations and ordinary associations [Hejbudzki, 2015: 5].

A foundation is based on assets donated by a founder for the pursuit of socially or economically useful goals. Although The Act of April 6, 1984, on foundations does not contain a legal definition of a foundation, it is assumed that its essential elements are: the existence of legal personality, the existence of assets strictly related to the designated purpose, a public benefit purpose, and permanence in the pursuit of its objectives [Cioch, 1995: 22].

Both foundations and associations may employ staff, cooperate with volunteers, and apply for public funds, including grants. Organisations with public benefit status are additionally entitled to receive 1.5% of personal income tax. However, the two forms differ in their organisational structure, sources of funding, objectives, and manner of establishment, which affects their practical functioning and ability to implement public projects (see Table 1).

According to Article 2(3) of the Lithuanian Law on the Development of Non-Governmental Organisations of 2013, an NGO is a public law entity, established on a voluntary basis, independent of the management of state or municipal institutions or bodies, acting for the benefit of society or a group thereof, whose purpose is not to seek political power or pursue exclusively religious objectives. NGOs in Lithuania are entities that do not engage in profit-making activities or pursue the private interests of individuals or groups. Their functioning is based on acting for the common good or for specific communities [Žuromskaitė, Zakrzewska, 2015: 304]. These organisations are also eligible for annual financial support in the form of a 1.2% deduction from personal income tax [Valstybinė Mokesčių Inspekcija, 1.07.2025]. There are three basic forms of NGOs in the Lithuanian legal system, differentiated according to their organisational basis. These are: associations (Lithuanian: Asociacija), public institutions (Lithuanian: Viešoji įstaiga) and charitable and support foundations (Lithuanian: *Labdaros ir paramos fondas)*. Under the Lithuanian law, religious communities and associations are not recognized as NGOs if they operate exclusively in the religious sphere [Žuromskaitė, Zakrzewska, 2015: 304] (See Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of NGO organisational forms in Poland and Lithuania according to the selected criteria

Country	POLAND			LITHUANIA		
Criterion	Ordinary association	Registered association	Foundation	Association	Public institution (PSU)	Charitable and support foundation (LPF)
Legal basis	Act of 7 April 1989 – Law on Associations	Act of 7.4.1989 – Law on Associations	Act of 6.4.1984 on foundations	Act on Associations of January 22, 2004	Act on Public Institutions of July 3, 1996	Act on Charitable and Supportive Foundations of 14 March 1996
Number of founders	Minimum 3 natural persons	Minimum 7 natural persons	Minimum 1 natural or legal person	Minimum 3 natural or legal persons	1 or more natural/legal persons	Minimum 1 natural or legal person
Method of establishment	Drawing up of regulations, notification to the district administrator, appointment of a representative or management board	Founding meeting, adoption of statutes, election of bodies, notification to the National Court Register	Declaration of intent by the founder, drafting of statutes, notification to the National Court Register	Founding meeting, statutes, minutes, agreement, registration, address of the registered office	Statutes, agreement/ founding decision, registered office address, minutes (if there are multiple founders), registration, registered office address	Statutes, foundation agreement, compliance with the classification of objectives, registration, registered office address
Registration	Register of ordinary associations kept by the district administrator	Entry in the National Court Register	Entry in the National Court Register	Entry in the Register of Legal Entities	Entry in the Register of Legal Entities	Entry in the Register of Legal Entities
Basis for operation	Regulations	Statute	Statutes and foundation deed – a notarised declaration of intent by the founder, specifying the purpose of the foundation and the assets allocated for its implementation.	Statute	Statute, agreement or founding decision	Statutes, foundation agreement

Country	POLAND			LITHUANIA		
Criterion	Ordinary association	Registered association	Foundation	Association	Public institution (PSU)	Charitable and support foundation (LPF)
Bodies	One representative or management board – optional	Management board, general meeting, supervisory body, e.g. audit committee	Management board, supervisory body – optional, e.g. foundation council	General meeting of members, executive body, e.g. director	Shareholders' meeting, management body, e.g. director, optional board	Shareholders' meeting, management body, e.g. director, optional board
Legal personality	None	It has been entered in the National Court Register	Has after entry in the National Court Register	Has after entry in the Register of Legal Entities	Has after entry in the Register of Legal Entities	Possesses after entry in the Register of Legal Entities
Legal capacity	Limited	Full after obtaining legal personality	Full after obtaining legal personality	Full after obtaining legal personality	Full after obtaining legal personality	Full after obtaining legal personality
Initial assets	Not required	Not required	Required to be provided by the founder. Without economic activity – any amount With economic activity – min. PLN 1 000	Not required	Not required	Contribution of assets or services required
Membership fees	Yes	Yes	No	Optional	Not applicable – organisation not based on membership	Not applicable – non-membership-based organisation
Conducting business activity	Not permitted	Permitted, profits allocated to statutory purposes	Permitted, with profits allocated to statutory purposes	Permitted, if consistent with statutory purposes	Permitted, profits allocated to statutory purposes	Permitted, profit allocated to statutory purposes
Employment of employees and volunteers	Limited	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: the authors' own work.Financial situation of NGOs in Poland and Lithuania.

A Lithuanian association is a public legal entity with limited civil liability, having its own name and established for the purpose of coordinating the activities of its members, representing and protecting their interests, or satisfying other public interests. [Art. 2(1), Lietuvos Respublikos Asociacijų Įstatymas, 2004]. A public institution, on the other hand, is a special type of legal entity of a public-law nature, operating on a non-profit basis, with limited civil liability. Its main purpose is to satisfy the public interest by providing public services or conducting other activities that bring social benefits. This institution has civil law capacity, which means that it may acquire rights and incur obligations, but only through its governing bodies. The scope of its activities must be consistent with the provisions of its statutes and the objectives set out in its founding documents [Art. 2, Art. 3, Lietuvos Respublikos Viešųjų Istaigų Įstatymas, 1996].

A charitable and support foundation is a legal entity under public law with limited civil liability, the activities of which are based on the principles of selflessness and public benefit. It has its own name and separate property, which it may freely manage, use, and dispose of in accordance with the objectives set out in the relevant legal acts. Its main purpose is to provide charitable assistance and support to both natural and legal persons, as well as other types of assistance in cases provided for by law. The scope of this activity covers many socially important areas, including, among others: science and education, culture and art, religion, sport, health care and social welfare, environmental protection, and other socially useful areas [Art. 2 Lietuvos Respublikos Labdaros ir Paramos Fondų Istatymas, 1996]

The NGO sector in Poland is characterised by a large number of formally registered entities, but its actual scale is much smaller. According to data from the REGON and KRS registers, in December 2024 there were approximately 161 000 registered NGOs, including 117 000 associations and 44 000 foundations, but only about 50% of them are actually active. The key barrier to the effective functioning of NGOs remains the issue of financing. As many as 72% of organisations report difficulties in obtaining funds to carry out their statutory activities. In 2023, approximately 27% of organisations had an annual budget of less than €2 500 000. The average annual budget of an NGO in Poland is €12 500, and 65% of organisations have no financial reserves [Charycka, Bednarek, Belina, Gumkowska, 2025: 73–86]. This state of affairs not only limits the development potential of many organisations, but also hinders their professionalisation, stable functioning, recruitment of staff, and effective application for larger public grants. As a result, a significant part of the civil sector operates in conditions of chronic

underfunding, which negatively affects its ability to achieve long-term social goals and exert systemic influence on public policy.

Although most NGOs in Poland still base their budgets on a few main sources of income, with public funds playing a dominant role, we can observe a gradual change in the sector's financing structure. In 2023, 55% of organisations declared that they used local government grants, 24% used government and central administration funds, and only 13% used European Union funds. Importantly, the share of these sources in the total budget of the sector was 23%, 13%, and 7%, respectively. Although public money remains the main source of NGO funding, its relative share in the budgets of organisations is steadily declining. Compared to 2014–2020, when public funds accounted for more than half of the sector's budget, their share fell by nearly 10% in 2023 [Charycka, Bednarek, Belina, Gumkowska, 2025: 79]. In Lithuania, the NGO sector shows a relatively high level of activity and transparency. According to data, at the end of 2024, there were 6 759 NGOs registered in the Lithuanian Register Center. Of these, as many as 6 619 submitted the required financial and operational reports for 2023, which means that approximately 98% of them remain active. Only 197 organisations, or less than 3%, failed to comply with their reporting obligations [Nacionalinė NVO Koalicija 2024, 1.07.2025]. Lithuanian NGOs also face challenges in terms of financial stability. According to the Ministry of Social Security and Labor of the Republic of Lithuania, most NGOs do not have sufficient financial resources that could be used to strengthen their institutional capacity. Limited resources not only hamper the day-to-day functioning of organisations, but also significantly complicate medium- and long-term development planning [Kurk Lietuvai, 1.07.2025].

In the 2024 Sustainable Governance Indicators report, experts emphasise that financing remains one of the biggest problems limiting the sustainability of the NGO sector. The lack of systemic, long-term financial support continues to be a barrier to the professionalisation and stabilisation of many NGO activities [Vilpišauskas, Kalanta, Auers, 2024: 15–16]. Unfortunately, neither national nor international sources provide comprehensive data on the full structure of NGO funding sources in Lithuania and the share of different forms of income in NGO budgets. However, according to an analysis presented by Brigita Žuromskaitė and Małgorzata Zakrzewska in 2015, the main sources of NGO income remain EU funds, sponsors' grants, and tax deductions made by citizens. Some organisations, especially those of a charitable nature, also finance their activities through social campaigns and public collections [Žuromskaitė, Zakrzewska, 2015: 307]. The financing system for the Lithuanian NGOs was supported by the establishment of

the Non-Governmental Organisations Fund on March 1, 2020, introduced together with the new version of the Law on the Development of Non-Governmental Organisations. Its aim is to strengthen the institutional capacity of NGOs, invest in the development of the sector, and support the sustainable functioning of reliable partners of the state. The Fund's resources are allocated on a competitive basis, including for strengthening the potential of organisations and implementing statutory activities. The Fund thus acts as a national mechanism for financing civil society. In practice, however, public support for NGOs remains scattered and insufficient – the Fund's annual budget was planned at a maximum of €2 million, while the real needs are estimated at around €19 million, which would provide adequate support for nearly 700 organisations [Creation of NGO Fund, 1.07.2025].

3. Barriers to NGOs applying for public grants

Polish and Lithuanian NGOs encounter barriers when applying for grants from the EU, national, and local government funds. These limitations significantly weaken their ability to effectively apply for funding and compete with other applicants.

The shortage of qualified staff with the skills to effectively obtain grants is one of the key difficulties that is becoming increasingly apparent. An analysis of job offers in NGOs in Poland indicates that the most sought-after skills are: the ability to write grant applications, raise funds, and coordinate projects, which have been the most pressing issue for non-governmental organisations for at least a decade [Nyziak, Wiśliński, 2021: 7, 10, 14]. NGOs do not have the financial resources to develop the skills of their members, and the grant competitions aimed at strengthening human resources are few and far between and require skills to obtain. Data indicate that 38% of NGOs still do not take any measures to improve the skills of their members and employees, e.g. through training, courses or conferences [Charycka, Bednarek, Belina, Gumkowska, 2025: 71, 116–117].

Similar problems affect Lithuanian NGOs. Despite gradual improvements in the sector, as noted in the Civil Society Sustainability Index, organisations continue to face staffing and institutional constraints. The lack of professional staff remains a key problem, as their role is becoming increasingly important in the face of growing social expectations and donor requirements [Kurk Lietuvai, 1.07.2025]. As many as 79% of NGOs do not have staff dedicated to fundraising, which translates into limited effectiveness in applying for grants [Aukok, 4.07.2025]. The lack of practical knowledge in project implementation also remains a challenge

[Žuromskaitė, Zakrzewska, 2015: 307]. At the same time, the availability of financial resources to strengthen the institutional capacity of NGOs remains limited, which prevents the building of competent teams and investment in their professional development [Kurk Lietuvai, 1.07.2025].

This barrier is compounded by insufficient free support for NGOs in the areas of training, advice, and consultation [Centrum Obywatelskie, 2021: 19]. In a study conducted by KraFOS, as many as 71.8% of the NGOs in Małopolska declared training as one of the most important forms of support. Among the indicated thematic areas, issues related to fundraising and project management dominated. As many as 79.5% of the respondents expressed a desire to improve their skills in writing applications and fundraising [Training for non-governmental organisations, 6.07.2025]. It turns out that local NGOs need real help in raising funds for public tasks from various sources, not only from the local government grants but also from EU funds and private funds [Centrum Obywatelskie, 2021: 26]. In Poland, access to this type of training is uneven and largely dependent on the local potential of the civil sector and the activity of regional support centers. Although there are public and non-public educational initiatives, there is no coherent, nationwide education system in this area [OWOP, 6.07.2025]. The available training is often ad hoc, short-term, and limited in scope, and therefore, it does not meet the long-term needs of organisations, especially those operating outside large urban centers. The problem is not a complete lack of educational opportunities, but their limited reach, low visibility, and insufficient promotion. What is more, many training courses are limited to presenting the rules of a specific grant competition, without teaching participants a comprehensive approach to designing activities or writing applications from scratch. Commercial training courses are sometimes an alternative, but their cost is an insurmountable barrier. As a result, a kind of systemic paradox arises: competitions are announced, including so-called microgrants, which aim to build or develop the institutional capacity of NGOs, including in the area of project preparation and applying for public funds, but at the same time, in order to apply for these funds, organisations must already have a certain level of project design competence to meet the requirements of grantors.

In Lithuania, the local NGOs in particular face significant difficulties in accessing free and systematic educational support in the areas of grant writing, fundraising, and project management. Although initiatives such as *the NGO Leaders Academy* and *Fundraising.lt* exist, their reach is limited and participation is only possible for a selected number of organisations [*Open Lithuania Foundation,*

8.07.2025]. There is no nationwide, coherent training system, which means that many NGOs do not have access to long-term development support [EEA Grants Lithuania, 8.07.2025]. The organisations that need help the most are unable to apply for funding effectively because they lack the necessary skills. Commercial training that could fill this gap is too expensive. Reports on the use of the NGO Fund's institutional capacity-building grant show a high demand for this type of support. In 2023, EUR 2.57 million (97%) of the planned amount of EUR 2.655 million was used, and in 2024, EUR 2.617 million of the planned EUR 2.9 million [Nevyriausybinių Organizacijų Fondo, 2023: 6; Nevyriausybinių Organizacijų Fondo, 2024: 3].

A study on the needs, barriers, and expectations of Krakow-based NGOs shows that one of the most frequently mentioned problems regards "the extensive formal requirements for applying for funding in competitions" [Centrum Obywatelskie, 2021: 16]. This phenomenon is part of a broader picture of the systemic complexity of grant procedures, which is a significant factor discouraging many organisations, especially smaller and less experienced ones, from attempting to apply for public funds [Identification of support directions: 2023: 82]. As Magda Krasowska-Igras notes: "procedures in grant competitions vary depending on the whims and, above all, the individual bureaucracy of a given institution." The specific formal obstacles include: overly bureaucratic procedures – each institution announcing competitions applies its own, often complex and inconsistent rules; unfriendly application generators – the systems are perceived as complicated, unintuitive, and discouraging; unclear and difficult to interpret rules and regulations; imprecise descriptions of competition objectives and unclear evaluation criteria result in uncertainty as for the grantor's expectations – and extensive application forms, which require a lot of work and time, disproportionate to the available resources or chances of success [Krasowska-Igras, 4.07.2025]. In Lithuania, it is also noted that bureaucratic barriers make cooperation between NGOs and state or local government institutions difficult [Vorevičienė, Butkevičienė, 2017: 1–17].

In Poland and Lithuania, most NGOs do not have funds for their day-to-day operations, let alone financial reserves. This is a serious barrier to applying for grants, as one of the key requirements of competitions is often the obligation to make a financial contribution to the project. This requirement is intended to demonstrate the organisation's commitment and increase the likelihood of successful project implementation. In practice, it takes the form of a specific percentage of the project value, which must come from the organisation's own resources and is not refundable. In the case of EU-funded grants, the own contribution in Poland

usually ranges from 2 to 20% of the project value, in Lithuania from 5–15%, while in national competitions it is most often between 5 and 15% [the own contribution to an EU project, 9.07.2025]. The own contribution requirement is a condition which, if not met, disqualifies the organisation and excludes it from access to the public funds [EU funds for all organisations, 9.07.2025]. In the literature on NGOs in Lithuania, it is difficult to find scientific studies that directly analyse their problems in applying for EU funds. An analysis of the available sources identified only one master's thesis devoted to this issue. Its conclusions indicate that NGOs find it difficult to compete with the public and private sectors for support from the EU structural funds. The main barriers are limited financial resources, small staff numbers, and limited material infrastructure. The results of the study showed that organisations that operate on a larger scale, covering several regions, have an extensive network of contacts and connections, and employ active, proactive, and competent staff to have a better chance of obtaining support. The collected data indicate that the problem of co-financing affects everyone. When selecting programs financed from the EU structural funds, NGOs prefer projects that are 100% financed by the EU funds, but such projects are small in scale or very rare. As a result, when applying for structural funds, organisations are forced to seek additional funds for their own contribution. Respondents indicated funds from other projects, sponsors, partners, local governments, and their own social initiatives as the main sources of financing. These results confirm that the effective implementation of NGO objectives requires additional financial resources. Importantly, at the project preparation stage, limitations in human and financial resources result in a low percentage of successful applications, and sometimes in complete failure. This sometimes leads to often unjustified disappointment among organisation members with the work of the project evaluation committees [Savukynienė, 2015].

One solution to this problem could be to take out a bank loan to cover the own contribution. In practice, however, NGOs face further constraints here, as financial institutions often perceive them as entities with low creditworthiness, which makes it difficult or even impossible to obtain a loan. Even if a loan is obtained, the costs associated with its servicing are not considered eligible under the project budget. Another barrier is the non-recognition of in-kind contributions and volunteer work as an equivalent to own contribution. In both countries, the recognition of non-financial contributions remains limited, which effectively narrows the application possibilities of organisations that do not have sufficient financial resources but do have human or material resources (equipment, premises).

NGOs also have to deal with project cost reductions by evaluation committees. In Poland, there are known cases where project budgets have been cut by up to half. This practice can lead to serious difficulties in implementing planned activities, especially when the cuts affect costs that are crucial to the success of the project. Although in both countries the procedures allow for the possibility of negotiating the terms of funding or partial consultation with the applicant, in practice organisations are rarely able to negotiate terms favorable enough to save the full scope of activities; more often than not, the choice is between implementing the project in a reduced form or abandoning it altogether.

4. Conclusions

A comparative analysis of the legal systems regulating the activities of the third sector in Poland and Lithuania has revealed significant similarities in the basic principles of their functioning. In both countries, organisations are characterised by independence, non-commercial nature of their activities, voluntary association, and focus on the common good. Despite these similarities, there are noticeable differences in organisational forms, registration procedures, initial capital requirements, and internal structures, which affect the operational capacity of NGOs.

In both countries, the financial situation of NGOs remains a problem. The vast majority of the third sector entities do not have sufficient financial resources for their day-to-day operations, let alone for investments in institutional development. Organisations often lack financial reserves, which makes it difficult for them to plan long-term activities and limits their ability to apply for public funds, especially whene own contribution is required. This requirement, common in both Poland and Lithuania, often constitutes an insurmountable barrier, especially for smaller and local organisations.

Although public funds, both national and EU, remain one of the main sources of financing for NGOs in both countries, their availability is limited due to a number of barriers. The most frequently mentioned include: complex and non-transparent competition procedures, lack of professional staff involved in fundraising, low availability of free and long-term training, and insufficient institutional support. NGOs also face the problem of project budget cuts by grantors, which often prevents projects from being implemented as planned.

The analysis clearly confirms the research hypothesis adopted by the authors of the publication. Non-governmental organisations in Poland and Lithuania face similar difficulties in accessing public funds, which negatively affects their effectiveness, sustainability, and ability to exert systemic influence on public policies. The lack of adequate support, procedural difficulties, and limited internal resources mean that the potential of the NGO sector in both countries is not fully exploited.

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TRAUMA: THE DEPORTATIONS OF THE CRIMEAN TATARS IN 1944 IN THE LIGHT OF TESTIMONIES, MEMOIRS, AND DOCUMENTS

| Abstract

Goal – The purpose of this article is to present the traumatic experiences of the Crimean Tatars resulting from the mass deportation of 1944 and the living conditions of this community in exile, primarily in Central Asia. Drawing on eyewitness' accounts, memoirs, and documents, the authors reconstruct not only the course of the deportation itself but also the everyday realities of life in exile, the forms of adaptation to extreme living conditions, and the strategies employed to preserve the national identity. The article seeks to highlight the long-term consequences of the political, social, and cultural repressions suffered by the Crimean Tatars in the 20th century, and to indicate their impact on the contemporary identity processes, collective memory, and inter-ethnic relations within the territory of the former USSR.

Research methodology – The article employs a qualitative research approach aimed at presenting the experiences of the Crimean Tatars deported in 1944 and their lives both in exile and after returning to Crimea. The primary method was the analysis of autobiographical sources – including memoirs and oral and written testimonies – treated as carriers of individual and collective memory. The research also utilised content analysis of historical documents, including NKVD orders, resolutions of Soviet state bodies, and official statistics related to deportations and mortality. Comparing documentary data with memoir materials made it possible to capture the dissonance between the official narrative and individual experiences. Elements of the oral history method were also

applied, enabling an understanding of the emotional dimension of trauma as well as the mechanisms of cultural memory and intergenerational transmission. These methods were complemented by an interdisciplinary perspective, encompassing historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches, which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the deportation experience and life in exile.

Score/results – The analysis of the source material – including eyewitness accounts, memoirs, and historical documents – allows for the formulation of several significant conclusions regarding the consequences of the 1944 deportation of the Crimean Tatars and the conditions of their lives in exile and after repatriation.

Firstly, the deportation constituted a form of systemic state violence aimed at the permanent removal of the Tatars from their ancestral territory and at the severing of their cultural and social ties with Crimea. The repressions carried out against this ethnic group were part of a broader Soviet model of managing "politically uncertain elements" and exemplified an internal colonial policy.

Secondly, the research findings reveal the long-term effects of exclusion and stigmatisation. The deported Tatars were deprived of the fundamental civil rights, branded as a "nation of traitors", and their children – seen as members of a group tainted by the stigma of betrayal – experienced discrimination in schools and educational institutions. The traumatic experiences of childhood proved particularly enduring, leaving a deep imprint on the identities of the entire generations.

Thirdly, the analysis of personal testimonies showed that, despite extremely harsh living conditions, the Crimean Tatars demonstrated strong survival mechanisms: mutual assistance, cultural resistance, intergenerational transmission, and the preservation of the memory of their homeland. These elements were crucial for maintaining their national identity and for their later efforts to return to Crimea.

Fourthly, the returns after 1989 revealed a new phase of exclusion – this time in their native land. Hostility from the local communities, administrative obstacles, and economic barriers demonstrated that repatriation did not mean the end of trauma but rather transformed it into a new form of marginalisation.

Ultimately, the research results indicate that the experience of the Crimean Tatars' deportation should be analysed not only as a historical event but as an ongoing process shaping collective memory, social relations, and identity politics. The article confirms that deportation trauma is transgenerational and that the struggle of the Crimean Tatars for recognition and agency continues – both symbolically and practically.

Originality/value – The originality of this study lies in its combination of documentary source analysis with an extensive body of autobiographical and testimonial material, presenting the deportation of the Crimean Tatars from the perspective of witnesses and their descendants. A unique aspect of the research regards the inclusion of the voices of the deported individuals in the context of their lives in exile and during repatriation – taking into account local social relations, discrimination, interethnic conflicts, and efforts to rebuild the community. The study employs the oral history method, which makes it

possible to reveal the personal and emotional dimensions of the forced displacement, often overlooked in the traditional historical approaches.

Another innovative element is the framing of deportation as a colonial process and a tool of spatial and demographic control, rather than merely as an episode of the repressive policies of the USSR. Juxtaposing these themes within the context of research on identity, memory, and long-term ethnic exclusion situates the article within the current interdisciplinary discourse that encompasses history, anthropology, sociology, and trauma studies.

The research also has a practical value: it may be applied in reflections on memory politics, the integration of national minorities, and the analysis of survival mechanisms within marginalised and forcibly displaced communities.

Keywords: Crimean Tatars, national and ethnic minorities, deportations 1944, testimonies, documents

1. The Tatars in Crimea

The Tatars appeared in Crimea as a community as early as the 7th century, but the peninsula became the center of Tatar life within the Kipchak Empire of the Golden Horde, founded by Jochi [Sejdamet, 1930: 20]. Over the centuries, the number of Tatars in Crimea gradually declined, a trend further reinforced by policies implemented by the occupying powers already in the 19th century. The first census of the Russian Empire, conducted in 1897, reported a total population of 546,592 in Crimea, of which Tatars constituted around 35% [Chazbijewicz, 2001: 11]. The displacement of the indigenous Tatar population from their lands was not solely a result of 20th-century forced resettlements [Voytyuk, 2012: 82]. This process had already begun following the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire in the late 18th century. The process was facilitated by land decrees. According to Sejdamet: “For those Tatars who are not of the nobility, the issue of land ownership does not exist” [Sejdamet, 1930: 68]. This was one of the reasons why Tatar lands passed out of their hands, leading to widespread emigration, most frequently to Turkey. In their place, the Tsarist authorities settled Jews, Bulgarians, Greeks, Czechs, and Estonians in Crimea. The 19th century was, on the one hand, a period of significant fragmentation for the Tatar community, but on the other hand, it was also a time of renewed intellectual activity due to the efforts of Gasprinsky. The period following 1917 was one in which the Tatars hoped to regain their independence, aided in no small part by Tatars from the “Western Country” – the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars [Voytyuk, 2018: 133–184].

The Second World War brought the greatest tragedy for the Tatar nation. In 1944, mass deportations of the Crimean Tatars from their homeland were carried out. It is worth noting that, contrary to long-held assumptions, the reason for these deportations was not the community's alleged collaboration with the Nazi Germany. As Chazbijewicz observes in the context of collaboration with Germany: "According to the account of Idris Asanin, these people [who had returned from exile after the dekulakisation campaign – AK], were not convinced of the benefits of the German occupation, but they believed that under relative calm they could begin working on the development of the Tatar intelligentsia. (…) In these schools, the Tatar national spirit was instilled regardless of the period of the German occupation, which was simply regarded as a change after the Soviet occupation" [Chazbijewicz, 2001: 81].

In this article, we do not intend to deliberate on the issue of collaboration or its absence, but rather to outline the context of the 1944 deportations as seen through the testimonies of those who survived them and to examine how these experiences affected their adult lives and the lives of the third generation.

2. The 1944 deportations

The deportation was prepared by the NKVD in secret Order No. 00419/00137, "On the application of measures to cleanse the Crimean ASSR of anti-Soviet elements". The document, delivered by Beria to Stalin and stipulating the removal of the population of Crimea, was justified by, as it stated, "taking into account their treacherous actions against the Soviet people" and signed on May 11, 1944 [Voytyuk 2018: 190].

The tragedy of the Crimean Tatars unfolded between May 18 and 20, 1944, when, under Lavrentiy Beria's orders, the mass deportation of Crimea's population was carried out. The operation primarily affected women, children, and the elderly, as many men were still serving on the front lines. The Crimean Tatar national movement estimates that approximately 140 000 people died as a result of the military operations, ethnic cleansing, and deportations, while 238 500 were deported from Crimea [Chazbijewicz 2001(b): 100]. Other sources indicate that 180 014 people were deported in 67 transport trains, and after the subsequent "cleansing" actions, the total number reached 191 044 Crimean Tatars [Chazbijewicz 2001(a): 83]. The deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944 to remote regions of the Soviet Union (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan)

was carried out under extremely harsh conditions: overcrowded railcars, with no access to food or water. During transport, around 7 890 people died; in Uzbekistan alone, 10 105 people died between May and November 1944 due to harsh living conditions and a malaria epidemic [Voytyuk 2018: 193].

Deportation meant not only the loss of the homeland but also the necessity of adapting to extremely difficult living conditions. For many deportees, exile was synonymous with hunger. According to the State Defense Committee of the USSR Resolution "On the Crimean Tatars" of May 11, 1944 (No. 5859), "special deportees were allowed to take personal belongings, clothing, utensils, and food in an amount not exceeding 500 kg per family" [Voytyuk 2018: 192].

The testimonies of those who survived the exile are a record of their daily struggle for survival.[1] As our interviewees' recall, the deportation was brutal and devoid of any human solidarity. It also had a lasting impact on the Tatar community. Firstly, it disrupted the cultural and historical continuity of the Tatars, who lost access to their traditions, language, and religion. Secondly, it forced them to live in foreign lands where they lacked full civil rights and where their national identity was systematically suppressed. Yet throughout their years in foreign lands, the longing for their homeland remained: "Grandparents, and later our parents, constantly said that they wanted to live in Crimea. Over time, they only wished to see it one last time before they died and to be buried in Crimea."[2] Preserving identity and memory became essential for the survival. Despite the difficult conditions, the Crimean Tatars nurtured the memory of their homeland. Families passed on stories about life in Crimea, and the older generations ensured the preservation of the language and national traditions. This was a way to maintain identity in a foreign environment: "In the evenings, we would sit in a circle, and my grandmother would tell us about Crimea – the mountains, the sea, and our old life. For me, it was like a fairy tale, but she always said that one day we would return there."[3] Despite the harsh living conditions, the deported Tatars sought to support one another. Informal gatherings were organised where people

[1] The source material consists of testimonies of individuals who survived the deportations. The testimonies are held in the authors' collections. Due to the fact that these individuals currently reside in Poland but intend to return to Crimea, and out of concern for their safety, the authors have decided not to disclose their identities in this text, providing only information about gender and year of birth. All interviews and recollections were collected in Białystok.

[2] The testimony of a man born in 1979 [W1], in the authors' collections.

[3] The testimony of a woman born in 1956 [W2], in the authors' collections.

shared food, clothing, and assistance in difficult times. This solidarity was one of the foundations of survival in the exile. "We had nothing, but our neighbor would always share a piece of bread, even if he had little himself. At such moments, you felt that we were one family" – recalls an interview participant.

The living conditions of the Crimean Tatars in exile exemplified the systemic destruction of a nation. Nevertheless, their determination to preserve their national identity and their persistent desire to return to Crimea became the foundation for the later struggle for the rights and for repatriation. The testimonies of those who lived through these events serve as a reminder of the importance of community and memory during the most difficult moments in history.

3. A new reality in a new, foreign land

One of the major problems was how the new settlers – who had arrived not of their own free will – were perceived: "After arriving in Uzbekistan, my mother was unable to feed us and had to place me and my two sisters in an orphanage. We spent four years there. In the orphanage, we were taught about the Great Patriotic War, about how all the nations fought together and how, thanks to that, we now had a happy childhood. I almost believed it. The greatest blow for me was when I was not admitted into the children's Komsomol organisation (ros. октябрят), which all the children my age were joining at the time. I studied very hard, but later I was also denied entry to the Pioneers. That was when I learned that I was the daughter of traitors to the homeland, and such children were not accepted."[4]

In exile, the Crimean Tatars were perceived by the local population as "traitors to the homeland". This stigma was the result of Soviet propaganda, which portrayed them as collaborators with the Nazi Germany. In schools, Tatar children were often mocked and isolated, while adults were barred from applying for positions that required public trust.

It was not until after 1974 that the Tatars began to receive certain privileges in the USSR, such as the possibility of holding managerial positions or obtaining higher education. However, they were still treated as outsiders, and their full reintegration into social life was impossible. Witness testimonies reveal how complex daily life in the exile was for the Tatars. On the one hand, they had to adapt to new political, social, and economic conditions; on the other hand, they

[4] The testimony of a woman born in 1938 [W3], in the authors' collections.

continued to be treated with suspicion and, at times, outright hostility by the Soviet authorities and the local communities.

The Tatars lived in various Soviet republics, and their experiences were shaped by regional differences. In Uzbekistan, for instance, the phenomenon of Uzbek nationalism became increasingly visible in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, many Tatars began to experience not only marginalisation within the Soviet society but also growing tensions with other ethnic groups living in the same areas. "Our situation in Uzbekistan in 1989 was changing from day to day. The streets were restless and dangerous. The USSR was weakening before our eyes. Communism was collapsing, and nationalism was taking its place. The Soviet authorities allowed the Crimean Tatars to return to Crimea. Our parents and grandparents decided immediately. All minorities were leaving Uzbekistan. Everyone was afraid of the unpredictable Uzbeks – until then calm and hospitable. My grandfather and grandmother were the happiest to leave. They were happier than they were afraid."[5] "Soon after, the Uzbeks began driving everyone out. Firstly, the Meskhetian Turks. They had long been disliked. The Meskhetian Turks were a proud, defiant people, much like the Chechens. There weren't many of them, but they were giving the Uzbeks a hard time – especially in the bazaars, where they had pushed the Uzbeks to the margins while making good money themselves. The final straw was a rumor about the rape of an Uzbek girl. A wave of bloody pogroms broke out in the Ferghana region. The Turkish women who worked with my mother at the main hospital for the entire Sirdaryo Region would not leave the hospital after work. They slept there in fear of armed Uzbeks. In Gulistan, all the Turks lived in one district – the Sixth Quarter. In a single night, they abandoned everything and left. They fled from the Uzbeks. Suddenly, Uzbekistan became dangerous for everyone".[6] Many respondents confirm that life in Uzbekistan became increasingly dangerous, partly because of ordinary neighborhood disputes – often related to trade in the bazaars – and partly because of the growing Uzbek nationalism, which sought national self-determination and was embodied by figures such as Kadyrov [Konopacki, 2024: 85–92]. "Until perestroika, everyone lived in harmony with the Uzbeks. Uzbeks are good people, hospitable. Everything fell apart around 1985. The communist system was visibly weakening, and that was when the Uzbeks wanted to become the masters of

[5] The testimony of a woman born in 1980 [W4], in the authors' collections.
[6] The testimony of a woman born in 1983 [W5], in the authors' collections.

their republic. Nationalisms awoke.”.[7] And yet another example of testimony and recollections: “From 1987 on, street names in Uzbekistan were being changed. All the Uzbeks were seized by nationalism. They would ask: when will you leave for your own country?”.[8]

Such testimonies as those presented here reveal how, as a result of the settlement of the Tatars in Central Asia, various conflicts emerged – both among minority groups themselves and between these minorities and the Uzbek majority – which reached their peak in the 1980s.

Like other nationalities deported to Central Asia, the Tatars were treated as outsiders, even though, over the years, they became an integral part of local communities. Nevertheless, as the witnesses emphasise, life in this region was far from easy: they lacked full civil rights and often faced restrictions on professional opportunities. Testimonies speak of Tatars struggling with overwhelming bureaucracy, xenophobia, and difficulties in accessing education. The yearning for a return to Crimea was deeply felt among the Tatars, not only because of political activists such as Mustafa Dzhemilev, the symbolic figure of the struggle for the Tatars’ return [see: Gołąbek, 2017: 335–348]. “I lived with my parents in Samarkand. My grandfather and grandmother were small children when they were deported from Crimea. For as long as I can remember, there were always conversations at home about returning to Crimea. My grandparents always wanted to go back. They managed to visit a sanatorium in the 1970s with a vzyatka [bribe, in Russian]. In Crimea my grandfather’s cousin lived. His mother was Ukrainian. Her husband had been deported, and she stayed in Crimea with her young son.”[9]

After 1989, when Mikhail Gorbachev announced the possibility of repatriation for the deported peoples, the Crimean Tatars began to return en masse to Crimea, hoping to rebuild their homeland. It seemed that, after 45 years of exile, it would finally be possible to restore the Tatar national identity and that Crimea would once again become a place where the Tatars could reclaim their rightful place in society. However, these returns came with enormous difficulties, and the returning Tatars became the target of hostility from both local Ukrainians and Russians who had settled in Crimea after the deportation of the Tatars. The return of the Tatars was initially to be controlled by the State Commission on the

[7] The testimony of a woman born in 1986 [W6], in the authors’ collections.
[8] The testimony of a man born in 1980 [W7], in the authors’ collections.
[9] The testimony of a man born in 1984 [W8], in the authors’ collections.

Crimean Tatars, established in 1989. The original plan called for the creation of 80 Tatar settlements, to house the incoming population mainly from Uzbekistan [Voytyuk, 2018: 236]. Efforts were also made to avoid forming large settlements composed solely of Tatars. By decision of the Crimean Regional Council, the Tatar community in any one location could not exceed 23–25% of the total population [Voytyuk, 2018: 240]. These measures were aimed at the further disintegration of the community; in this case, the authorities of newly independent Ukraine feared large and strong concentrations of the Tatar population because, at that time, the young Ukrainian nation was struggling for self-preservation and its own identity, a task made difficult by the demographic predominance of Russians (over 67% of Crimea's population in the 1990s). For the Tatars, concentrated settlement was essential for reviving their language and traditions, including religion. It should be noted that Tatars living together were better and quicker at addressing socio-economic challenges.

Testimonies such as those by [W9] and [W3] illustrate how difficult living conditions were after their return. Many Tatar families did not have enough resources to buy houses in Crimea, and the bureaucratic procedures for legalising residence and obtaining registration were exceedingly complex. "With the money from selling our house in Uchqo'rg'on in Uzbekistan, we barely managed to build a 'vremyanka' 5 kilometers from Simferopol. A small house, 5 by 6 meters, as a 'samozakhvat'. I worked at the bazaar and on construction sites. Later we managed to legalize the 'samozakhvat' and built a proper house there. Before 1995, OMON would bulldoze such 'samozakhvats'. No Tatar was accepted into any state job in Crimea. If someone privately hired a Tatar, they risked trouble from the authorities. We cultivated vegetables and fruit and traded at the bazaar, which practically did not exist in Crimea before the return of the Tatars. Before our return, the Simferopol bazaar was an overgrown, weed-covered square, open one day a week, with stray dogs roaming around. We restored its former life. Without a bazaar, there is no city. Trade drives development and creates wealth."[10]

These memories, contained in personal testimonies, point to the discrimination experienced by returning Tatars, both at the administrative and social levels. "The Tatars in Crimea managed to cope. They were used to not getting state jobs. Now, there was hardly any work for anyone.

[10] The testimony of a man born in 1974 [W9], in the authors' collections.

My uncle once found several wild grapevines in an orchard abandoned for 45 years. He dug them up, brought them to his newly purchased plot. He pruned and cared for them, and the vines grew so well that each produced several buckets of grapes. A Soviet person cannot do that. A Russian does nothing – just sits, drinks, and wants to rule everything. The old Tatars used to say: don't plant birch trees in your garden, because a Russian will come and claim it's his. The primitive Russian people, after the deportation, didn't even spare our trees. Fools cut down cypresses, peach trees, and vines because they didn't know how to cultivate them. If they grew anything at all, it was only potatoes, sometimes tomatoes and cucumbers."[11]

Most Crimean Tatars were forced to work in collective farms (*kolkhozes*) or in building industrial infrastructure. Working conditions were extremely harsh – long hours, low wages, and a lack of adequate tools or support from the authorities. Many deportees recounted that for years they lived in extreme poverty. One testimony described children as young as a few years old working in the cotton fields: "My mother told me that I was so small I couldn't even reach the plants, yet they still made me pick cotton."

The lack of food often forced families to limit meals, leading to malnutrition. Adults and children alike suffered from illnesses caused by vitamin deficiencies and inadequate diets.

As [W11] recalls: "The Tatars bought houses without any documents, just based on a written note – an agreement with the current occupant scribbled on a piece of paper. There was an unofficial rule: it was forbidden to sell property to Tatars. We lived without registration until 1985, with no right to work, no electricity. We couldn't even use the piece of land by the house. We kept a garden. Late in the spring, a tractor from the collective farm would arrive, smash the fence, drive through the garden, destroying everything like a tank.".[12]

For many, the return to Crimea turned out to be yet another trauma. Although they realised they were returning to a "different" Crimea, the reception from some of the new inhabitants was a painful experience. "The local population was hostile towards us. They treated us nastily and constantly humiliated us. They would ask: why are you coming back? The Tatars would answer: we have returned to our homeland. The locals used vulgar Russian. On the street, we were not allowed to speak Tatar. On the bus, we could only speak Russian because the

[11] The testimony of a man born in 1972 [W10], in the authors' collections.
[12] The testimony of a man born in 1971 [W11], in the authors' collections.

Russians had to hear and know what we were saying. Until 1985, there was no legal work. My father gathered wild rose hips, herbs, and nuts from the forest and sold them; in one week, he earned more than a collective farm worker made in a month. At school, I sat alone at a desk until the fourth grade. I was the only Tatar in my class. In the entire school, only a few students were Tatars. On every occasion, other students and teachers would bully us. Nationalist teachers pushed propaganda. They signed us up for the Pioneers when I was in the second grade. They didn't ask anyone; they signed everyone up. I never joined the Komsomol. I wasn't worthy of it. I was the son of a nation of priedateley."[13]

Despite these hardships, the Tatars began to rebuild their presence in Crimea, establishing businesses, organising education for their children, and promoting the Tatar culture and language. These returns, though fraught with political and social obstacles, also marked the beginning of the Tatar community's revival in Crimea, which later formed the foundation for the creation of the Mejlis, a key institution in the fight for the rights of the Crimean Tatars. An important role in these efforts was played by the difficult negotiations with representatives of the Ukrainian state, as the "problem" of the Crimean Tatars remained unresolved. A significant step was the convening of the Kurultai and, on 26–30 June 1991, the establishment of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People [Voytyuk, 2018: 233].

4. Strangers among "their own"

One of the elements that deserves particular attention is the network of neighborly relations, which became a natural part of the social life of the deportees. The attitude of Russians towards the Crimean Tatars over the centuries was marked by hostility, prejudice, and systematic discrimination. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 1783, the Crimean Tatars were subjected to a brutal colonial policy aimed at marginalising and displacing them from the Crimean Peninsula. This attitude was rooted in the perception of the Tatars as "foreign", both culturally and religiously, a notion that was used to justify actions taken against their community.

In exile, Crimean Tatars often faced hostility from Russians living in the Soviet republics. They were labeled as "traitors" and blamed for alleged collaboration

[13] The testimony of W11, in the authors' collections.

with the Germans during World War II. Many Russians viewed them as a "wild" and "disloyal" community, which only deepened their social isolation. Many testimonies from the Tatars include examples of hostility from their Russian neighbors. One female respondent recalled: "The Russians always reminded us that we were not from here. Even when we worked hard and lived in extreme poverty, they still called us traitors."

The Russians' attitude toward the Crimean Tatars, rooted in prejudice and stereotypes, is a prime example of the colonial and imperialist policies toward indigenous peoples. This hostility, firmly rooted in history, evolved over time, but its essence – marginalisation and discrimination – remains relevant even today. These accounts serve as a warning about the consequences of policies based on exclusion and intolerance towards cultural and religious diversity.

The deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, organised by the Soviet authorities under the pretext of collaboration with the Germans during World War II, left deep scars in the national memory of this ethnic group. The forced resettlement of the Tatars to remote parts of the USSR – such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan – marked the beginning of decades of exile, during which many generations of Tatars lived with a profound sense of alienation and loss of their homeland. Eyewitness accounts, such as those of [W2], contain vivid descriptions of the hardships of daily life in the USSR, where Tatars struggled with the absence of property rights, the inability to engage in independent economic activities, and the systematic suppression of their national identity.

Although Crimean Tatars were initially treated as outsiders by the Soviet authorities, after 1974 they gradually began to gain certain rights, such as the opportunity to take up professional occupations that had previously been closed to them. Nonetheless, life in the exile continued to involve many restrictions, particularly in the face of rising nationalism in the Asian republics of the USSR. Recollections, such as those of [W4] and [W5], highlight the inter-ethnic tensions and growing sense of insecurity that intensified during the final years of the Soviet Union. In this atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, many Tatars decided to return to Crimea, hoping to regain their homeland.

After the collapse of the USSR and the resettlement of Crimean Tatars on the peninsula, their relations with the local population – especially with Russians and Ukrainians – became highly complex. Russians who had remained in Crimea after the Tatars' deportation felt like the rightful owners of the land and perceived the Tatars' return as a threat to their dominant position. As many witnesses, including [W4] and [W9] recounted, Tatars in Crimea encountered

prejudice manifested through difficulties in finding work, the inability to purchase property, and strained interpersonal relations, especially in schools, where Tatar children were often isolated and bullied. Ukrainians, initially neutral, gradually moved closer to the Tatars, as [W8] noted, due to the challenging political situation and a growing awareness of their shared struggle for the rights of national minorities.

Relations with the local population became particularly tense in the face of political changes and the new reality after 1991. Testimonies show that Tatars lacked full civil rights, and their integration into local communities was hindered by local authorities who implemented various forms of discrimination, such as refusing to recognise their educational qualifications or denying them employment. Nevertheless, as [W9] observed, the Tatars – accustomed to the realities of the Soviet system – learned how to survive, supporting themselves through small-scale trade at bazaars, which, in the later period after 1993, allowed them to regain some of their lost economic independence.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of eyewitness testimonies and documents concerning the 1944 deportation of the Crimean Tatars reveals the multilayered nature of this community's traumatic experiences.

Firstly, the deportation was not merely the physical displacement of a population but an act of systemic, colonial violence intended to sever the Crimean Tatars' ties with their historical homeland – Crimea. Soviet policy towards the Tatars fits into a broader context of repression aimed at peoples deemed "disloyal" to the central authorities. In the case of the Crimean Tatars, these repressions were exceptionally brutal and long-lasting, resulting in social exclusion, economic marginalization, and intergenerational trauma.

Secondly, the living conditions in exile can be understood as part of a strategy of gradual destruction of this community. The lack of access to basic means of subsistence, restrictions on employment, education, and healthcare, as well as ethnic tensions in the Central Asian republics, led to a lasting sense of alienation. The testimonies of children, who experienced discrimination from an early age – in orphanages, schools, and youth organisations are particularl significant here. The stigma of a "nation of traitors" accompanied the Tatars for decades and became an element of their collective memory and identity.

Thirdly, despite systemic repression, the Crimean Tatars demonstrated an extraordinary ability to survive and preserve their national identity. Everyday practices of resistance – such as passing down memories of Crimea, cultivating language and culture, mutual aid under harsh conditions – allowed the community to maintain cohesion in exile. A particularly important element was the strong intergenerational bond and the cultivation of cultural and emotional memory of their homeland.

Fourthly, the returns to Crimea after 1989, although long awaited and highly symbolic, represented for many Tatars yet another act of humiliation and exclusion. The confrontation with administrative barriers, hostility from local populations, and limited access to the labor market revealed that repatriation was a dramatically complex process, often devoid of real state support. The trauma of exile was often replaced by a new trauma – marginalisation in their own homeland.

Finally, the testimonies discussed here show that the experience of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars did not end with their physical return to their homeland. On the contrary – it endures in collective memory, and its consequences continue to manifest as social, psychological, and cultural difficulties even in the 21st century. This article makes it clear that the fate of the Crimean Tatars should be analysed not only in the context of historical events but also in relation to contemporary forms of exclusion and identity politics. It documents a process of long-term, systemic human rights violations against an entire nation and highlights the strength of community as a key factor of survival.

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POSTULATES OF ANTI-IMMIGRATION MOVEMENTS AND THE COMPLIANCE OF THE LOCAL LAW ACTS PROHIBITING THE ACCOMMODATION OF FOREIGNERS ON THE PROPERTIES CONSTITUTING MUNICIPAL ASSETS WITH POLISH STATUTORY LAW

Abstract

- *Goal* – The objective of this article is to examine the compatibility of draft local law resolutions introducing prohibitions on the accommodation of foreigners (migrants) on properties owned by municipalities with the binding provisions of the Polish law.
- *Research methodology* – The research methods employed in this article include an analysis of normative sources and the case law of Polish administrative courts. The analysis is further based on doctrinal studies addressing the principles of local law-making, particularly from the perspective of the rights and obligations of residents.
- *Score/results* – The article leads to the conclusion that it is impermissible to arbitrarily exclude, without statutory authorisation, foreigners (migrants) residing in a given municipality from the local community, and thus from the group of persons entitled to benefit from the municipality's housing policies on an equal basis with other residents.
- *Originality/value* – The article has been prepared independently, relying primarily on binding statutory acts, judicial decisions, and the views of the Polish legal doctrine. The publication aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the admissibility of adopting local legal measures that restrict the rights of foreigners as compared to other inhabitants of a given local government unit.

Keywords: foreigners, local law, accommodation, municipal housing resources

1. Introduction

It is a commonly known fact, analysed primarily at the level of public commentary, that certain factors currently exist in Poland which are potentially conducive to the development of anti-immigration movements. There is an influx of immigrants and refugees on a previously unprecedented scale. According to the 2024 report of the Warsaw Enterprise Institute, the number of immigrants in Poland is estimated at approximately 3.5–4 million persons, of whom approximately 60–75% are nationals of Ukraine. Data published in the press by the Central Statistical Office, derived from the National Population and Housing Census 2021, clearly indicate that 1 433 800 immigrants were temporarily residing in Poland, of whom approximately 73% were Ukrainian nationals [www 1].

Data from aid organisations indicate that in 2024 a significant increase in the number of applications for international protection was also recorded. A total of 11 460 applications were submitted, covering 14 524 individuals, which constitutes an 81% increase compared to 2023, when 6 316 applications were lodged [www 2]. In addition, there are visible public concerns related [www 3] to the entry into force of the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum, COM/2020/609 final; and Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on asylum and migration management, amending Regulations (EU) 2021/1147 and (EU) 2021/1060 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 604/2013, OJ L, 2024/1351, 22.5.2024, hereinafter referred to as the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management, or the so-called Migration Pact. In view of the foregoing, a problem arises with regard to the organisation of assistance to third-country nationals – both in terms of access to employment and the provision of accommodation – in a manner that would be socially acceptable. This gives rise to attempts to initiate legislative action at the municipal level, aiming to introduce bans on the accommodation of third-country nationals (migrants) on properties owned by individual municipalities [www 4]. It is therefore worth considering the compliance of draft local law resolutions introducing such bans with the binding Polish statutory law.

It should thus be noted that from the perspective of Polish statutory law, the matter in question is regulated primarily by the following acts: the Act of 12 December 2013 on Foreigners [Journal of Laws 2024, item 769 – hereinafter referred to as the "Foreigners Act"], the Act of 13 June 2003 on Granting Protection to

Foreigners within the Territory of the Republic of Poland [Journal of Laws 2025, item 223 – hereinafter referred to as the "Protection Act"]. the Act of 12 March 2022 on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of That State [Journal of Laws 2025, item 337 – hereinafter referred to as the "Ukraine Assistance Act"], and, above all – taking into account that a potential draft resolution concerns a municipality, its residents (members of the municipal self-government community), and its legislative authority – the Act of 8 March 1990 on Municipal Self-Government (Journal of Laws 2024, item 1465 – hereinafter referred to as the "Municipal Self-Government Act"). At the same time, given that a potential resolution would concern the "accommodation" of foreigners on properties constituting part of the municipal housing stock, reference must also be made to the Act of 21 June 2001 on the Protection of Tenants' Rights, the Municipal Housing Stock and on the Amendment of the Civil Code [Journal of Laws 2023, item 725 – hereinafter referred to as the "Tenants' Rights Protection Act"].

2. The issue of the legality of local law resolutions

First and foremost, it should be noted that, pursuant to Article 91(1), the first sentence, of the Act on Municipal Self-Government, any resolution or order adopted by a municipal authority that is contrary to the law shall be null and void.

In accordance with the case-law of the Supreme Administrative Court, "such a contradiction shall be understood as an inconsistency with universally binding legal acts, including the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, statutes, implementing acts, and universally binding local legal acts." [Judgment of the Supreme Administrative Court, case no. I OSK 1287/06, published in LEX no. 320891]. According to the view of the court, "when assessing the legality of a local law act, it must be borne in mind that, within the current legal system, local law serves solely an executive function in relation to statutes. Indeed, the Constitution of the Republic of Poland does not contain any legislative delegation for self-government authorities. Local self-government does not enjoy an autonomous status, but constitutes merely a form of decentralised administration. Although the decentralisation of the process of adopting executive regulations to statutes in the form of local law permits a certain degree of variation in their content, such variation may extend only up to the limits set

by the law." [Judgment of the Supreme Administrative Court, case no. I OSK 297/17, published in CBOSA].

The voivodeship administrative courts express a similar view. As noted by the Voivodeship Administrative Court in Wrocław, "public authorities shall act on the basis of and within the limits of the law; it is prohibited to presume the existence of a public authority's powers. The relevant provision requires that any action taken by a public authority must be based on a clearly defined competence norm. Each competence norm must be implemented in a manner that does not infringe other provisions of the statute. The scope of the authorisation must always be determined in light of the principles of a democratic state governed by the rule of law, and actions must be taken within and on the basis of the law. In exercising its powers, the authority must take into account the content of the statutory norm. Any departure from this principle generally constitutes a significant breach of the law." [Judgment of the Voivodeship Administrative Court in Wrocław, case no. IV SA/Wr 24/25, published in CBOSA]. The Administrative Court in Gdańsk expressed a similar view, confirming that "unlike private law entities (natural and legal persons), public authorities – as explicitly stated in Article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland – shall act on the basis of and within the limits of the law. Whereas private entities may undertake any actions not prohibited by law, public authorities may only engage in actions that are expressly permitted by law." [Judgment of the Supreme Administrative Court – the Gdańsk Branch of 30 September 1992, case no. SA/Gd 1008/92, published in ONSA 1993, no. 2, item 51]. That court emphasises the illegality of resolutions and other acts adopted by local government units which exceed the tasks assigned to them under the statute, regardless of the title of the act adopted or its normative or non-normative nature [Judgment of the Voivodeship Administrative Court in Gdańsk, case no. III SA/Gd 636/24, published in CBOSA].

It follows from the above that the content of Article 91(1) and (4) of the Act on Municipal Self-Government determines that a prerequisite for declaring a resolution of a municipal legislative authority null and void is its material inconsistency with the law. It should also be noted that an analysis of judicial case-law enables the identification of a number of types of legal infringements which are considered material and therefore result in the nullity of a resolution adopted by a local government body. Such infringements include: acting in breach of provisions defining the competence to adopt resolutions; lack of legal basis for adopting resolutions; violation of provisions of constitutional or organisational

law; infringement of substantive law (e.g. through incorrect interpretation); and breach of provisions governing the procedure for adopting resolutions.

Similar arguments can be found in the academic literature. P. Chmielnicki argues that the principle of legality and the rule of law bind all public authorities, including the organs of local government units. In their actions, the principle that "what is not prohibited, is permitted" does not apply. Instead, the applicable rule is that "only that which is expressly provided for by law is permitted." In the author's view, any regulation that exceeds the scope of the granted authorisation constitutes a breach of the empowering norm and, at the same time, a violation of the constitutional conditions for the legality of a legal act. [Chmielnicki, 2022, article 91 Lex-el].

It should be emphasised that, pursuant to Article 163 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, local self-government shall perform public tasks not reserved by the Constitution or statutes for other public authorities. This provision must be read in conjunction with Article 6(1) of the Act on Municipal Self-Government, from which it follows that all public matters of local significance, not reserved by statutes for other entities, fall within the scope of a municipality's activities. Importantly, however, these matters – as noted by T. Moll – stem from legal provisions which impose specific executive powers or obligations on public authorities, the implementation of which takes place within the territory of the basic unit of local self-government. [Moll, 2021, art. 6, Lex.el].

It follows from the above that local communities enjoy – within the scope defined by applicable legal provisions – full discretion to act in any matter not excluded from their competence or not falling within the remit of other public authorities. This means that self-government bodies could regulate the issue of housing for foreigners if provisions of substantive law explicitly conferred such powers upon them.

It should be noted at this point that exceeding the scope of statutory authorisation to issue a local law act, as well as violations of provisions defining the competence to adopt resolutions, constitute material breaches of the law. These justify declaring the relevant parts of the contested resolution null and void, pursuant to Article 147 § 1 of the Act of 30 August 2002 – Law on Proceedings before Administrative Courts, in conjunction with Article 91(1) and (4) and Article 94(1) of the Act on Municipal Self-Government.

3. The issue of the accommodation of foreigners under the Act on Foreigners, the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners within the Territory of the Republic of Poland, and the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict in the Territory of That State

In light of the thesis that any regulation exceeding the statutory delegation constitutes a breach of the empowering norm and, at the same time, a violation of the constitutional conditions of legality of a legal act, the question arises whether there exists, in the Polish law, a specific statutory delegation authorising the adoption of local laws concerning the accommodation of foreigners. In order to answer this question, an assessment must be made primarily on the basis of legislative acts directly concerning foreigners and their legal status, namely the Act on Foreigners (hereinafter: the Foreigners Act), the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners within the Territory of the Republic of Poland (hereinafter: the Protection Act), and the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict in the Territory of That State (hereinafter: the Ukraine Act).

The Foreigners Act regulates the issue of accommodation in several specific contexts. First and foremost, the Act governs the matter of invitations to stay in the territory of the Republic of Poland. The only authority statutorily empowered to issue secondary legislation in this regard, including matters concerning the costs of accommodation for such individuals, is the Minister competent for internal affairs. The Minister, by way of regulation, determines, inter alia, the amount of financial means that the inviting person must possess (in an amount sufficient to cover the necessary costs of the foreigner's stay in the territory of the Republic of Poland), including the costs of accommodation. Secondly, the Foreigners Act sets out the conditions for granting a temporary residence permit to foreign volunteers, including the bearing of costs of their accommodation. Thirdly, the Act regulates the rules of voluntary return of foreigners and the coverage of accommodation costs prior to their departure. Furthermore, when executing a return decision, the Act requires the Minister competent for internal affairs to include in a relevant regulation the costs of food and accommodation of the foreigner in a detention facility or a guarded centre or detention centre for foreigners. Fourthly, the Act assigns specific competences to the Chief Commander of the Border Guard, who, at the request of a competent authority of another Member State of the European Union, may assist in air transit through the territory of a Polish airport, in particular by providing accommodation for

the foreigner during the transit operation. Lastly, the Act provides for a competence of the Chief Commander of the Border Guard, who may (under certain conditions) provide a foreigner with social assistance, medical and psychological care, including accommodation in a location specified in the decision granting such assistance. In summary, the Foreigners Act does not provide any statutory delegation empowering municipal authorities to adopt local legislation concerning the accommodation of foreigners.

Likewise, no statutory delegation enabling local government units to enact local laws concerning the accommodation of foreigners can be found in the Protection Act. The issue of foreigners' accommodation is regulated in that Act solely within the framework of the social assistance granted to them, as laid down in Article 71. The Act also addresses international protection for persons requiring special treatment (e.g. minors, persons with disabilities, the elderly, pregnant women, etc.), and mandates that, when granting social assistance to a foreigner requiring such special treatment, the individual's needs in respect of accommodation and food must be duly taken into account. Importantly, the responsibilities related to accommodation, as well as the power to issue implementing regulations to the Act, have been conferred exclusively upon the Minister competent for internal affairs and the Head of the Office for Foreigners.

In turn, the Ukraine Act vests the responsibility for the accommodation of Ukrainian nationals in the Voivode. According to Article 12(1)(1) of the Ukraine Act, the Voivode may provide assistance to Ukrainian citizens referred to in Article 1(1), including – among others – the provision of collective accommodation, defined as accommodation in a facility hosting at least 10 persons, or in facilities owned or permanently managed by public finance sector entities, as well as round-the-clock collective catering.

With regard to the subject matter of this opinion, the Ukraine Act further regulates the following: 1) the establishment of the Assistance Fund intended to finance or co-finance the performance of tasks aimed at supporting Ukraine, in particular Ukrainian citizens affected by the armed conflict in the territory of Ukraine, including tasks carried out both within and outside the territory of the Republic of Poland, as well as tasks related to food security in Poland in connection with the conflict (Article 14); 2) the accommodation of Ukrainian citizens in buildings which do not meet technical, fire safety, or sanitary standards applicable to such buildings, provided that, under the circumstances of their use, those buildings meet the basic requirements with regard to structural safety, fire safety, usability, and hygiene, health and environmental protection (Article 12a);

3) assistance granted to foreigners (from Ukraine) by the Head of the Office for Foreigners in the form of accommodation and food (Article 100b); 4) support for local government units in carrying out additional tasks under the Act in connection with the armed conflict in Ukraine, under which the Minister of Justice may make available to a local government unit, for temporary accommodation purposes, a property managed by a juvenile detention centre or shelter for minors (Article 101), and may specify – by regulation – the juvenile detention centres and shelters that shall be made available to local government units to provide temporary accommodation for Ukrainian citizens. Thus, the provisions of the Ukraine Act also do not include any statutory authorisation for the adoption of local legislation concerning the accommodation of foreigners.

4. The issue of the accommodation of foreigners under the Act on Municipal Self-Government

It is also essential to determine whether – given that public authorities, including municipal bodies, may undertake only those actions which are expressly permitted by law – the matters relating to the accommodation of foreigners specifically are grounded in the provisions of the Act on Municipal Self-Government?

To answer this question, it is at first necessary to ask: *who is the addressee of local legislation?* Undoubtedly, the addressees of the local law in Poland are natural persons, legal persons, and other organisational units residing or operating in the territory in which the given local law is applicable. In other words, the addressees are all entities present within the territorial limits of the local government unit (e.g. municipality, county, or region) that has adopted the law. This follows from Article 87(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, pursuant to which the sources of universally binding law in the Republic of Poland are: the Constitution, statutes, ratified international agreements, and regulations. Within the area of competence of the authorities that issued them, acts of local law are also sources of universally binding law.

This conclusion is further supported by Article 40(1) of the Act on Municipal Self-Government, which provides that, on the basis of statutory authorisation, the municipal council may adopt acts of the local law applicable within the territory of the municipality. Confirmation of this interpretation is also found in the case law of the Constitutional Tribunal. In its judgment of 24 March 2003, ref. no. K 28/02, the Tribunal held that: "Acts of [the] local law are a source of universally

binding law in the sense that they apply to all natural and legal persons residing or operating in the given area."

A similar position is taken in the legal literature. For example, J. Zimmermann has stated that acts of local law apply to all addressees (both nationals and foreigners – emphasis in the original) residing or operating within the area of activity of the concerned authority. [Zimmermann, 2018: 79]

Likewise, M. Kotulski has noted that: "Acts of local law have a universally binding character within the area of operation of the authority that issued them." [Kotulski, 2001: 49] This means that their addressees include all natural and legal persons and other organisational units present in the area, regardless of their nationality, place of residence, or registered seat. The above leads to the conclusion that anyone – irrespective of citizenship – who is present in the territory of a municipality is an addressee of the law adopted by that municipality's legislative authorities.

In light of the above, it is therefore worth considering – from the perspective of national legislation – whether municipal authorities, when adopting acts of local law, may limit the rights of a person present within the territory of the municipality to benefit from entitlements arising from the performance of the municipality's own tasks, solely on the ground that such a person is a foreigner?

Pursuant to Article 1(1) of the Act on Municipal Self-Government, the residents of a municipality constitute, by operation of law, a municipal community. At the same time, the legal doctrine observes that membership in the municipal community is not conditional upon any act of consent on the part of the member (i.e. the resident); moreover, it is not possible to withdraw from the community as long as one remains a resident of the territory which defines it. [Niżnik-Dobosz 2022, art. 1, Lex-el.]. For the purpose of recognising an individual as a resident of a given municipality, neither the fact of official registration of residence nor the duration thereof is of any relevance. A resident of a municipality is any natural person whose place of residence is located within the territory of that specific municipality. As M. Stahl rightly observes: "For the purpose of recognising an individual as a resident of a given municipality, neither the fact of official registration of residence nor the duration thereof is of any relevance." [Stahl, 2021: 259].

Accordingly, the status of a municipality resident is based on the actual place of residence within its territory, rather than on formal registration of residence. This distinction is of particular importance in the context of exercising rights and fulfilling obligations associated with membership in the municipal community, such as participation in local elections or access to public services provided by the municipality.

At the same time, legal scholarship emphasises that a foreigner, by the very fact of residing within the territory of a basic administrative unit of the State, becomes – in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Poland – a member of the municipal community. M. Kumela-Romańska rightly points out that the Act on Municipal Self-Government, as a fundamental legislative act in relation to the concept of territorial self-government, does not distinguish between permanent and temporary residents of a municipality. As a consequence, the foreigner's membership in the municipal community entails the entitlement to legal protection of their interests against infringements by local government authorities – including the possibility of seeking judicial review of resolutions, actions or omissions of a local government body [Kumela-Romańska, 2007: 42–50].

Similarly, administrative courts have expressed analogous views. For example, the Regional Administrative Court in Kraków held that: "The introduction of a limitation not provided for by statute, restricting entitlements only to those members of the municipal community who have fulfilled the registration obligation by registering for permanent or temporary residence, violates the statutory duty of the municipality to create conditions for satisfying the housing needs of all the members of the municipal community. An arbitrary exclusion without legal basis of persons lacking permanent or temporary registration from the community constitutes an overstepping of statutory authorisation." [Judgment of the Voivodeship Administrative Court in Kraków, case no. III SA/Kr 1181/12, CBOSA]. Regarding subjective limitations in the implementation of the municipality's own tasks, including the unfounded (in the court's view) differentiation of the legal situation of the members of the municipal community in relation to the rights to conclude a lease agreement for a municipal premises depending on the length of residence in the municipality, the Supreme Administrative Court (NSA) stated in its judgment of 24 January 2012 that a municipality, in carrying out its own task of "creating conditions to satisfy the housing needs of members of the municipal community," cannot arbitrarily exclude from the community persons who have resided in the municipality for less than five years without statutory authorisation. For the recognition of an individual as a resident of a given municipality, the lapse of a five-year residence period within that municipality is irrelevant. A resident of a municipality is – it should be emphasised – any natural person who has a place of residence within the specific municipality (Article 1 of the Act on Municipal Self-Government). The legislator does not set any temporal limits for acquiring the status of resident" [Judgment of the Supreme Administrative Court, case no. I OSK 2021/11 – published in CBOSA].

5. The issue of the accommodation of foreigners under the Act on the Protection of Tenants' Rights, Municipal Housing Stock and Amendments to the Civil Code

Additionally – taking into account the specificity of the draft resolution, as well as the fact demonstrated above that pursuant to Article 91(1), the first sentence of the Act on Municipal Self-Government, a resolution of a municipal authority that is contrary to the law is null and void, whereby such contrariness must be understood as inconsistency with universally binding legal acts – it is worth drawing attention to the binding normative regulation concerning the municipal housing stock, i.e., the provisions of the Act on the Protection of Tenants' Rights.

Pursuant to Article 20(1) of the Act on the Protection of Tenants' Rights, in order to carry out the tasks referred to in Article 4 (namely, creating conditions for satisfying the housing needs of the municipal community), a municipality may establish and hold a housing stock.

Furthermore, from Article 21(1) of the Act, it follows that the municipal council adopts: (1) long-term programmes for managing the municipal housing stock; (2) rules for renting premises constituting part of the municipal housing stock, including rules and criteria for renting premises related to employment, if premises are designated for this purpose within the municipal housing stock.

At the same time, pursuant to paragraph 3 point 3 of this provision, the rules for renting premises within the municipal housing stock should specify, in particular, the criteria for selecting persons entitled to priority in concluding indefinite-term lease agreements and social lease agreements.

Referring to this provision, the administrative court in Kraków held that "the municipal council should regulate all the elements indicated in this provision. It may include other matters related to leasing in the resolution; however, this does not imply unlimited discretion of the authority" [Judgment of the Voivodeship Administrative Court in Kraków, case no. III SA/Kr 1181/12, CBOSA].

In turn, the administrative court in Opole stated that: "The content of Article 20(1) of the Act of 21 June 2001 on the Protection of Tenants' Rights, Municipal Housing Stock, and Amendments to the Civil Code (Journal of Laws No. 71, item 733) unequivocally shows that the municipal housing stock is created to fulfil the tasks resulting from Article 4 of the cited Act, namely, inter alia, to satisfy the housing needs of the municipal community. An analysis of the content of Article 1 of the Act of 8 March 1990 on Municipal Self-Government [Journal of Laws of 1996 no. 13, item 74, as amended], which mandates the inclusion of municipality

residents in the municipal community, and Article 16 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, which states that the entire population of the basic units of territorial division constitutes, by the operation of law, a municipal community, allows for a sufficient conclusion that all residents of the municipality, regardless of whether they are registered for permanent or temporary residence or live without registration, are members of the municipal community entitled by the Constitution of the Republic of Poland to equal treatment by the authorities" [Judgment of the Voivodeship Administrative Court in Opole, case no. II SA/Op 144/04, published in CBOSA].

Colloquially speaking, in the aforementioned judgments, the courts correctly assumed that where a person is a member of the municipal community, they should be treated without discrimination when applying for access to the municipality's housing resources. Accordingly, in our opinion, if a foreigner was to become a member of the municipal community of the City of Suwałki, it would be impossible to exclude them from the group entitled to satisfy housing needs on an equal footing with other persons. Therefore, the draft resolution could be deemed to contravene the provisions of the Act on the Protection of Tenants' Rights.

The above observation is also confirmed in the doctrine. It is pointed out that "the combination of statutory regulations on the protection of tenants' rights, the municipal housing stock, and amendments to the Civil Code, social assistance, and the Act on Repatriation allows for the conclusion that the primary group of foreigners entitled to demand the enforcement of this right has been limited by the legislator to a specific category, namely repatriates and refugees," and that "there is no basis for introducing provisions into a resolution setting out the rules for renting premises which would unjustifiably differentiate the situation of persons in similar material and housing conditions" [Kumela-Romańska, 2007: 42–50].

6. Summary

Taking into account that a defect of a normative act consists in its adoption in violation of statutory authorisation (as resolutions and other acts of local government units that exceed the tasks entrusted to them by statute are unlawful), an analysis of the provisions of the Acts on Foreigners; on Granting Protection to Foreigners within the Territory of the Republic of Poland; and on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of that

State leads to the conclusion that these normative acts do not contain statutory authorisation for municipal authorities to enact legal provisions concerning the accommodation of foreigners.

Undoubtedly, the addressees of local law acts are all natural and legal persons, as well as other organisational units, located within the territory of the relevant local government unit, regardless of their nationality, place of residence, or seat. Foreigners should also be included among such addressees. This leads to the conclusion that the possibility of arbitrarily and without statutory authorisation excluding foreigners from the municipal community, and consequently from the entities entitled to satisfy housing needs on an equal basis with others, is excluded.

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ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SEGREGATION OF ROMA CHILDREN IN ALBANIAN EDUCATION

| Abstract

- *Goal* – The goal of the article is to present research findings regarding the segregation of Roma children in Albanian education. The paper presents findings from a study carried out in Albania with 210 respondents divided into 3 groups: Roma children and their parents, non-Roma children and their parents, and teachers of Roma and non-Roma children. A questionnaire in 4 parts: "socio-demographic factors", "attitudes towards Roma", "the wide topic of discrimination" and "my personal opinion", was used to conduct the study, in order to answer the question "Why are the Roma children discriminated against in the Albanian educational system?".
- *Research methodology* – The research thoroughly examines the segregation of Roma children in the school system in Albania, attitudes towards the Roma community, and integration of minorities in the country.
- *Score/results* – The article presents the stereotypical points of view of Albanians towards Roma communities. The study analyses the discrimination and racism factors in the Albanian society, the necessities in the state educational system for better integration of minority groups, discourse about the reasons underlying segregation of Roma children not only in schools but in society more broadly as well, and xenophobia towards the Roma community in general in Albania.
- *Originality* – This is the first time when a study with predominantly majority representatives, who acknowledge the existing discrimination to Roma children in society and at school, is conducted.

| Keywords: Roma, Albania, education, segregation

1. Introduction

Roma communities throughout Europe are discriminated against and in most European countries Roma children are placed in segregated schools. School segregation in Europe started in 1960-s and has the same features in all countries: poor school environment, not enough teaching books and materials, low quality of the teachers' working in those schools preparation, no school mediators, no lessons of Romani language, culture and history [Kyuchukov, 2006].

Kende [2021] reports the situation of segregated schools in different European countries. In Hungary, the school segregation of Roma children had significantly increased since the transition in 1989. In Romania, 27% of the children receive education in segregated schools. In Serbia, about 30% of Roma children are in special schools. In Slovakia, the segregation of Roma children at school is a regular practice. There is a lack of systemic measures to prevent segregation – 62% of Roma children are in segregated and special schools. The explanation of the Ministry of Education for this high number is simply "incidental". According to Milenkova and Hristova, 58% of Roma children in Bulgaria attend "ghetto" schools in the segregated areas in Bulgaria. "Schools with prevailing number of Roma pupils are located also in the rural areas and, unlike the urban "ghetto" schools, the rural educational institutions have not been established especially for the Roma; however, they occurred as "mainly Roma schools" as a result of the outward migration of majority of Bulgarian families from the country towards the cities" [2016: 76]. Merhaut, Fulkova and Rudorfer reported that Roma children in the Czech Republic placed in segregated schools are victims of discrimination. According to the authors, the segregation in education is not functional, but rather abusive and criminal. At the same time, the children in the segregated schools and classes receive a "substandard education that severely limits their opportunities to pursue all sorts of professions, which disadvantages them in comparison to their peers educated in other Czech primary and secondary schools" [2022: 3].

Vagra, studying the school segregation in Romania, reports that between 1998 and 2016, the proportion of segregated schools increased significantly, and this became a barrier for the Roma integration. The author recommends that "Roma civil society should be involved in the process of monitoring segregated schools, enrolling Roma children from residentially segregated communities in mixed schools and informing parents about the consequences of segregation on Roma children" [2022: 82].

Minova [2025] studied the role of non-profit organisations bringing a non-formal education of preschool Roma children in Slovakia. The author finds out that providing non-formal education to children is very important, especially before starting formal education. Non-profit organisations also often adapt non-formal education to the needs and interests of children. The first author observed similar non-formal education in Edirne, Turkey. After school, the children attend the Center based in one of the Roma settlements of the town and there get additional information and help with their homework in non-formal environment.

In almost all East European countries, the Roma organisations were those who were fighting with segregated schools and institutions allowing them. There were cases in the Czech Republic, Croatia, and Bulgaria, where the parents of the children under the supervision of non-governmental organisations started court procedures against the governments and they went even to the Human rights court in Strasbourg.

2. Roma in Albania

Albania is a developing country, among the least prosperous in Europe. Struggling now for years to get join the EU, Albania and its government is working hard to improve the institutional and legal framework, economy, and other areas in order to qualify for membership in the EU. Assisting minority communities in this connection has not been a government priority, but that is slowly changing. Law no. 96/2017 "On the Protection of National Minorities in The Republic of Albania", ratified by law no. 8496, dated 3 June 1999 states in Article 3 that:

1. A national minority is a group of Albanian citizens residing in the territory of the Republic of Albania, having early and lasting links with the Albanian state, display distinctive cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or traditional characteristics and who are willing to express, preserve and develop together with their distinctive cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious or traditional identity.
2. According to this Law, national minorities in the Republic of Albania are the Greek, Macedonian, Aromanian, Roma, Egyptian, Montenegrin, Bosnian, Serbian, and Bulgarian minorities.

Zacellari, Mico, and Sinistra [2018] mention many important points regarding the educational situation of Roma children in Albania. The fact that Albania has basically granted formal recognition to the Roma community as a minority since 2017 has not aided much over the past seven years with their integration into society or achieving a satisfactory level of involvement of Roma children in the education system as a whole. Moreover, that is a common factor encountered in most European countries, including the most developed ones according to UNESCO [2010: 45] as cited in Zacellari et al. [2018].

The authors stress that since the fall of communism in Albania, the transition towards democracy has impacted many aspects of Albanian life, including the lack of access in strengthening education for the Roma. Like other European countries, Albania has ratified a wide variety of conventions related to the protection of human rights including the right to education. Education and its lack is still viewed as the main factor for the marginalisation of these groups: "In Albania, despite the status of being a minority, the inclusion in education of Roma children suffers from low participation. The level of enrollment of children in school is low, and nearly half the Roma children have dropped out of school". This is according to the decision of the Council of Ministers [2016: 15], cited in Zacellari et al. [2018].

It was also found that pre-university education in Albania was not of equal quality for all students in all the regions of the country. Many differences between rural and urban schools in the quality of the teaching force and the availability of different resources were identified. The fact that also groups of minority students (such as Roma, Balkan-Egyptian, low-income students, and students with disabilities) were not yet being well-served, was also noted.

To make a significant difference in the gaps that were found in educational equity and equality, the EPR recommended that teacher training and professional development have to be expanded and an increased emphasis should be placed on inclusiveness while teaching (through differentiated instruction) as well as on the effective pedagogy and classroom management in order to engage all students in the learning process [UNESCO, 2017].

The report further mentioned it was clear that the government was making efforts to integrate all children into schooling, but a significant group of the population was being left behind, in particular Roma children, children in rural and remote communities, and children with disabilities, who did not have proper access to quality education which was "promised" and entitled by law. "To achieve the goal and targets of SDG4-Education 2030, as well as Albania's own national priorities in education, the Government must do more for these children" [UNESCO, 2017].

The advice from UNESCO will be difficult to achieve based on the fact that due to the internal migration and rapid urbansation in Albania, many schools are working at the brink of capacity or in excess of the allowed capacity. As a result, implementation of any reform can be compromised.

The EPR report recommended "that the Government increase investment in institutions, including by strengthening the capacities of teachers and school leaders, and school infrastructure. The targeted investments need to reduce overcrowding in public schools in the urban area and to increase educational access and quality for the marginalised and disadvantaged populations, including Roma and Balkan Egyptian children, children in the remote rural areas, and children with disabilities" [UNESCO, 2017].

Consequently, there is a need for more investment for these institutions, we need special teachers who are prepared and well-qualified and have the abilities to teach these groups of students. And we have to work on school infrastructure to reduce overcrowding in public schools, and to increase the access to education and the quality of education for the marginalised and disadvantaged populations in Albania. We can confirm and underscore once more that education is still the main factor in marginalisation of these groups, so there is much more work to do regarding this by the government and by other linked institutions. to sum up, we see a lot of rhetoric at state level about diversity and inclusion, but little concrete action. Such a contradiction is familiar to other countries as well. For example, Kyuchukov [2006] described similar situation in Bulgaria with segregated schools. And for so many years the situation in those schools did not change although Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007. Even still today, the segregated schools in Roma settlements of Bulgaria exist and the quality of education in them is very low.

3. Methodology of the study

The study is based on a research conducted with a questionnaire of 25 questions, related to the attitudes towards Roma students and the Romani language. The interview is anonymous and is formulated in the Albanian language. The data collection was done online. The data from this interview gives a general idea of the situation and attitude towards the Roma community and Roma children within the rest of the society in Albania (parents, teachers, and other students) focusing on their origin and mother tongue.

The questionnaire was addressed to three groups of respondents (Roma children and their parents, non-Roma children and their parents, and teachers of Roma and of non-Roma children). The questionnaire is formulated mostly by closed questions (compulsory), in which respondents must choose only one of the answers. The last question is open-ended (non-compulsory) for giving a personal opinion about what participants think is the main reason why Roma are discriminated in the Albanian society.

The questionnaire is formulated in 4 parts. The first section "socio-demographic factors", specifically the first 9 questions (1–9), are about getting to know the participants, and are mainly questions about age, gender, profession, education, race and ethnicity, mother language, etc.

The second part "attitudes towards Roma" (8 questions, 10–17) concentrate mostly on the opinion of the participants regarding the importance of the Romani language, discrimination at school and society against people using the Romani language or simply being of the Roma minority, etc.

The third section (7 questions, 18–24) "the broad topic of discrimination" consists of a variety of questions about the personal opinions of the participants regarding the feeling of discrimination in different aspects, along with questions concentrated especially on discrimination against Roma children and the Roma community.

The final section (question 25), "my personal opinion" is an open-ended question about one's personal opinion regarding "Why are Roma people discriminated against in our society, what are the reasons?"

The main goal of this research is to raise awareness that in every school there are children that come from minority families and most of the time these children are segregated, separated from the others, and bullied by other children or even by the teachers themselves. The majority of the teachers usually have difficulties and do not know how to deal with these students, they leave or make them feel separate, excluded and do not give them enough attention during the class.

The working hypothesis is that as in most European countries, Albania will not make a difference and take concrete steps in the policy and civic action regarding the general opinion in the society regarding discrimination against Roma. We have seen the way Roma are treated with disrespect, because of the color of their skin, the way they dress, the language they speak. They are not viewed as equal compared to the rest of the society and this not only with Roma, so-called "*harixhinj*"[1] or "*gabele*".

[1] *Harixhinj*, *gabele* – are negtative prejudicial slang terms used to refer to Roma in Albania.

4. Research findings

The study reached an unexpectedly large number of participants, but 210 of them answered all the questions. The questionnaire was online and the participants in the study answered the questions online.

Table 1. Number of participants in the study

The first group Parents and/or teachers	Aged 30–50 (62.4%) Aged 50+ (12.4%) 74.8% = 157 participants
The second group Young parents, young teachers, and students in higher grades at school	Aged 16–30 24.3% = 51 participants
The third group Students of primary and secondary school	Students aged 6–15 0.9% = 2 participants

Source: autor's own elaboration.

The majority of participants are adults aged 30 to 50 +, 74.8%, representing the substantial majority of the respondents, 157 out of a total of 210 participants. These participants in the survey are parents and/or teachers, young parent and/or teacher, relying on their age, or a student in a higher grade.

In Albania, no school uses the Romani language in the teaching program at school. So Roma children do not have the opportunity to acquire school-based literacy in what is their home language.

99% of the participants think without a doubt that education in their mother tongue is very important for the learners. However, 58.6% of the participants stated that the Romani language is not important at all for them. This is a quite expected result of this question. Most of the Albanian society does not have a direct connection with the Roma community and Roma culture so the Romani language is not in their interest at all, and they do not feel any deep stimulus or reason to learn more about this language. When it comes to interest in languages, young people in Albania are more attracted to learning languages like English, Italian, and German which will serve them to get a better job and most likely a better income. Quite naturally, Romani does not fit into this group of conventionally "useful" languages.

48.6% think that "perhaps" the Romani language should be studied at school. So, they do not agree nor disagree with this fact, or probably they just do not have a strong opinion about this question. Yet 41.4% of the participants are of the opinion that the Romani language should not be studied at school. This negative feedback should be seen in the light of its context, namely that the greater majority of schools in Albania have a small number of the studying and enrolled there, or no Roma children whatsoever. This is because of a high drop-out rate of Roma kids from school in some areas, and the geography of Roma settlement: Roma kids at school are often concentrated in schools mainly where Roma live. So, for most of the respondents there is no sense that just for 1–2 students they should be offering Romani language as a classroom subject in the curriculum. Only 10% think that the Romani language should be studied at school. This suggests the conclusion that the majority of participants, 90% of them, basically do not care about the topic or think that the Romani language should not be studied in schools, or is just not important enough to be part of the school curriculum even if Roma children are studying there. Such a question requires greater more focused research.

36.7% of participants think that the Roma minority is discriminated today just as they were at the time of Enver Hoxha's dictatorship decades ago. 23.8% think that Roma were more severely discriminated against under the authoritarian system in past decades than they are today. 20% think that the Roma minority is more discriminated against today than they were in the time of the authoritarian government in the socialist Albania.

90.5% of the survey respondents are not of Roma origin so logically they never felt this kind of discrimination at school. Moreover, most of the participants are adults and not students at this point. 6.2% responded that they do not feel discriminated against at all at school. 2.4% say that they feel just a little discriminated against now and then. Only 0.9% of the respondents note that they feel very discriminated at school. It can be assumed that these respondents feel discriminated against because of their Roma origin, because if they were not Roma, they would select the fourth option, that they are not of Roma origin. In any case, very few of the participants were of Roma origin. This finding in response can reflect a normal phenomenon of bullying common in almost in every school all over the world and that these respondents wanted to express this fact.

This constitutes a more concrete and direct question if someone has ever felt discriminated against because of the fact of being of Roma origin and using Romani as a mother tongue at school. Since most interviewees are not of Roma

origin, 89% of the respondents, consequently, they have never experienced this kind of discrimination.

5.2% accept the fact of their Roma origin but do not use the Romani language at school. These results give pause for reflection. Question № 5 asked the respondents about their origin. Yet, nobody confirmed that they were Roma but called themselves Albanian, and even question № 6, in which they were directly asked if they come from a family of Roma origin, only 1% confirmed this fact. So, we are discovering that indeed ever more participants do in fact have some connection with the Roma community and language, but somehow did not want to accept that right at the outset earlier in the survey.

43.3% of participants think that Roma children are very discriminated against in Albanian society. 35.2% think that Roma children are just a little discriminated in the society. 11% think that Roma children are not discriminated against at all in our society. 10.5% do not have an opinion about this question or they do not know how to answer it.

In any case, these are in the main subjective answers and thus difficult to evaluate. It depends on the environment a person has grown up in and what they have seen and experienced. The second author has witnessed both sides, many people feeling hatred against Roma people for no tangible reason; treating them with no respect because they were observed begging on the streets, and even youngsters made fun of other Roma kids. At the same time, from this researcher's own personal experience, it happened that in the first author's hometown there was a used clothing market where the majority of the traders were of Roma origin, and that every day the market was full of people, and nobody seemed to be disgusted or fearful to be a customer and purchase some goods at this market from traders who were clearly Roma. They were even the most preferred tradespersons because they were selling cheaper than others. Some people were even making friends with the Roma traders they were talking with and buying from them.

90.5% of the respondents think that Roma children deserve and should be treated in the same way as other children in society. This is an encouraging finding as response, and this researcher was hoping that most of society would empathise or at least sympathise with this topic and answer that they are not in agreement. 8.6% say that Roma children should be treated differently from other children. Here we can observe a discriminatory opinion, since quite a significant percentage of respondents in the survey believe that Roma children have no right to be treated the same as Albanian children.

90% of the participants say that they would react if they saw and were confronted with a situation or case where a Roma kid was being discriminated against or mistreated in front of them. This is a very positive approach and an expected result. Of course, what does "react" mean here is a separate issue. It is an unfortunate finding that 10% of participants are not sure if they would react at all some way or maybe even would most probably not react if they encounter this kind of situation in the future. But one can also surmise that these respondents answering in this way would not react even if some other kid, not Roma and a stranger, was to be discriminated against or mistreated in front of them. On a positive note, at least there are relatively few respondents who think this way compared with the majority who believe they would certainly react. Of course, for some it is normal behavior to avoid interfering in other people's problems on the street or they are just afraid that they will get negative feedback if they undertake to do something, since strangers are involved.

44.8% of participants think that Roma children are not treated the same as other children in the society/ school or other environments in Albania. 25.2% think that "maybe" they are treated the same but are not sure since probably they have never had to experience any situation where a Roma person was involved. 24.3% think that Roma children are treated the same as other children in Albania. Once again, this is a very subjective question. It all depends on the personal experience regarding the topic.

90% of respondents think that yes, without a doubt there should be measures taken against those who discriminate against Roma children in schools, including other children/students or even teachers. 9.5% say that they feel or have felt a bit discriminated against in general (no reason specified). The remainder.

80% of participants think that there is no gender difference when it comes to discrimination of Roma in school, or out in the society in other environments. 7.1% think that Roma girls are more discriminated against than boys.

Albania retains elements of a patriarchal society, so such a response is not unexpected in dealing with a questionnaire survey. This dimension can apply not only in the Roma environment but even in other layers of society, since Albanian women can, like this researcher personally, feel at times discriminated against. This discrimination is pretty visible in different professions, such as that of the teacher, considered almost exclusively as a women's profession, or working in construction trades and handicrafts, almost a 100% male profession in Albania, or other higher positions in society and administration, which customarily are staffed by males.

The final question which was an open-ended question about the opinion of the participants regarding what reasons there are for Roma to suffer discrimination in the Albanian society? This question brought some very surprising results. The mentality of the Albanian families is of a type that encourages a division between two communities: Roma and non-Roma. Anyway, in recent years, many Roma families appear to look like they are more integrated into society. In the group of kindergarten kids, this division does not exist, over time (years) in grown-up kids the opinion and reactions of family influence the socialisation with people of this community. We think they get discriminated against without a concrete reason only because they are Roma. They can be very good kids, they study hard in school, and come from a good Roma family like all other families, but again get discriminated by other kids because that is how their parents teach them. We think that is connected with family education. The child is the mirror of the parent, a child 5–6 years old did not "make up" the epithet "*gabeli*, *evgjiti*, *arixhiu* (Gypsy), *gogoli* (scarecrow), *bolua* (dumb)" And other such negative slang words, etc., etc. He/she has heard it in an environment where he/she has to grow up and often without even knowing the meaning.

5. Discussion and conclusions

From the answers, it is clear that a large majority of the respondents think that the main reason why Roma people are discriminated against in society is because of their skin color. Other reasons can be anything that is stereotypically connected with the Roma minority but not only that minority: for example, the way they dress, the way they live, their economic level, their social inclusion, their educational level, because of their language and origins, some "strange" traditions, marriages at a young age and so on.

Most participants in the survey think that Albanian society is a discriminatory society in general and not only against Roma but for other minorities as well. Some others think that the Roma minority on its own is responsible for being a target of discrimination, for many reasons. The main one is cultural: that parents of Roma children marry their children at a very young age, do not send them to school, and do not take care of their personal hygiene, making this a reason for the other segments of society to distance themselves from them.

Others attribute the fault to parents of non-Roma children, who with their prejudices are the reason their kids have a discriminatory attitude against Roma

children. It is because that is the idea the parents have transmitted to them, that Roma kids are dirty and have a bad smell and they should not make friends with them. There is a proverb in Albanian: "The child is the mirror of his parent." (*Femija eshte pasqyra e prinderit*). So, family education is very important.

Our hypothesis was confirmed because Albania, like most European countries, is not different with regard to the general opinion in the population and in civil society regarding discrimination against Roma. Roma in general in Albania are treated with disrespect and racism because of the color of the skin, the language they speak, their culture, their ways of life. For such reasons, they are not viewed as equal compared to the rest of the society.

However, this study showed an unexpected result: almost 90% of the respondents acknowledge that in Albanian society there is racism against Roma, and they will not tolerate a Roma child to be discriminated against in front of them. Almost all the participants in the study think that mother tongue for Roma children is important and they have to have possibility to study it at school. These are things which never came out from other studies with the majority representatives towards Roma in other European countries. These findings are show new tendencies in the attitudes towards the segregation of Roma children through education.

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FINANCIAL MECHANISM FOR RENEWABLE ENERGY SOURCES ON THE EXAMPLE OF ALGERIA

Abstract

- *Goal* – The purpose of this manuscript is to characterise the financing mechanisms for renewable energy projects in Algeria – government, international, private – in solar and wind energy, along with an assessment of their effectiveness.
- *Research methodology* – The effectiveness of financing sources was determined using a case study of the largest completed and contracted solar and wind power plant projects in Algeria and an analysis of national and international reports on the energy sector and renewable energy sources.
- *Score/results* – The forms of financing used in Algeria are effective in terms of the share of solar and wind energy in total renewable energy production, the per capita energy generated from RES, and the energy potential generated by built and implemented PPP RES installations. In contrast, areas such as the share of solar and wind energy in the country's total energy mix and the implementation of a renewable energy development program for solar and wind energy are characterised by inefficiency.
- *Originality/value* – The article fills a research gap in the effectiveness of solar and wind energy financing sources in Algeria.

Keywords: renewable energy sources, financial mechanism, Algeria

1. Introduction

Algeria, one of North Africa's largest economies, has significant natural gas and oil reserves, the extraction of which accounts for 95% of export revenues, representing

over 30% of GDP [Bélaïd et al., 2017: 277–287]. These reserves also form the basis of its energy system. Changes in global energy production trends, oil price volatility, and problems with the extraction and export of fossil fuels caused by the activities of Islamic radicals have prompted the Algerian government to begin implementing sustainable development goals to reduce dependence on fossil fuels in favour of renewable energy sources. This is also intended to counteract environmental problems related to the relatively low average annual rainfall, which has fallen by 30% over the last few decades, and the limited possibility of reducing carbon dioxide emissions [www 1].

In terms of solar and wind energy potential, Algeria is classified as a country with high levels of solar radiation. It amounts to over 3,000 hours [Ghezloun et al., 2015: 1561–1570], which generates a potential of 13.9 TWh per year and, according to estimates, enables the production of over 1 000 gigawatts of energy through photovoltaic systems. This can be supplemented by wind energy, with a potential of approximately 35 TWh/year [www 2].

The pursuit of a sustainable energy future has required adaptation to international climate agreements, including, for example, the Paris Agreement, through the development and increase of the share of RES in the national energy strategy. In addition, an ambitious target of generating 27% of electricity from renewable sources by 2030 has been set [www 3]. The implementation of the adopted goals and obligations resulting from the signed agreements requires the use of available domestic and foreign financing mechanisms to obtain funds for the transition from the traditional energy sector dominated by oil and gas to sustainable energy solutions.

The aim of this article is to characterise the mechanisms of financing renewable energy projects in Algeria in the field of solar and wind energy, together with an assessment of their effectiveness.

Previous studies on the functioning of the renewable energy sector in Algeria can be classified into several groups. The first concerns the potential of renewable energy analysed by Stambouli et al. [2012: 4445–4460; 2011: 4507–4519], Bouraiou et al. [2020], Himri et al. [2009: 1584–1591], Hadji [2016] and Zahraoui [2021]. The second one relates to energy production through wind [Himri et al., 2012: 2381–2385; Laouadi et al., 2025, Himri et al., 2020, Nacer et al., 2016: 3631–3642], solar and photovoltaic [El-Kenawy et al., 2022: 5837–5854; Kaid et al., 2018: 169–182, Bouziane et al., 2022]. The third one covers the country's energy policy and the promotion of RES [Bouznit et al., 2020; Sahnoune et al., 2016; Haddoum et al., 2018]. The presented studies do not address the issue of assessing the effectiveness of RES project financing mechanisms, which provides an opportunity to examine this issue.

2. Materials and methods

The achievement of the adopted objective required the use of the following research methods. Firstly, a review of the literature on the Algerian energy sector was conducted, focusing on the adopted objectives and strategies leading to the diversification of the energy mix towards RES based on domestic and foreign sources of financing. Next, using an analysis of national legislation, incentives and forms of support for domestic and foreign investors to implement RES projects were identified. In the next step, documents on cooperation with international institutions and organisations, i.e., the European Union, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and the United Nations, were analysed to determine the types of support provided. Then, based on an analysis of online sources and Algerian legislation, the functioning of private support in the PPP formula and the projects in which it was used were identified.

The effectiveness of financing mechanisms was determined based on a case study analysis and an analysis of data on the renewable energy sector published by, for example, the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), the International Energy Agency (IEA), and the Ministry of Energy. The first study presented the largest solar and wind power plant projects contracted under PPP arrangements, together with the amount of energy generated. This made it possible to determine how the energy potential of renewable energy sources has changed over the years. The analysis of the data made it possible to determine:

- the share of solar and wind energy in the total energy mix,
- the share of solar and wind energy in total renewable energy production,
- per capita energy production from renewable energy sources,
- the level of implementation of the renewable energy development program in the field of solar and wind energy.

This made it possible to determine the effectiveness of the used financing mechanisms, while identifying the barriers that prevent their full utilisation.

3. Financing mechanisms for RES in Algeria

To promote and develop investment in renewable energy, the Algerian authorities are implementing initiatives to encourage domestic and foreign investors. A key move by the authorities was the implementation in 2011 of the Renewable Energy

and Energy Efficiency Development Plan [Stambouli et al., 2012: 4445–4460], which promotes the diversification of Algeria's energy portfolio, reduces dependence on fossil fuels, and limits greenhouse gas emissions by 7% by 2030 [Algeria's INDC-UNFCCC, 2018]. In addition, it was assumed that by 2030, 40% of the country's electricity production would be generated from renewable sources, including 37% from solar energy and 3% from wind energy. The total generated capacity was to amount to 23 000 MW, of which 10 000 MW would be exported to the European energy market [Nachmany et al., 2015]. In 2015, it was revised to 22 000 MW, of which 12 000 MW is to supply the national energy system and the remainder will be exported to EU countries [Abada et al. 2018: 1–7]. In addition, the share of renewable energy in the national energy mix was reduced to 27% in 2030. Achieving the adopted targets requires the use of appropriate financing mechanisms. These should be understood as methods of obtaining financial resources for the implementation of specific projects. They may come from private entities, foreign organisations and institutions, as well as the state in the form of share purchases, credits, loans, subsidies, public funds, or tax exemptions [www 4 h].

In Algeria, the renewable energy sector is being recapitalised through national support linked to domestic legislation, international aid from the European Union, the World Bank, and the African Development Bank, as well as the participation of domestic and foreign private entrepreneurs in PPPs related to renewable energy infrastructure.

3.1. Domestic support

Algeria's energy policy is regulated by Law No. 99-09 of 2009 on the rationalization of internal energy consumption, the promotion of electricity generation from renewable sources (sun, geothermal, wind, and water), and the fight against greenhouse gas emissions in residential areas. In 2011, the National Energy Management Fund was established to support the renewable energy sector by providing financial assistance or interest-free loans for all activities and investment projects carried out in the sector. In addition, the National Renewable Energy and Cogeneration Fund (NFREC) was established, financed by 1% of the license fee on crude oil and energy consumption taxes paid by energy users [Nachmany et al., 2015]. It uses its funds to finance, for example, renewable energy sources and cogeneration in the area of guaranteed tariffs for the purchase of electricity (PPA) and various costs of renewable energy projects,

i.e., the implementation of power plant projects, the purchase of production equipment, the financing of additional production and maintenance costs of production facilities, or the financing of training or research and development (R&D) work.

One form of incentive for domestic and foreign investors to implement renewable energy projects is guaranteed tariffs. These serve to cover the additional costs associated with energy production and diversification [Ghezlouna et al., 2014]. Owners of renewable energy production facilities receive a bonus from the government – an increased base tariff – for each kWh produced, consumed or sold. The rate depends on the production technology used and the amount of energy generated. Solar energy is the most lucrative – 300% – and hydroelectric energy is the least lucrative – 100%. In addition, the Algerian government has committed to purchasing all renewable energy produced by photovoltaic and wind cells for 20 years at a price exceeding the total production costs. It is worth noting that the rate depends on the capacity of the installation and the investment operating period.

Table 1. RES feed-in tariffs

	Power	Feed-In Tariff (DZD/kWh)	
		5 Initial Years	15 Remaining Years
Wind	1 to 5 MW	13.10	9.55–16.66
	More than 5 MW	10.48	7.64–13.33
Solar PV	1 to 5 MW	15.94	11.80–20.08
	More than 5 MW	12.75	9.44–16.06

Source: [Bouznit, Pablo-Romero, Sánchez-Braza, 2020].

The data in Table 1 shows that for the first 5 years, the investor receives a fixed remuneration for each kWh produced, and from the sixth year onwards, the rate may change depending on the level of energy generated, as confirmed by the data in Table 2.

The table below shows that in the second phase of the investment, the highest rate per kWh produced will be paid to the installation that achieves its energy potential in the shortest time during the year.

Table 2. Phases of feed-in tariffs in Algeria

	Hours of annal operation	Feed-In Tariff (DZD/kWh) per plant size	
Phase I		1–5 MW	> 5MW
Phase II	–	15.94/kWh ($202/MWh)	12.75/kWh ($162/MWh)
	1275–1349	20.08/kWh ($255/MWh)	16.06/kWh ($204/MWh)
	1350–1424	18.83/kWh ($239/MWh)	15.06/kWh ($191/MWh)
	1425–1499	17.45/kWh ($222/MWh)	13.96/kWh ($177/MWh)
	1500–1574	15.94/kWh ($202/MWh)	12.75/kWh ($162/MWh)
	1575–1649	14.43/kWh ($183/MWh)	11.54/kWh($147/MWh)
	1575–1649	13.06/kWh ($166/MWh)	10.44/kWh ($133/MWh
	≥1725	11.80/kWh ($150/MWh)	9.44/kWh ($120/MWh)

Source: [Serdouk, F.] A legal framework of renewable energies and climate change in Algeria.

Further forms of support are included in the Algerian legislative code of August 20, 2001, which allows domestic and foreign entities to invest in any area of the economy, including renewable energy sources. These include tax breaks, the list and duration of which vary depending on the phase of the project. The project implementation period is a maximum of 5 years, and the exploitation period is 10 years [Bouznit et al., 2020]. In the first phase, the investor is exempt from customs duties and VAT, does not incur the costs of company registration, capital increase, transfer of real estate ownership, and obtains a 10-year exemption from land tax related to real estate used in the production process. In the second phase, exemptions apply to corporate income tax, turnover tax, customs duties, VAT, and equipment and goods used in the production process.

Referring to the presented benefits, Ramli and Twa argue that they encourage investors to implement investments by mitigating the financial risk associated with renewable energy projects [Ramli et al., 2015: 649–661].

3.2. Support from foreign institutions and organisations

The inflow of capital from international institutions and organisations is essential for the development of renewable energy infrastructure, technology transfer,

and alleviating national budget constraints [Stambouli et al., 2024: 753–763]. The Algerian government cooperates with the European Union, the World Bank, and the African Development Bank. In addition, it obtains funds from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as the Climate Investment Fund (CIF).

Cooperation with the European Union is based on the 2005 Association Agreement, the July 2013 Memorandum on Strategic Energy Partnership [www 5], the European Neighbourhood Policy, the renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood – New Agenda for the Mediterranean Region of 2021, the Mediterranean Solar Plan and the LEAP-RE program offering funding for renewable energy projects [www 6]. Between 2014 and 2020, Algeria received approximately €80 million under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) – part of €236 million in grant support [www 7] – for investments in renewable energy infrastructure, technological innovation, and energy efficiency improvements. The obtained funds made it possible to attract significant investments promoting the creation of solar parks [Zahraoui et al., 2021]. In addition, this cooperation provides access to advanced technologies and expertise, strengthening the capacity to develop sustainable energy solutions within the framework of a long-term joint partnership between the EU and the African Union in the field of research and innovation in renewable energy. Between 2021 and 2027, the EU will provide Algeria with €13.5 million for the implementation of the Paris Agreement and €28 million for renewable energy and energy efficiency through the Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) [www 8].

The African Development Bank (AFDB) provided Algeria with $160 million in support in 2010 from the Clean Technology Fund (CTF), which is part of the Climate Investment Fund (CIF), as part of the MENA concentrated solar power program for the implementation of the Meahir, Namma and Hassi R'mel II, and $1.8 million in technical support [CIF, 2014]. In 2016, it recapitalised the Program for the Support of Industrial and Energy Competitiveness (PACIE) with EUR 900 million, aimed at improving the efficiency of the energy sector [www 9]. In 2020, the Algerian government requested funding for the national Renewable Energy Program (AREP) in the amount of $995 million for the identification and assessment of the potential of solar project locations, the preparation of a legal framework, including concession agreement templates and PPA agreements, and tender documentation for the selection of investors [www 10].

Cooperation with the World Bank includes technical assistance and analytical services to accelerate the transition to cleaner energy sources, as well as raising funds for the phasing out of fossil fuel subsidies and oil subsidies under the energy sector management assistance program [World Bank, 2018]. In addition, Algeria benefits from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It is a beneficiary of the SwitchMed initiative, phases I (2013–2018) and II (2019–2023) [www 11] to promote the transition to a circular economy and the implementation of renewable energy sources. Under the national program for Algeria for 2023–2027, the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Program will allocate $776 million to increase electricity generation from renewable energy sources from 0.4% to 13% [Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme, 2023].

3.3. Private support

Cooperation with global companies specialising in renewable energy technologies enables the promotion of knowledge transfer, support for local innovation, development of national renewable energy potential, implementation of advanced technologies, and acquisition of financing for key renewable energy investments.

Since 2009, Algeria has applied a 50/49% rule, under which foreign investors could only hold a 49% stake in an Algerian joint venture, organise their finances through local banks, and the state had the right of first refusal on the completed investment [Serdouk, 2017]. The PPP regulation was introduced by Executive Decree No. 17–98 of February 26, 2017, introducing the organisation of auctions for projects related to renewable energy sources. According to the decree, the auction is opened by the minister responsible for the environment and renewable energy sources, who is also responsible for processing bids. Participation in the tender requires the submission of an energy project together with an economic assessment model. The government appoints public companies to participate in the implementation of the submitted projects [RES4Africa Foundation, 2018].

In 2002, as part of a PPP, the joint-stock company NEAL was established, responsible for projects related to the production of electricity from renewable energy sources, in which the state-owned companies Sonatrach and Sonelgaz held a 90% stake, and the Italian company SIM held 10% [Stambouli et al., 2011:

1169–1181]. At the beginning of the second decade of the 2000s, Sonelgaz established cooperation with the French electrical engineering company Cegelec for the construction of a wind farm in Adrad. In 2013, Shariket el Kahraba wa el Taket el Moutadiadida (SKTM), a subsidiary of Sonelgaz, was a party to a tender for the supply of photovoltaic farm projects with a total capacity of 233 MW of energy. The tender was won by the Chinese consortium Yingli Green Energy, which undertook to prepare the projects and implement the investment [www 12]. In February 2023, as part of the Solar 1000 Program, the Minister of the Environment opened a tender for the construction of 2 GW of solar power plants in the sunniest regions of Algeria based on a build-own-operate (BOO) contract. The tender assumed a 34% share of SHAEMS (a joint venture between Sonatrach and Sonelgaz) in the project company, financing of the project from equity and bank loans in a ratio of 20 to 80%. However, the project contractor could count on a 25-year PPA agreement with SADEG, a Sonelgaz group entity [www 13].

A consortium of Chinese companies, including China Water & Electric Corporation (CWE) and China Nuclear Industry Huaxing Construction (HXCC), the Turkish company Özgün İnşaat, the Chinese company China State Construction Engineering Corporation (SCCEC), the subsidiary COSIDER Canalisation, the Chinese company PowerChina, and the Chinese company Longi Green Energy Technology [www 14].

4. Effectiveness of financing mechanisms for RES projects in Algeria

The effectiveness of RES project financing mechanisms should be interpreted as the effects of financial capital expenditure, which have a direct impact on the energy balance, the natural environment, and society. Determining this requires an analysis of the largest completed and contracted renewable energy projects in solar and wind energy, as well as an analysis of statistical data from the Algerian renewable energy sector based on reports from the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), the International Energy Agency (IEA), and the Ministry of Energy.

4.1. Case study – largest RES projects in solar and wind energy

The first Algerian hybrid power plant was built in 2011 by the joint-stock company NEAL in cooperation with the Spanish company ABENER ENERGÍA and

the CONFIDES organisation. Located in Tilghemt Hassi R'Mel, ISCC generates 150 MW of power [www 15]. It was built under a build-own-operate (BOO) contract, with ownership supervision transferred to Sonatrach. Four years later, in cooperation with the French company Cegelec, the 10 MW Kabertene wind farm was built in Adrar, which is managed by a subsidiary of Sonelgaz [www 16; www 17].

Between 2015 and 2016, four photovoltaic parks were commissioned as part of an agreement between Shariket Kahraba oua Takat Moutadjadida and the Chinese consortium Yingli Green Energy. Located in Aradar, the Sonelgaz Algeria Solar PV Park generates 233 MW of power [www 18], the Laghouat Solar PV Park has a capacity of 60 MW [www 19 h], the Djelfa Solar PV Park generates 53 MW of energy [www 20], and the Ouargla Solar PV Park generates 30 MW [www 21]. These power plants are owned by Algeria through Sonelgaz or its subsidiary. Meanwhile, the Hauts Plateaux West Saida Solar PV power plant, completed in 2016 by Shariket Kahraba oua Takat Moutadjadida and located in Saida, produces 29.88 MW of energy [www 22].

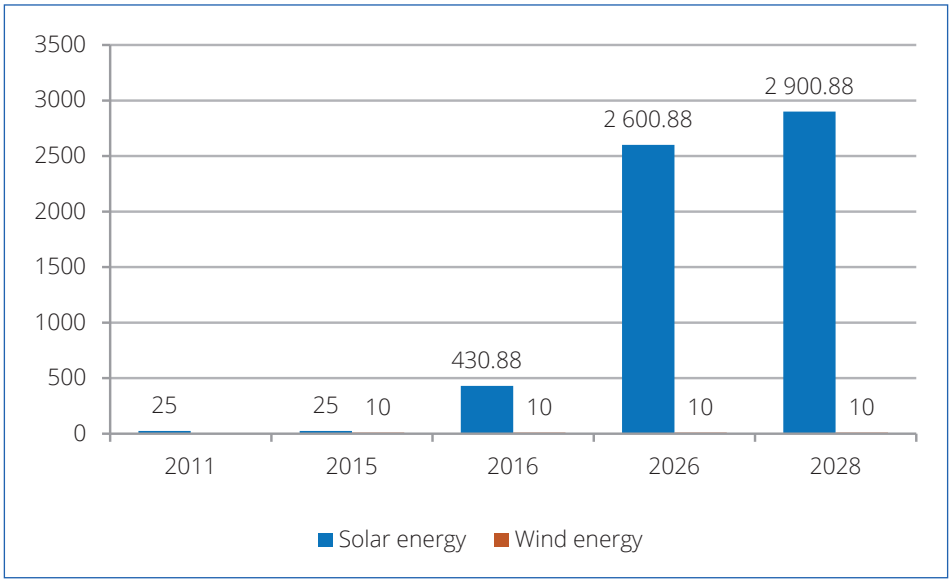
In November 2023, agreements were concluded with foreign companies for the implementation of investments in solar power plants. As part of the co-operation with Chinese partners, nine installations are to be built. Batmet with a capacity of 220 MW in M'sila Wilaya, Gueltet Sidi Saad in Laghouat Wilaya generating 200 MW of energy; Douar El Maa producing 200 MW in El Oued Wilaya; Abadla – 80 MW in Bechar Wilaya; Ouled Djelal Wilaya generating 80 MW, Ouled Fadel in Batna Wilaya with a capacity of 220 MW, Tendla in El M'ghaier Wilaya generating 200 MW, a 200 MW power plant in Laghrous and in Khanguet Sidi Nadji generating 150 MW of energy [www 23]. The Spanish company is responsible for projects in Béchar and Laghouat with a capacity of 150 and 250 MW, while the Turkish one is responsible for a 300 MW solar farm in Hassi Delaa [www 24]. The commissioning of the presented installations is planned for the end of 2025 or the beginning of 2026, and the Turkish one in 2028.

The 200 MW solar power plant in Tindouf, built in cooperation with the Chinese CGC group, together with an energy storage system, is to cover the demand of the Gara-Djebilet mining deposit and auxiliary facilities, including the high-voltage network of the wilaya of Tindouf [www 25]. It is scheduled to be commissioned in 2026.

A characteristic feature of the presented projects is the use of the BOO formula, which allows a public entity to take over the rights to the completed

installation and finance a private partner through guaranteed tariffs (PPA). In addition, the use of a special purpose vehicle made it possible to obtain funds for the investment from domestic and foreign banks and international institutions. Based on the data presented above, it is possible to determine Algeria's solar and wind energy potential for the period 2011–2028 (commissioning of the last power plant).

Figure 1. Wind and solar energy potential of Algeria in relation to biggest PPP projects



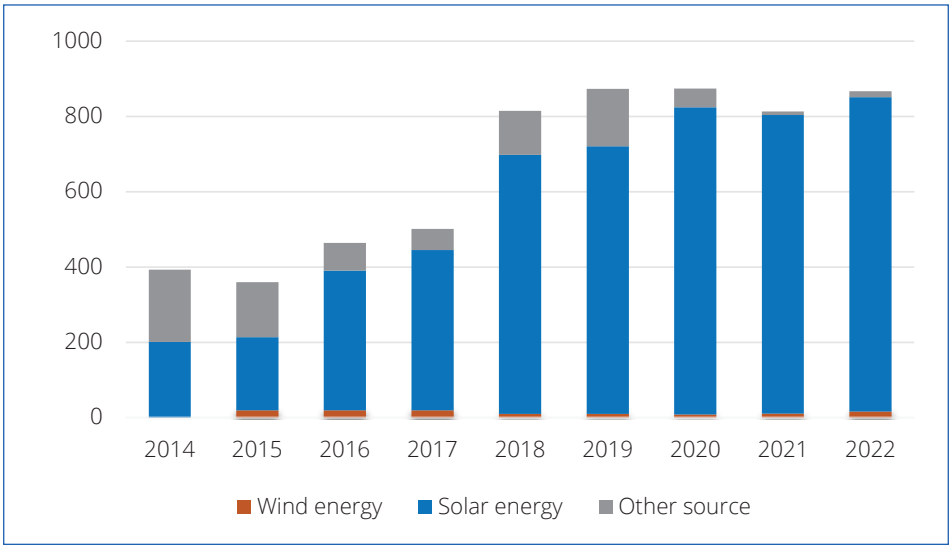
Source: the author's own work.

The above chart shows that wind energy generation amounts to only 10 MW despite significant geographical conditions. On the other hand, solar energy potential is steadily increasing. In 2016, it amounted to approx. 431 MW, and partnerships concluded seven years later will enable an increase to 2.9 GW in 2028. It should therefore be concluded that establishing cooperation with private entities contributes to the growth of solar energy potential. The stagnation of investments in wind farms remains striking.

4.2. Evaluation of the effectiveness of RES financing mechanisms – analysis of national and foreign reports.

The assessment of the effectiveness of financing mechanisms focused on the share of energy generated by solar and wind power plants in the total level of renewable energy sources in 2014–2022.

Figure 2. Share of solar and wind energy in the total renewable energy production



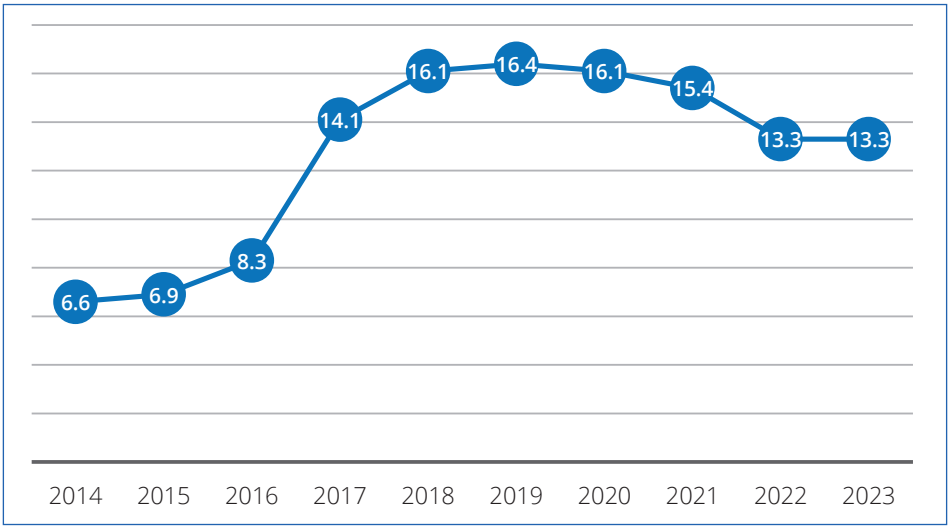
Source: the author's own work.

The above chart shows that, in the adopted time horizon, the amount of energy from renewable sources showed an upward trend, except for 2021, due to the pandemic, and in 2022 it amounted to 867 GWh. In addition, solar energy accounted for the highest percentage of total energy generated, while wind energy accounted for a marginal percentage. This is due to the photovoltaic farm projects implemented since 2015 under PPP.

Another factor was the number of watts of renewable energy produced per capita. From Figure 3, we can see that between 2014 and 2019, there was a steady increase in energy per capita. However, in the last four years, there has been a downward trend caused by the effects of the pandemic.

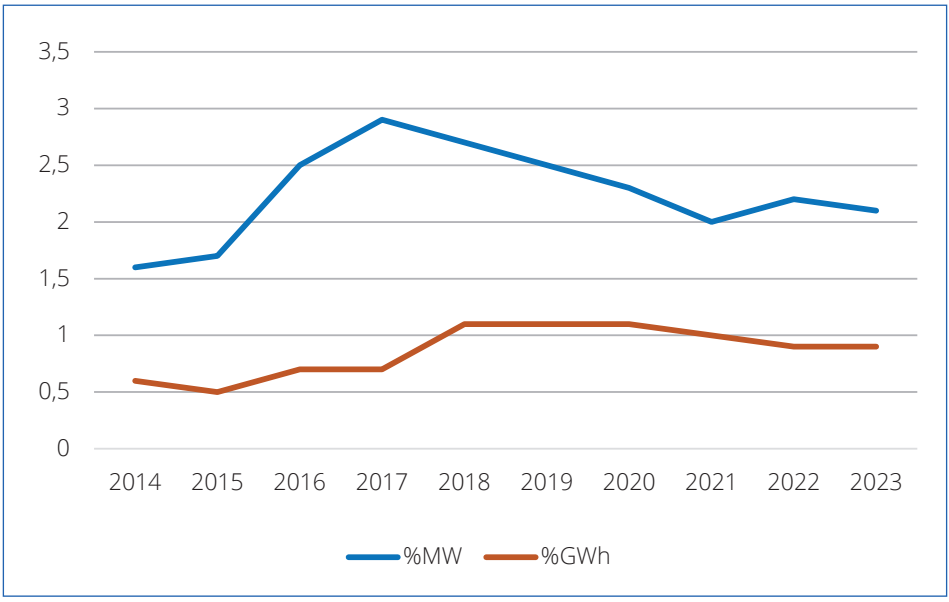
Next, the share of the RES sector in the country's total energy mix was analysed in terms of potential and generated energy (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Renewable energy production per capita



Source: the author's own work.

Figure 4. Share of% of energy potential and level of energy generated by renewable energy sources in Algeria's energy sector



Source: the author's own work.

The data presented above shows that the renewable energy sector has a higher percentage of generation potential in relation to the generated power. In the adopted time horizon, the % potential curve showed greater fluctuations, which may have resulted from decreasing precipitation in 2017–2020, which could have affected the operation of hydroelectric power plants [www 26]. Furthermore, in both examined categories, renewable energy sources account for a marginal share of the total energy mix. The energy potential in 2022 was 2.1%, and the energy generated was 0.9%.

The last analysed issue is the implementation of the renewable energy development program in the field of solar and wind energy in phases I and II, which is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Realisation of renewable energy development program regarded to solar and wind energy

MW Unit	FASE I 2015–2020	Potential 2020	% of plan realized	FASE II 2021–2030	Potential 2023	% of plan realized
Solar Energy (PV & CSP)	3000	441	14.7	12 575	547	4
Wind Energy	1.01	10	990	4000	10	0.25

Source: the author's own work.

The above data shows that the Algerian government has set a high level of energy generated from renewable sources. In the first phase, the target for solar energy set for 2020 was achieved at 14.7%, and for wind energy at 990% of the adopted plan. However, in the second phase, after two years of implementation, the potential of solar farms was recorded at 4% and wind farms at 0.25% of the plan. It is worth noting that this is the beginning of the second phase, and the CSP and PV power plants built between 2025 and 2028 may significantly improve the potential under study. However, it should be noted that the results achieved in both phases are well below expectations compared to the adopted targets.

The analysis shows that the use of RES financing mechanisms in the area of solar and wind energy was effective in terms of the increasing share of solar energy in total RES capacity, the growing number of watts per capita, and the stable growth of the percentage of potential and generated energy in relation to the

energy sector. This is due to the use of the PPP formula for the construction of solar installations (PV and CPS). However, the ineffectiveness of financing mechanisms was detected in the context of the negligible share of RES in the total energy mix and the failure to achieve the objectives of the renewable energy development program. According to RES4MED [RES4Africa Foundation, 2018] and Zeggagha and Ziane [2025: 1–16], this is due to legislative aspects and auction procedures. They point to the protracted administrative process of approving and implementing RES projects, gaps between legislative rules and their implementation, the unpreparedness of local financial institutions to implement RES projects, and the protracted auction process resulting in delays, reduced capacity, or postponements. The regulatory barriers presented may affect investment uncertainty and discourage potential investors from investing capital in the Algerian RES sector. This is confirmed by the cancellation in 2010–2021 of auctions for the supply of solar energy with a potential of 4 000 MW, which is the highest result in North African countries [IRENA, 2023].

5. Conclusions

Based on the conducted research, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Three financing mechanisms are used in the Algerian renewable energy sector: national, international, and private.
2. National support includes the implementation of tax breaks, exemptions, and financial incentives for domestic and foreign investors. Private support, on the other hand, concerns public-private partnerships.
3. Funding obtained from foreign entities includes the adaptation of national legislation to the Paris Agreement, the modernisation of renewable energy infrastructure, technical assistance and analytical services to accelerate the transition to cleaner energy sources, and the withdrawal and reduction of subsidies and subsidies for conventional fuels.
4. The participation of foreign investors in PV and CSP farm projects will enable an increase in solar energy capacity to 2.9 GW in 2028.

The financing mechanisms used in Algeria are effective in terms of the share of solar energy in total renewable energy capacity, the amount of renewable energy per capita, and the growing percentage of energy potential and renewable energy levels in the entire energy sector. However, their ineffectiveness relates to the

unfulfilled objectives of the renewable energy development program, which are the result of the government's ambitious goals and the existence of legislative and tender barriers that contribute to uncertainty among investors. Appropriate adjustment of the requirements for renewable energy potential, together with the removal of these barriers, could increase the inflow of foreign capital.

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THE IMPACT OF THE DEPOSIT SYSTEM ON SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article is to present the principles of operation of the deposit system in Poland and to indicate how society can engage in the functioning of this system, with the active participation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The study examines the legal framework governing the deposit system implementation and its potential environmental and social impacts.
- *Research methodology* – The research methodology is based on legal analysis of the European Union directives, particularly the Single Use Plastic (SUP) Directive, and comparative analysis of deposit systems functioning in the selected EU Member States. The study also incorporates the analysis of the Polish legal regulations implementing the deposit system and the examination of the role of non-governmental organisations in environmental protection.
- *Score/results* – The analysis reveals that the Polish deposit system, scheduled to begin operation in October 2025, goes beyond the requirements of the SUP Directive by including not only single-use plastic bottles for beverages up to 3 liters but also reusable glass bottles up to 1.5 liters and metal cans up to 1 liter. The research demonstrates that deposit systems in other EU countries achieve collection rates of 80–90% through high consumer participation.
- *Originality/value* – The study contributes to the understanding of legal and social mechanisms for implementing environmental policies at the national level. The

originality lies in analysing the role of non-governmental organisations in creating an "ecological society" and examining the Polish deposit system in the context of the EU legal requirements and comparative experiences of other Member States.

Keywords: deposit system, environmental law, non-governmental organisations, packaging waste, circular economy, Single Use Plastic Directive

1. Introduction

The deposit system represents a mechanism whereby consumers are charged an additional cost, called a deposit, when purchasing beverages in specific packaging. This cost is refunded when the packaging is returned to a designated collection point. This solution has been proven effective in many countries, such as Germany, Slovakia, Sweden, and Norway, where significant waste reduction has been achieved through high consumer participation. In Poland, this system is scheduled to begin operation from October 2025. The subject of this article is to present the principles of operation of the deposit system in Poland and to indicate how society can engage in the functioning of this system, with the active participation of environmental organisations.

2. The "Plastic Directive"

The European directive known as Single Use Plastic (SUP) has been in force since July 3, 2019. It aims to phase out certain single-use products made from plastics [www 1].

The Directive's objective is to reduce the use of the most environmentally polluting products listed in its annexes, as well as all products made from oxo-degradable plastics and fishing gear containing plastics. According to estimates, single-use plastic products covered by the measures of this directive constitute approximately 86% of single-use plastic products found on beaches in the European Union [www 2].

In accordance with the directive, EU Member States are obligated to introduce bans and other measures aimed at reducing the use of these products. Furthermore, the SUP Directive aims to support a circular economy, which prioritises sustainable and non-toxic reusable products and reuse systems, instead of single-use products, primarily aimed at reducing the amount of generated waste. The Directive

assumes ensuring separate collection of packaging waste from single-use plastic bottles for beverages with a capacity of up to 3 litres (including their caps and lids) at a level of 77% in 2025 and 90% in 2029. The Directive prohibits the sale of plastic cotton buds, cutlery, straws, and single-use polystyrene cups. In addition to bans on placing certain products on the market, the SUP Directive obligates EU Member States to collect at least 77% of the plastic bottles introduced into circulation after 2024, with this level expected to increase to 90% in 2029.

The EU Directive on single-use plastic products recommends introducing solutions such as establishing deposit return systems and setting targets for separate collection in relation to the appropriate extended producer responsibility systems as ways to meet the challenges associated with plastic pollution of the environment. Importantly, the SUP Directive does not directly mandate the implementation of deposit systems in EU Member States; this is only a recommendation, indicating – in accordance with the spirit of EU directives – the goal to be achieved, without simultaneously specifying binding methods or legal instruments for achieving this goal [Cesarz, 2014: 188].

The Directive emphasises taking measures to promote awareness, and it indicate that the role of various types of non-governmental organisations should be recognised and emphasised. It is assumed that Member States take measures to inform consumers and encourage them to behave responsibly to reduce littering from products covered by this directive and take measures to inform consumers of single-use plastic products listed in part G of the annex and users of fishing gear containing plastics [www 1].

EU Member States are taking active measures to implement the provisions of the SUP Directive. For example, France mandated a reduction in the introduction of plastic bottles to 50% by 2030 and achieving a minimum level of returnable beverage packaging of 5% by 2023 and 10% by 2027 [www 3].

Currently, deposit systems function in Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, the Netherlands, Iceland, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, Germany, Norway, Slovakia, and Sweden. It is estimated that approximately 138 million people use it, and it ensures a return rate of 80–90% [www 4].

3. The Polish deposit system

In Poland, approximately 240,000 tons of PET bottles alone are put into circulation annually, of which only 50% are recycled.

The provisions of the directive were transposed into the Polish law only by the Act of April 14, 2023, amending the Act on entrepreneurs' obligations regarding the management of certain waste and the product fee and certain other acts [Act of April 14, 2023, item 877, 2023]. The Polish legislator, when designing the deposit system, showed certain overzealousness, as it exceeded the requirements of the SUP directive. The deposit system covers not only single-use plastic bottles for beverages with a capacity of up to 3 litres but also reusable glass bottles up to 1.5 litres and metal cans up to 1 litre. However, milk packaging was excluded from the system due to the potential contamination of this waste and hygienic consequences.

The deposit for PET bottles and metal cans will be PLN 0.50, and for reusable glass bottles – PLN 1.00 [Regulation of July 8, 2024, item 1046, 2024]. The maximum deposit amount is PLN 2.00 [Regulation of July 8, 2024, item 1046, 2024].

Consumers will not be required to show a receipt to obtain a deposit refund. Any reservations by entrepreneurs making the deposit refund conditional on presenting a receipt will not be effective. This follows directly from Article 40 g paragraph 1 point 4 of the Act on Packaging and Packaging Waste Management [Act of June 13, 2013, item 927, 2024].

According to the Act amending the Act on entrepreneurs' obligations regarding the management of certain waste and the product fee and certain other acts, large stores with an area exceeding 200 square meters will be required to collect empty packaging and refund deposits. Smaller stores will collect deposits, but joining the packaging collection system will be voluntary in their case.

The system's assumption is that a deposit will be collected for each beverage introduced to the market in packaging covered by this system. The refund of this deposit to the end user will also occur through the system, without the need to show a purchase receipt for the beverage [Act of June 13, 2013, item 927, 2024]. Uncollected deposits will be allocated to financing the deposit system. The deposit is intended to encourage the return of packaging and increase the amount of reused and processed raw materials used to produce packaging [Act of June 13, 2013, Art. 40i para. 4, 2013].

The assumptions of the Polish deposit system are based on the principle that when purchasing a beverage in packaging with a logo, a deposit will be collected from the customer. The deposit is to be added to the price of beverages only at the checkout. All commercial units, regardless of their area, if they offer beverages in packaging covered by the system, will collect deposits, with the business profile of a given store being irrelevant – only the products offered matter.

Packaging covered by the system will be appropriately marked with the deposit system logo. It will not be possible to collect a deposit for packaging without a logo, so it will not be possible to obtain a deposit for bottles purchased before the system comes into effect. A deposit can be collected when returning packaging. When returning packaging to recover the deposit, showing a receipt will not be required. Packaging can be returned at any collection point. Packaging should not be crushed before being handed over to the collection point. This represents a significant difference from how society has been educated so far, requiring the crushing of plastic bottles primarily so that more could fit into the waste bag and consequently onto the waste collection vehicle – which in practice reduces waste transport costs.

A requirement was introduced to create at least one stationary point for collecting packaging and packaging waste covered by the deposit system in each municipality. It will be possible to create points for collecting empty packaging outside commercial units.

An important element of the system will be entities operating the deposit system. According to Article 40 g paragraph 2 of the Act on Packaging Management, the deposit system is operated by a representing entity that meets the conditions specified in the act:

1. is a joint-stock company with its seat in the country, established by entities introducing products in beverage packaging or directly introducing products in beverage packaging, or representing their employers' associations or chambers of commerce;
2. its shareholders are exclusively the entities mentioned above;
3. members of its supervisory board, members of its management board, or its proxies have not been convicted by a final court judgment for an intentional crime or intentional fiscal crime;
4. has not been finally convicted under the provisions of the Act of October 28, 2002, on the liability of collective entities for acts prohibited under the threat of penalty;
5. fulfills the obligations specified in the act, and revenues obtained from business activities are allocated exclusively to statutory purposes;
6. exclusively performs the activities related to packaging and packaging waste management and organising and operating the deposit system;
7. has an appropriate permit and required share capital (of at least PLN 500 000).

The representing entity has ownership rights to waste from the packaging collected within the deposit system operated by this entity. The representing entity that collected packaging or packaging waste from packaging covered by the deposit system from this entity is obligated to refund the deposit to the entity that refunded the deposit to the end user.

In case of an operation of more than one deposit system, representing entities operating these systems are obligated to establish among themselves, through a written agreement in paper or electronic form under penalty of invalidity, the conditions for settling the collected and refunded deposits and settling and exchanging packaging or packaging waste collected within the deposit systems operated by them. The agreement is concluded before the launch date of each subsequent deposit system.

The representing entity that concluded the agreement is obligated to provide a copy of this agreement no later than within 14 days from the date of its conclusion to the minister responsible for climate affairs.

The representing entity within the deposit system ensures:

1. selective collection of packaging and packaging waste to achieve the required levels referred to in Annex 1a to the act;
2. collection of packaging and packaging waste from retail and wholesale trade units and other points collecting packaging and packaging waste covered by the deposit system;
3. transport of packaging to the entity introducing products in beverage packaging or directly introducing products in beverage packaging and packaging waste to the waste processing facilities;
4. maintaining records and preparing reports;
5. settling deposits with retail and wholesale trade units and other points collecting packaging and packaging waste covered by the deposit system, particularly financing the deposit payments for end users;
6. financing costs of collecting packaging and packaging waste by entrepreneurs operating retail and wholesale trade units and other points collecting packaging and packaging waste covered by the deposit system.

The costs of these activities are financed by the entities introducing products in beverage packaging and directly introducing products in beverage packaging. The financial settlement between retail and wholesale trade units and other points collecting packaging and packaging waste covered by the deposit system and the representing entity, as well as between representing entities operating different deposit systems, occurs within a settlement period not longer than one month.

The permission to operate a deposit system is issued upon application by the representing entity. Operating a deposit system requires obtaining a permit issued by decision by the minister responsible for climate affairs. The permission to operate a deposit system is issued for a specified period, not longer than 10 years from the launch of the deposit system.

The entities introducing products in beverage packaging and directly introducing products in beverage packaging are obligated to place marking on packaging indicating coverage by the deposit system and specifying the deposit amount. Throughout 2024, 8 applications from 8 companies seeking the status of the representing entity were submitted to the Minister of Climate and Environment. Currently, 5 companies have received permits to operate deposit systems [www 5].

It appears that the shape of the system proposed by the legislator and the role of the representing entities assumed in it does not provide for an important issue, which is ensuring space for managing the waste collected within the deposit system. No provision requires that the representing entity must have installations allowing for the management of waste collected within the deposit system. Therefore, it should be assumed that the representing entities will currently seek waste managers with whom they will sign contracts for waste management. The problem is that the waste management (not only these, but all, regardless of how valuable material they may constitute on the market) will have to be paid for, and the costs of the system operation are to be covered by uncollected deposits – probably the amount of funds obtained in this way will not cover the management costs. It can be assumed that the representing entities will want to transfer waste for management free of charge, so that managers can obtain funds either from further transfer of waste for recycling or from trading in documents confirming recycling (DPR). However, such action is legally questionable, considering that it is not possible to perform waste management services free of charge (at zero rate). Even if the waste in question is only collected by another entity, this undoubtedly constitutes waste management, which should lead to accepting waste according to the applicable price list.

It is also worth noting that nearly one in four Poles (23%) has never heard of the deposit system and does not know that it will begin operation this year. A similar number of people believe that the problem of littering public areas with waste hardly exists in Poland. Among the litter we most often see in forests, parks, and on the streets, we primarily mention cigarette butts (39% of respondents see them “a lot” and “daily”), small alcohol bottles, so-called “małpki” (25%), and PET plastic bottles (24%) [Pawłowski, 2025].

4. The deposit system in the selected EU countries

The Polish deposit system is modeled on solutions introduced in other EU states, particularly on the German system. A mandatory deposit system was introduced in Germany in 2003. Initially, it covered single-use packaging for mineral water, beer, and carbonated beverages. In the subsequent years, deposits began to apply to additional packaging.

In Germany, two deposit systems are primarily distinguished – for single-use and reusable packaging. The first type consists mainly of single-use plastic bottles and beverage cans, which are subject to a deposit of 25 euro cents. Their distributors are obligated to accept completely emptied packaging free of charge. Reusable packaging (including glass bottles) is subject to a deposit of 8–15 euro cents. In their case, distributors must accept only those emptied packages that they introduced into circulation. This means that in Germany, almost every type of bottle (plastic and glass) and beverage must be returned to the store. Packaging return takes place in special machines located near or inside larger stores, and in smaller stores – in a designated place near the checkout. The machine provides a refund in the form of a voucher to be used for shopping in a specific store branch. Each deposit packaging must have appropriate marking enabling identification of the deposit type. The German system is not only about collecting packaging but also concerns recycling it. According to regulations, every seller must ensure the collection of all the returned single-use and reusable packaging and transfer them for appropriate recycling.

Another example is Sweden, which achieves one of the highest waste recycling levels. Sweden was the first country in the world to introduce a deposit for glass bottles in 1885. The modern system has included beverage cans since 1984 and small and large PET plastic bottles since 1994. Since last year, juice packaging has been included in the system, and the Swedish state monopoly store chain Systembolaget began charging fees for some plastic wine bottles. The Swedish Parliament set a goal for 90% of beverage packaging to be returned. Currently, this is 88.5%. The deposit usually amounts to 1–2 crowns (approximately 0.4–0.8 PLN). Customers can recover money by putting bottles and cans into machines, which are usually located in grocery stores or nearby. In many locations, this involves the necessity of shopping for the recovered amount, though there is also the possibility of donating the recovered money to charity.

In Sweden, the private company Returpack AB, created by three industry organisations associating producers of beer and non-alcoholic beverages, is responsible for organising the deposit system for packaging. The company has its

own PET bottle processing plant in Norrkoping and also promotes bottle returns through social advertising [www 6].

Deposit systems already operate in Scandinavian countries, Slovakia, Romania, and Estonia. Countries such as France and Italy have not yet decided to introduce them.

5. The role of non-governmental organisations in creating an "Ecological Society"

The theoretical framework for understanding the role of non-governmental organisations in environmental policy implementation is grounded in the governance theory, especially through the lenses of multi-level governance (MLG) and network governance.

Multi-level governance is a concept that emerged from policy debates and from the restructuring of political systems, emphasising the vertical integration of governance across multiple levels – local, regional, national, and international – and the involvement of diverse actors, including NGOs, in decision-making processes [Partelow et al., 2020]. It recognises that environmental policies often require coordination between different levels of government and non-state actors to be effectively implemented, highlighting the importance of communication and cooperation across these levels. MLG assumes that better vertical integration enhances governance effectiveness, allowing top-down policies to be adapted and implemented at local levels where NGOs often play a critical role. This framework is especially useful for understanding how international or national environmental policies translate into local action through the participation of NGOs and other stakeholders [Paavola, 2015; Di Gregorio et al., 2019]. On the other hand, network governance complements MLG by focusing on the horizontal relationships and interactions among actors within governance systems, including NGOs, government agencies, and private stakeholders [Partelow et al., 2020]. It highlights how NGOs and other actors form decentralised, pluralistic networks that facilitate information sharing, social learning, and collective action outside traditional hierarchical government structures [Di Gregorio et al., 2019]. Network governance theory examines the structure and quality of connections among actors, showing how these influence policy outcomes and implementation effectiveness [Wang, 2021]. This approach underscores the agency of NGOs and their capacity to influence environmental governance through partnerships and alliances.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for analysing the complex roles NGOs play in environmental governance, emphasising their participation in multi-level, networked processes that transcend traditional state-centric policy models. This reflects a shift towards more inclusive, adaptive, and collaborative governance arrangements necessary to address complex environmental challenges, such as the deposit system. These theoretical frameworks provide the foundation for understanding how NGOs operate in practice within the deposit system context.

Non-governmental organisations play a significant role in promoting and supporting the deposit system [Buijs et al., 2024]. Their activities encompass public education, monitoring of system operation, and initiatives for its expansion and efficiency improvement. The role of non-governmental organisations in creating an "ecological society" is particularly crucial in relation to the deposit system implementation and encompasses several key areas.

Education and shaping social awareness constitute the fundamental area of activity for environmental organisations [Fien, 2002]. These entities conduct educational programs, information campaigns, and workshops that increase the society's knowledge about environmental threats and promote responsible attitudes toward the natural environment. Through social education, they contribute to building ecological awareness, which is the foundation for the development of an ecological society [Heimlich, Ardoin, 2008: 216]. In the context of the deposit system, these organisations play a crucial role in explaining the principles of operation, benefits for the environment, and practical aspects of participation. They organise workshops in schools, local communities, and workplaces, explaining how the system functions, where packaging can be returned, and what environmental benefits result from active participation [Kollmuss, Agyeman, 2002: 251].

The mobilisation of society to action, in which organisations arrange civic actions such as protests, petitions, cleaning of green areas, or legislative initiatives that engage local communities and encourage active participation in environmental protection [Mariyam, Satria, Samsudin, 2023: 112], is equally important. Environmental associations often operate locally, allowing their members to actively participate in decision-making and implementation of pro-environmental actions. In the deposit system context, NGOs organise campaigns promoting packaging return, coordinate establishment of additional collection points in cooperation with local governments and mobilise citizens to actively use the system through competitions, challenges, and community initiatives.

The influence on policy and monitoring of government actions represents another crucial dimension of NGO activity. Non-governmental organisations serve as "guardians" of ecological policy implementation, monitoring the actions of governments and institutions, as well as influencing the formation of environmental protection law and policy at local, national, and international levels [Mariyam, Satria, Samsudin, 2023: 113–116]. Through lobbying, social consultations, and social campaigns, they force changes towards sustainable development and nature protection. Regarding the deposit system, NGOs monitor the effectiveness of implementation, evaluate the achievement of collection targets set by law, conduct independent assessments of system operation, and advocate for improvements in legal regulations and expansion of the system to include additional types of packaging.

Cooperation and partnership building constitute the final essential element of NGO activity. Environmental organisations often create civic coalitions that combine different groups and resources for more effective environmental action. Partnership between the public sector and non-governmental organisations is crucial for developing and implementing comprehensive, socially acceptable environmental protection plans [Scott, 2015: 18–19]. In relation to the deposit system, cooperation between NGOs, representing entities, local governments, and commercial units enables the creation of an effective network of collection points, ensures broad social acceptance of the system, and facilitates information exchange about best practices and encountered difficulties.

The activities of non-governmental organisations are crucial for the success of the deposit system because they ensure social legitimacy, civic oversight, and continuous improvement of its operating mechanisms. Without their involvement, the system could remain merely a "dead letter" legal provision, failing to deliver the expected environmental and social benefits. Non-governmental organisations act as a bridge between formal legal regulations and practical implementation, ensuring that the deposit system becomes not only a legal obligation but also a socially accepted and actively supported environmental protection tool.

Based on the presented analysis, non-governmental organisations are indispensable in fostering an ecological society by bridging policy frameworks and community action. Their multifaceted roles, ranging from public education and awareness-raising to active mobilisation and vigilant monitoring, ensure that environmental initiatives like the deposit system transcend legal obligations to become socially embraced and effectively implemented. By facilitating cooperation among citizens, governmental bodies, and commercial entities, NGOs enhance transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness within the environmental governance.

6. Conclusion

The deposit system is an effective legal and social instrument for reducing packaging waste and for promoting a circular economy, as confirmed by experience in various EU countries and currently being implemented in Poland. The Polish deposit system, which covers a broader range of packaging types than the minimum requirements of the Single Use Plastic Directive, has the potential to achieve high collection rates and to significantly reduce the environmental pollution from beverage packaging.

It is essential to emphasise the key role of NGOs in the system's success. Through public education, community mobilisation, monitoring, and partnership building, they bridge the gap between the legal framework and practical results. They contribute to raising environmental awareness, ensuring social acceptance, and fostering active citizen participation in packaging return activities. Furthermore, NGOs' oversight and advocacy activities enhance transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement of the system's operation.

Nevertheless, challenges remain – including ensuring adequate waste management infrastructure and ensuring cooperation among various stakeholders. The participatory approach embodied in the Polish deposit system, supported by the active involvement of NGOs, promises to deliver significant environmental, social, and economic benefits.

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UNCOVERING OF FINTECH COOPERATION IN POLISH BANKS

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article is to examine how banks listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange disclose cooperation with FinTech firms and technological innovations in their financial and non-financial reports between 2022 and 2024. The purpose is to assess the frequency, scope, and form of such disclosures and to verify whether technological narratives are explicitly linked to FinTech partnerships.
- *Research methodology* – A mixed-method design was employed: quantitative content analysis based on keyword frequency and a technological diversity index (DIM_FT), combined with qualitative assessment of narrative elements in reports.
- *Score/results* – Two distinct disclosure strategies were identified. In the tech-first model, banks emphasised digital transformation and internal technological solutions, while in the ally-first model they highlighted partnerships with FinTechs, accelerators, and ecosystem initiatives. The most frequently reported areas were digital payments, open banking, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and big data, with blockchain and robo-advisory remaining marginal. No direct correlation was observed between the intensity of technological reporting and FinTech mentions, indicating that disclosures primarily reflect communication strategies rather than the actual scale of innovation.
- *Originality/value* – The study provides novel insights into how Polish banks construct technological narratives in their disclosures. It highlights the divergence between communication and practice, offering a framework for evaluating the role of FinTech partnerships in shaping banks' innovation strategies.

Keywords: FinTech, bank FinTech cooperation, disclosure practices, innovation, digital transformation

1. Introduction

Over the past several years, financial services have undergone radical transformation, mainly as a result of technological development driven by advances in telecommunications, information technology, and financial practices [Elsaid, 2021; Gomber et al., 2017; Lee & Shin, 2018; Vives, 2019]. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2009 was a trigger, accelerating the emergence of a new group of entities providing technology to companies offering financial services [Ajambo et al., 2023; Arner et al., 2015; Buckley et al., 2022; Haddad & Hornuf, 2019; Pandey et al., 2024; Philippon, 2019]. Technological progress fostered financial innovations that have transformed many products and services in the sector, as well as the processes and organisational structures of these institutions [Elsaid, 2021; W. Frame et al., 2018].

The term FinTech is used in various business contexts, often inconsistently and ambiguously [Schueffel, 2016; Sharma et al., 2024]. No uniform definition of this concept has yet been established, and a review of the literature highlights its elusive nature, which complicates research [Gomber et al., 2017; Lee & Shin, 2018; Milian et al., 2019; Schueffel, 2016]. In a broad literature review, FinTech is generally understood as an umbrella term encompassing innovative financial solutions and business models enabled by information technologies, often referring to start-ups providing such solutions [Yan, 2025]. The concept is closely linked to technological progress in the financial sector and the implementation of technological innovations in banking services [Drago et al., 2025]. The literature emphasises that FinTech firms are typically technology-oriented financial start-ups, while the term FinTech itself refers to new financial instruments, innovative technologies, and business models delivering financial services outside the traditional banking sector [Le et al., 2024; Puschmann, 2017]. In other words, FinTechs are innovative entities employing, among others, digital assistants, chatbots, mobile applications, blockchain, and big data, which enable fast, remote, and convenient execution of financial operations [Kloba, 2024]. To summarise, the term FinTech serves as a collective designation for firms that provide technological solutions to the financial sector [Kou & Lu, 2025].

In the early stage of FinTech market development, these entities were primarily perceived as a disruptive force to the traditional banking system [Barberis & Arner, 2016; Philippon, 2019; Puschmann, 2017]. Today, however, FinTechs are increasingly regarded by banks as natural partners in the modernisation of financial services [Drago et al., 2025]. Traditional banking institutions face pressure

from new digital players and, as a result, are increasingly entering into partnerships with technology firms and FinTech start-ups in order to modernise their offerings and remain competitive in the era of digital transformation [Drago et al., 2025; Drasch et al., 2018; Jakšič & Marinč, 2019]. Collaboration with providers of financial innovations has thus become an integral part of many banks' strategies, enabling them to benefit from the latest technologies without the need to develop them in-house [Klus et al., 2019a].

Despite the dynamic development of FinTech innovations and the growing popularity of this topic, the literature points to numerous research gaps. Drago et al. [2025] highlight the lack of research devoted to bank–FinTech partnerships from a microeconomic perspective (the level of firms and specific alliances). Moreover, banks still rarely disclose their expenditures on cooperation with FinTechs in a transparent manner – while many financial institutions include descriptive information on FinTech-related initiatives in their annual reports, detailed financial data on this subject remain scarce [Drago et al., 2025; Drasch et al., 2018; Hornuf et al., 2021; Jakšič & Marinč, 2019]. The literature also lacks extensive empirical evidence on the impact of cooperation between banks and FinTech firms on banks' performance outcomes [Le et al., 2024].

The aim of this article is to map, document, and quantify disclosures concerning the cooperation of banks with FinTech firms, as well as the implementation of FinTech solutions in the financial and non-financial reports of the Polish banks listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange (WSE) in the years 2022–2024, with particular emphasis on the frequency, forms, and context of such communication.

In light of the above, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: With what frequency and in what manner do the Polish banks listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange (WSE) communicate: in their non-financial reports (2022–2024), cooperation with FinTech firms as well as the issues of technology and innovation [BIS, 2024; Drago et al., 2025; Loew & Schröder, 2021]?

RQ2: Which categories of financial technologies are most frequently disclosed in these reports, and which banks demonstrate the broadest approach [Xie & Wang, 2023; Zou et al., 2024]?

RQ3: Is the intensity of technological disclosures (scope, number of categories) related to the disclosures of cooperation with FinTechs in the non-financial reports of these Polish banks [Bian et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2024]?

The article follows a classical structure. After this introduction, a literature review is presented, discussing the existing research on the adoption of FinTech in the banking sector and the various models of cooperation between banks and the FinTech industry. The subsequent section outlines the research method and database, including a description of the applied measures and the analytical techniques employed to extract information from the annual reports of the listed banks in Poland in the years 2022–2024. This is followed by the presentation of the results of the empirical analysis, covering, among others, the frequency of occurrences of terms related to FinTech, technology, and innovation in the reports, comparisons of disclosures across individual banks, and the identification of the most frequently described technological areas. The article concludes with a summary section, which presents the key findings of the study, discusses its limitations, and offers suggestions for future research directions.

2. Theoretical framework of Bank-Fintech cooperation

Contemporary regulations on non-financial disclosures and ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) reporting indirectly encourage banks to include information on technological innovations and digital transformation in their reports as elements of strategy and corporate governance. It has been demonstrated that digital transformation significantly increases the scope of ESG disclosures among enterprises [He et al., 2024]. Research on the links between financial technologies and the concept of sustainable development remains limited, making this a novel and increasingly significant area [Galeone et al., 2024a; Liu et al., 2022].

Digital transformation is redefining the paradigm of competition in the financial sector, shifting the focus of rivalry from traditional products and distribution channels to the capacity for rapid acquisition, adaptation, and scaling of new technologies [Verkhoglyadova et al., 2024]. The implications of these theoretical approaches are reflected in EU regulatory requirements (e.g. legal acts such as DORA – the Digital Operational Resilience Act – concerning digital resilience, or guidelines on ICT management).

2.1. Open Innovation in the Bank–FinTech relationship

The theory of Open Innovation assumes that enterprises can utilise both internal and external sources of knowledge. This enables them to combine their own

resources with those of partners through alliances, technology licensing, and other forms of collaboration [H. Chesbrough, 2010; H.W. Chesbrough, 2003; Laursen & Salter, 2006; Pandey et al., 2024; West & Bogers, 2014]. Partnerships between banks and technology firms (FinTechs) fit within this logic, facilitating mutual transfer of competences [Fasnacht, 2018; Martovoy et al., 2015]. Banks gain access to modern solutions (e.g. artificial intelligence, blockchain, big data) [Feyen et al., 2021], while technology providers benefit from access to an extensive client base, strong brand reputation, payment infrastructure, and the established knowledge of the regulatory requirements of the financial sector [BIS, 2024; FED, 2023].

Empirical confirmation of the adoption of an open innovation strategy can be found in the purchase of technological solutions, outsourcing of technological services, acceleration programmes, innovation laboratories, technology hubs, and acquisitions of firms with specific technologies. These initiatives appear in banks' reports as pillars of digital transformation [Drasch et al., 2018]. This transformation has a direct impact on the organisational structures of technology and innovation departments, shaping technology strategies and transforming operational processes, business models, and, at times, the entire logic of value creation [Vial, 2019]. At the same time, the dynamic development of FinTechs, InsurTechs, and BigTechs has redefined their role from "disruptors" to partners filling the competence gaps of banks [Cosma & Pennetta, 2024; Jaksic & Marinc, 2019]. As a result, the flow of technology-related knowledge has become bidirectional: banks learn about new solutions, while technology providers gain insights into the specifics of banks' client bases, regulatory challenges, and advanced risk management practices [Nicoletti, 2017].

2.2. Transaction Cost Economics and cooperation forms

The theory of transaction costs has become the dominant theoretical model for explaining decisions concerning organisational boundaries, originating from very early theories [Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975]. Coase [1937] argued that the choice between the market mechanism and hierarchy (the internal structure of the firm) depends primarily on differences in transaction costs. Williamson [2007], in turn, demonstrated that testable hypotheses can be formulated by linking the relative efficiency of alternative governance structures with the observable dimensions of transactions, namely asset specificity, uncertainty, and transaction frequency.

From the perspective of Transaction Cost Economics (TCE), the decision to acquire technological innovations follows one of the three classical paths:

make (internal development), *buy* (acquisition), or *ally* (partnership) [Drago et al., 2025; Geyskens et al., 2006]. In practice, the *ally* option dominates, in the form of equity and non-equity alliances, white-label licences, open API interfaces, or acceleration programmes [Elsaid, 2021; Salmasi et al., 2024]. At the same time, hybrid variants are emerging, whereby banks simultaneously develop their own solutions (e.g. digital subsidiary banks) and invest in start-ups through corporate venture capital funds [Le et al., 2024].

The first option, *make*, means that a bank independently builds and implements technological solutions within its own organisation instead of relying on external providers. This strategy gives the institution full control over the development of innovations, although it may prove costly and time-consuming. An example may be the establishment of in-house R&D teams or proprietary digital platforms instead of purchasing ready-made solutions [Drago et al., 2025; Kloba, 2024].

The available literature further distinguishes a wide spectrum of *ally*-type (partnership) cooperation models and intermediate forms between partnership and acquisition. Table 1 provides a synthetic overview of the most frequently described models of cooperation between banks and FinTechs, together with their characteristics.

Table 1. The model of cooperation between banks and technology providers

The Model of Cooperation Strategic Partnership*	Characteristics
	A form of cooperation between a bank and a technology entity without equity ties. The parties exchange resources and competences: the bank provides licences, infrastructure, and clients, while the partner provides innovative technology. Together, they deliver financial services [Elsaid, 2021; Ngo & Nguyen, 2022]. An example may be SME lending, where the bank provides financing and the FinTech operates the online platform [Cosma & Pennetta, 2024].
	Partnerships between banks and large technology firms (BigTech) involve bank integration through the provision of payment infrastructure within the BigTech ecosystem, thereby expanding the digital offering and increasing the reach of both parties [Salmasi et al., 2024].
	Banking-as-a-Service (BaaS) is gaining critical mass as a distinct model, whereby the bank sells licences and back-end services via APIs, while the partner is responsible for the front-end [Agarwal & Assenova, 2024; Pineda, 2025; Prashant Bansal, 2024].

The Model of Cooperation Strategic Partnership*	Characteristics
Bank–Telecommunications Operator Partnership (MNO))	The essence of bank–operator cooperation in mobile finance lies in the division of roles between the party that holds the funds and bears the regulatory risk (a bank, operator, or FinTech) and the party that provides network coverage and the mobile channel (the operator). In practice, four variants emerge: bank–led, FinTech–led, operator–led, or hybrid – with the choice depending on local regulations and infrastructure [Agarwal & Assenova, 2024; Ky et al., 2024; Panday et al., 2024].
Licensing Partnership	A model in which a FinTech firm operates on the basis of a banking licence granted by a partner bank. This allows the FinTech to provide quasi-banking services without holding its own licence, under the supervision and involvement of the licensing bank. Example: an Iranian digital banking provider operating under the licence of a state-owned bank [Salmasi et al., 2024].
Project-Based Partnership	A model in which a bank and a FinTech cooperate on the implementation of a specific project or product from start to finish. Such temporary collaboration enables the combination of expertise (e.g. the bank provides regulatory compliance and a client base, while the FinTech contributes technology) in the deployment of innovations [Kloba, 2024; Verkhoglyadova et al., 2024]. The joint go-to-market strategy may take the form of: • co-branding – a service branded by both partners, • co-lending – the FinTech provides scoring algorithms, while the bank finances the portfolio. The sharing of risk and profits enables rapid access to new segments, leveraging the strengths of both parties [Roy et al., 2025]. Pro-financial inclusion partnerships occur when a bank commissions FinTechs to deliver projects targeting unbanked segments (microfinance, low-value payments). The institution focuses on key premium products, while the partner develops solutions that extend the reach of services, thereby supporting the goal of inclusion without excessively burdening the bank's resources [Chernoff & Jagtiani, 2023; Panday et al., 2024].
Cross-Sector Partnership	A strategic alliance with multiple FinTechs specialised in different segments (e.g. payments, InsurTech, IT infrastructure). The bank engages in numerous partnerships simultaneously in order to comprehensively digitalise its offering. Example: banks in Vietnam cooperating with FinTechs across various sectors (digital payments, comparison platforms, e-banking, etc.) [Le et al., 2024; Lien et al., 2020].

The Model of Cooperation Strategic Partnership*	Characteristics
Ecosystem Partnership	A broad, non-exclusive network-based cooperation model – the bank establishes a network of relationships with multiple partners simultaneously (FinTechs, IT providers, InsurTechs, etc.). Partners may collaborate in parallel with several banks (no exclusivity). The bank gains a portfolio of diverse innovations that can be integrated into its offering. Such a partnership ecosystem enables faster scaling of new ideas and services [BIS, 2024; Roy et al., 2025; Yıldırım & Erdil, 2024].
Digital Bank within a Bank	The establishment by a traditional bank of a separate digital banking brand (digital bank) operating like a FinTech within the banking group. This enables the bank to compete with FinTechs on their own ground while simultaneously retaining the advantages of a bank. Example: Blubank created by Saman Bank in Iran as an internal digital subsidiary [Papathomas & Konteos, 2022; Salmasi et al., 2024].
FinTech Acquisition	The acquisition of a FinTech by a bank involves the purchase of a majority or 100% shareholding in the company. The bank integrates the acquired firm and its technologies into its own structure, which enables the rapid large-scale adoption of innovations. A wave of such acquisitions is predicted as a result of competitive pressure from FinTechs [Elsaid, 2021]. The acquired FinTech becomes part of the bank, replacing less efficient internal solutions [Drago et al., 2025; Kloba, 2024; Kwon et al., 2024; Mao & Zheng, 2022].
Equity Investment (Minority Stake)	A model in which a bank invests capital in a FinTech company without full acquisition, by acquiring a minority stake, establishing its own corporate venture capital (CVC) fund, forming a joint venture partnership, or acting as a co-founder of a start-up. This enables the bank to gain access to the FinTech's innovations and know-how while maintaining the autonomy of both parties [Cosma & Pennetta, 2024; Drago et al., 2025; Li et al., 2023; Riikkinen & Pihlajamaa, 2022; Verkhoglyadova et al., 2024].
Incubation/ Acceleration Programmes	Banks establish their own incubators or accelerators to support the development and incubation of FinTech start-ups. They provide resources (financing, mentoring, infrastructure, data), often in exchange for equity stakes or priority access to the start-ups' technologies. This allows banks to stimulate innovation in their environment, while FinTechs can accelerate their growth [Hornuf et al., 2021; Roy et al., 2025; Verkhoglyadova et al., 2024].

The Model of Cooperation Strategic Partnership*	Characteristics
Technology Outsourcing	A model in which a bank commissions an external provider (a FinTech or an IT company) to deliver a specific solution instead of developing it internally. This allows for the rapid implementation of a new product or service without the need to build in-house competences [Enriques & Ringe, 2020; Galeone et al., 2024b; Yıldırım & Erdil, 2024]. The white-label model enables the FinTech to provide the bank with a ready-made platform or technology, which the bank subsequently offers under its own brand [Roy et al., 2025].
Adaptive Model	A cooperation model that emphasises the flexible adaptation of the bank–FinTech relationship to the dynamic changes of the market environment, as well as the role of the state in supporting innovation. Within this framework, banks and their technology partners continuously adjust the scope and form of their cooperation in response to emerging new technologies, customer needs, or regulations, with active support and coordination from regulators [Enriques & Ringe, 2020; Kálmán, 2025; Panday et al., 2024].

* non-equity alliance

Source: the authors' own elaboration based on the literature.

The guidelines of the European Banking Authority (EBA) also emphasise the importance of technological innovations in banks' strategies and their transparent communication. The EBA Guidelines on the management of ESG risks [2025] require banks to identify, measure, and manage these risks in the short-, medium-, and long-term perspective, and to integrate them into business plans. In practice, this compels banks to disclose in their reports which technologies (e.g. AML tools, cloud solutions) support the resilience of the business model and corporate governance of the institution [EBA, 2025].

Similarly, the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) of 2022 significantly broadens the scope of reporting – it obliges companies to disclose, among other things, their "strategy and business model resilience" in the context of sustainable development and requires them to present plans for adaptation to climate and technological change. Digital transformation, automation, and investments in FinTechs are among the typical elements of such adaptation plans [European Parliament; Council of the European Union, 2022].

Moreover, the EBA published guidelines on ICT risk management and security [2020], indicating, inter alia, how to describe business models, strategies, and

key risks and opportunities in banking activities. If digital transformation and cooperation with FinTechs are important to a bank, these regulations, in effect, mandate their disclosure in the bank's periodic reports [EBA, 2019].

2.3. Link to the identified research gaps

Relatively few studies focus on the micro-perspective of bank–FinTech cooperation, as most existing works are macroeconomic or conceptual in nature [Alaassar et al., 2023; Harasim, 2021; Klus et al., 2019b]. Drago et al. [2025] point to a shortage of empirical analyses examining specific bank–FinTech alliances at the level of financial institutions and their impact on banks' operations. Similarly, Le et al. [2024)] note that while there is some initial evidence of positive effects of cooperation with FinTechs (e.g. improved efficiency or enhanced bank performance), there is still a lack of broad generalisations and multi-market studies, particularly in the context of emerging markets – hence the Polish financial sector appears to be an important area for investigation.

Secondly, the literature highlights the scarcity of disclosures provided by banks themselves, regarding their engagement in financial innovations [Birindelli et al., 2020; W.S. Frame & White, 2004]. As emphasised by Drasch et al. [2018] and Hornuf et al. [2021], banks relatively rarely communicate directly the expenditures related to cooperation with FinTechs or the detailed outcomes of such initiatives. While annual reports do include descriptive references to innovations, detailed and comparable data remain limited, which hampers the assessment of the actual scale and forms of such activities [Cosma & Pennetta, 2024; Jaksic & Marinc, 2019].

Thirdly, there is a lack of research on banks' communication and informational transparency in the area of digital transformation. Previous studies on disclosures in reports have mainly concentrated on regulatory [Loew & Schröder, 2021] or ESG-related topics [Galeone et al., 2024b], while overlooking technological issues. Consequently, the literature underscores the need to examine how banks report on their innovativeness and cooperation with FinTechs [Milian et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2024].

2.4. Conceptual assumptions and direction of analysis

In light of the above research gaps, a conceptual framework for analysis has been formulated, linked to the research questions presented in the introduction. Drawing on the theory of open innovation, it is assumed that banks actively cooperating

with FinTechs will explicitly communicate this in their reports, as firms that share knowledge with external partners tend to emphasise such alliances as part of their innovation strategy [H. Chesbrough, 2010; H.W. Chesbrough, 2003]. It may therefore be expected that banks with a culture open to innovation will report more frequently and extensively on FinTech-related initiatives.

At the same time, banks that prioritise internal development [Geyskens et al., 2006; Williamson, 2007] may focus in their reports on their own technological projects rather than explicitly using the term *FinTech*. Such institutions may emphasise the description of the implemented technologies (AI, cloud solutions, etc.) without referring to external partners. From the perspective of transaction cost theory [Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975, 2007], it is assumed that the choice between internal development and alliances will be reflected in the structure of disclosures. Banks employing multiple technologies and diverse forms of cooperation should communicate a broader range of FinTech-related issues.

Accordingly, the scope of disclosed categories of financial technologies (e.g. AI, blockchain, open banking, etc.) is expected to vary from very narrow (where some banks mention only individual solutions) to very broad (covering most of the key trends), which will allow Research Question 2 to be addressed. The interdependence between the intensity of general technological initiatives and the propensity to cooperate with FinTechs can be verified by examining how banks demonstrating higher digital maturity (reflected in the frequency of technology- and innovation-related keywords) approach such disclosures. This is consistent with the intuition that institutions investing in digital transformation seek external partnerships to accelerate development [Klus et al., 2019b]. The present study will test this relationship through an analysis of technological disclosures alongside references to FinTechs. In addition, an in-depth qualitative analysis of FinTech-related disclosures in banks' reports will be carried out (Research Question 3).

3. Methodology

The study covers all the Polish banks listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange (WSE). These institutions publish consolidated financial statements that also include a non-financial section, available for the years 2022–2024. In the first stage, a complete list of entities meeting this criterion will be compiled, excluding UniCredit and Banco Santander, as their securities reflect the activities of capital groups based in Italy and Spain. Getin Bank will also be removed from the sample, as

following restructuring and resolution proceedings its sound assets were transferred to a bridge bank and subsequently sold to a strategic investor, resulting in the exclusion of Getin from the study.

For the qualifying banks, consolidated annual reports (including financial reporting) for the years 2022–2024 will be collected and used as the text corpus for analysis. To develop a set of variables describing FinTech disclosures, the study will draw upon findings from the literature and reporting practice. Table 2 presents the proposed indicators together with their definitions, theoretical justification, and recommended best practices regarding the disclosure of each information category.

Table 2. Data description

Skrót	Variable Name	Description
KW_FT	KeyWords_FinTech	Number of occurrences of the word "fintech"
KW_T	KeyWords_Technolog*	Number of occurrences of the word "technolog*"
KW_I	KeyWords_Innowac*	Number of occurrences of the word "innowacj*"
W_T	Words_Total	Number of words in the report
KW_FT_norm	wsk KW_FT_norm = KeyWords_ FinTech/ (Words_Total/ 10000)	Indicator of "FinTech" occurrences in the report (per 10 000 words)
KW_T_norm	wsk KW_T_norm = KeyWords_ Technolog*/ (Words_Total/ 10000)	Indicator of "technolog" occurrences in the report (per 10 000 words)
KW_I_norm	wsk KW_I_norm = KeyWords_ Innowac*/ (Words_Total/ 10000)	Indicator of "innovat" occurrences in the report (per 10 000 words)

Source: the authors' own elaboration based on the literature.

Variables based solely on the number of "FinTech" mentions indicate the intensity of the narrative but do not reflect the breadth of technologies employed. Therefore, following Drago et al. [2025], an additional indicator DIM_FT is introduced, defined as the number of distinct technology categories mentioned at least once in a bank's report.

Table 3. categories of financial technologies (dim_ft) with example services, typical keywords, and literature review

Category (DIM_FT)	Key technologies / services	Typical search terms / synonyms (Proceegir)	Literature review
AI / ML	Artificial intelligence, machine-learning models, conversational AI (chatbots, NLP)	artificial intelligence, machine learning, conversational AI	[BIS, 2024; Drago et al., 2025]
Blockchain / Crypto / Tokenization	Blockchain and DLT solutions, smart contracts, tokenisation, DeFi platforms, crypto-assets	blockchain, distributed ledger, smart contract, tokenization, crypto-assets, DeFi	[Chen et al., 2021; Dashottar & Srivastava, 2021]
Cloud & DevOps	Public/private cloud, SaaS / PaaS / IaaS, serverless computing, container orchestration (e.g. Kubernetes), micro-services	cloud, SaaS, PaaS, IaaS, serverless, Kubernetes, micro-services	[Farrow, 2020; Hon & Millard, 2018; Prashant Bansal, 2024]
Big Data & Analytics	Data warehouses and lakes, business intelligence, predictive analytics, data science	data lake, data warehouse, analytics, predictive	[Hung et al., 2020; Nobanee et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021]
Digital Payments / Embedded finance	Digital wallets, mobile payments, Buy-Now-Pay-Later (BNPL), domestic instant-payment schemes	digital wallet, mobile payments, BNPL, blik	[BIS, 2024; Omarini, 2018; Pramani & Iyer, 2023]
Open Banking / API	Open-banking frameworks, PSD2 compliance, API management, embedded finance interfaces	open banking, API management, embedded finance	[Farrow, 2020; Hornuf et al., 2021; Najaf et al., 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2022]
Cybersecurity & Digital Identity	Biometric authentication, multi-factor authentication (MFA), digital identity (eIDAS), fraud detection	cybersecurity, biometrics, MFA, digital identity	[Najaf et al., 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2022]
RegTech / SupTech / Compliance	Automated AML/KYC, transaction-monitoring, regulatory reporting, supervisory tech	RegTech, AML, KYC, compliance technology	[Anagnostopoulos, 2018; Arner et al., 2017]
RPA / Automation	Robotic process automation (RPA), OCR bots, low-/no-code workflow automation	robotic process automation, RPA, OCR bot, workflow automation, low code	[BIS, 2024]
Robo-advisory / WealthTech	Algorithmic portfolio managers, digital investment advisers, wealth-management platforms	robo-advisory, digital advisory, wealth tech	[Aw et al., 2023]

Source: the author's own elaboration based on the subject literature.

Table 3 presents the set of key variables used for the quantitative and qualitative description of disclosures concerning FinTech, technology, and innovation. In the subsequent stage of the study, the reports will be analysed in terms of ten identified technology categories, which form the dictionary for the DIM_FT indicator.

After collecting data from the consolidated reports of the Polish banks, for each of them we calculate the technological diversity indicator DIM_FT, defined by the following formula:

$$DIM_FT_{i,t} = \sum_{k=1}^{10} 1(h_{i,t,k} = 1)$$

where:
i – bank identifier,
t – reporting year,
$k \in \{1,\ldots,10\}$ – technology category (e.g., AI/ML, blockchain, cloud, etc.),
$h_{i,t,k}$ – binary variable equal to 1 if bank i in year t mentions at least once a technology from category k in its report (0 otherwise),
1 – indicator function that returns 1 if the condition in parentheses holds and 0 otherwise.

The DIM_FT indicator takes values from 0 to 10. A value of 0 indicates that the bank did not refer, in the given year, to any of the ten distinguished technology categories. Conversely, a score of 10 shows that the institution mentioned each of these categories at least once in its report. The higher the value of the indicator, the broader the declared diversity of FinTech technologies in the reports, which makes it possible to capture the aspect of variety and thus complements measures based solely on the number of mentions.

In addition, a qualitative analysis of FinTech-related disclosures was conducted. For this purpose, all fragments of the reports containing the word *"FinTech"* were identified and then interpreted in terms of context and content. The qualitative analysis makes it possible to determine how banks present their cooperation with FinTechs – whether they highlight specific partnerships and projects, or whether they refer to FinTechs more generally within their digital strategies. This qualitative approach enriches the quantitative results and reveals the narrative behind the number of mentions, showing how banks seek to communicate and construct their image as innovators to stakeholders.

4. Results

Below, a coherent narrative description of the quantitative results (Tables 4 and 5 and Figure 1) is presented, followed by a summary of the qualitative study (Table 6).

Table 4 shows the disclosures of the words FinTech, Technology, and Innovation across the entire study period. The highest intensity of references to technology (KW_T_norm, per 10 000 words) is recorded by ING (8.17), PKO BP (6.65), and BNP Paribas (6.53), followed by mBank (5.51), Santander (4.12), Citi Handlowy (3.83), Pekao (3.75), and Millennium (3.06). Mentions of innovation (KW_I_norm) are most frequent at ING (2.30), PKO BP (1.81), Pekao (1.76), and BNP Paribas (1.49). At the same time, the highest average intensity of the term FinTech (KW_FT_norm) occurs at Alior (0.83) and mBank (0.62), while some institutions do not use this word at all in the analysed corpus (BOŚ, Citi).

The comparison of these measures suggests two distinct styles of communication in the banks' published reports: an ally-first profile (high KW_FT_norm with moderate KW_T_norm – Alior, mBank) and a tech-first profile (high KW_T_norm with low or zero KW_FT_norm – ING, PKO BP, BNP Paribas, Pekao, Santander). Millennium, despite demonstrating lower technological intensity than the leaders, also fits into the second category (KW_FT_norm = 0.04; KW_I_norm = 1.33).

Table 4. Indicators of the intensity of disclosures of the terms "FinTech" (KW_FT_norm), "Technology" (KW_T_norm), and "Innovation" (KW_I_norm) in the annual reports (financial and non-financial) of Polish listed banks (values normalised per 10.000 words), average for the sample 2022–2024

Bank	KW_FT_norm	KW_T_norm	KW_I_norm
Alior	0.83	2.96	0.91
BNP PARIBAS	0.29	6.53	1.49
BOŚ	–	2.51	0.42
Citi	–	3.83	0.35
ING	0.18	8.17	2.30
mBank	0.62	5.51	1.12
Millennium	0.04	3.06	1.33
Pekao	0.08	3.75	1.76
PKO BP	0.54	6.65	1.81
Santander	0.16	4.12	1.09

Source: the authors' own calculations based on the banks' annual reports.

The annual dynamics (Table 5) refine these profiles. Alior, from 2022 to 2024, clearly shifts towards a "high-FinTech" orientation (KW_FT_norm: 0.21 → 1.28 → 1.01), while simultaneously strengthening its technological (2.47 → 3.57) and innovation layers (0.11 → 1.74). mBank maintains a balanced, high level of technology (5.35–5.90–5.26), relatively frequent FinTech mentions (0.65–0.75–0.45), and increasing references to innovation (0.74–0.83–1.80). PKO BP is characterised by a FinTech "peak" in 2023 (0.10 → 1.26 → 0.25) alongside a strong upward trend in technology (4.83 → 8.64), while ING exhibits a stepwise reduction in the intensity of all three indicators (e.g. KW_T_norm 9.73 → 5.98; KW_I_norm 3.59 → 1.15; KW_FT_norm 0.26 → 0.12) – albeit from a still very high base.

Table 5. Indicators of the intensity of disclosures of the terms "FinTech" (KW_FT_norm), "Technology" (KW_T_norm), and "Innovation" (KW_I_norm) in the annual reports (financial and non-financial) of individual banks in 2022–2024 (values normalised per 10 000 words)

Bank	KW_FT_norm			KW_T_norm			KW_I_norm		
	2022	2023	2024	2022	2023	2024	2022	2023	2024
Alior Bank	0.21	1.28	1.01	2.47	2.85	3.57	0.11	0.88	1.74
BNP PARIBAS	0.18	0.40	0.29	6.58	5.70	7.31	1.49	1.28	1.68
BOŚ	–	–	–	1.00	3.67	2.84	0.10	0.28	0.89
Citi	–	–	–	3.49	2.96	5.05	0.19	0.28	0.59
ING Bank	0.26	0.17	0.12	9.73	8.80	5.98	3.59	2.16	1.15
mBank	0.65	0.75	0.45	5.35	5.90	5.26	0.74	0.83	1.80
Millennium	–	0.09	–	2.74	2.29	4.15	1.52	0.71	1.76
Pekao	0.10	0.08	0.08	2.69	3.42	5.14	1.92	1.79	1.56
PKO BP	0.10	1.26	0.25	4.83	6.49	8.64	1.77	2.16	1.48
Santander	0.38	0.09	–	2.88	3.65	5.83	1.53	0.43	1.31

Source: the authors' own calculations based on the banks' annual reports.

Pekao and Santander expand their technological narrative (from 2.69 → 5.14 and 2.88 → 5.83, respectively) while maintaining consistently low FinTech mentions. At Millennium, the growth in technology (2.74 → 4.15) and a rebound in innovation (1.52 → 1.76) are confirmed. BOŚ and Citi, despite the absence of

references to "FinTech", systematically strengthen their technological layer and, to a lesser extent, communicate innovation.

These time series may suggest that the openness of cooperation with FinTechs (KW_FT_norm) represents a communication strategy distinct from the intensity of technology-related reporting (KW_T_norm).

The technological diversity indicator (Table 6) suggests a broad, often close-to-maximum, range of technology categories in the reports of some banks: BNP Paribas (9–9–8), mBank (9–9–7), ING (9–8–7), PKO BP (8–9–8), and Pekao (8–7–8). Alior makes a significant jump from 5 → 9 and maintains 9 in 2024, which may indicate a shift towards an "ally-first" communication style. BOŚ expands its spectrum (3–4–5), despite the absence of the word "FinTech" in its reports. In turn, the slight decline of the DIM_FT indicator in 2024 at mBank (9–9–7) may suggest a more selective description of categories in its reports.

The analysis of the DIM_FT indicator reinforces the conclusion regarding RQ2 that banks display two reporting models with respect to technology: "tech-first" and "ally-first." Banks may disclose an equally broad set of technologies, differing mainly in the level of transparency about partnerships, or they may prefer to emphasise internally developed technologies.

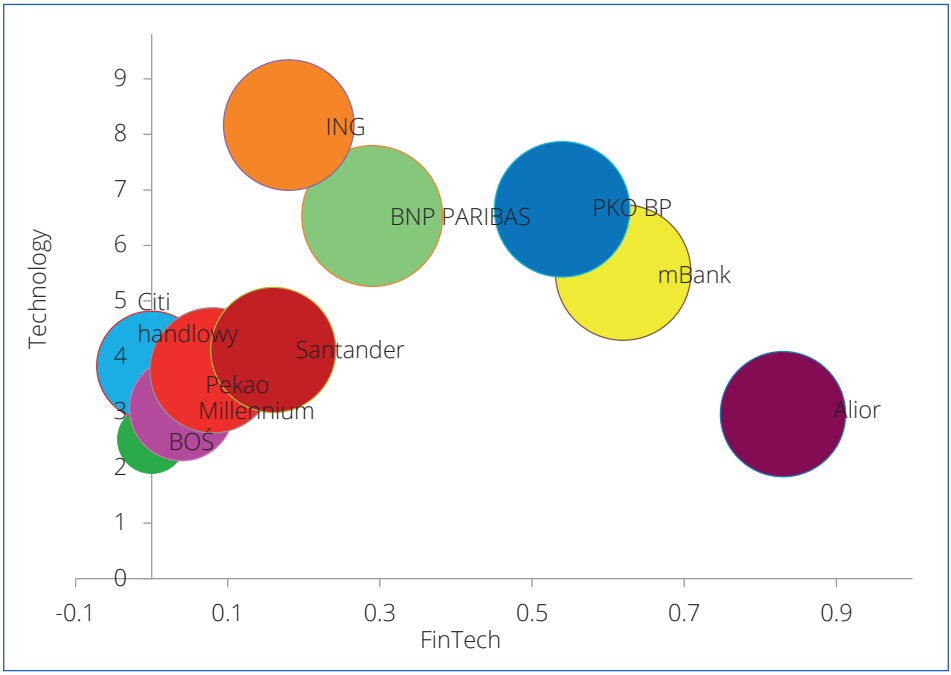
Table 6. Technological diversity indicator (DIM_FT) in the annual reports of the Polish listed banks in 2022–2024

DIM FT	2022	2023	2024
Alior	5	9	9
BNP PARIBAS	9	9	8
BOŚ	3	4	5
Citi	6	7	7
ING	9	8	7
mBank	9	9	7
Millennium	7	6	6
Pekao	8	7	8
PKO BP	8	9	8
Santander	6	9	8

Source: the authors' own calculations based on banks' annual reports.

Chart 1 synthesises the findings from Tables 4–6, comparing the intensity of technological disclosures (KW_T_norm) with the frequency of references to FinTech (KW_FT_norm). ING, PKO BP, and BNP Paribas are positioned high on the technology axis, with relatively low levels of FinTech disclosures. A different communication profile is presented by Alior and mBank, which are shifted to the right side of the chart due to more frequent use of the term "FinTech" combined with moderately high values of KW_T_norm. The bubble size reflects technological diversity (DIM_FT), showing that the breadth of disclosed categories is not directly correlated with the frequency of either "FinTech" or "technology" mentions. Consequently, with respect to RQ3, no straightforward positive relationship between KW_T_norm and KW_FT_norm was confirmed. The results suggest that the form and intensity of technological narratives are the outcome of the bank's chosen communication strategy rather than a by-product of the actual scope of the applied technologies.

Chart 1. FinTech (X) vs Technologia (Y), size = DIM Relationship between the intensity of "FinTech" disclosures (X-axis) and "technology" disclosures (Y-axis) in annual reports of Polish listed banks; bubble size reflects the FinTech diversity index (DIM_FT)



Source: the authors' own elaboration based on indicator calculations from banks' annual reports.

The qualitative perspective is presented in the thematic matrix in Table 7, which outlines the modes of communication and disclosure of the term *FinTech* in the financial and non-financial reports of the Polish banks.

Table 7. Thematic matrix of qualitative disclosures on FinTech in the annual reports (financial and non-financial) of the Polish listed banks in 2022–2024 – number of identified cases based on the cited report excerpts

Category	Topic	2022	2023	2024
Ecosystem, awards, memberships	Ecosystem membership/partnership (e.g., FinTech Poland)	1	4	3
	Awards and distinctions	3	5	2
	Visibility/positioning in the ecosystem	0	2	3
Human capital and expertise (competence proxy)	Bio/expertise (FinTech/banking)	3	4	5
Disclosure metrics and KPIs	"Number of initiatives" / volume of activities	1	1	0
Named partnerships and implementations	Partnership: LeaseLink/Paynow	0	2	1
	Partnership: Monevia (factoring/leasing))	0	1	2
	Partnership: Plenti (subscriptions)	0	1	1
	Solution: UNHCR/BLIK (cash assistance))	1	0	0
Collaboration programs and accelerators	Acceleration program/innovation laboratory	3	2	2
Strategy	Innovation strategy – benchmarking	3	3	5
	Strategy – general narrative	1	1	1
Structures and organisational governance for innovation	Description of organizational unit	0	0	2

Source: the authors' own elaboration based on qualitative analysis of banks' annual reports.

The qualitative analysis reveals two main approaches. The first is the growing emphasis on ecosystem building and affiliations (an increase in references

to FinTech Poland and various FinTech-related events: 1 → 4 → 3), with banks legitimising their position through visibility (0 → 2 → 3) and awards (3 → 5 → 2). Moreover, there is a strengthening reliance on benchmarks and maturity metrics: ING's reports highlighted that "the score is higher than 90% of the organisations surveyed globally… median OHI = 70 points, compared to our group's result of 84 points", reinforcing a transformation narrative backed by organisational validation. At the same time, ING links these elements to specific implementations: "We also use big data and artificial intelligence… we have launched the *imoje* payment gateway." This mode of description is typical of the "tech-first" profile, where reports focus extensively on technology while devoting less attention to potential partnerships or cooperation.

On the *ally-first* communication side, banks indicate the names of projects and partners. Alior reports: "The Bank actively cooperates with the FinTech ecosystem… in 2024 the Bank signed five agreements with FinTech partners and actively tested solutions within pilot projects", which explains the high level of KW_FT_norm and the jump in DIM_FT (5 → 9). mBank, in turn, highlights product synergies: "LeaseLink and Paynow… started cooperation… the customer journey is intuitive, convenient, and fast"; at the same time, "LeaseLink… introduced deferred payments for companies… (the only entity)… with such a broad payment ecosystem… leasing, installments, and BNPL". Such examples of "named implementations" (Table 6: 0 → 2 → 1 for LeaseLink/Paynow) precisely explain the elevated FinTech indicators in ecosystem banks. The partnership theme is complemented by BNP Paribas, which, in addition to a broad technological spectrum, communicates specific value propositions: "cooperation… with the FinTech Monevia – leader in online microfactoring… free factoring limit up to PLN 100 000… no commission… no penalties up to 30 days", as well as "cooperation with Plenti… users… can now use electronics for two years."

Visibility and ecosystem positioning are reflected, for example, in PKO BP's activities: "Singapore FinTech Festival… more than 60 000 participants from 130 countries… generated PLN 1.8 million AVE", while memberships materialise through cooperation with FinTech Poland ("Joining the FinTech Poland community… PKO Bank Polski was the project's strategic partner"). Similar references appeared in the reports of BNP Paribas and Alior. This "soft" communication may aim at strengthening the image of an innovator through emphasis on ecosystem engagement, awards, and memberships.

Collaboration programs are reported as permanent infrastructures for absorbing innovation: at Alior, "RBL_START is an acceleration program… a pathway

for a solution to enter the Bank"; PKO BP develops "Let's Fintech"; Bank Pekao operates an "Innovation Laboratory… continuous monitoring of the innovation market"; while on the investment side, mBank uses "mAccelerator." In some reports, Alior stresses a shift from recruitment in the form of editions to a continuous process, which fits well into broader process-building around such cooperation. Similarly, Bank Pekao emphasises the process-oriented nature of activities: "The number of initiatives… requires continuous monitoring of the innovation market, cooperation with FinTechs, and testing of solutions in the implementation phase." On the social side, Santander reports a project on "the distribution of aid funds… using BLIK cheques… in cooperation with UNHCR," showing that selected FinTech implementations also serve as tools of financial inclusion.

5. Discussion

The aim of the article is to map, document, and quantify disclosures regarding banks' cooperation with FinTech firms as well as the implementation of FinTech solutions in the financial and non-financial reports of the Polish banks. The interpretation of patterns in the use of the terms *FinTech*, *Technology*, and *Innovation* indicates that, in quantitative terms, the notion of "technology" (KW_T_norm) appears in the narrative significantly more often than "FinTech" (KW_FT_norm) or "innovation" (KW_I_norm). This is typical of digitalisation reporting presented at a high level of generality [BIS, 2024]. In turn, the DIM_FT indicator (technological diversity) shows a relatively high degree of diversification in the sector: the average value for all banks in 2024 is 7.3, suggesting that the communication is not limited to individual threads but covers a broad spectrum of technological topics [Loew & Schröder, 2021].

5.1. Frequency and manner of communicating disclosures of the terms FinTech, Technology, and Innovation [RQ1]

In quantitative terms, *Technology* (KW_T_norm) remains far more frequent in the narrative than *FinTech* (KW_FT_norm) or *Innovation* (KW_I_norm). In qualitative terms, however, the years 2023–2024 show that several banks (including Pekao, Alior, mBank, and BNP Paribas) explicitly highlight partnerships, discuss implementation cases, and describe collaboration pathways (accelerators, open calls for solutions, brand-level partnerships) in their reports. This is confirmed by the

disclosure matrix, where the number of "documented" cases increases from 16 → 26 → 27. This pattern supports the observation from the literature that, as digital transformation matures, financial institutions shift from a broad technological rhetoric toward evidence-based disclosure grounded in concrete projects and collaborations [BIS, 2024; Drago et al., 2025; Loew & Schröder, 2021].

5.2. Most frequently disclosed categories of financial technologies in annual reports [RQ2]

The breakdown of disclosures by DIM_FT categories indicates that, in the years 2022–2024, banks most frequently communicated topics related to digital payments / embedded finance, open banking / API, and cybersecurity & digital identity. These areas are directly tied to the client experience, diversity of access channels, and the bank's security posture. AI/ML and big data & analytics also belong to the most visible categories in the analysed reports. The role of AI/ML has increased alongside the growing adoption of decision automation in banking processes and the prioritisation of personalised customer services. Cloud & DevOps appears as the enabling layer, ensuring scalability and implementation speed. RegTech/SupTech and RPA/automation are disclosed at a moderate level, often in the context of compliance and process efficiency, whereas blockchain / crypto / tokenization and robo-advisory / wealthtech appear only sporadically and not across all banks.

This profile is consistent with findings from comparative studies: financial institutions tend to highlight categories that are less invasive for their IT architecture and deliver easily communicable customer-facing outcomes (such as payments or digital identity) before moving toward more capital-intensive or regulatory-uncertain areas (such as tokenization or robo-advisory) [Gomber et al., 2017; Thakor, 2020; Xie & Wang, 2023].

5.3. FinTech disclosures (scope, number of categories) in reports [RQ3]

The breadth of disclosures is measured by the number of DIM_FT categories indicated by each bank in a given year. For the examined sample of banks, the values are as follows: 2022: mean 7.0, median 7.5 (min–max 3–9); 2023: mean 7.7, median 8.5 (min–max 4–9, the broadest range in the period); 2024: mean 7.3, median 7.5 (min–max 5–9), accompanied by a decline in dispersion (standard deviation from approx. 1.90 to 1.10). This pattern suggests thematic expansion in 2023, followed

by the maintenance of a broad yet more balanced spectrum of technological topics in 2024. Such a trajectory corresponds to the transition described in the literature from the phase of expanding the scope of disclosures to their stabilisation and standardisation, which fosters comparability and reliability of non-financial information [Bian et al., 2023; Loew & Schröder, 2021; Wu et al., 2024].

6. Conslusions

6.1. Theoretical contribution and managerial implications

This study makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on bank–FinTech collaboration by combining the perspectives of Open Innovation [H. Chesbrough, 2010; H.W. Chesbrough, 2003; West & Bogers, 2014] and Transaction Cost Economics [Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975, 2007] with an empirical analysis of disclosure practices. The findings confirm that banks pursuing an open innovation strategy are more likely to highlight partnerships with FinTechs in their reports as a component of building competitive advantage [Drasch et al., 2018; Fasnacht, 2018], while institutions favouring internal development focus on technological narratives without explicit references to external alliances [Geyskens et al., 2006; Kloba, 2024].

The study addresses the gap in the literature regarding micro-level analyses of bank–FinTech collaboration [Drago et al., 2025; Le et al., 2024], complementing prior work predominantly oriented towards the macro perspective [Alaassar et al., 2023; Harasim, 2021]. The findings also confirm earlier observations that transparency in reporting financial innovation remains limited, with banks rarely disclosing detailed data on the scale and outcomes of cooperation [Hornuf et al., 2021; Jakšič & Marinč, 2019].

The analysis of technological diversity (DIM_FT) shows that a broad spectrum of the reported technology categories can be observed both among institutions investing in external partnerships and among those developing solutions internally. This suggests that the choice of disclosure narrative is a matter of competitive strategy rather than solely a function of innovation intensity [BIS, 2024; Klus et al., 2019a].

From a managerial perspective, the results imply that decisions about communication – whether emphasising partnerships or focusing on proprietary solutions—should be aligned with the bank's market positioning and innovation acquisition model. Banks can leverage acceleration programs, innovation labs, and partner ecosystems [Hornuf et al., 2021; Roy et al., 2025] not only as vehicles for

technology absorption but also as instruments of reputation-building. At the same time, benchmarking and the use of maturity metrics (e.g., OHI) may reinforce the credibility of digital transformation narratives, consistent with observations that institutions often legitimise their strategies through references to external standards [Galeone et al., 2024a; Loew & Schröder, 2021].

6.2. Limitations

The study is based on a content analysis of annual reports (financial and non-financial) of banks listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange (WSE) for the years 2022–2024, which means that the findings reflect only the information that institutions chose to disclose publicly. The lack of access to detailed financial data limits the ability to precisely assess the scale and outcomes of cooperation with FinTechs. Another potential limitation stems from the heterogeneity of reporting standards, resulting from individual banks' communication policies, which may affect the comparability of data.

6.3. Future research

Future research should incorporate additional sources of information – including interviews with bank representatives, press materials, and market data – to more fully capture the actual scale and outcomes of bank–FinTech cooperation. An important direction is the analysis of how disclosure strategies affect banks' financial performance, innovation levels, and competitive positioning. Further studies should also examine the impact of regulations such as CSRD [European Parliament; Council of the European Union, 2022] and DORA on the scope and form of reporting technological partnerships. In addition, comparative analyses across other markets – particularly in the context of emerging economies – could provide broader insights into bank–FinTech collaboration models under different institutional conditions.

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SEARCHING FOR ALLIES: BALTIC REPUBLICS IN "KURIER BIAŁOSTOCKI"

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article is to present Poland's attitude towards the Baltic republics in the local newspaper between March and September 1939. The article shows how a Polish local newspaper has been reporting on the Baltic republics during the last few months of peace.
- *Research methodology* – The article is based on qualitative research, using mainly articles from "Kurier Białostocki" – a daily newspaper published from March 1 to August 31, 1939, in Białystok, the capital of the Białystok Province in the Second Polish Republic. A total of 181 issues of the newspaper (incorrectly numbered up to 239) were reviewed, searching for articles and references to the Baltic states. The analysis of individual articles and references will be presented in chronological and thematic order.
- *Score/results* –The basic questions contained in the text concern whether the local newspaper wrote a lot about the Baltic states. What topics did the articles cover? Were allies sought in these countries in the face of the threat of war? The form and content of these references, as well as when and how they were written, will also be important.
- *Originality/value* – The study's originality lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining perspectives from border press studies and history of international relations. Nearly half of the "Kurier's" content was devoted to the current international events. In addition, it covered local, sports, and educational issues. During the period in question, a total of 54 pieces of information about the Baltic states were published. Most of them concerned Lithuania. Far fewer texts concerned Estonia, and especially Latvia. These smaller countries are presented from the perspective of the official policy of the Polish authorities.

Keywords: international relations, Baltic republics, Białystok, press, "Kurier Białostocki"

1. Introduction

Kurier Białostocki was a daily newspaper published in Białystok from March to September 1939. At that time, Białystok was the capital of the Białystok Province in the pre-war Second Polish Republic. The publication of Kurier was suspended with the outbreak of World War II. The main criterion for choosing this particular newspaper (among the four published during the period in question) was its completeness [Bezzubik, 2011; Brzezińska-Stec, 2006; Dobroński, 1988]. The other newspapers are only available in fragments today[1]. The aim of this paper is to present the attitude of the local newspaper towards the young independent states, in particular in Lithuania, which was not recognised by Poland until 1938. The basic questions contained in the text concern whether the local newspaper wrote a lot about the Baltic states? What topics did the articles cover? Were allies sought in these countries in the face of the threat of war? The form and content of these references, as well as when and how they were written, will also be important. The analysis of individual articles and references will be presented in a chronological and thematic manner.

Kurier Białostocki was published daily (including Sundays) without interruption from March 1, 1939, to August 31 of that year. A total of 181 issues were published (incorrectly numbered up to 239)[2]. The newspaper was edited by Mikołaj Zdanowicz, who was associated with the ruling camp in Poland at the time. The exact circulation remains unknown, but it fluctuated around 1 000 copies. It consisted of 8 pages (Sunday editions consisted of 12 pages). Nearly half of the Kurier's columns were devoted to the current international events. In addition, it included sections on local events, sports, education, as well as columns, excerpts from novels, and picture stories.

2. The Baltic republics in Kurier Białostocki from March 1 to August 31, 1939

The first mention of the Baltic states in Kurier Białostocki appeared on March 22. In a short article accompanied by a photograph, the newspaper informed the

[1] It was one of four newspapers published in Białystok until the end of August 1939. The others were Dziennik Białostocki, published for nearly 20 years, Gazeta Białostocka Dzień Dobry, and the Jewish newspaper Unzer Lebn. Bialystoker Tegleche Cajtung.

[2] All issues of Kurier Białostocki [later: KB] are available, among others, in the Podlasie Digital Library.

readers about the visit to Warsaw by the Estonian Foreign Minister Karl Selter [*Min. Selter opuścił Warszawę*, 1939, KB, 22: 2].

More extensive articles about Lithuania appeared in the newspaper on March 23, in connection with the Germany's annexation of Klaipėda. This time, the issue began with a clearly distinguished headline: "Lithuania has surrendered the Klaipėda region to the Reich." Under this collective title, numerous notes were published concerning the events of March 21 and 22: German demands on Lithuania to hand over the Klaipėda region to Berlin, the actions of the Lithuanian government and its acceptance of the ultimatum, and the planned visit of the Lithuanian side to Germany to determine the details of the transfer of the disputed area [*Litwa oddała kraj kłajpedzki Rzeszy*, 1939, KB, 23: 1]. It is worth noting that Kurier did not report, for example, the visit of Lithuanian MP and envoy E. Tarauskas to Warsaw on March 21 in connection with the German ultimatum on Klaipėda, nor did it report on other diplomatic and military contacts that took place during the period in question [Łossowski, 2007: 175–178].

The first and only article concerning the occupation of Klaipėda was published on March 26. It was essentially a report on the Polish Senate's deliberations, during which the friendship between Poland and Lithuania, which was "going through difficult times," was emphasised. Such statements were accompanied by a "prolonged applause" [*Prace prawodawcze Senatu,* 1939, KB, 26: 1]. As can be seen, Lithuania, which lost the Klaipėda region to Germany, was shown friendship and support in the pages of Kurier. This is evidenced by the title given to the description of the proceedings – "Demonstration of friendly neighbourly feelings towards Lithuania." It should be noted, however, that in this case no mention was made of Germany's responsibility for the situation.

It is worth elaborating on the positive perception of Lithuania by Poland. When discussing relations with Lithuania, it should be noted that for a long time, they did not exist at all. The main bone of contention was the issue of the Vilnius region, which was occupied by the Polish Army in 1920. The situation did not change until 1938. As the Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck wrote, "establishing relations with a neighbouring country in the international situation at that time was necessary in order to protect Polish interests." The pretext was the death of a Polish KOP soldier shot by Lithuanian border guards. The ultimatum issued by Warsaw ultimately led to the establishment of diplomatic relations, and relations with Poland's neighbour "entered a new creative path."[Beck, 1987: 139–141; Kornat, Wołos, 2020: 541–553].

According to a Lithuanian scientist, the Polish ultimatum was intended to humiliate the national pride of Lithuanians and deepened their distrust of Poland and Poles, but it did not result in the severance of diplomatic relations, only their establishment [Žulys, 2015: 169, 175].

The subject of Klaipėda was raised several times in the pages of Kurier Białostocki in March and April 1939. Short notes were devoted, among other things, to the heroic resistance of the unit led by Lieutenants Zemaitis and Bendorius (Bernot) [*"Zemajtis i Bernot wracajcie do Kowna!"*, 1939, KB, 27: 1; Łossowski, 1997: 355–356], the German plans to fortify the naval port, Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler's visit to the city, the resignation of Prime Minister Vladas Mironas' government, and the formation of a new cabinet led by General Jonas Černius [*Pierwszy dzień rządów swastyki w Kłajpedzie*, 1939, KB, 24: 1; *Kanclerz Hitler w Kłajpedzie*, 1939, KB, 25: 1; *Sejm litewski nie ratyfikował aneksji Kłajpedy*, 1939, KB, 26: 1; *Kłajpeda portem wojennym*, 1939, KB, 27: 1; *Rząd litewski podał się do dymisji*, 1939, KB, 28: 1; *Nowy rząd litewski gen. Czerniusa*, 1939, KB, 29: 1; *Sejm litewski ratyfikował układ z Niemcami*, 1939, KB, 32: 1; *Roboty fortyfikacyjne w Kłajpedzie*, 1939, KB, 32: 1]. These were mostly short, few-sentence mentions, but they were always placed on the front page of the newspaper, which testified to their importance.

The newspaper also reported on a radio address by General Stasys Raštikis, Commander-in-Chief of the Lithuanian army, concerning a collection for the armament fund. In his speech, the general emphasised that the positions of states depend on foreign policy, the internal situation, the moral state of the country, and the army. Kurier Białostocki also published several quotes from Raštikis' speech. For example: "Therefore, if we want to be free, we must defend ourselves," or "The fundraising campaign for the armament fund is not a demonstration against any of Lithuania's neighbors. The fundraising campaign is a decision that Lithuanians will not surrender without a fight..." [*Litwini nie poddadzą się bez walki,* 1939, KB, 29,: 1]. After a few days, the Białystok daily newspaper highlighted the massive response of Lithuanian society to Raštikis' speech and noted an increase in membership of the riflemen's associations – szaulis [*I Litwa zbiera fundusze na uzbrojenie*, 1939, KB, 34: 1].

In April 1939, Kurier published three more articles on the Baltic states. The first, entitled "Lithuania is prepared to defend its independence," provided Polish readers with extensive information about the Lithuanian government's plans to strengthen the army and the country's defense system, the direction of foreign policy, and budget cuts following the loss of Klaipėda. The same issue also included

a separate reprint from the Lithuanian press (Lietuvos Zinies), which emphasised the positive reception of Lithuania by the Polish society: "A year ago, it was possible to hope that, after establishing relations with Poland, Lithuania would find a loyal partner in the Polish society for the preservation of its independence. These expectations were not disappointed. At a critical moment (the occupation of Klaipėda), the Polish society showed a great deal of understanding for Lithuania." [*Litwa przygotowana jest do obrony niepodległości*, 1939, KB, 38: 1–2; *Polska nie zawiodła Litwy*, 1939, KB, 38: 2].

The next two articles described the visit of the Estonian Commander-in-Chief General Johan Laidoner to Poland. The visit took place on April 17–24. The first article reported on the general's ceremonial farewell at the train station in Tallinn. It mentioned, among other things, that he was seen off by the highest state authorities (led by the prime minister) and military officials, as well as the entire Polish legation in Tallinn with their spouses (!). The report also included a list of his companions, among whom were his wife, Estonian officers, and the Polish military attaché [*Generał Laidoner odjechał do Polski*, 1939, KB, 47:. 1].

The next article, entitled "The Estonian People Will Respond with Arms to Hostile Advances," quoted an interview with General Laidoner, given to representatives of the press shortly before his return to Estonia. It is worth mentioning the most important points of this statement. After praising the state of the Polish Army, General Laidoner emphasised the development of the Polish arms industry, the scale of which came as a surprise to him. Commenting on his visit to the arms factories in Stalowa Wola and Rzeszów (Central Industrial District), Johan Laidoner stated: "What I saw represents a great achievement, which was accomplished in an extremely short time and with careful planning." Later in the interview, the general drew attention to "the unchanging will of the leadership to pursue an independent Polish policy and the readiness to defend against any armed aggression." He also pointed to numerous common interests, despite the fact that "Poland is a great power and Estonia is a small country." On the other hand, he noted the lack of a military alliance between the two countries and made it clear that it was unnecessary, as "possible dangers confront us with common issues." At the end of the article, the importance of the Estonian Commander-in-Chief's visit was once again emphasised, pointing to his ceremonial farewell, among others, by Marshal E. Rydz-Śmigły. It was a new opportunity "to show friendship towards Estonia", highlighted by the playing of the Estonian national anthem and General Laidoner's shout in Polish, "Long live Poland!" [*Naród estoński odpowie z bronią w ręku na wrogie zakusy*, 1939, KB, 54: 1].

In May 1939, Kurier Białostocki published a series of articles covering the visit to Poland of the commander-in-chief of the Lithuanian army, the Brigadier General Stasys Raštikis. As in the case of General Laidoner's previous visit, the invitation came from the Polish Marshal Rydz-Śmigły. The newspaper provided a detailed profile of the distinguished guest and described his service. During his several-day visit (May 9–11), General Raštikis met with three of the most important representatives of the Polish authorities: the Foreign Minister Józef Beck, President Ignacy Mościcki, and the Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły. On the first day of the visit (May 9), the newspaper described Raštikis' stay in detail. The visit began with a ceremonial welcome at the Warsaw railway station by the Polish Marshal, surrounded by an honour guard of the Polish Army, with the national anthems of both countries being played. Before noon, the guest met with Minister Beck, and in the afternoon he laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. General Raštikis then held further meetings with representatives of the Second Polish Republic, watched Polish infantry combat exercises in Rembertów, visited the State Aviation Works in Okęcie and, importantly, the armament facilities of the Central Industrial District. The Kurier also published positive opinions from the Lithuanian press about this visit. It was noted that although General Raštikis was a military man, he also acted on behalf of the Lithuanian people [*Naczelny wódz armii litewskiej przyjeżdża dziś do Warszawy*, 1939, KB, 68: 2; *Naczelny wódz Litwy złożył wizytę ministrowi Beckowi*, 1939, KB, 69: 1; *Gen. Rasztikis przyjęty został przez P. Prezydenta*, 1939, KB, 70: 1; *Litwa prowadzi politykę niezależności,* 1939, KB, 70: 1; *Litwa przeżyła z Polską niejeden wiek wspólnej doli i niedoli,*1939, KB, 71: 2]. The Białystok newspaper also published a report reprinted from the Italian press [Giornale d'Italia] about the visit of the Lithuanian general, which ended with an announcement of the possible signing of a non-aggression pact between Poland and Lithuania [*Stosunki Polski z ZSRR i Litwą na drodze do dalszej normalizacji*, 1939, KB, 72: 2].

In May 1939, the capital city's daily newspaper devoted little space to the Baltic states. Latvia was mentioned for the first time in issue 74 of May 13. It reported on a joint meeting of the economic and cultural council and the country's highest authorities. Particular attention was paid to the most important points contained in the speech by the Latvia Foreign Minister Wilhelm Munters. These included: the decline of cooperation between nations, the lack of hope for outside help, reliance on own resources, and the need to sign a non-aggression pact with Germany [*Łotwa przygotowana do obrony*, 1939, KB, 74: 1].

Other May mentions of the Baltic states include: the development of Polish-Lithuanian relations, a football match between the LGSF team from Kaunas and the Białystok team, which ended with a score of 5 : 0 for the visitors, and a brief note on the Lithuanian reception of General Raštikis' visit to Warsaw [*Pomyślny rozwój stosunków polsko-litewskich*, 1939, KB, 76: 1; *Witamy miłych gości litewskich*, 1939, KB, 83; 5; *Zwycięstwo drużyny litewskiej*, 1939, KB, 84: 5; *Podróż gen. Rasztikisa do Warszawy faktem o historycznym znaczeniu*, 1939, KB, 86: 2].

In June 1939, eight issues of Kurier Białostocki published information about the Baltic states. It concerned: a visit by Lithuanian cooperative members; problems with the financial settlement of the May visit of Lithuanian footballers to Białystok; the awarding of an honorary doctorate to a Polish professor by the University of Kaunas; reprints of Lithuanian announcements related to a possible future war; celebrations related to the 20th anniversary of the Latvian Riflemen, including the presence of delegations from Poland, Estonia, Finland, and Lithuania; German propaganda postcards about Poland and Lithuania; and visits by Estonian journalists to Warsaw [*Goście z Litwy i Szwecji*, 1939, KB, 95: 2; *Echa meczu piłkarskiego z Litwinami*, 1939, KB, 102: 4; *Doktorat h. c.,* 1939, KB, 103: 2; *Litwa nie podda się*, 1939, KB, 108: 1; *20-lecie strzelców łotewskich*, 1939, KB, 109: 1; *Jak Zagłoba Szwedom Niderlandy,* 1939, KB, 116: 4; *Dziennikarze estońscy w Polsce*, 1939, KB, 117: 2].

On June 24, Kurier Białostocki published a lengthy interview with the Estonian Major General Ants Kurvits, commander of the Estonian Border Guard. Kurvits was in Poland on an official visit at the invitation of the Brigadier General Jan Kruszewski, the commander of the Polish Border Protection Corps (KOP). Before his departure, General Kurvits shared his reflections with Polish readers. He noted that his main goals were to familiarise himself with the organisation and working methods of the Polish border guard and to deepen the "traditionally good" relations between the two countries. In the rest of the interview, General Kurvits mainly praised the preparation and training of the Border Protection Corps, which he was able to observe personally [*Pochlebna opinia estońskiego generała o K.O.P.*, 1939, KB, 113: 2].

It should be noted that although in July and August there are as many as 17 references to the Baltic states in the newspaper, none of them concerns military issues. Instead, topics such as the issue of small border traffic between Poland and Lithuania, the visit of Polish writers to Kaunas, the stay of Lithuanian and Estonian writers and journalists in Poland, fraud committed by Germans against Lithuanian workers in the Third Reich, the visit of the Polish sailing ship "Dar

Pomorza" in Tallinn, the location of the Lithuanian population of Klaipėda and Lithuanian border issues, a train crash near Riga, and references to attempts by German propaganda to disrupt good relations between Poland and Lithuania [*Pisarze litewscy przyjadą do Polski,* 1939, KB, 127: 2; *Wycieczka dziennikarzy litewskich w Polsce*, 1939, KB, 128: 1; *Gra o Bałtyk*, 1939, KB, 129: 2; *Litwini przysięgają walczyć o dostęp do morza*, 1939, KB, 131: 1; *"Dar Pomorza" w Tallinie spotkał się z serdecznym przyjęciem*, 1939, KB, 198: 1; *Po Tyrolu – Kłajpeda,* 1939, KB, 199: 1; *Układ niemiecko-litewski,* 1939, KB, 200: 2; *Oszukani robotnicy litewscy wracają masowo do domu*, 1939 KB, 203: 1; *Ostre zarządzenie litewskie przeciw nielegalnemu przekraczaniu granicy*, 1939, KB, 204: 1; *Tendencyjne kłamstwa prasy niemieckiej,* 1939, KB, 205: 2; *Przymusowe gromadzenie zapasów żywności w Estonii*, 1939, KB, 207: 2; *Ostatni dzień pobytu wycieczki literatów polskich na Litwie*, 1939, KB, 211: 2; *Mały ruch graniczny w Grodzieńszczyźnie i Suwalczyźnie*, 1939, KB, 212: 5; *Rokowania niemiecko-litewskie o rozrachunki kłajpedzkie*, 1939, KB, 231: 2; *Prowokatorzy usiłują poderwać dobre stosunki Polski z Litwą*, 1939, KB, 234: 2].

Some space in Kurier Białostocki was also devoted to the Polish-Lithuanian sporting contacts. For example, there were detailed descriptions of the Lithuanian boxers' tour of Poland, and announcements of athletics competitions between Vilnius and Białystok, which ultimately did not take place [*Turnee bokserów litewskich*, 1939, KB, 216: 5; *Mecz lekkoatletyczny Wilno–Białystok odłożony*, 1939, KB, 216: 5]. It is worth mentioning here that in May 1939, matches played by the Lithuanian champions – the LGSF football team from Kaunas – were described in a similar way, including games against the Białystok team (5:0) and the Grodno team (2:4).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the goals of the Polish foreign policy towards the Baltic states. Józef Beck specified them in instructions given to MP Jerzy Kłopotowski in Riga: "we will help these countries as long as they are able to maintain the independence of their policies and do not become the subject of their neighbours' policies." [Kornat, Wołos, 2020: 553].

3. Conclusions

In summary, during the period in question, from March to the end of August 1939, a total of 54 reports on the Baltic states were published in 181 issues of Kurier Białostocki, mostly short, often based on sources provided by the Polish Telegraphic Agency (PAT). Most of them concerned Lithuania and focused on four main issues: the annexation of Klaipėda by the Third Reich, the formation of

a new government in Lithuania, the visit of the Lithuanian commander-in-chief to Warsaw, and mutual visits by representatives of Polish and Lithuanian culture and science. Among the texts concerning Latvia and Estonia, a short mention of the 20th anniversary of the Latvian Riflemen and longer interviews with high-ranking Estonian military officers during their visits to Poland are worth noting. In these interviews, particular attention was paid to praise emphasising the strength of the Polish army and arms industry. In total, only 6 of the 54 mentions or articles directly referred to Polish-Baltic military relations, but these were the longest texts concerning the Baltic states.

It is worth noting that Kurier Białostocki made virtually no mention of the Baltic states signing non-aggression pacts with the Third Reich[3]. It should also be noted that the Latvian generals did not visit Poland.

Although the Baltic states did not want to enter into military alliances with Poland, their behaviour towards their larger neighbour after the outbreak of war was commendable. For example, Lithuania refused the proposal to take Vilnius made by the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. In turn, the Estonian military authorities, led by General Laidoner, allowed the Polish submarine Orzeł, which had been interned in Tallinn, to leave. In addition, all the Baltic states accepted a number of Polish refugees. Without prior good relations, such action would probably not have been possible.

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Pierwszy dzień rządów swastyki w Kłajpedzie, 24.03.1939, KB, No. 24, p. 1.

Kanclerz Hitler w Kłajpedzie, 25.03.1939, KB, No. 25, p. 1.

Sejm litewski nie ratyfikował aneksji Kłajpedy, 26.03.1939, KB, No. 26, p. 1.

Prace prawodawcze Senatu. Demonstracja przyjaznych sąsiedzkich uczuć dla Litwy, 26.03.1939, KB, No. 26, p. 2.

[3] Latvia and Estonia signed non-aggression pacts with the Third Reich on the same day, June 7, 1939.

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VALUES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: FROM SCHUMAN'S VISION OF INTEGRATION TO TODAY'S EUROPE AND ITS DEPARTURE FROM CHRISTIAN ROOTS

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of the article is to confront Robert Schuman's vision of integration based on Christian values with the values of today's EU pointing to the threats resulting from Europe's departure from its Christian heritage. European identity, as a result of the rejection of the Christian values on which it was built, is currently in a crisis that threatens the existence of Europe.
- *Research method* – To achieve the purpose of the paper, a literature review was conducted and an analysis method was employed. The article also makes use of media articles, because the media currently play a significant role in shaping life values. The article is descriptive in nature. The manuscript has a journalistic-apologetic character. The article combines the fields of economics and also philosophy, and political science, showing that the issue of values is not confined to a single academic discipline. The starting point for the considerations presented in the manuscript is the identification of Christian values with the only "true" European values.
- *Score/results* – The analysis leads to the conclusion that cutting off the roots will result in moral relativism, constituting a threat to European integration and a crisis threatening the existence of the European Union. Economics and finance should not be considered in isolation from the Christian values on which the European Union was built.
- *Originality/value* – The results of the analysis may influence the increase in awareness regarding the consequences of the European Union's departure from its Christian roots, as envisioned in the European integration vision by the Servant of God Robert Schuman. This analysis should serve as a starting point for further research on the crisis

of values in the European Union. The issue is undoubtedly worth further academic exploration, because it is an important economic and social issue.

Keywords: integration, European Union, Schuman, values, crisis of Christian values, economy and finance, John Paul II

1. Introduction

European culture was shaped by Christians and therefore the values that constitute the basis of this culture are referred to as Christian values. The justification for their existence is God. Christian values are divided into specifically Christian values and universal ethical values. Man recognises the former in the light of Revelation and accepts them by an act of faith, together with the rules of conduct related to them. A subset of these values includes the truth of faith about the supernatural dignity of man, merited by Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross, as well as ethical principles, including respect for every person and brotherly love, also relating to enemies. Universal ethical values are the basis of the humanistic social order and include: the good of the human person, the good of the family and the common good. The good of the human person regards the rights bestowed on every human being, including the right to live from conception to natural death. The good of the family is based on marriage, i.e. a lasting relationship between a woman and a man and, among others, the right to raise children in accordance with their own religious values. The good of the nation refers to the natural community of people, bound by common spiritual values, i.e. language, tradition, religion, culture. Every nation has its own dignity, which consists of the dignity of the individual people who create the nation. The negation of Christian values in the legal order began in France with the Liberal Revolution [Krukowski, 2012].

After World War II, three Christian politicians: Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi and Robert Schumann attempted to unite the nations of Europe to prevent the outbreak of another war [Pionierzy Unii Europejskiej, 2025]. It was them who initiated the reconstruction of the Christian Europe, and Jean Monnet, already during World War II, prepared a program constituting the foundations of the future European Union [*Czym jest plan Schumana?*, 2025]. A devout Catholic, Robert Schuman, a lawyer by education and the French Minister of Foreign Affairs after World War II, was one of the founding fathers of the European Union, and as an advocate of Franco-German cooperation, he assumed that peace in Europe

was possible only through reconciliation with Germany. Without such a Christian perspective, the vision of the European integration would not be possible. Schuman, in cooperation with the French economist Jean Monnet, developed a plan to exercise joint control over the production of coal and steel, which were strategic raw materials in the 1950s [*Robert Schuman: architekt projektu…*, 2025]. Presented by Schuman on May 9, 1950, the project two years later contributed to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) - as a result of the Paris Agreements signed in 1951. Thus, the European integration was initiated by six founding countries: Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany and Italy. In 1957, the Treaties of Rome were signed and the European Communities (EC) were created, which included the European Atomic Energy Community – Euratom and the European Economic Community – EEC. The European Communities, constituting the institutional framework of integrating Europe, were the predecessor of today's European Union. On November 1, 1993, under the Maastricht Treaty signed on February 7, 1992, the European Economic Community became the European Community – one of the pillars of the established European Union (the second pillar is the common foreign and security policy, and the third: cooperation in the field of justice and home affairs). In 2007, as a result of signing the Lisbon Treaty, significant changes took place – the European Union (EU) acquired legal personality and replaced the European Community, taking over all its competences. Therefore, with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty on December 1, 2009, the European Community ceased to exist, and Euratom, having not merged with the European Union, retained a separate legal personality. To summarise this synthetic information, the European Union was established on November 1, 1993 under the Treaty on European Union. In 2023, 30 years will have passed since this historic moment.

This study is devoted to the Servant of God Robert Schuman (1886–1963) [Dębiński, 2004] and his plan for the post-war reconstruction of Christian Europe, in order to further present a diagnosis of religiosity and secularisation in the EU countries. Then, the threats contained in the thought of John Paul II related to Europe's departure from its Christian roots were presented. The article also draws attention to the contemporary EU values and to the secularisation of marriage and family, as particularly dangerous for the future of the EU. While the European Communities were based on Christian values, today's European Union, denying its Christian roots, acts as if God did not exist [Grabowski, Gierycz, 2017]. The economic and political changes in the European integration are accompanied by changes in the values that constitute the foundation of these processes. The aim

of the article is to show the values promoted by Robert Schuman and compare them with today's EU values, which are inscribed in the secular tradition. The aim of the article is to confront Robert Schuman's vision of integration based on Christian values with the values of today's EU pointing to the threats resulting from Europe's departure from its Christian heritage. The aim of the research is to seek an answer to the question: What may be the consequences of the European Union's rejection of the Christian heritage?

2. A vision of integration based on the Christian values according to Robert Schuman

Robert Schuman, in the declaration made on May 9, 1950, which laid the foundations for a united Europe, stated that "Europe will not be created all at once or in its entirety: it will be created through specific implementations, first creating real solidarity" [Deklaracja z 9 maja 1950 roku…, 2011]. Commenting on his declaration, Schuman stated that he created it because he believed in the Christian foundations of Europe [Audisio, Chiara, 2007: 84].

Robert Schuman was a proponent of a "Europe of values". In his statements, he often repeated that the value of Europe is a Europe of values, and the project of Europe should be a "community of homelands" [Sotowska, 2023]. The fundamental terms in Schuman's declaration were: peace, reconciliation and solidarity [*Deklaracja Schumana…*, 2025]. Schuman emphasised that the unity of Europe can only be based on the foundation of Christian civilisation, and democracy on fidelity to the teachings of Christ and the implementation of the principle of love for one's neighbor. He was close to the idea of unity in the diversity of European nations, which, owing to the awareness of common spiritual roots, should be connected by bonds of brotherhood, cooperation and love, and at the same time ready to give up some of their particular interests for the common good [Kobeszko, 2021]. In his book "For Europe", Schuman wrote, among other things, that democracy is doctrinally and chronologically related to Christianity, and "Christianity taught the equality of all people, children of the same God, redeemed by Christ, without distinction of race, skin color, class and profession. It brought recognition of the dignity of work and the obligation for all to recognise it. It brought primacy to internal values…". In the book, which is a kind of a testament, Schuman, emphasising the contribution of Christianity to the European culture and civilisation, wrote that Christianity is not and cannot be identified with any

form of government, even if it is a democratic form, because the Church, which is concerned with defending the most important interests the human person: his freedom, dignity and development, must ensure respect for natural law and revealed truths [Schuman, 2003]. Schuman's vision of the European integration was based on the belief that the best way to serve one's country is cooperation based on trust. The Schuman Plan is one of the most important documents in the history of the European civilization, inspiring this formula of understanding and practicing politics [Głażewski, 2021].

Faith helped Schuman take on subsequent life challenges. He was a Christian and a politician, and at the same time a modest man who respected others, a man of great stature, both spiritually and intellectually [Szareyko, 2009]. Deep Catholicism was the most important motive for Schuman's actions, he attended Latin Holy Mass every day and prayed for a world without war. He saw the future Europe as integrated and consisting of states with their own national identities. He did not see the point of building democracy in isolation from the foundations of Christianity. Schuman was a politician who was never ashamed to acknowledge Jesus Christ. Konrad Adenauer said about Schuman: "Saint in a suit" [Bugała, 2025]. Schuman's idea of the unity of Europe grew out of concern for the preservation and transmission of the heritage of Christian culture to future generations.

The beatification process of Robert Schuman opened on June 9, 1990 [Wójtowicz, 2021]. In 2021, Pope Francis approved the decree on the heroic virtues of Robert Schuman, which marked an important step towards beatification [Wysocka, 2021]. In his life, Schuman combined fidelity to Christian values with political activity, which laid the foundations for an integrated Europe. In 2004, Robert Schuman was proclaimed a Servant of God. Today, against the background of the refugee crisis and the controversy surrounding the place of Islam on the "old continent", the discussion regarding the Christian values on which the European Union was built is returning.

3. Values of today's European Union

The purpose of the European Union, as follows from Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its nations [*ABC prawa…*, 2023]. The member states of the European Union are united by economic and political ties [*Ewolucja ustroju…*, 2025] and a common system of values, which are written down in Art. 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon [Dziennik

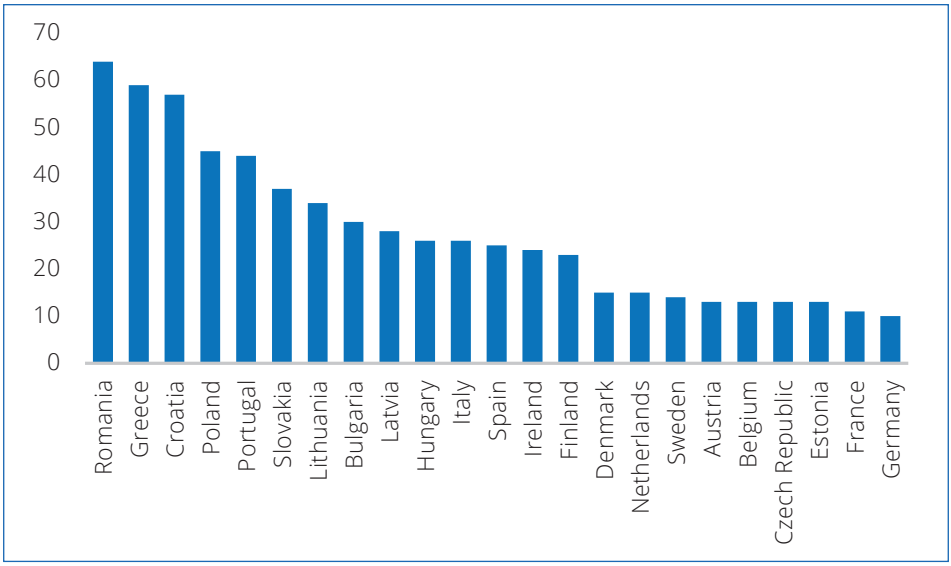
Urzędowy…, 2016] and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union [Dziennik Urzędowy…, 2012]. The fundamental European principles include: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, law-abidingness and respect for human rights, including the rights of people belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States and are based on pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men [Dz.U.2004.90.864/30]. The EU is based not only on the metioned values, but also on two principles, namely: democracy and the rule of law [Wróbel: 20]. However, a problem arises when interpreting these values, because it turns out that the EU has moved far from the values proclaimed by the founding fathers of Europe, which means that both the values and principles do not flow from the Christian roots of Robert Schuman's vision of European integration.

In 2001, Germany and France recognised the need to adopt a constitution for the European Union. The adoption of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe by referendum was supposed to be the fullest form of legitimising the government and confirming citizens' involvement in the complex issue of the European integration [Kużelewska, 2011]. The constitution is a means of defining common goals and rules for adopting binding decisions. The European Constitution is an international agreement signed by the Member States of the European Union on October 29, 2004 in Rome. However, due to the lack of ratification by all parties, this agreement did not enter into force. During the debate on the EU constitution, the topic of God was not raised, and mainly France and Belgium were against including a reference to God in the preamble. The reason is the secular nature of these countries and their fear that followers of other religions might feel aggrieved in this way. At the same time, Germany emphasised that followers of other religions can freely practice their faith in Europe, but, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, everyone could find out where the roots of our culture are through the reference to God in the constitution [Czerny, 2006].

Today, the EU's actions are determined more by secular tradition than by the Christian heritage. Debates increasingly reject the primacy of the family based on marriage and the culture of life. According to research by the Pew Institute Research Center (PRC) The European Union is becoming more and more atheistic [Veneto, Wojteczek, 2022], cutting itself off from its roots. The PRC survey was conducted in 2022 among 34 countries on the Old Continent. The inhabitants of these countries were asked whether they believed in God with absolute certainty. The lowest percentage of deep believers was recorded in Germany – only 10% of residents answered that they believed in God with absolute certainty. A similar

response rate was recorded among residents of France and Switzerland. These countries can be described as countries of spiritual crisis. The highest percentages are observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina (66%, with the proviso that Islam is the dominant religion in this country). Romania is second (64%), and Serbia is third (58%). In Poland this percentage was 45%. Figure 1 presents the results of this study for European Union countries (there is a lack of data for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovenia), which show how to European countries differ in religious commitment [Evans, Baronavski, 2018]. The highest percentage refers to Romania (64%), Greece (59%) and Croatia (57%).

Figure 1. Percentage of Europeans believing in God with absolute certainty



Source: the author's own elaboration based on [Evans, Baronavski, 2018].

From the data included in Figure 1 it can be concluded that the vast majority of Central and Eastern Europeans express belief in God and that Europe is becoming more and more secularised. For comparison, it is worth mentioning the results of a study by the Institute of Catholic Church Statistics (ISKK), which took place 10 years ago. At that time, among the European Union countries, belief in God was most common in Malta, Romania and Cyprus, and least common in Estonia, Sweden and the Czech Republic. At that time, the vast majority of European inhabitants considered themselves Christians (76.2%) [*Religijność w Europie*, 2014].

Unfortunately, secularisation also affects countries that were previously considered the most Catholic, e.g. Poland. This applies, for example, to eliminating the Christian roots of Christmas in the name of a peculiarly understood political correctness. What comes to mind is the return of the trend forcibly imposed by communist regimes [*Warszawa wstydzi się Jezusa…*, 2023]. When it comes to teaching religion in schools, it is a part of European standards, although its implementation is diverse. In most countries, participation is voluntary [Przeciszewski, 2023]. Freedom of religion is guaranteed in Art. 9 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms [*Wolność kultu…*, 2021]. The development of the EU's attitude towards religion is accompanied by dialogue with the Church and religious movements [Golus, 2014]. Religion is a factor determining the identity of individuals and communities, and Christianity is an important culture-forming factor. While religion, which is expressed through culture and influences the formation of national identity, concerns human development in the transcendental dimension of his life, culture determines human development in the dimension of temporal values. In today's globalised society, where pluralism is proclaimed, the influence of religion on shaping the identity of multicultural and multi-religious societies in Europe is also changing.

Eurobarometer data shows that only 6% of European Union residents mention religion as one of the values that guide their lives, even though 72% of EU residents consider themselves Christians, including 48% Catholics, 12% Protestants, 8% for Eastern Christians and 4% belong to other denominations. Most EU countries do not conduct research on the frequency of receiving Holy Communion, which is partly due to the fact that in Western European countries it is usually received by almost all participants of the Holy Mass (regardless of whether sacramental absolution has been obtained or not) [*Religijność w Europie*, 2014].

Additionally, and this is very sad, there is a kind of moral split among some Christians, which manifests itself in, on the one hand, declaring faith in God, and on the other, demeanor or declaration of demeanor contrary to the Commandments of the Decalogue, e.g. faith in God, while accepting the legalisation of abortion, which is considered a lesser evil or free choice, or the postulate of acceptance of homosexual relationships. Unfortunately, the Vatican also provides examples of failure to adhere to tradition, e.g. by allowing same-sex couples to be blessed [Przeciszewski, 2023]. In the context of the crisis of the Church, we should express hope that in the future a pope will restore

traditional values and the full traditional Holy Mass, because it is a treasure of the Church that should be preserved for future generations [Schneider, 2023]. Robert Schuman, as was already mentioned, attended such a Latin Mass [Kobeszko, 2021].

Secular identity is present among both elites and ordinary residents of the European Union. Fundamental values are increasingly the subject of dispute in the EU. For example, the European Union proclaims contradictory definitions of marriage and proclaims human dignity, but at the same time, it considers consistent with this value to finance research aimed at taking human life in the first, embryonic phases of its development [Grabowski, Gierycz, 2019]. The European Union, unable to make sacrifices, cares more and more about its own interests, its money and business than about the values on which it was built. An example of such actions in the context of migration is the failure to distinguish between defense against illegal "refugees" from Belarus and assistance to refugees from Ukraine [Roszkowski, 2022]. In recent years, EU activities have focused primarily on the pandemic, greening of the economy, and internal affairs division concerning the rule of law [Borkowski, 2021]. Moreover, in view of the possible Franco-German rapprochement, the prospect of peripheralisation of the countries based on Christian values is becoming more and more real. The functioning of the European Union as a community of norms and values [Florczak, Pacześniak, 2014] should be critically assessed.

The resignation of the member states from part of their sovereignty in favour of the EU allows the conclusion that in the process of its development, the structure of the EU was built similar to the structure of a federal state [*ABC prawa…*, 2023]. The current European Union already has some features of a totalitarian organisation [*NIE dla superpaństwa…*, 2023]. It is worth adding here that one of the EU symbols refers to Christian roots. It is a flag designed by the French cartoonist Arsene Heitz. The inspiration for this EU symbol was the biblical image of the Virgin Mary – with a halo of twelve stars. The flag in this form was approved by the European Parliament in 1983 [*Kto wymyślił Unię Europejską?…*, 2023]. However, apart from the Christian symbol, which is often associated with the number of EU members rather than attachment to Christian values, today's Europe is moving away from its roots. Moral relativism should be considered the main threat of this process. Moreover, the lack of values resulting from God's truth makes man miserable because his soul is bereaved.

The aim of the neutrality towards religious beliefs proclaimed by secular states is the complete eradication of Christian values from the legal order. The

religiosity of Europeans today is characterised by the modernisation of religion, secularisation and relativisation, which result in a crisis of its traditional form, leading to a departure from the values that were the source of European Christian culture [Krukowski, 2012; Krasowska, 2013]. John Paul II drew attention to this process of moving away from the Christian roots of European culture, which took shape in the 1950s, calling it a threat to European integration.

To sum up, today values in the EU are often an empty phrase, because the EU seems to assume that it is impossible to be a modern European and a person practicing religion at the same time [Banaszak, 2014]. Meanwhile, Poland is one of the most religious countries in the European Union, and Polish Pope John Paul II was one of the most influential popes in history.

4. The departure from Christian roots as a threat to European integration in the thought of John Paul II

From the beginning of his pontificate, Saint John Paul II emphasised that Christianity was and is a decisive factor in the history of Europe [*Europa w nauczaniu…*, 2023], because the foundations of the spiritual unity of Europe were laid on the Gospel. Feeling special responsibility for the spiritual and moral face of Europe and recognising European culture as the sphere of special care of the Church, the Pope often spoke about how important it is that the nations of Europe do not lose their Christian roots [Wójtowicz, 2021]. The element defining the identity of the "old continent" is the Church founded by Jesus Christ [Jan Paweł II, 2002], and common Christian roots constitute a commitment to building the unity of Europe based on spirituality and Christian values [Muszyński, 2002]. John Paul II often spoke out on the issue of the European integration, seeking to strengthen Christianity in Europe through its full unification [Delong, 2011]. In Gniezno on June 3, 1997, he said: "There will be no unity in Europe unless it is a community of spirit" [*Wystawa…*, 2008]. Six years later, in the exhortation "Ecclesia in Europa", he explained that he saw Christianity as an important factor in the process of "Europeanization of Europe" [Przeciszewski, 2019]. He perceived the problems of changes taking place in the European Union in the context of combining the heritage of the past with the challenges of the present and the future [Chodubski, 2014]. John Paul II pointed to Robert Schuman as a model for all those responsible for building Europe [Sotowska, 2023].

In a homily delivered in Gniezno in 1997, John Paul II asked: "Without Christ, it is impossible to build lasting unity. This cannot be done by cutting ourselves off from the roots from which the nations and cultures of Europe grew and from the great wealth of past centuries. How can we hope to build a 'common house for all of Europe if there are no bricks of human conscience, burned in the fire of the Gospel, united by the bond of solidarity and social love, which is the fruit of God's love?" [*Jan Paweł II: Zrąb tożsamości…*, 2022]. Meanwhile, when the European Constitution was being drafted at the beginning of the 21st century, the demands of appealing to God or even Christianity were rejected, which illustrates a change in the understanding of European integration and a departure from the European roots of the EU's founding fathers. Commenting in 2002 on this lack of reference to Christian roots, John Paul II did not hide his disappointment at the lack of mention of God, Who is the original source of human dignity and of his fundamental rights. John Paul II said that omitting a reference to God in the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the preamble to the European Constitution is an ahistorical and insulting action to the fathers of the new Europe. The Pope emphasised that this demeans the work of Robert Schuman, distorting his vision of a united Europe heading in a safe direction [Bugała, 2025]. Saint John Paul II recalled how many tears and blood were shed in Europe when it forgot its Christian roots [*Europa i wartości chrześcijańskie…*, 2000].

John Paul II, seeing the threats to European integration resulting from the parting from Christian values, repeatedly expressed concern about the wave of secularism flooding Europe [Re, 2011], which means a decline in religiosity and people's turning away from God. The Pope pointed out a particular threat to the future of the EU in the form of the secularisation of marriage and family, emphasising that the most clear manifestation of the functioning of the secularised model of marriage and family life is the legalisation of abortion in many European countries [Stępniak, 2014]. It is undoubtedly a paradox for the EU that while proclaiming the need to respect human rights, the human right to life is denied [*Nasz Profesor: Karol Wojtyła…*, 2025]. A comparison of the contemporary EU, which is moving away from its Christian roots, compared to the vision of European integration according to the Servant of God Robert Schuman is presented in Table 1. The information contained therein confirms that today's EU has rejected its Christian roots.

Table 1. Christian values according to Schuman vs. today's EU

	Robert Schuman's vision of European integration	EU today
Specifically Christian values	yes	no
Universal ethical values:		
the good of the human person	yes	no
the good of the family	yes	no
common good	yes	no

Source: the author's own study.

European identity is currently in crisis as a result of the rejection of the Christian values on which it was built [Wiech, 2021]. John Paul II pointed out the threat associated with rejecting the cult of the living and true God in the form of a real threat to the existence of Europe in both the human and material sense [Guz, 2019]. Message of the Holy Father John Paul II was reflected in his words spoken during the Homily delivered during the Holy Mass which solemnly began his pontificate [October 22, 1978]: "Do not be afraid, open wide the doors to Christ, open the doors of his saving power" [*Otwórzcie na oścież drzwi Chrystusowi*, 2025]. Without Christian heritage, there is a real threat to European integration, resulting in the collapse of the EU. This implies an urgent need for repeated evangelisation of the European Union countries.

5. Conclusions

The Schuman Declaration, delivered on May 9, 1950, announced the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community and was a kind of road map for building the predecessor of the European Union. Schuman referred to the concept of "community" inherently related to the category of solidarity, which he considered the central principle of integration. The example of Robert Schuman also shows that by engaging in politics one can achieve holiness.

John Paul II emphasised many times that Europe's identity cannot be understood without Christianity. Meanwhile, today's European Union is characterised

by gradual and uneven secularisation, which means that we can talk about a post-Christian EU in which economics and finances are more important than the values on which it was founded. Referring to the thought of John Paul II, one cannot cut off the roots from which it has grown, and the common European home must become, taking Christian traditions as an example, Europe of the spirit. Cutting off the roots will result in moral relativism, constituting a threat to European integration and a crisis threatening the existence of the European Union.

This study does not exhaust the topic, but it may constitute a starting point for further considerations in this area and searching for answers to the question regarding the consequences of the European Union's rejection of the Christian heritage. A limitation of this study is the lack of data for all EU countries regarding the responses of EU residents to the question about believing in God with absolute certainty and the failure of most EU countries to carry out research on the reception of Holy Communion by the faithful. In future research, it would be worth taking into account participation in the traditional Holy Mass in this context, because the consequence of the restrictions resulting from the announcement of the pandemic was an increase in the number of the faithful attending Mass in the classical Roman rite, and Robert Schuman, as indicated, attended such a mass.

May God allow Europe to take advantage of the chance given to it, the last possibility of salvation [Schuman, 2003]. Lord, let us in Your Church honor Robert Schuman, a disciple and follower of Christ, as blessed. Let him be a model for legislators and rulers, so that they too become servants of their nations and work for peace and justice between them [Kobeszko, 2021; *Proces beatyfikacyjny*, 2025].

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BORDERLAND MUSEUMS IN POLAND – TOWARDS A CRITICAL RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Abstract

- *Goal* – The article develops a theoretical and analytical model for studying museum representations of the borderland, focusing on how these spaces become arenas of memory and identity construction.
- *Research methodology* – The article is conceptual and based on desk research. It draws on critical literature in museum studies, borderland studies, memory studies, and postcolonial theory. It proposes a qualitative methodology combining critical discourse analysis, visual interpretation, and the study of curatorial strategies that shape narratives about the borderland and the Eastern Borderlands (Kresy).
- *Score/results* – The article aims to:
  - conceptualise museums as actors in memory politics and identity formation in border regions;
  - analyse tensions between national, local, and minority narratives;
  - propose analytical dimensions (e.g., inclusion/exclusion, center/periphery, symbolic power) for interpreting museum narratives;
  - reflect on the museum's role in shaping discourses on multiculturalism and identity in peripheral areas.
- *Originality/value* – The article offers a novel contribution by treating the borderland as an analytical category that exposes mechanisms of cultural representation and symbolic hierarchy. It integrates critical borderland studies and postcolonial theory into museum analysis, introduces methodological tools for examining regional museums as cultural actors, and provides insights for both scholars and practitioners seeking more inclusive and dialogical forms of heritage representation.

Keywords: museum, borderland, Eastern Borderlands (Kresy), collective memory, memory politics

1. Introduction

Although museums are commonly regarded as institutions entrusted with the task of preserving and interpreting the past for future generations, in practice they actively mobilise selective representations of the past to construct narratives that legitimise the present [Preziosi, 2012: 25]. The ways in which historical narratives are constructed and interpreted are shaped not only by the institutions themselves, but also by the socio-cultural contexts in which they operate. If we acknowledge that museums are cultural institutions embedded in specific social and political conditions, then the concept of the borderland – with its inherent complexity and ambiguity – presents a distinctive interpretive challenge.

Museums operating in borderland regions, drawing on the cultural heritage of multiethnic communities, produce narratives that – depending on the adopted interpretive strategy – may foster social integration or contribute to the reproduction of social divisions and exclusionary practices. In this sense, the borderland functions as an analytical space for exploring the processes through which collective memory is constructed, their entanglement with memory politics, and their role in shaping collective identities and intergroup relations.

In the context of the growing significance of memory politics and the intensifying contestation over interpretations of the past, museums have emerged as active participants in shaping collective memory and social identity. No longer neutral spaces for presenting historical facts, they are institutions actively involved in the production of narratives embedded in the prevailing symbolic orders. As Benedict Anderson [1991: 163–185] argues, museums play a crucial role in constructing national "imagined communities"; they function as instruments of state-driven identity formation and collective memory production.

This article, conceptual and theoretical in nature, was developed within the framework of a research project.[1] It outlines the main research assumptions, the significance of the subject matter, the theoretical framework, and the methodological rationale. The aim of the project is to develop an analytical framework for examining borderland museums, with particular focus on how the notion of the borderland – as a historical, cultural, and symbolic space – operates within museum narratives in Poland. Special attention is given to institutions the mission

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statements or names of which explicitly refer to the borderland or the *Kresy* – a term used to describe the former eastern territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

2. Towards a critical reflection on borderland museums: theoretical foundations of the project

A museum as a cultural institution is not only a space for collecting and displaying objects but also a site of knowledge and power production, as well as an institution regulating social imaginations of the past and identity [Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Bennett, 1995; Fyfe, 2006]. Museums functioning specifically in borderlands – geographical, symbolic, and cultural – require a critical reflection that takes into account their position within power relations, memory, and representation. This chapter attempts to outline the theoretical framework for a research project focused precisely on such institutions. It draws upon selected concepts from critical museum studies, critical heritage studies, postcolonial theory, and reflections on the notions of borderland and the Eastern Borderlands (Kresy) as cultural and ideological constructs.

2.1. Museum as a cultural institution and site of power

One of the key theoretical categories in this project is the museum itself. According to the Polish law, it is defined as an institution the primary areas of the activity of which include collecting, exhibiting, educational, and dissemination activities [Journal of Laws 1997, no. 5, item 24]. On the one hand, museums serve the society, being inclusive institutions that promote diversity and sustainable development [ICOM, 2022]. On the other hand, they function as sites of memory that construct and sustain collective memory.

Owing to the development of critical museum studies, contemporary museums are no longer seen merely as neutral spaces for the collection and presentation of objects, or as "temples of art." Increasingly, they are understood as institutions embedded within structures of symbolic power, legitimising particular historical narratives [Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992]. Proponents of the critical heritage studies paradigm, such as Gordon Fyfe, emphasise that museums are themselves sites of knowledge and power production, actively participating in the creation of norms, meanings, and social hierarchies, thereby regulating social perceptions of the past and identity [Fyfe, 2006: 35–36].

2.2. Museums, collective memory, and historical politics

The emergence of public museums in the late 18th century, followed by their dynamic development throughout the 19th century, was closely intertwined with the consolidation of the nation-state [Pomian, 1996]. Simultaneously, this process marked the beginning of the institutionalisation of collective memory. Museums began to collect objects of significant cultural importance that expressed a "national" identity [Anderson, 1991]. In this way, museums became key instruments in shaping shared memory and played a crucial role in constructing social identity through selective representations of the past.

The concept of collective memory was initiated by Maurice Halbwachs, who initially studied the social frameworks of individual memory [Halbwachs, 2008 (1925)]. This concept was further developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann, who distinguished between communicative memory – linked to intergenerational and oral transmission and cultural memory, which is maintained through institutions, symbols, and the media [Assmann, 2009] These forms of memory do not exist in a vacuum but are deeply entangled with mechanisms of power and political intention

The literature frequently emphasises the connection between collective memory and mechanisms of power, which employ diverse tools to legitimise specific narratives [Wawrzyniak, 2014: 346–351]. One such a tool is historical politics – understood as a set of actions and strategies employed by the state and other socio-political actors regarding the interpretation, commemoration, and utilisation of the past for social, political, and cultural purposes. Museums play an important role in this process as sites of memory, where the past is selectively presented and interpreted through exhibitions, collections, and educational activities [Kalicka, Witek: 2014, 384].

Drawing on Pierre Nora's concept, the museum itself can be understood as a "site of memory" (*lieu de mémoire*) – a symbolic space where the past is anchored, and collective memory is structured and preserved [Nora, 2022] Thus, as a site of memory, the museum not only documents historical events, but actively shapes their interpretation – through thematic selection, curatorial strategies, narrative framing, and the employed interpretative language. Public museums often function as instruments of nation-building, selectively curating the past to produce coherent narratives of belonging.

3. The borderland as an analytical framework in museum studies

Museums do not operate in isolation but are embedded in specific social, political, and cultural contexts that significantly influence their functioning, the form of their exhibitions, and the narratives they construct. A particularly compelling case, worthy of in-depth analysis, is the museum located in a borderland region. The borderland context is shaped by complex historical, ethnic, and cultural processes, which vividly expose mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, negotiation of meaning, and the reproduction of dominant narratives.

Despite the growing interest in the concept of the borderland – both in academic reflection and in social practice – it remains a complex, multidimensional, and therefore problematic notion [Babiński, 1996: 6; Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak, 2020: 283]. As Dariusz Wojakowski points out, this reveals the historical and institutional conditions of the Polish sociology, in which two approaches coexist: a modernist one – emphasising territoriality and ethno-cultural diversity, and a constructivist one – focusing on the relational and symbolic dimension of borders. This tension gives the Polish discourse on borderlands an ambiguous yet theoretically stimulating character [Wojakowski, 1990: 419–431]. A different perspective is offered by Agnieszka Pasieka, who argues that the borderland has become a fashionable and universal academic term – perfectly aligned with scholarly jargon, yet often detached from social realities and susceptible to ideological instrumentalisation [Pasieka, 2016: 127].

The social perception of the borderland is marked by ambivalence, manifested in a variety of often contradictory interpretations. On the one hand, in cultural animation practices and in theoretical reflection, alike the borderland is portrayed as a multicultural space of dialogue [Czyżewski, 2017: 75–86; Nikitorowicz, 1995: 125]. On the other hand, it is also described as a space of socio-cultural tensions and conflicts [Sadowski, 2001]. This ambivalence stems from the fact that borderlands are social and cultural spaces in which national ideologies, state power, and local identities intersect and are continuously negotiated [Donnan & Wilson, 1999: 7].

Additionally, from a critical perspective, the borderland is seen as a peripheral area subjected to symbolic subordination by the center, which leads to the reproduction of the existing hierarchies of power and identity [Zarycki, 2011: 33–54]. In this view, the borderland is not so much a space of openness as a site of tensions and asymmetries inscribed in the logic of center–periphery relations.

The concept of the borderland can also be interpreted through the lens of Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" – as a site of hybridity, negotiation, and cultural translation. In this perspective, the borderland is not merely a peripheral or contested area, but a dynamic arena in which meanings are continuously negotiated and where identity and memory are subject to ongoing reconstruction. This approach shifts the focus from the fixed categories of difference to processes of cultural interaction, symbolic transformation, and the creation of new, hybrid forms of belonging. At the same time, it challenges essentialist understandings of national or ethnic identity by emphasising the productive potential of ambiguity and in-betweenness. [Bhabha, 2010].

In summary, for institutions such as museums operating within the complex reality of the borderland, this constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity: they may either reproduce hegemonic frameworks of memory or open up space for pluralism, critical reflection, and dialogical engagement.

4. "Kresy" or borderland? Contested narratives and postcolonial perspectives

In the Polish academic literature, the concept of the "Kresy" is often used alongside the term "borderland." While some scholars treat the two as synonymous [Babiński, 1994: 5; Sadowski 1995: 40], and others regard them as distinct analytical categories [Bukała, 2006: 15–16; Kwaśniewski, 1997: 77–78], both groups agree that, in contrast to the emotionally charged notion of the "Kresy", the term "borderland" is more neutral and descriptive in nature.

According to this perspective, the "Kresy" refer to specific territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that were lost during the partitions of the eighteenth century and again after World War II – the lands now located within the borders of Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. Although the Kresy are often portrayed as a lost "Arcadia," in reality – as Daniel Beauvois emphasises – they were spaces marked by domination, violence, and inequality [Beauvois, 2017: 301–317]. Beauvois and other scholars argue that this Polonocentric category marginalises the native cultures of these territories and overlooks the current existence of independent states and nations [Bukała, 2006: 14–15; Kwaśniewski, 1997: 64]. Some authors go further, drawing parallels between the Kresy and Western colonies, interpreting the Polish presence in these areas as a form of colonial-imperial expansion [Sowa, 2011: 496]. These interpretations are influenced

by the growing impact of the postcolonial theory in the Polish humanities over the past decade. This development has been supported by the translation of seminal works by Edward Said [2005 (1978)], Homi Bhabha [2010 (1994)], and Leela Gandhi [2008 (1998)], as well as by the writings of Polish scholars such as Ewa Thompson, Maria Janion [2006], Bogusław Bakuła [2006, 2011, 2014], and Jan Sowa [2011].

Postcolonial theory – focused on analysing the structures of domination, subordination, and hegemony emerging from colonial experiences – offers valuable analytical tools for studying cultural and historical narratives. While it has traditionally been used to critique Western colonial empires, especially in relation to cultural plunder and the need to decolonise museum collections [Michalik, 2018], its applicability is much broader. As Ewa Domańska [2008: 158] argues, postcolonial critique can be employed wherever power asymmetries, exclusion, and symbolic hierarchies persist.

In this light, the postcolonial theory becomes a means of revealing those aspects of culture and collective memory that are marginalised or silenced, especially in relation to difficult or suppressed histories. Bogusław Bakuła advocates for the use of postcolonial approaches in reinterpreting the Polish Kresy discourse, which he sees not only as an expression of the national nostalgia but also as a central component of the Polish national axiology. According to Bakuła, the Kresy narrative is exclusionary: it constructs the eastern territories not only as lost and heroic, but also as essentially and exclusively "Polish" [Bakuła, 2006: 12–14]. Applying postcolonial theory to the study of borderland museums – including those explicitly devoted to the Kresy – allows for a critical examination of dominant historical narratives and exposes mechanisms of marginalisation, exclusion, or "Orientalisation" of minority groups [Bukała, 2006; Buchowski, 2006; Zarycki, 2013]. It encourages a reflection on how museums participate in shaping, reproducing, or contesting symbolic boundaries and collective memory, and invites the inquiry into whose voices are represented, and whose remain unheard.

5. Methodology

The aim of this research project is to examine how the concept of the borderland is represented in the exhibitions of the museums operating in the border regions of Poland. The analysis focuses on the content of both permanent and temporary

exhibitions, with particular attention paid to the ways in which cultural heritage is represented, the employed narrative strategies, and the presence – or absence – of minority, local, and national perspectives. The project seeks to identify which visions of the borderland are being promoted, which themes are emphasised, and which remain invisible or marginalised. The main research question posed in the project is as follows: How is the notion of the borderland represented and how does it function within the narratives of borderland museums? In order to deepen this analysis, the project addresses several more specific research questions:

1. What aspects of borderland heritage are emphasised, and which are omitted in the museum narratives?
2. What narrative strategies are used by the museums to construct the image of the borderland?
3. How are national and ethnic cultural heritages represented in the museum storytelling?
4. How do the museums interpret difficult or conflict-laden moments in the history of the region?

The research focuses on the museums the names, missions, and institutional profiles of which explicitly refer to the heritage of the borderland or of the *Kresy* (former Eastern Borderlands). The project includes both institutions located in the contemporary border regions and those situated in the country's interior, which nonetheless refer to the borderland as a symbolic point of reference. The selection encompasses municipal and private museums as well as institutions still in the process of being established.

The study covers, among others: the Museum of Borderland Heritage and Culture in Brzeg Dolny [*Muzeum Dziedzictwa i Kultury Kresów w Brzegu Dolnym*]; the Museum of the Eastern Borderlands in Częstochowa [*Muzeum Kresów w Częstochowie*]; the Museum of the Eastern Borderlands in Węgliniec [*Muzeum Kresów Wschodnich w Węglińcu*]; the Ignaz Reimann Museum of Borderland Culture in Wambierzyce [*Muzeum Kultury Pogranicza im. Ignaza Reimanna w Wambierzycach*]; the Silesian-Lusatian Borderland Museum in Żary [*Muzeum Pogranicza Śląsko-Łużyckiego w Żarach*]; the Museum of the Eastern Lands of the Former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in Lublin [*Muzeum Ziem Wschodnich Dawnej Rzeczypospolitej w Lublinie*] the Borderland Museum in Działdowo [*Muzeum Pogranicza w Działdowie*]; the Museum of the Borderlands in Ostrów Mazowiecka [*Muzeum Kresów w Ostrowi Mazowieckiej*]; and the Museum of Lwów and the South-Eastern Borderlands in

Kuklówka Radziejowicka [*Muzeum Lwowa i Kresów Południowo-Wschodnich w Kuklówce Radziejowickiej*].

Despite differences in the legal status, location, and the character of their collections, these institutions share a common orientation towards the borderland as a framework for interpreting history and cultural identity. The project proceeds from the assumption that museum exhibitions are not neutral presentations of facts, but rather carefully constructed interpretive spaces. Through the selection of artifacts, textual materials, visual arrangements, and broader interpretive context, they generate specific representations of the past. Accordingly, the qualitative content analysis of museum exhibitions, grounded in the principles of critical discourse analysis is the employed core research method. This approach encompasses both the verbal language used in curatorial narratives and the visual strategies of display, with a focus on how museums shape relationships among national, local, and ethnic heritage. The analysis draws on tools developed within discourse studies [van Dijk, 2001], while also incorporating the specificity of museum communication as a form of spatial and visual narration.

The research is structured around the following analytical dimensions:

1. Selection of exhibits – what is included and what is excluded; what types of objects are used to represent the borderland heritage; whether objects relating to ethnic minorities are present;
2. Structure and language of the narrative – analysis of curatorial texts, exhibit descriptions, labels, catalogues, and educational materials;
3. Spatial arrangement – how the exhibition organises relationships between objects, themes, and visitors; whether it constructs hierarchies, contrasts, or tensions;
4. Visuality and aesthetics – the analysis of the visual layer of the exhibition as an element of meaning-making.

In addition to the qualitative analysis of exhibitions, the research also includes semi-structured interviews with the museum staff in order to gain insights into the institutional intentions, curatorial decisions, and internal reflections on the representation of the borderland heritage. Additionally, desk research will be undertaken, focusing on institutional materials such as websites, exhibition catalogues, mission statements, and educational publications. This will serve to contextualise the exhibitions and to explore the wider discursive landscape shaping museum narratives.

6. Conclusion

This project makes an important contribution to the ongoing debates on the role of museums not only as the custodians of heritage, but also as active agents in its interpretation and reinterpretation. By examining museum narratives related to the borderland heritage, it demonstrates how contemporary museums construct images of history, identity, and intergroup relations in culturally and politically complex regions.

The findings provide insight into how the concept of the borderland is framed within institutional narratives, identifying which types of heritage are emphasised and which are marginalised or excluded. The project also uncovers narrative strategies that either promote inclusion or reinforce exclusion of minority groups – an issue of particular relevance in current discussions on multiculturalism, memory politics, and identity.

One of the project's expected outcomes is the development of analytical tools for critically assessing the museum exhibitions as forms of cultural discourse. In addition, it offers practical recommendations for more inclusive curatorial practices. These findings may be of value to both researchers of the heritage and museum studies and professionals – such as curators, educators, and cultural policymakers – interested in fostering more diverse and dialogical representations of the past.

More broadly, the study contributes to the field of critical heritage and museum studies by deepening reflection on how cultural institutions shape social memory and identity, especially in the peripheral and borderland areas marked by historical tensions. Through the analysis of specific case studies, the project reveals the mechanisms of selection, silencing, and symbolic appropriation at work in museum representations of the past, and highlights the tensions between local experiences and national historical narratives.

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LEVERAGING THE INNOVATION INDEX AS A STRATEGIC POLICY TOOL: INSIGHTS INTO LATVIA'S INNOVATION PERFORMANCE AND PATHWAYS TOWARDS EU CLIMATE AND SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article is to demonstrate how the transition towards implementing the European Green Deal has influenced Latvia's level of innovative development, as reflected in its innovation performance indicators.
- *Research methodology* – The study is based on an analysis of the Republic of Latvia's regulations and strategic guidelines, supported by a comprehensive review of relevant literature, including national and international reports and scientific publications.
- *Score/results* – The findings underscore that innovation is playing an increasingly pivotal role in Latvia's economic development. It acts as a catalyst for fostering a greener, more sustainable society and enhancing the EU's global competitiveness. The article highlights how the European Green Deal has influenced Latvia's innovation ecosystem, revealing progress alongside persistent structural challenges that limit advancement beyond the emerging innovator status.
- *Originality/value* – This article uniquely examines Latvia's Green Deal initiatives within the framework of its position on the EU Innovation Scoreboard, offering insights into the country's pathways toward sustainable innovation and its evolving innovation ecosystem.

Keywords: Green Deal, EU Innovation Scoreboard, innovation ecosystem, legislation, sustainability

1. Introduction

The experience of countries with developed market economies demonstrates that addressing socio-economic challenges is closely tied to the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In Latvia, the growth of business activity aligns with the country's long-term economic strategy and priorities. National competitiveness is driven by the success of competitive enterprises, which in turn depends on the quality of the overall business environment. SMEs play a vital role in maintaining a healthy, dynamic market economy [Hillary, 2004: 561–569]. Innovation and the broader innovation environment are influenced by a variety of factors within the business ecosystem. This environment is shaped by the prevailing economic and political conditions, as well as by legal, socio-cultural, technological, geographical, ecological, institutional, and informational contexts. In recent years, the Latvian government has prioritised innovation and skills development, creating opportunities for SMEs to access funding for new products and services, to enhance workforce skills, and to facilitate knowledge and technology transfer from research institutions to businesses. Furthermore, the European Union's Green Deal has introduced new dimensions to SME development, emphasising sustainability and the green transition.

The Green Deal supports SMEs in adopting environmentally friendly practices and technologies, offering financial instruments and policy frameworks aimed at fostering innovation while reducing environmental impact [www 1].

Latvia's pursuit of sustainable economic growth and alignment with the European Green Deal requires a more strategic application of innovation performance metrics. This paper examines the Innovation Index, specifically the Global Innovation Index and the European Innovation Scoreboard, as a policy tool to inform and guide national strategies in entrepreneurship and green transition. As of the European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS) 2024, Latvia is classified as an "Emerging Innovator" (53.6% of the EU average), and with a performance level below 70% of the EU average. This classification places Latvia among countries that are still developing their innovation capabilities compared to the EU average.

By using the Innovation Index not only as a benchmarking framework but as a strategic policy guide, Latvia can enhance its innovation ecosystem, improve SME competitiveness, and accelerate progress toward EU climate and sustainability goals.

2. Innovation ecosystems in the context of sustainability

According to Daniel Isenberg, entrepreneurship functions as an ecosystem – a dynamic and interdependent network of environmental factors and elements connected through complex relationships. These ecosystem components are intertwined in cause-and-effect chains, in which the influence of one factor often depends on and impacts others. Entrepreneurial activity within a region both shapes and is shaped by these interactions. Given this complexity, the effective functioning of an entrepreneurial ecosystem requires the alignment of various supportive elements, including policy frameworks, access to markets and capital, human capital and skills, a strong entrepreneurial culture, and enabling infrastructure and tools. Each of these elements plays a critical role in fostering entrepreneurship. Sustainable entrepreneurial growth can only be achieved through the synergy of all these components. Because the conditions influencing entrepreneurship are unique to each country and region, it is essential to analyse the specific factors that contribute to creating a favorable business environment as a cohesive ecosystem [Isenberg, 2011: 6]. Mason and Brown define an entrepreneurial ecosystem as a set of interconnected entrepreneurial actors (e.g., entrepreneurs, advisors, investors), organisations (e.g., firms, universities, support organisations), institutions (e.g., regulatory bodies), and processes which formally and informally coalesce to connect, mediate, and govern the performance of local entrepreneurial environments [Mason, Brown, 2014]. Their definition highlights the role of both formal structures and informal networks.

Stam expands the concept by introducing the idea of ecosystem performance, defining it as a set of interdependent actors and factors coordinated in such a way that they enable productive entrepreneurship, which contributes to economic development. His model includes framework conditions (like culture and infrastructure) and systemic conditions (such as networks and leadership). [Stam, 2015: 1761]. Researches show that the main drivers behind a successful innovation ecosystem are favourable administrative requirements, government incentives, available financial resources, academic-industry collaborations, research and development, commercialisation, market dynamics, entrepreneurial culture [Ratanova, Voroncuka, 2019: 1011].

The concept of the innovation ecosystem has emerged as a pivotal analytical framework for examining the processes through which innovation originates, evolves, and is sustained within the context of an increasingly complex and interconnected global economy. Grounded in systems theory, the innovation ecosystem

encapsulates the dynamic interrelations among a diverse array of actors, institutions, and contextual factors that collectively facilitate the generation, dissemination, and commercialisation of innovative outputs. Over time, this concept has been elaborated through various scholarly contributions, each offering distinct perspectives on the structural components, functional mechanisms, and contextual determinants that underpin the operation of innovation ecosystems.

As innovation ecosystems have evolved with advances in technology and globalisation, more recent scholars have refined the concept to reflect these shifts. Granstrand and Holgersson conducted a systematic review of 21 existing definitions and proposed a comprehensive one that captures the ecosystem's multidimensional nature: "an evolving set of actors, activities, and artifacts, and the institutions and relations, including complementary and substitute relations that are important for the innovative performance of an actor or a population of actors". This definition accounts for not only cooperation but also competition, recognising that innovation ecosystems include both supportive and rival elements. An innovation ecosystem is the evolving set of actors, activities, and artefacts, and the institutions and relations, including complementary and substitute relations, that are important for the innovative performance of an actor or a population of actors" [Granstrand, Holgersson, 2020: 102098].

Innovation ecosystems are increasingly shaped by sustainability imperatives, driven by the European Green Deal and ESG frameworks. This marks a shift from purely economic innovation towards the holistic value creation that supports environmental responsibility, social inclusion, and ethical governance. Rooted in systems theory, the innovation ecosystem framework highlights dynamic interactions among firms, universities, investors, public institutions, and civil society now expected to integrate sustainability into their strategies.

Policies such as the EU Taxonomy Regulation and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) are reshaping innovation governance, promoting green technologies and sustainable transitions. ESG criteria are also transforming investment, directing capital toward climate-conscious ventures through instruments like green bonds and impact funds. This transition increases demand for green skills, reshaping education and workforce development around environmental literacy, ethical leadership, and inclusive practices. Innovation ecosystems now prioritise sustainable infrastructure, renewable energy, and low-impact digital systems. In this evolving context, sustainability is no longer a peripheral concern but a core driver of innovation, culture, and long-term economic and societal resilience (Table 1).

Table 1. Sustainability-Oriented Factors Shaping Innovation Ecosystems

Factor	Description	Contributors
1. Actors and Stakeholders	Diverse participants (firms, universities, investors, public agencies) enable innovation collaboration.	Jackson; Granstrand & Holgersson
2. Institutional Frameworks	Regulatory systems, IP laws, public policy incentives that shape innovation. Green Deal adds sustainability laws and ESG standards.	Autio & Thomas; European Commission
3. Financial Capital	Access to funding through public support, venture capital, green bonds, ESG-linked finance tools.	Adner
4. Human Capital	Skills, talent, and education systems supporting innovation. Green Deal emphasizes green skills.	Stam; EC Green Skills Agenda
5. Knowledge & Tech Flows	Formal and informal mechanisms for research and knowledge diffusion; increasingly focused on sustainability.	Jackson; Granstrand & Holgersson
6. Infrastructure	Physical and digital infrastructure (labs, broadband, transport); emphasis now on sustainability.	Autio & Thomas; European Commission
7. Cultural and Social Norms	Societal values that promote risk-taking, collaboration, ethics, and sustainability.	Mason & Brown
8. Market Dynamics	Demand-side drivers including circular economy, green markets, ESG consumer trends.	EC Circular Economy Plan; Granstrand & Holgersson

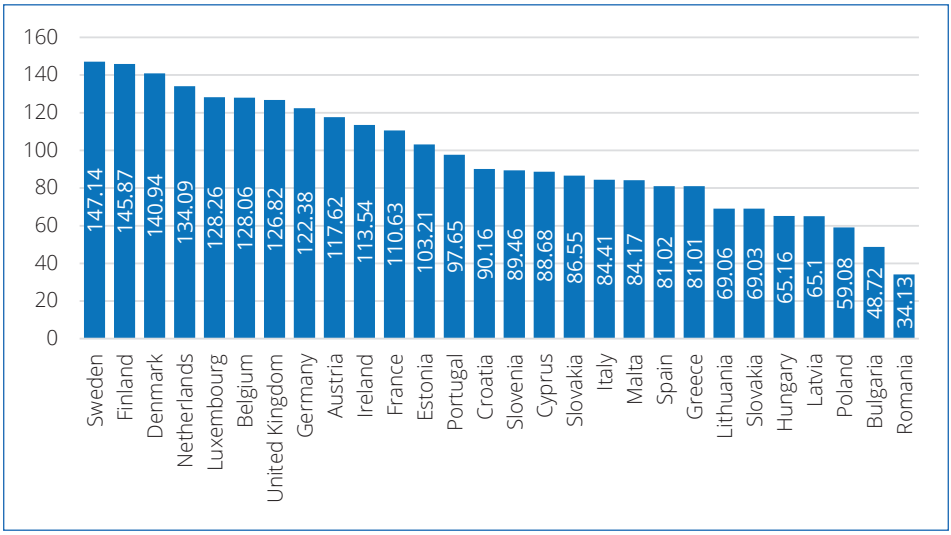
Source: the author's own work.

The innovation ecosystem is a multifaceted construct, shaped by a wide range of interdependent factors. In recent years, the integration of sustainability through the European Green Deal and ESG frameworks has fundamentally reshaped how these factors operate and interact. Innovation is increasingly expected to align with ecological responsibility, social inclusion, and good governance. Consequently, understanding and developing innovation ecosystems today requires not only attention to traditional elements such as capital, talent, and infrastructure but also to emerging imperatives of green growth, ethical practices, and systemic resilience. For innovation ecosystems to remain relevant and effective in the 21st century, they must internalise sustainability not as an external obligation, but as a core driver of long-term value creation and societal progress.

3. Latvia's progress towards achieving EU climate and sustainable development goals

To achieve a high level of innovation performance, countries need a balanced innovation system performing well across all dimensions. They need an appropriate level of public and private investment in education, research and skills development, effective innovation partnerships among companies and with academia, as well as an innovation-friendly business environment, including strong digital infrastructure. These key areas largely correspond to the dimensions and indicators used for the European Innovation Scoreboard. The Annual European Innovation Scoreboard offers a comparative evaluation of the research and innovation performance across EU Member States and selected third countries. It systematically identifies the relative strengths and weaknesses of national research and innovation systems, thereby supporting policymakers in recognising areas that require targeted efforts to enhance innovation outcomes. "Latvia has demonstrated notable progress in its innovation performance, transitioning from a 'modest innovator' in 2011 to a 'moderate innovator' by 2017, as classified by the European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS)." [www 2]. The Summary Innovation Index (SII) for 2019 (Chart 1) indicates the relative performance of EU Member States, where Latvia is among the group of moderate innovators.

Chart 1. Summary Innovation Index (EU 28), 2019



Source: European Innovation Scoreboard, 2019 [www 3].

Chart 1 presents the Summary Innovation Index scores for EU Member States [EU, 28], illustrating their relative innovation performance. Latvia is positioned among the moderate innovators, with a score of 65.10, reflecting a mid-range innovation capacity relative to other EU countries. The index highlights the disparities in innovation performance across the EU, with Romania and Bulgaria at the lower end, scoring 34.13 and 48.72 respectively. This distribution underscores the ongoing challenge of fostering innovation uniformly across the region. According to the data for the period up to 2024, Latvia has again returned to the category of emerging (modest) innovators by the data of SII is 59 [www 4]. In 2024, Latvia's innovation performance within the categories of Finance and Support and Innovation Activities exhibited mixed outcomes across key indicators. Notably, R&D expenditures in the public sector (59) and job-to-job mobility (87.5) demonstrated increases compared to previous years, reflecting enhanced public investment in research and a more dynamic labor market conducive to knowledge diffusion. Conversely, several other indicators declined or remained below the European Union average. These include venture capital expenditures (53.6), government support for business R&D (3.3), R&D expenditure in the business sector (16), non-R&D innovation expenditures (57.7), and environmental-related technologies (41.5). The downward trends in these areas point to persistent challenges in private sector engagement, innovation financing, and sustainable technological development.

The European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS) underwent a major revision in 2021 to align more closely with the evolving EU priorities, including the Green Deal and ESG objectives. This update expanded the innovation dimensions from 10 to 12 and the indicators from 27 to 32, incorporating digitalisation, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility. While retaining the core structure Framework Conditions, Investments, Innovation Activities, and Impacts the revised framework reflects a broader and more nuanced understanding of innovation. It marks a shift from traditional R&D-focused metrics toward a more comprehensive assessment of innovation systems in line with contemporary policy goals. The increase in both dimensions and indicators illustrates a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to evaluating innovation systems, aligned with evolving EU policy priorities, including the Green Deal and ESG frameworks.

How can Latvia strategically use innovation performance metrics not just for benchmarking but as active tools to guide national policy toward green and sustainable growth? This gets to the heart of turning passive measurement into

proactive policy management. In other words, using innovation indicators not just to assess performance, but to inform, guide, and prioritise policy decisions. This is especially relevant in the context of the European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS), which now integrates Green Deal and ESG metrics. These indicators can help identify where public investment can accelerate sustainability transitions, which sectors need targeted support (e.g. digital infrastructure, green tech), and how to align national innovation policy with EU-level climate and social goals. What are the key structural weaknesses in Latvia's innovation ecosystem, and which targeted reforms or investments could most effectively elevate its status beyond the "Emerging Innovator"? This invites discussion on the specific challenges Latvia faces and how they might be overcome to improve innovation capacity. In what ways can improved innovation performance contribute to Latvia's competitiveness in SMEs and its alignment with the European Green Deal and broader EU sustainability objectives? This links innovation outcome directly to economic and environmental policy goals, encouraging a holistic view.

The European Green Deal is deeply embedded in Latvia's National Development Plan (NDP) for 2021–2027, serving as a strategic foundation for steering the country toward climate neutrality, sustainable economic transformation, and enhanced social cohesion. This integration reflects Latvia's commitment to aligning its national development priorities with broader EU sustainability and climate policy goals, particularly those targeting decarbonisation, circular economy transition, and biodiversity preservation. The NDP outlines specific measures to promote green innovation, improve energy efficiency, expand renewable energy capacity, and support low-carbon mobility, all while safeguarding social equity through inclusive labour market policies and regional development strategies. Moreover, the plan emphasises digitalisation as a key enabler of sustainability, facilitating the deployment of smart technologies in sectors such as transport, energy, and public administration. Through this comprehensive approach, Latvia aims not only to meet EU climate targets but also to build a resilient, resource-efficient, and socially inclusive economy capable of withstanding future environmental and economic shocks. The primary legislative acts of Latvia concerning the European Green Deal and innovation are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Latvian Legislation on Green Deal and Innovation

Document	Description	Green Deal / Innovation Relevance
1. Strategy of Latvia for the Achievement of Climate Neutrality by 2050	Official government strategy [2019], aligned with EU Green Deal. Published and cited in international policy databases (e.g., UNEP, UNFCCC).	Use for long-term sustainability goals, climate-neutral policy framing, national commitment to Green Deal.
2. National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) 2021–2030	Officially submitted to the EU; forms part of each member state's obligations under EU Regulation 2018/1999. Available on the European Commission website.	Use for sectoral targets (energy, transport, buildings), implementation of EU climate goals, investment priorities.
3. Environmental Policy Guidelines 2021–2027	Adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers. Cited in the national strategic planning documents.	Used to describe Latvia's mid-term environmental planning and alignment with EU biodiversity, waste, and circular economy policies.
4. Sustainability Reporting Law, 2024 (Ilgtspējas informācijas atklāšanas likums)	Official Latvian law (published in Latvijas Vēstnesis, No. 193, OP 2024/193.1). Implements EU CSRD directive.	Use for legal basis of ESG reporting, transparency obligations, corporate sustainability integration.
5. Guidelines for Science, Technology Development & Innovation 2021–2027	Strategic planning document endorsed by Cabinet. Supports EU R&I goals. Published on official Latvian government portals (likumi.lv).	Use for national innovation ecosystem planning, science-policy interface, green and digital innovation funding.
6. EU Taxonomy & Sustainable Finance Roadmap (Latvia)	Jointly developed with the European Commission (DG REFORM). Available on official EU site.	Use for aligning finance, banking, and SME policy with EU Taxonomy Regulation and ESG investment standards.
Support of Innovative Entrepreneurship Law (Green Corridor).	Currently, a draft law [Saeima Bill No. 625/Lp14].	Fast track strategic export oriented innovation. Promotes net-zero tech and sandboxes

Source: the author's own work.

These legal frameworks outline the national policy directions, regulatory instruments, and strategic priorities that guide the country's transition towards a green economy and its support for research, development, and innovation. They

serve as the foundation for aligning Latvia's environmental and innovation policies with broader EU objectives, including climate neutrality, resource efficiency, and technological advancement. According to financial commitment to the green transition Latvia is allocated a total of €4.6 billion in Cohesion Policy funding for the 2021–2027 period to support a green and equitable economy. Of this sum, €839 million will be invested in renewable energy and energy efficiency projects through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Cohesion Fund, thereby enhancing national energy resilience and climate mitigation efforts. In addition, €823 million has been earmarked for research, innovation, and digitalisation initiatives, underscoring Latvia's commitment to building a future-ready economy. The allocation also includes €1.2 billion dedicated to integrated territorial development and sustainable urban mobility encompassing public transport, cycling infrastructure, and electric vehicle charging networks. To ensure a just transition, €192 million from the Just Transition Fund (JTF) is being channeled towards phasing out peat-based energy and restoring peatlands, with associated support for affected regions and workers. Latvia's innovation ecosystem is shaped by a set of national policies aligned with the European Green Deal and EU innovation objectives. These frameworks provide regulatory and financial support for sustainable and digital transformation.

The Strategy for Climate Neutrality by 2050 and the National Energy and Climate Plan (2021–2030) define long-term and sectoral goals, guiding investments into low-carbon technologies and renewable energy. The Environmental Policy Guidelines (2021–2027) reinforce circular economy principles and sustainable resource use. Legislation such as the Sustainability Reporting Law [2024], which implements the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), integrates ESG criteria into corporate governance and encourages sustainability-driven innovation. Meanwhile, the Guidelines for Science, Technology Development & Innovation (2021–2027) promote collaboration across academia, business, and government, strengthening Latvia's research-to-market capabilities. The EU Taxonomy & Sustainable Finance Roadmap enhances green investment channels, while the proposed Green Corridor Law aims to fast-track innovation in net-zero technologies through regulatory flexibility.

Together, these instruments form the backbone of Latvia's transition towards a more resilient, innovation-led economy, although their full impact depends on the effective implementation.

4. Conclusions

Latvia's innovation performance, as reflected in the 2024 European Innovation Scoreboard, continues to place the country within the "Emerging Innovator" category, with performance levels below 60% of the EU average. This indicates that, despite some progress, Latvia faces persistent structural and systemic challenges that hinder its innovation capacity. To address these obstacles and unlock the full potential of its innovation ecosystem, Latvia must adopt a more strategic approach to utilising innovation performance metrics such as the European Innovation Scoreboard not only as benchmarking tools but also as active instruments for policymaking. These tools can guide the country's transition toward sustainable economic growth aligned with the European Union's climate and sustainability objectives. A central priority in this process is the substantial increase of domestic investment in research and development, along with the enhancement of mechanisms for the effective commercialisation of scientific and technological outputs. At the same time, Latvia must strengthen its human capital base by improving education systems that cultivate talent in high-potential, innovation-driven sectors. Institutional reform is equally essential, particularly in promoting regulatory and administrative flexibility to facilitate greater collaboration among academia, industry, and government. Moreover, fostering a national culture that embraces risk-taking, experimentation, and the acceptance of failure as inherent aspects of innovation is critical.

A cohesive national innovation strategy supported by stable funding frameworks, the development of innovation labs, and robust digital and human capital infrastructures will be vital for Latvia to bridge the innovation gap with its Baltic counterparts and evolve into a mature, competitive innovator within the broader European innovation ecosystem.

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ACTIVE WOMEN HAVE BEEN HERE FOR A LONG TIME. CONTRIBUTION OF THE WOMEN'S CITIZEN WORK UNION TO BUILDING COMMUNITY

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article, which is historical and pedagogical in nature, is to describe and analyse women's social activities in the context of initiatives undertaken by the Women's Civic Work Union. This was one of the most active associations of the Second Polish Republic, engaged not only in activities on behalf of women but also of children, families, and society at large. The article particularly emphasises the importance of the association's activities in shaping the community.
- *Research methodology* – The analysis was based on historical research methodology. The study focuses on document analysis, a method used in scholarly research on the history of education. The source base includes archival and printed sources, official documents, publications, press articles, and interwar and contemporary literature on the subject.
- *Score/results* – Research indicates that women associated with the Women's Civic Work Union played a significant role in shaping social bonds and fostering community spirit during the interwar period. By organising grassroots initiatives and educational, outreach, and activism activities, they contributed to integrating local communities, strengthening interpersonal solidarity, and creating spaces for collaboration. The women of the Women's Civic Work Union not only supported individuals but also actively built the foundations of civil society, promoting attitudes of responsibility, mutual assistance, and social activism.
- *Originality/value* – The originality of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach. It demonstrates an understanding of the significance of initiatives dating back almost a century, and can serve as a valuable reference point for contemporary social and local strategies aimed at (re)building and strengthening social ties through associational activities.

Keywords: woman, Second Polish Republic, associations, Women's Civic Work Union

1. Introduction

Studies on the history of women in the 20th century have a long history in the Polish historiography. A number of publications have been devoted to women's achievements in various spheres of social life. An undisputed role in the research on the social history of women in the Second Polish Republic in this regard has been played by scholars such as Wiesław Caban, Iwona Dadej, Małgorzata Dajnowicz, Joanna Dufrat, Agnieszka Janiak-Jasińska, Dobrochna Kałwa, Agnieszka Kaczmarska, Urszula Kozłowska, Teresa Kulak, Adam Miodowski, Monika Piotrowska-Marchewa, Tomasz Sikorski, Agnieszka Szudarek, Andrzej Szwarc, Anna Żarnowska, and others.

To date, interdisciplinary research on women's history in the interwar period is integrative and multifaceted. It focuses on women's social roles, everyday life, women's emancipation, and their involvement in many areas of public life, including culture, education, and politics. The continuing interest in women's history has enabled the presentation of new findings regarding their activity within associational structures.

According to various estimates, in the interwar period in Poland there were from forty to over sixty women's associations, varying in terms of goals, methods of operation and social base [Dufrat, 2017: 31–48].

The associations played a significant role in the social life, fulfilling a variety of functions depending on their nature, goals, and activities. They built a sense of community by representing the interests of their members, conducting charitable and aid activities, as well as educational and cultural activities. Often, also engaging in social and political life, they undertook initiatives for social change, promoting democratic values, and supporting the development of civic participation. Women also actively participated in the activities of these associations, assuming responsibility for organising events, conducting aid and educational activities, and representing the interests of local communities. Their involvement was an important element of social change and the emancipation of women in the public sphere. The authors who wrote about the activities of associations include Julian Marian Auleytner, Jan Bełcikowski, Katarzyna Ceklarz, Sławomir Kantyka, Piotr Kędzia, Katarzyna Krysztofek, Jarosław Olbrychowski, Janusz Pawlak, Joanna Sosnowska, Agnieszka Suplicka, Leszek Wilczyński, Maria Wierzbicka and others.

During the Second Polish Republic, women gained greater opportunities for action and greater independence in both social and public life. The granting of voting rights – both active and passive was a groundbreaking symbol of the

changes in their social status that occurred after Poland regained independence in November 1918.

As Joanna Dufrat writes: "The interwar period was a continuation of the modernization processes initiated in Europe in the 19th century. In the social sphere, these processes were manifested, among other things, in progressive urbanization, the spread of education, the growth of life aspirations and individual susceptibility to change, and the secularization of norms and values. Equally important were the accompanying changes in the customs and social status of women" [Dufrat, 2020: 811].

In this article, I attempt to explore the activities of one such association – the Women's Civic Work Union – with particular emphasis on its social activism aimed at representing women's interests in the public sphere, highlighting the need to build community bonds. The literature on the subject still lacks sufficient information on associations founded and led by women. Furthermore, the current state of research on the activities of the Women's Civic Work Union (ZPOK) has gaps and requires examination from different research perspectives.

2. Women's Civic Work Union

The Women's Civic Work Union (ZPOK) operated from 1928 to 1939 and was one of the largest women's organisations under the Sanation regime, openly identifying with the ruling camp in Poland. The ZPOK operated nationwide, with headquarters in Warsaw and a network of branches and circles [Związek Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet: Deklaracja Ideowa: przyjęta w dn. 30 IX 1934 r. Przez Nadzwyczajny Walny Zjazd Delegatek Z.P.O.K].

The origins of the ZPOK, however, date back to the period before 1918, when a women's movement associated with the independence left was developing, which put the idea of gender equality and granting women political rights at the forefront. Already in a free Poland, activists associated with the women's movement capitalised on the situation following the May Coup and campaigned for the Sejm and Senate elections at the turn of 1927–1928, winning three seats.

The Women's Civic Work Union (ZPOK) integrated women with shared interests, values, and goals, creating a community based on cooperation and support. The ZPOK's goal, as stated in its 1928 statute, was "to strive for the rebirth of Poland in the spirit of essential internal independence by: a) spreading and deepening the idea of Polish statehood; b) implementing the principles of true

democracy; c) ensuring women a direct influence on the state and social life of Poland" [Statut Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet 1928: 3]. The union aimed to achieve its intended goal by: "a) organising lectures, talks, and self-education circles; b) establishing workshops for women and young people; c) establishing care homes for women, centers, community centers, clubs, dormitories, nurseries, and kindergartens for preschool children; d) publishing magazines and publications devoted to women's issues" [Statut Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, 1928: 3].

The founders of the union were supporters of Józef Piłsudski's policies [Dufrat 2013: 10]. It was one of three women's political entities operating in the Second Polish Republic – alongside the National Organization of Women and the Political Club of Progressive Women – that included political goals in their statutes. Furthermore, it was the largest women's organisation associated with the ruling camp in Poland from May 1926 to 1939 and one of the largest women's associations of the interwar period – alongside the National Organization of Women – to have its own parliamentary representation [Dufrat, 2013: 10–11].

The group of outstanding activists included, among others: members of the Main Board of the ZPOK with its chairwoman Zofia Moraczewska, Maria Bartlowa, Halina Chełmicka-Jaroszewiczowa, Zofia Daszyńska-Golińska, Bronisława Dłuska, Hanna Hubicka, Maria Jaworska, Wincenta Konarzewska, Julia Kratowska, Janina Strzelecka, Leokadia Śliwińska, Wanda Twardowa.

3. The contribution of ZPOK women to community building

The organisation emphasised the need for women to participate in public and political life. The association also engaged women in a range of social activities. The diverse nature of the association's activities was a response to the enormous needs and difficulties of the state. The scope of women's activities is impressive, as their initiatives played a significant role in providing assistance and strengthening the newly reborn state, thus fostering the need to build a community [Dufrat, 2005: 197–200].

Women were active in social and political affairs, working to promote social change, democratic values, and women's civic participation. The union advocated for equal access to education, the elimination of stereotypes and prejudices regarding women's social roles, and sought legislative change by eliminating policies that disadvantaged women [Statut Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, 1928: 3].

The Association represented women's interests, acting not only on behalf of its members but also more broadly – as a women's advocate before public authorities, institutions, and other organisations. It fulfilled this role, among other things, through charitable and outreach activities, helping women and their families in difficult life situations and offering them concrete forms of support.

The Association was active in the fields of culture and art, organising artistic events, exhibitions, and concerts, supporting the development of culture and creativity. It conducted journalistic and publishing activities, publishing books, magazines, and instructional publications covering all areas of the organisation's work. Among the organisation's publications were the biweekly "Praca Obywatelska", published from 1928 to 1939, and the weekly "ProstaDroga", published from 1930 to 1939 [Dufrat, 2019, 117–129; Piwowarczyk, 2018, 93–114].

Among the important tasks the women set for themselves within the association's activities there was initiating various forms of socio-cultural activity. They organised talks, lectures, civic education courses, and meetings to celebrate national holidays and celebrations. The association also initiated events that integrated the local community, such as dances, balls, dances, festivals, performances, lotteries, exhibitions, and trips to centres and workplaces. These activities aimed not only at cultural development but also at strengthening social ties and promoting civic engagement.

Various types of summer camps provided space for building community: holiday camps, military-recreational camps, traveling camps, and camps held in permanent facilities – hostels and boarding houses. For example, summer camps ("recreational and recreational camps") for working women were recreational and restful. They were paid and primarily intended for women with manual labour. However, the fees were not high, making the offer attractive to many women, both financially and programmatically [Piwowarczyk, 2021: 86].

To promote reading, the ZPOK established libraries, reading rooms, and community centres. These were established from 1930 onwards within individual branches, primarily in large and medium-sized cities, and were a fundamental form of educational and caregiving work. For example, in 1935, there were 76 community centres operating in Poland [Praca Świetlicowa. Instrukcja dla świetlic ZPOK, 1934].

The Union demonstrated a particular interest in family issues. According to the ZPOK's philosophy, supporting families was to foster the development of the country. It also undertook practical care activities and provided various forms of assistance, particularly for children from the poorest families affected by unemployment, illness or alcoholism.

The broad spectrum of tasks assigned by the union emphasised the need to educate the society. Therefore, many of the union's initiatives focused on social work for the youngest, focusing on caregiving, educational, and caregiving activities. To this end, the ZPOK organized Mother and Child Care Stations, operated Mother and Child Homes, closed and open nurseries, orphanages, "Drops of Milk," Jordanian gardens, boarding schools and orphanages, community centres, summer and day camps, kindergartens, foster homes, feeding programs, and financed the establishment of schools and preschools [Jaroszewska, 1933; Majewska-Borowska, 1933; Lewińska; Czałczyńska-Podolska, 2016: 116; Instrukcja dla wiejskich dziecińców sezonowych Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, 1937].



Photo 1. The consecration ceremony of the "Jagódka" children's playground of the Women's Civic Work Union in Leszno, 1932. Source: National Digital Archives, Reference Number: 1-N-2826.

With the insufficient state's resources, the association began organising preschools at its own expense. The support for children included providing spaces where the youngest children were cared for by professional teaching staff and ensuring favourable conditions for the mental, physical, and moral development of the children. To ensure the efficient organisation and operation of preschools,

the association issued special instructions on how to establish and run them. Examples of preschools operated by the ZPOK in the Białystok Voivodeship include private preschools located in Białystok, Bielsk Podlaski, Kolno, Łomża, Supraśl, Wołkowysk, and Zambrów [Suplicka, 2024: 61–84].

The Association conducted educational activities, training sessions, and propaganda campaigns to raise public awareness of specific issues. Education was a key path to social advancement and the increased independence for women. During the Second Polish Republic, the education system created new educational opportunities for women. The introduction of modern general secondary schools for girls and boys, offering identical curricula and levels of instruction , was a significant step towards equality. For the first time in the history of the Polish education, girls' schools were formally equalised with boys' schools. In practice, however, despite legal access for women to all levels of education, the actual opportunities for obtaining an education remained significantly limited for many of them. Secondary vocational schools were the primary place where girls could pursue their education. The ZPOK also made its mark in this area by establishing private schools where girls could pursue their education. Most often, these schools offered opportunities to acquire a profession and, consequently, gainful employment. Such institutions operated in Brzeżany, Hrubieszów, Krzemieniec, Kowel, Kutno, Lida, Łomża, Stryj, Suwałki, Vilnius, and Warsaw [Suplicka, 2015: 14–142, 319, 327–329].

The union's activists distinguished themselves by their exceptional solidarity and ability to organise grassroots initiatives, which often became the foundation for the functioning of local communities. Their involvement created a space for support, cooperation, and the development of civic activity. An important aspect of the Women's Civic Labour Union's activities included organising courses and training, developing manufacturing activities based on cooperative principles, providing seasonal employment for women, and creating real opportunities for gainful employment.

Before the war, culture and education were areas in which the women of the ZPOK invested with great commitment. Organising training courses and opening libraries and community centres undoubtedly fostered the intellectual development of the society.

The Women's Civic Work Union also dealt with girls and boys at moral risk, who were placed in closed institutions that carried out resocialisation activities based on strict rigors [Piwowarczyk, 2018, 175–192]. It also played an important role in caring for women, organising material, economic and home assistance for them.



Photo 2. ZPOK kindergarten in Vilnius, 1932. Source: National Library, Reference Number: F.69872/II.

It is also worth emphasising a significant area of women's activity: ad hoc aid campaigns. This type of initiative maintained a significant growth in the 1930s, during the Great Economic Depression. The Women's Civic Work Union undertook numerous initiatives aimed at children, providing material assistance and hygienic and medical care. Soup kitchens were established and food drives were organised, along with social workers and hygienists visiting families. Material assistance was also provided. Shelters and care homes were established for orphaned, abandoned, and disadvantaged children.

Women became involved in organising leisure activities. They organised therapeutic camps, summer recreation camps, and day camps. The primary goal of the ZPOK was to provide care, education, and treatment during the camps, thus addressing the deficiencies resulting from the families' hygienic, economic, material, and moral conditions.

The primary goal of the therapeutic summer camps was to provide the widest possible access to healthcare for children suffering from conditions requiring climate and spa treatment. These camps served not only children from

middle-income and wealthy families, but above all – due to the social nature of the initiative – they were available to the poorest children and those whose parents were unemployed. Therefore, the organisation of the summer camps took into account the need to provide the largest possible percentage of children from these most vulnerable backgrounds with appropriate therapeutic and rehabilitation care [Akcja kolonijna Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, część I. Kolonia wypoczynkowa, 1937; Akcja kolonijna Związku Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, część II. Kolonia lecznicza, półkolonia, dzieciniec wiejski letni, Warszawa, 1938].

4. Conclusions

The examples of the initiatives presented above demonstrate that one of the fundamental dimensions of ZPOK's activities was the community spirit, clearly present both in the organisation's ideology and in its daily activities. ZPOK not only provided a platform for support for women but also actively built social bonds in local communities, strengthening a sense of belonging, solidarity, and civic responsibility.

The communal nature of ZPOK's activities was, therefore, a response to the needs of the era – a counterbalance to the numerous problems of the interwar period. By building community, women not only gained space for development but also had a real impact on shaping social life in the Second Polish Republic.

Women associated with the Women's Civic Work Union played a significant role in community service and supporting the idea of the community in the interwar period. By organising grassroots initiatives, educational, outreach, and activism activities, they contributed to integrating local communities, strengthening interpersonal solidarity, and creating spaces for collaboration. Their involvement in continuing education courses, cooperative activities, childcare, and support for families in difficult economic situations constituted a real response to social needs. Women of the ZPOK not only supported individuals but actively built the foundations of civil society, promoting attitudes of responsibility, mutual assistance, and social activism. It is worth noting that the examples cited in this article are not exhaustive; they are merely informative.

Despite the passage of time, the need for the existence and formation of associations remains unwavering. It's difficult to imagine a modern democratic society without an active non-governmental sector. They constitute not only a crucial element of collective life but also an effective tool for meeting the needs of

individuals and social groups. They facilitate the achievement of common goals through self-help, cooperation, and the development of civic engagement.

Currently, in an era of globalisation and of rapid technological development, it is worthwhile to revisit these ideas to strengthen social ties and truly improve the quality of life in both cities and rural areas. Contemporary educational programs can draw on these experiences, promoting access to knowledge and culture for all social classes. The experiences of pre-war social initiatives can significantly contribute to the contemporary reality; despite the passage of time, they remain not only a source of inspiration but also examples of concrete and proven solutions. The activities of former associations, although rooted in the realities of a bygone era, can provide a valuable point of reference for today's projects and strategies, especially in the social dimension. Associations are voluntary and lasting cooperatives of citizens whose goal is not profit, but the implementation of specific social, cultural, and educational activities – serving both the common good and the individual needs of their members. The pre-war women's initiatives offer valuable inspiration that can be successfully applied in today's world. It is therefore worth examining history to draw from it and to create a better future.

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BETWEEN OVERSIGHT AND OVERLOAD: STRATEGIC USE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION LAW (BY NGOS) IN POLAND

Abstract

- *Goal* – The article investigates the growing tension between democratic oversight and procedural exploitation in the implementation of Poland's public information access regime, particularly by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It aims to clarify how the constitutional right to information, while essential for accountability, can be strategically misused to burden administrative institutions and distort participatory governance.
- *Research methodology* – The study employs a combination of doctrinal legal analysis, empirical audit data on information requests, and comparative examination of foreign access-to-information frameworks. This mixed approach allows for identifying patterns of instrumental use and assessing their compatibility with the constitutional and European transparency standards.
- *Score* – The findings reveal three interrelated forms of misuse: quantitative overload, qualitative manipulation, and procedural weaponisation, all of which undermine administrative functionality and erode the intended participatory role of transparency law. To address these issues, the article develops a purpose test designed to differentiate legitimate civic oversight from tactical exploitation. Two normative variants of the test are proposed: a codified legislative model and a judicial interpretive model, each offering distinct institutional safeguards.
- *Originality/value* – The article contributes a new conceptual and policy framework for balancing transparency with administrative sustainability. It reframes the debate from a dichotomy of openness versus restriction toward a proportional recalibration of access rights, preserving democratic accountability while mitigating systemic abuse.

Keywords: public information law, transparency, NGOs, procedural abuse, access to information, strategic litigation, purpose test, administrative capacity

1. Introduction

The constitutional right to public information [Article 61 of the Polish Constitution] represents a cornerstone of democratic oversight, enabling civil society to monitor governmental operations. However, the practical implementation of this right through the 2001 Public Information Access Act (UDIP) has generated unintended consequences – the weaponisation of transparency mechanisms by certain NGOs. This study posits that while UDIP provisions remain essential for democratic governance, their procedural guarantees are increasingly exploited by organisations pursuing non-substantive goals ranging from financial gains to administrative pressure tactics.

The research employs legal-dogmatic analysis of administrative court rulings [2019–2024] and empirical case studies of NGO request patterns identified through NIK audits. It addresses two research questions: (1) How do Polish courts interpret abuse thresholds in public information cases? (2) What systemic reforms could prevent instrumentalisation while preserving civic oversight?

2. The legal architecture of public information access in Poland: constitutional imperatives and operational challenges

The Polish legal framework governing access to public information represents a complex interplay between constitutional ideals and administrative realities. Article 61 of the Constitution, which establishes not merely an individual right but what the Constitutional Tribunal in judgment K 7/01 characterised as "a structural principle of democratic statehood", lies at its normative foundation. This constitutional anchoring creates a unique tension – while the provision mandates maximum openness, its implementation through ordinary legislation must accommodate competing public interests ranging from data protection to administrative efficiency.

The operationalisation of Article 61 occurs primarily through the 2001 UDIP, the drafting process of which reflected Poland's post-communist transition ethos. The Act's revolutionary aspect lies in its presumption of disclosure (§3(2)), reversing traditional administrative secrecy paradigms. The statutory framework imposes three core obligations on public entities: the duty to provide information ex officio through Public Information Bulletins (§9), the requirement to respond to individual requests within 14 days (§13), and the obligation to maintain orderly

records facilitating access (§5a). These provisions collectively create what the European Court of Human Rights in Magyar Helsinki Bizottság v. Hungary [2016] recognised as one of Europe's most progressive transparency regimes.

However, the practical operation of the system reveals significant structural tensions. The broad subjective scope of the Act – allowing any natural or legal person to submit requests without demonstrating a legal interest – in practice creates conditions conducive to abuse and institutional overload. Such phenomena can be critically examined through the lens of the so-called "transparency paradox," described in the organisational literature as a situation in which increased access to information, rather than enhancing oversight and effectiveness, may lead to the fragmentation of knowledge, diffusion of responsibility, and the cultivation of strategic ignorance [Stohl et al., 2016; Tsoukas, 1997]. Although this concept was originally developed in the context of information management within organisations, its application to the relationship between public administration and civil society is well justified. In conditions of excessive information demands, mechanisms designed to promote transparency can – paradoxically – destabilise institutional functioning and obstruct genuine public understanding of state activity.

While designed to maximise accessibility, this approach creates opportunities for strategic actors to exploit procedural mechanisms. Audit reports from the Supreme Audit Office (NIK) and civil society watchdogs suggest that a disproportionate share of public information requests is directed at a small subset of public bodies – particularly those responsible for economically sensitive areas such as public procurement and spatial planning. Although precise national statistics are limited due to inconsistent registry practices, NIK's findings indicate a concentration of requests in institutions that handle high-stakes administrative decisions. This imbalance underscores how the legal architecture, while normatively inclusive, can be operationally skewed in practice.

The legal framework further intersects with competing regulatory regimes in complex ways. The General Data Protection Regulation's (GDPR) Article 6(1)(e) presents a key point of the tension between data protection obligations and transparency mandates. Supreme Adminsitrative Court (NSA) has taken a nuanced approach in this area. In its decisions such as III OSK 4266/21 [15 December 2021] and III OSK 1129/21 [24 March 2022] the court affirmed that salary information (including amounts and components) of public officials constitutes public information, given that it's financed from public funds and linked to official duties. At the same time, the court recognised that when salary components are

not related to official functions but rather to personal circumstances, the "serious harm" test under Article 5(2) of the Data Protection Act may justify redaction or refusal. Similarly, trade secret protections under the 2018 Act on Combating Unfair Competition continue to pose interpretive challenges, particularly in relation to contractual documentation in public-private partnerships.

The financial implications of compliance introduce additional complexity. Unlike many European systems, Poland's UDIP enshrines a strict principle of cost-free access (§15), exempting only the actual reproduction expenses. While this approach ensures broad accessibility, it generates substantial hidden costs. According to data cited in a 2022 report by the Supreme Audit Office [NIK, 2022], the cumulative annual expense of processing information requests runs into tens of millions of PLN, with small municipalities spending up to 8% of their legal departments' budgets on compliance. These findings have prompted concerns about the proportionality and sustainability of the current model.

Jurisprudential developments reflect growing judicial awareness of these systemic pressures. Several rulings of the Supreme Administrative Court – such as I OSK 759/14 [12 February 2015] and III OSK 1129/21 [22 March 2022] have affirmed the "processed information" doctrine, allowing public bodies to reject requests that require substantial analytical or aggregative effort. However, this doctrine is not applied uniformly across judicial panels. As Kościuk and Kulikowska-Kulesza [2020] emphasise, Polish administrative courts demonstrate "interpretive doubts" when distinguishing between simple retrieval and transformation of data, resulting in inconsistent jurisprudence and legal uncertainty.

3. The dual role of NGOs in Poland's transparency framework: between democratic oversight and systemic exploitation

The participation of non-governmental organisations in Poland's transparency mechanisms represents a profound conceptual dichotomy at the heart of contemporary democratic governance. While constitutional and statutory frameworks position NGOs as essential actors in maintaining governmental accountability through public information access, empirical evidence reveals increasingly complex operational dynamics that challenge this idealised vision. This analysis examines the evolving jurisprudence and policy landscape surrounding NGO activities in the transparency domain, with particular focus on emerging patterns of instrumentalisation that test the boundaries between legitimate oversight and systemic abuse.

The theoretical foundation for NGO involvement in transparency mechanisms derives from deliberative democracy theory, particularly Habermas's conceptualisation of the public sphere as a space for communicative action between state institutions and civil society [Habermas, 1996]. The Polish constitutional order institutionalises this principle through Article 12's guarantee of collective participation in public affairs, reinforced by the Public Benefit Activity Act's provisions granting NGOs privileged procedural standing in information requests. This legal architecture reflects a broader normative assumption found in post-communist transitions: that civil society empowerment through broad access to public information is essential to consolidating democratic institutions and reversing authoritarian legacies [Mendelson & Glenn, 2002; Gwiazda, 2020].

However, the practical implementation of these theoretical constructs has generated significant operational tensions. Without clear statutory distinctions between genuine public interest activities and organisational self-interest, a regulatory gray zone opens up. Entities formally registered as public benefit organisations frequently act as legal entrepreneurs – employing transparency instruments in ways misaligned with their declared missions. This is especially noticeable when NGOs use mass information requests within broader legal or commercial strategies, rather than as part of accountable oversight.

Moreover, underlying financial incentives may distort transparency's democratic purpose. A growing number of NGOs focused on "transparency monitoring" appear to derive a significant share of their funding from litigation-related activities. This dynamic gives rise to what one might call a "transparency-industrial dynamic," in which organisational sustainability hinges on generating high volumes of information requests and appeals – even when these efforts may not advance true public interest objectives.

The recent civil society research underscores the emergence of precisely such exploitative dynamics. A 2024 report by Watchdog Poland documents multiple cases in which mass requests, often submitted by a limited number of individuals or nominal NGOs, are used not to obtain meaningful public data, but rather to provoke administrative gridlock or pursue financial compensation through litigation. In one documented case, a local councilor submitted over 2 000 requests in less than a year, many of which were clearly repetitive or incomprehensible. In another, a journalist demanded the full content of 15 000 court rulings in raw format, prompting severe institutional overload.

These examples reveal that procedural weaponisation is not a theoretical risk but a growing empirical reality – one that further blurs the distinction between

civic oversight and systemic misuse of transparency frameworks [Watchdog Poland, 2024: 12–17].

The case of transparency-focused NGOs frequently illustrates a broader pattern: many of these organisations appear to rely heavily on litigation-related revenue. While specific financial dependencies vary, in several instances the bulk of an NGO's legal aid income is linked to public information disclosure cases. This suggests the emergence of a transparency-industrial dynamic, in which organisational sustainability becomes disproportionately tied to the volume of requests and appeals – regardless of whether these interventions lead to substantive public-interest outcomes.

4. Institutional and judicial responses to transparency mechanism exploitation

Judicial practice in recent years has begun to recognise the procedural consequences of such patterns. In multiple cases involving a single applicant formally claiming to represent a watchdog NGO and active across numerous jurisdictions in Poland, administrative courts explicitly noted the serial and mass-character of requests. Referring to Article 206 of the Law on Proceedings before Administrative Courts (p.p.s.a.), the courts declined to award legal representation costs, expressing doubt as to whether the primary objective of the litigation was to remedy administrative inertia or rather to obtain procedural compensation. Such reasoning was articulated in judgments including III SAB/Gd 47/24 [12 December 2024], II SAB/Wa 209/24 [24 June 2024], I SAB/Sz 209/24 [20 February 2025], I SAB/Sz 187/24 [13 March 2025], and III OSK 824/24 [28 March 2025], in which courts identified a pattern of strategic large-scale filings. These rulings underscore how the boundary between civic oversight and instrumentalised litigation can become blurred under the current transparency rules. These judicial observations resonate with broader concerns raised by civil society monitors. The 2024 Watchdog Poland report systematically analysed administrative court rulings and identified a trend towards invoking implicit "purpose-based" reasoning in decisions involving mass or burdensome requests. For instance, in the Białystok case II SA/Bk 191/20 [26 May 2020], the court declined to process a highly repetitive request, noting the applicant's apparent intention to disrupt rather than inform. However, as the report emphasises, such judgments often occur without explicit statutory grounding, relying instead on inferred abuse criteria that remain undefined in the Polish law.

Beyond individual litigation strategies, Poland's legal framework itself contains structural provisions that may inadvertently enable such practices. Article 46(3) of the p.p.s.a., for instance, permits cost recovery even in unsuccessful appeals – an arrangement originally designed to support public-interest litigation. However, when coupled with high-volume, low-success filings, it may create unintended incentives for procedural exploitation. Recent judicial efforts invoking Article 206 p.p.s.a. to counteract these dynamics represent important signals of restraint, yet the underlying statutory design remains permissive.

These concerns have also been acknowledged in policy discourse. A Watchdog Poland 2024 report [www 1], reviewed by the Polish Parliament's Petitions Committee, warned that the legal framework lacks clear criteria to distinguish legitimate civic oversight from instrumental litigation. The report emphasised that without further statutory refinement, transparency rights may be co-opted in ways that generate administrative overload and erode public trust in access regimes.

Polish administrative courts have gradually developed jurisprudential mechanisms to address the strategic overuse of transparency rights. While the legal framework does not explicitly define what constitutes abuse of the right to public information, courts have relied on the category of processed information to filter requests that would place disproportionate burdens on the administration.

In several landmark judgments, including I OSK 89/13 [5 April 2013], I OSK 1347/05 [17 October 2006], and III OSK 4058/21 [1 October 2021], the Supreme Administrative Court has gradually articulated an interpretive approach to information requests that require complex processing. Specifically, it has affirmed that when a request necessitates aggregation, analysis, or synthesis of dispersed public data, it may be classified as a request for processed information. Under such circumstances, public authorities are entitled to deny access unless the applicant convincingly demonstrates that the request serves a particularly justified public interest. Although this doctrinal development is grounded in Polish statutory language, it performs a normative function similar to that of a purpose test – permitting courts to differentiate between legitimate oversight and procedural instrumentalisation.

Legal scholarship has further developed this line of reasoning. Parchomiuk [2018] argues for the formal recognition of the abuse of rights doctrine in administrative law, noting that procedural entitlements must not be allowed to obstruct the effective functioning of public institutions. Although Polish legislation does not explicitly codify an abuse threshold in the context of transparency, judicial observations concerning repetitive and disproportionate requests – particularly those with questionable connection to public interest – point to an emerging doctrinal structure.

This domestic evolution reflects broader European trends in administrative jurisprudence. In Germany, the doctrine of Rechtsmissbrauch, firmly established under the Federal Freedom of Information Act (Informationsfreiheitsgesetz), authorises public authorities to deny access to information when requests are manifestly abusive. Although Polish courts have not formally incorporated this doctrine, the German Federal Administrative Court's decision in BVerwG [7 C 19.18] has attracted interest among scholars exploring cross-jurisdictional principles of proportionality and procedural integrity [BVerwG, 2020].

The increasing complexity of transparency litigation in Poland – marked by strategic use of access tools and growing procedural volume – raises normative questions about how to balance the right to information with the functional integrity of public administration. In light of these developments, this article considers the purpose test: a conceptual framework for assessing whether a request for public information genuinely serves democratic oversight or instead represents an instrumental use of access law.

Although the test is not codified in the current Polish legislation, it draws on doctrinal insights and evolving jurisprudence related to "processed information", as well as comparative experiences from European administrative law, such as the Rechtsmissbrauch doctrine in Germany [BVerwG, 2020]. Its aim is not to restrict transparency, but to introduce proportional safeguards against systemic misuse.

The purpose test rests on three analytically derived indicators. Firstly, a pattern of repetitive or substantially identical requests submitted across multiple administrative units – or concentrated against a single institution – may indicate an intent to burden rather than to oversee. Polish courts have already recognised this logic when declining to award legal representation costs in such cases. Secondly, there are cases in which the disclosed information is diverted into commercial channels – for instance, by legal intermediaries or data resellers – rather than being used for public scrutiny or civic engagement. Thirdly, procedural instruments such as appeals and complaints are at times deployed *en masse* to exert pressure, rather than to remedy administrative inaction, undermining the procedural purpose of transparency law.

These indicators are not exhaustive, but they help delineate the boundary between legitimate oversight and tactical exploitation. As such, the purpose test could function both interpretively and normatively. From a *de lege ferenda* perspective, it could be incorporated into the Public Information Access Act (UDIP) as a formal standard guiding both administrative decision-making and judicial review.

Importantly, any statutory recognition of the purpose test would require narrow tailoring to safeguard constitutional rights [Konstytucja RP, 1997, Art. 61]. Application should be contextual and based on objective, demonstrable factors – such as consistent mass-filing behaviour or clear market-based motives. The aim is not to allow arbitrary refusals, but to introduce procedural filters that align access claims with their underlying democratic function.

This article's normative proposal – the consideration of a structured purpose test – is reinforced by civil society recommendations. The 2024 Watchdog Poland report urges the Polish legislature to clarify the boundary between acceptable and abusive requests. It warns that, in the absence of clear legal criteria, public bodies and courts risk either suppressing legitimate scrutiny or tolerating strategic obstruction. A well-defined purpose test, grounded in proportionality, procedural good faith, and institutional feasibility, could serve as a principled tool for navigating this tension [Watchdog Poland, 2024: 31].

Institutionalising such a calibrated tool would bring the Polish transparency law closer to the established European standards while maintaining fidelity to democratic ideals. Ultimately, this article does not advocate for limiting access to information but for recalibrating its procedural architecture – ensuring that transparency remains a means of public oversight, not a tool of administrative disruption.

Jurisprudential trajectory illustrates a subtle but important balancing of constitutional values. Polish courts continue to affirm the inviolability of Article 61 – guaranteeing access to public information – while recognising that an absolute interpretation might undermine the law's purpose when deployed for objectives unrelated to transparency [Konstytucja RP, 1997]. As has been occasionally noted in judicial reasoning, constitutional rights should not operate as blank cheques enabling practices that erode public trust in both public institutions and civil society watchdogs [Parchomiuk, 2018].

The practical articulation of these principles is gradually developing through case law, particularly those addressing systemic and strategic use of information requests. While no formal doctrine has been established, some rulings have implicitly incorporated elements of what could be termed the purpose test, by assessing not only the content but also the context of requests – such as volume, repetitive targeting, and overall procedural behaviour (also in this context detailed analysis of jurisprudence presents [Watchdog Poland, 2024: 38–39]. A few courts have also touched on whether applicants acted in procedural good faith, requiring plausible indications that each inquiry served a genuine oversight goal rather than indiscriminate data fishing.

These gradual shifts in jurisprudence – visible since the development of the "processed information" doctrine between 2007 and 2021 – occur against the backdrop of an increasingly urgent debate over the future of public information access in Poland. Comparative analysis suggests that the Polish framework remains notably permissive: unlike Germany's Freedom of Information Act (§ 8 IFG) or Sweden's Transparency Ordinance (Chapter 3), it does not include formal public interest balancing tests [Banisar, 2006; Bundesverwaltungsgericht [BVerwG], 2020]. While this regulatory openness was initially driven by Poland's post-authoritarian democratisation efforts, it now faces critical reassessment in light of documented instances of systemic misuse.

Recent trends in administrative jurisprudence show tentative but meaningful attempts to introduce contextual oversight, particularly through evolving interpretations of "processed information" and references to procedural good faith [Naczelny Sąd Administracyjny [NSA], 2013; NSA, 2021]. These tools, however, remain indirect and fragmented, underscoring the need for more robust normative foundations.

Addressing the structural dynamics enabling the instrumentalisation of access rights would require targeted legislative reform. In terms of NGO's as they also play a role of applicant, these could include revisiting the funding structures of watchdog NGOs, refining cost-recovery mechanisms in administrative litigation, and introducing statutory criteria for distinguishing legitimate civic oversight from opportunistic procedural gaming. These recommendations aim to protect the integrity of transparency mechanisms without weakening the constitutional right to information.

Such a recalibration would not restrict access but enhance its legitimacy and sustainability by ensuring its exercise aligns with public interest objectives rather than strategic exploitation. It would also support the constitutional imperative of maintaining a functional public administration in a democratic state governed by the rule of law [Parchomiuk, 2018]. As noted by Piskorz-Ryń [2022], the access to public information must remain functionally aligned with the core democratic purposes – namely, public trust, transparency, anti-corruption and administrative efficiency. Requests that do not serve at least one of these normative functions, she argues, risk qualifying as abusive and deviant from the legal intent of transparency frameworks.

Recent empirical evidence from official audits paints a compelling picture of mounting operational strain on public administration due to the increasing volume and intensity of NGO-driven information requests. According to a 2022

audit by the Supreme Audit Office (NIK), covering the selected municipalities and regional offices, the number of public information requests rose significantly between 2019 and 2021. In several cases, hundreds of inquiries were filed annually across various sectors, with the burden disproportionately affecting institutions managing economically sensitive data such as procurement or land use. Some local governments, particularly those with limited legal infrastructure, reported that the procedural obligations associated with transparency compliance consumed a substantial share of their operational capacity. In extreme cases, this strain led to delayed or suspended public infrastructure projects [NIK, 2022a].

These developments closely reflect the dynamics captured in Lipsky's [2010] theory of street-level bureaucracy, in which well-intentioned legal frameworks, when appropriated by strategic actors, distort institutional priorities and impose cumulative pressures on frontline governance.

Responding to these challenges calls for more than blunt regulatory fixes. For instance, fixed quotas on information requests may appear administratively appealing but risk violating constitutional guarantees and delegitimising genuine civic oversight. The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR), among other civil society organisations, has consistently advocated for preserving broad access to information as a democratic safeguard, particularly in contexts where public trust in institutions is fragile or contested.

To advance the debate, this article proposes a normative and policy-oriented conceptual framework for addressing disproportionate use of information rights – one that avoids simplistic "pro-transparency vs. anti-NGO" narratives. This approach aligns with concerns raised by Polish scholars such as Bernaczyk, who point out that in the absence of formal statutory tests, courts increasingly invoke a quasi-altruistic rationale to assess access rights – an interpretive drift that risks eroding legal certainty [Bernaczyk, 2014]. Rather than restricting access, the goal is to design calibrated legal instruments that uphold the constitutional value of transparency while insulating public administration from procedural sabotage.

This approach builds on comparative lessons from other jurisdictions, such as the use of tiered fee structures for resource-intensive queries, declarations of public interest for frequent requesters, and procedural safeguards against vexatious claims. These models share a common goal: to preserve transparency's normative core while acknowledging the real-world administrative limits of state institutions. By rooting this model in both empirical patterns and normative proportionality, the framework contributes to a more sustainable and rights-consistent regulation of access to public information.

The Polish legal regime on access to public information, though constitutionally robust and grounded in democratic oversight principles, increasingly reveals patterns of procedural exploitation by certain civil society actors. This raises important normative and practical questions about the balance between transparency and the operational sustainability of public administration.

Empirical observations gathered in official audits indicate that a disproportionate share of freedom of information (FOI) requests is initiated by a narrow group of highly active entities, many of which identify as public interest NGOs. According to a 2023 report by the Supreme Audit Office [NIK, 2023], some public bodies – especially at the municipal level – receive multiple requests weekly, many of which are near-identical in form and scope. Smaller municipalities, often lacking legal or administrative capacity, are particularly vulnerable. The report notes that in extreme cases, FOI-related tasks consume a substantial percentage of their legal budgets, sometimes delaying infrastructure investments.

These developments resonate with broader administrative law concerns about the abuse of procedural rights. Scholars such as Kozynets and Stechenko [2021] describe how mechanisms intended to protect access and fairness can be repurposed for strategic or dilatory objectives. In the FOI context, this manifests as procedural instrumentalisation, where legal rights are wielded not to enhance oversight but to impose administrative burden or to create leverage. The resulting "procedural pollution" arises when government capacity is diluted by template-based or marginally relevant requests, undermining the civic utility of transparency.

Polish courts have increasingly taken note of such patterns. As previously discussed, administrative judgments have applied cost-allocation principles to disincentivise mass-litigation behaviour lacking clear public interest motivation. This evolving judicial stance illustrates a cautious but growing awareness that civic accountability mechanisms must not be allowed to degrade into opportunistic or obstructive procedural routines.

This trend has also led to measurable delays in administrative proceedings. NIK documented specific examples where routine decisions – such as permit issuance or investment approval – were significantly delayed or suspended as administrative personnel struggled to comply with overlapping information demands [NIK, 2022a].

This phenomenon reflects what comparative scholars have described as "administrative fatigue": a defensive posture within institutions that, paradoxically, undermines transparency by encouraging bureaucratic risk-aversion, excessive proceduralism, and the inflation of internal documentation standards [Schwartz

& Johnson, 2021]. Indeed, a growing number of Polish municipalities now report adopting defensive administrative behaviours, such as creating redundant multi-tier approval processes for routine disclosures and standardising overly cautious recordkeeping, as a means of insulating themselves from potential litigation or criticism [NIK, 2022b].

These adaptive behaviours, while intended as safeguards, can ultimately distort institutional priorities and weaken effective governance. As noted in the Supreme Audit Office's findings, the procedural costs of excessive transparency-related workloads have begun to shift local governance from a model of proactive policymaking to one of reactive compliance—an outcome clearly at odds with the normative goals of access to public information legislation [NIK, 2022a].

The instrumentalisation of public information access mechanisms reveals distinct yet overlapping patterns that challenge the balance between legitimate oversight and administrative capacity, particularly in small municipalities. These are systemic phenomena, not isolated incidents, and this article outlines three interrelated forms of procedural misuse within Poland's transparency regime.

Quantitative Overload involves the submission of large volumes of substantively identical or only slightly modified requests. Official audits by the Supreme Audit Office [NIK, 2022a; 2022b] confirm that municipalities frequently receive dozens of such FOI applications weekly, causing administrative bottlenecks that divert staff time from core public services.

Qualitative Manipulation covers practices in which formally compliant requests are used strategically – to influence administrative timelines, gain procedural leverage, or advance corporate interests. Polish courts have addressed certain aspects of this pattern through the application of the "processed information" concept, which allow more restrictive handling of requests that require aggregation, analysis, or interpretation.

Procedural Weaponisation describes litigation strategies that rely on serial appeals or burdensome filings not meant to obtain information, but to disrupt administration or extract procedural costs. Although the current Polish framework lacks a specialised doctrine, courts have shown growing awareness of these practices and signalled a willingness to adapt procedural responses – without undermining transparency rights. For example, in III OSK 824/24 [28 March 2025], the NSA declined to award procedural costs under Article 206 of the Law on Proceedings before Administrative Courts (p.p.s.a.), citing concerns that the repeated filings constituted strategic litigation disconnected from actual transparency objectives. These rulings reveal growing judicial sensitivity to practices that

may weaponise transparency rights for procedural advantage. As it was indicated by NSA, such strategic use of information rights for adversarial legal advantage – e.g., obtaining insight into opposing legal arguments – constitutes a misuse of the access regime and has no connection to legitimate public oversight [I OSK 89/09, 16 March 2009].

Collectively, these forms constitute procedural instrumentalisation. Addressing them necessitates nuanced legal mechanisms that uphold constitutional access rights while preserving public administration's operational integrity.

5. Comparative models

Comparative models offer potential guidance. In Germany, the doctrine of Rechtsmissbrauch (abuse of rights) recognised under the Freedom of Information Act (IFG) allows authorities to deny manifestly abusive requests. The German Federal Administrative Court's ruling in BVerwG [7 C 19.18] affirmed that repetitive filings may justifiably be rejected if they impose disproportionate burdens with minimal public value. While Poland lacks a statutory equivalent, these developments offer an interpretive reference point for aligning domestic safeguards with broader European administrative law principles focused on proportionality and good faith.

The typology reveals an overarching tension between formal compliance and substantive legitimacy in transparency regimes. While each abuse pattern manifests differently, they collectively underscore the need for legal frameworks that incorporate both ex ante preventive measures and ex post remedial mechanisms. The evolution of jurisprudence in this domain suggests an increasing judicial recognition that unqualified access rights, when divorced from their democratic rationale, can paradoxically undermine the very governance values they were designed to protect. This normative rationale is echoed by Cybulska [2018], who argues that statutory regulation should explicitly allow for the restriction of access rights in cases of abuse, while simultaneously defining the mechanism for such restriction. According to Cybulska, the purpose of the right to public information lies not in fulfilling private or commercial needs, but in advancing public good, transparency of governance, and the openness of administrative activity [Cybulska, 2018]. Legal recognition of this purpose, she contends, would help reconcile access rights with institutional resilience. The same tension is highlighted in other domestic literature, in which some scholars warn that the absence of

a legal definition of abuse invites judicial arbitrariness and weakens the safeguards against either over-compliance or under-enforcement of transparency obligations [Bernaczyk, 2014; Jaśkowska, 2020; Lebowa, Fermus-Bobowiec, 2022]. As Wilk and Sześciło [2022] caution, however, any legislative attempt to address abuse must be carefully calibrated to avoid unintended consequences. They emphasise that the right to information often involves compelling the administration to disclose data contrary to its own political interests. Under such conditions, invoking the notion of "abuse" may serve not as a safeguard, but as a procedural strategy exploited by public authorities to evade scrutiny. They warn that codifying additional grounds for restricting access may actually reinforce arbitrariness, granting administrations another argumentative tool to justify opacity. This realisation is gradually reshaping transparency paradigms across European administrative systems, though the precise equilibrium between access and protection remains contested in both legal doctrine and policy implementation.

From a comparative legal perspective, the Columbia Global Freedom of Expression report, Transparency in the Spotlight [2023], highlights how courts around the world have grappled with the challenge of ensuring proportionality when balancing access rights with other public interests. The report underscores the importance of narrowly tailored exceptions and well-articulated legal standards to prevent abuse – either by the state or by private actors exploiting access regimes for strategic or commercial gain.

This broader discourse reinforces a more nuanced understanding of transparency as a legal and political value. While transparency serves democratic legitimacy, it is not absolute. As the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice has consistently affirmed, access rights must be reconciled with principles of proportionality, protection of legitimate public interests, and institutional functionality [C-213/15 P, Breyer v. Commission, 2018]. The challenge lies in calibrating legal frameworks, so they protect civic oversight without enabling administrative dysfunction or procedural exploitation.

The growing operational complexity of public information systems in Poland has renewed calls for more structured and context-sensitive frameworks to assess the legitimacy of information requests. While courts have taken steps to develop interpretive tools grounded in proportionality and good faith, the absence of explicit legislative criteria may continue to expose the system to strategic exploitation by high-frequency applicants.

Relevant international models provide valuable guidance. In the United Kingdom, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has issued binding guidance

outlining how authorities can manage excessive or vexatious requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The ICO recommends a case-by-case evaluation of indicators such as the burden imposed by the request, the applicant's prior behaviour, and the extent to which the request advances a clearly defined public interest. This approach has allowed British institutions to reject filings that, although procedurally valid, demonstrably serve disruptive or commercially motivated aims.

At the European level, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has emphasised in its case law that access to information must be balanced against the operational autonomy and decision-making capacity of public institutions. In Bayer CropScience SA v. Commission [C-442/14 P], the Court ruled that information rights must not be exercised in ways that obstruct administrative efficiency or compromise regulatory integrity. This principle aligns with broader trends in EU administrative law, in which transparency is interpreted in conjunction with the values of proportionality, effectiveness, and institutional resilience.

This normative evolution resonates with broader trends in European administrative law, in which the principle of proportionality is increasingly interpreted as a safeguard not only for individual rights but also for institutional functionality. As Lenaerts and Gutiérrez-Fons [2020] argue, the general principles of EU law must be applied in a way that preserves the equilibrium between effective governance and the rights conferred by the Union law. In the context of access to information, this requires careful attention to cumulative administrative burdens and the risk of instrumentalisation, particularly when transparency mechanisms are employed in ways that impair the capacity of public bodies to fulfil their core duties.

These comparative insights offer practical pathways for Polish lawmakers seeking to reform the access-to-information regime. Possible directions include adopting a tiered framework that allows differentiated treatment of high-frequency applicants, implementing pre-disclosure filters based on stated public interest rationales, or formalising cost-balancing rules to disincentivise procedural overload. Rather than undermining the constitutional guarantee of openness, such reforms would safeguard its meaningful application in the face of evolving systemic pressures.

Although the Polish law does not yet formally incorporate such proportionality assessments in transparency disputes, recent jurisprudence reflects growing judicial awareness of the underlying dilemma. This includes the development of interpretive standards that emphasise purpose, frequency, and impact, laying the groundwork for a more balanced approach to access rights enforcement.

Legislative reform efforts might draw on these developments to establish a tiered procedural model, differentiating between ordinary civic oversight and strategic exploitation, thereby strengthening the resilience of Poland's transparency regime.

6. Conclusions

The systemic challenges posed by the instrumentalisation of information access rights call for a multifaceted institutional response involving both judicial interpretation and legislative initiative. In light of mounting pressures on Poland's transparency infrastructure, a recalibration of the current access paradigm appears increasingly necessary. This process should rest on three interrelated pillars: the evolution of judicial doctrine, the development of administrative countermeasures, and the pursuit of targeted policy reforms – each aimed at reconciling the constitutional guarantee of transparency with the imperative to shield public administration from systemic abuse.

Firstly, judicial doctrine must evolve to provide clearer interpretive standards that distinguish legitimate transparency demands from procedural exploitation. Polish courts have begun this process by recognising the "processed information" concept – most notably in I OSK 89/13 [5 April 2013] – allowing authorities to treat complex, aggregation-heavy requests differently. Still, greater clarity is needed: a coherent judicial framework could adopt principles from comparative law, such as Germany's Rechtsmissbrauch doctrine, embedding proportionality and good faith into domestic jurisprudence [BVerwG 7 C, 19.18, 2020].

Secondly, administrative countermeasures must be institutionalised to proactively mitigate overload. Supreme Audit Office (NIK) reports [2022a; 2022b] document that dozens of near-identical information requests each week put unwarranted pressure on municipal operations. In response, public bodies should adopt routine triage systems – such as identifying bulk requests and flagging them for managerial review – while bolstering transparency training and procedural risk-awareness among staff. These steps would help operationalise "procedural filters" without impairing access rights.

Thirdly, policy reforms are needed to rebalance access with administrative sustainability. Comparative models suggest several avenues: incorporating declarations of purpose, fee differentiation for commercial usage, and audit-ready reporting on processing costs. Although Poland has no formal legislative mechanism in place, EU dialogues – such as the European Commission's recurring scrutiny

over Poland's RRP and transparency obligations – highlight political appetite for reform [European Commission, 2022]. Embracing such reforms could enhance accountability, ensure cost recovery, and discourage strategic misuse of access rights.

Together, these three pillars – judicial evolution, administrative infrastructure, and legislative innovation – form a comprehensive approach to defending democratic transparency while protecting public institutions from exploitation. It is only by aligning courtroom doctrine, bureaucratic practice, and policy design that Poland can sustain meaningful access to information in the face of growing procedural pressures. Codifying such principles into law – rather than relying on fragmented case law – may provide a clearer normative baseline and reduce the discretionary scope of public bodies when assessing the legitimacy of requests.

Judicial developments occur against a broader backdrop of intensifying debate – both academic and institutional – regarding the proper limits of transparency in contemporary governance systems. While the principle of access to public information remains a cornerstone of democratic accountability, its practical implementation has increasingly intersected with competing administrative, privacy, and efficiency concerns.

From the other hand, civil society organisations have voiced growing apprehension over how new constraints on access might affect democratic oversight. As Zaborska points out, the emergence of the concept of abuse of the right to public information in legal doctrine and case law has also been met with clear criticism from the civil society organisation Watchdog Poland [Zaborska, 2024; Watchdog Poland, 2024]. ARTICLE 19, for instance, in its 2021 statement on the Polish context, warned that any vague or discretionary limitations on the right to information risk undermining media independence and civil society's watchdog role, particularly in politically sensitive cases [ARTICLE 19, 2021]. The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR) has similarly cautioned against regulatory proposals that would permit public authorities to deny access based on arbitrary assessments of applicant motivation or presumed intent – pointing out the dangers such measures could pose to journalistic and civic activities [HFHR, 2023].

The following alternative formulations may guide legal and institutional reform, striking a balance between preventing instrumentalisation and preserving the constitutional core of access rights: legislative model (Hard Law Approach) and interpretive model (Soft Law Approach)

Legislative Model (Hard Law Approach) would assume that a structured purpose test could be codified within the Access to Public Information Act (UDIP) as a narrowly framed legal basis for rejecting requests that clearly diverge from

the public oversight function of the right. The test would not ask applicants to prove their intentions but would allow authorities to deny requests that are manifestly disproportionate, abusive in volume, or lacking any discernible connection to democratic transparency. To ensure legal certainty, such a clause should be accompanied by procedural safeguards – such as an obligation to justify the finding of abuse in writing, a right of appeal to the administrative courts, and a presumption in favour of access in doubtful cases. The legislative amendment could mirror standards already present in other parts of the Polish law, such as the concept of abuse of rights in civil procedure or the principle of good faith in administrative conduct. As alternative the Interpretive Model (Soft Law Approach) delivers a cautious and constitutionally sensitive model that could rely on interpretive tools already embedded in the Polish law. Without introducing a formal abuse clause, public authorities and courts could apply a proportionality-based balancing test – examining the scale, frequency, and administrative burden of a request, especially when coupled with observable patterns of instrumentalisation.

This "soft purpose test" would not be a ground for automatic refusal but rather an evaluative criterion used to justify limited procedural defenses, such as prioritisation, time extensions, or, in exceptional cases, refusal of clearly vexatious requests. Such an approach respects the presumption in favour of access while acknowledging the need to protect institutional functioning against deliberate overload.

The comparative landscape further highlights Poland's distinct regulatory trajectory. Germany's Informationsfreiheitsgesetz (IFG) incorporates a public interest override before disclosing personal or sensitive information, allowing authorities to weigh access against competing legal protections. The United Kingdom's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) goes further by explicitly permitting the refusal of "vexatious" requests, offering administrative safeguards against strategic misuse [Information Commissioner's Office [ICO], 2019]. Sweden, meanwhile, has undertaken transparency reforms aimed at clarifying the public interest thresholds for complex or burdensome queries [OECD, 2024]. In contrast, Poland's UDIP maintains a notably low threshold for access, reflecting its post-authoritarian legal culture and constitutional commitment to transparency.

The challenges posed by the strategic use of transparency mechanisms underscore the need for a careful recalibration of Poland's public information framework. Rather than adopting wholesale restrictions that might undermine constitutional guarantees, any future reforms should pursue a proportional approach that

protects the integrity of civic oversight while ensuring the operational sustainability of public administration. This requires a deeper engagement with empirical data on request patterns, institutional capacities, and litigation outcomes, as well as broader consultation with both civil society and administrative practitioners. A mature transparency regime should not only safeguard access but also recognise that democratic accountability is best served when procedural rights are exercised in good faith and aligned with the public interest. Democratic transparency must remain accessible, but not exploitable.

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MONETARY POLICY AND INFLATION DYNAMICS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PRE- AND POST-PANDEMIC PERIODS IN POLAND AND IN SELECTED ECONOMIES

Abstract

- *Goal* – The study assesses the effectiveness of Poland's monetary policy in curbing inflation between 2015–2023, focusing on post-pandemic structural shifts. It verifies the effectiveness of the National Bank of Poland's (NBP) conventional (interest rates) and unconventional (QE) tools, considering the international context and the structural nature of inflation.
- *Research methodology* – The methodology relies on a Vector Autoregression (VAR) model and Granger causality tests on quarterly data (2015–2023). This quantitative analysis is deepened by insights from structural (DSGE) and agent-based (ABM) models, comparative analysis, and qualitative analysis of central bank communication.
- *Score/results* – Result Interest rate hikes effectively, though with a 4–6 quarter lag, limited inflation; a temporary 'price puzzle' was noted. QE's impact on inflation was short-lived and marginal. External cost shocks were confirmed as the dominant driver of Poland's inflation (structural models attribute 8–10 p.p. of the 16.1% peak to them). NBP's policy was necessary to anchor expectations, but its effectiveness was limited by global factors. The analysis also revealed a "distributional trilemma".
- *Originality/value* – The article combines detailed econometric analysis for Poland (VAR, Granger) with a broad international context and an in-depth analysis of transmission mechanisms under dominant external supply shocks. It integrates findings from VAR, DSGE, and ABM models to explain post-pandemic inflation dynamics.

Keywords: monetary policy, economic crisis, fiscal policy, inflation expectations, supply shocks

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented challenges for the global economy, leading to both supply-side and demand-side disruptions [Trzonkowski, 2024]. In response to the turmoil, central banks around the world implemented intensive monetary policy measures such as interest rate cuts, asset purchases, and interventions in financial markets. This study analyses the effectiveness of these measures and their impact on the inflation dynamics in the pre- and post-pandemic period, with a particular focus on Poland and its international context.

The main objective of this study is to verify the effectiveness of monetary policy tools in Poland in the pre- and post-pandemic period, considering the international context and the structural nature of inflation. To achieve this goal, several specific tasks were formulated:

- To assess the effectiveness of both conventional (interest rates) and unconventional (QE) instruments used by the National Bank of Poland (NBP), analysing changes in interest rates, reserve requirement policy, and asset purchase programs.
- To identify the main global and regional factors that have affected the effectiveness of the central bank's actions. In this context, external energy and commodity shocks, the war in Ukraine, changes in international supply chains, and wage pressures will be relevant.
- To compare the monetary policy pursued in Poland with those applied in other European Union countries and in the selected non-European countries (e.g., USA, Canada) and other European economies (e.g., the Czech Republic).
- To assess the impact of inflation expectations and central bank communication on the disinflation process, including an in-depth analysis of the role of NBP communications.

Accordingly, the main research hypothesis (H.1) of this paper posits that the pandemic and its associated supply shocks significantly altered the relationship between monetary policy and inflation, limiting the effectiveness of traditional instruments. This hypothesis will be verified through the econometric and comparative analysis.

This article distinguishes itself from similar studies by combining a detailed econometric analysis for Poland with a broad international context and an in-depth examination of transmission mechanisms under the dominance of external shocks.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1. Monetary transmission mechanisms

The monetary transmission mechanism describes how changes made by the central bank to its monetary policy settings flow through to economic activity and inflation. This process is complex and there is a large degree of uncertainty about the timing and size of the impact on the economy. Several key transmission channels are distinguished [Reserve Bank of Australia, n.d.]:

- **Interest Rate Channel:** This is the most traditional channel. Changes in the central bank's policy rate affect the interbank market rates, and subsequently deposit and lending rates for households and businesses. Lower interest rates reduce borrowing costs, encouraging investment and consumption, which stimulates demand and can lead to higher inflation. Conversely, higher interest rates discourage spending, lowering demand and inflationary pressure [Mishkin, 1995].
- **Asset Prices and Wealth Channel:** Changes in interest rates affect the prices of assets such as real estate and stocks. Rising asset prices increase household wealth, potentially leading to higher consumption and housing investment.
- **Credit Channel:** This includes the bank lending channel and the balance sheet channel. Monetary policy changes can influence banks' ability to lend and the value of collateral and balance sheets of firms and households, which in turn affects their ability to borrow and spend [Bernanke & Blinder, 2019].
- **Inflation Expectations Channel:** Expectations about future inflation are crucial. If workers and firms expect inflation to increase, they may demand higher wages and raise prices, contributing to further inflation. The central bank, through clear communication and a credible inflation target, can anchor expectations, increasing confidence and reducing economic uncertainty.

One of the fundamental dilemmas in monetary policy is the choice between a discretionary approach and a strategy based on fixed rules. Policy based on rules, such as the Taylor rule, offers predictability and limits political pressure. On the other hand, discretionary flexibility allows for an adequate response to unique and unpredictable crises, which was crucial in the analysed periods.

The ultimate effectiveness of monetary policy is also strongly dependent on its interaction with the fiscal policy, known as the policy mix. During the COVID-19 pandemic, close coordination was key to avoiding economic catastrophe. Quantitative easing (QE) programs enabled governments to finance huge aid packages, which is an example of accommodative monetary policy. However, this creates the risk of fiscal dominance, whene the central bank subordinates its goals to the government's current needs.

Finally, the adequacy of a central bank's response depends on the nature of the shock hitting the economy. In the case of a demand shock, inflation and output move in the same direction, allowing for the simultaneous stabilisation of both goals (the so-called "divine coincidence"). The situation changes diametrically in the face of a supply shock, such as in the post-pandemic period, which leads to a simultaneous rise in inflation and a fall in output (stagflation). In that case, the divine coincidence disappears, and the central bank faces a painful trade-off, where fighting inflation deepens the recession, while supporting growth perpetuates high inflation.

2.2. Quantity Theory of Money (QTM)

The Quantity Theory of Money (QTM), formalised in the Fisher Equation ($MV = PT$), posits a direct relationship between the money supply and inflation. While historically significant, its relevance in modern central banking is limited due to the variability of the velocity of money [Fisher, 1911].

2.3. New Keynesian Phillips Curve (NKPC)

The New Keynesian Phillips Curve (NKPC) is a modern theoretical framework that links inflation to marginal cost and expected inflation, emphasising the role of nominal price rigidities [Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, 2008]. Unlike the traditional Phillips curve, the NKPC is derived from microeconomic foundations, assuming that firms cannot continuously adjust nominal prices [Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, 2008]. In the context of monetary policy, models based on NKPC show that credit shocks and quantitative easing (QE) can affect both the IS curve (aggregate demand) and the Phillips curve (aggregate supply) [Sims et al., 2023]. In such models, the so-called "Divine Coincidence" may not hold, meaning the central bank might need multiple instruments to achieve its objectives [Sims et al., 2023].

2.4. Unconventional Monetary Policy (UMP)

Facing financial crises and reaching the zero lower bound for interest rates, central banks began to employ unconventional monetary policy (UMP) tools. The two main forms of UMP are quantitative easing (QE) and forward guidance [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2015; Farmer & Zabczyk, 2016].

- **Quantitative Easing (QE):** Involves the central bank purchasing long-term assets (e.g., government bonds). The goal of QE is to lower long-term interest rates, increase liquidity in the financial system, and stimulate the economy, especially when short-term interest rates are near zero [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2015].
- **Forward Guidance:** This is central bank communication about the future path of interest rates or its balance sheet. It aims to influence market expectations and encourage more borrowing and spending in the present if the promise of keeping rates low in the future is credible [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2015].

2.5. Monetary policy and supply shocks

In the context of supply shocks, such as those observed in the post-pandemic period (e.g., rising energy prices, supply chain disruptions), the effectiveness of monetary policy is limited. Monetary policy is well-equipped to respond to demand shocks, but for structural or supply-side shocks, the traditional response has been to look through them and prevent second-round effects from emerging [Reis, 2024]. This means that the central bank can curb inflationary pressure resulting from excessive demand, but has less direct ability to influence prices stemming from supply constraints. In such situations, preventing inflation from becoming entrenched through anchoring expectations and avoiding wage-price spirals becomes crucial.

3. Causes of rising inflation in the post-pandemic period

Strong demand stimulus, triggered by support programs (such as the Anti-Crisis Shield in Poland), under conditions of limited supply led to rapid price increases [Zalewska, 2022]. Governments tried to counteract the pandemic decline in incomes, which, with the gradual unfreezing of economies, brought consumption

back to high levels. At the same time, the supply of goods and services remained limited due to production disruptions and logistical delays [Bednarczyk, 2023]. What is more, the spikes in the cost of energy and raw materials, especially oil and gas, which reached levels not seen in years [World Bank, 2023; International Monetary Fund, 2022] played a key role. Production restrictions during the pandemic, a surge in global demand, and finally the war in Ukraine caused additional supply disruptions. This, in turn, translated into higher transportation and production costs, which was particularly acute for energy-importing countries such as Poland. The war in Ukraine was also an important factor, limiting grain exports and destabilising the energy commodity market. It should also be noted that many of these phenomena overlapped, producing mutually reinforcing effects. A combination of demand and supply factors caused inflation in many countries, including Poland, to reach levels not seen in decades in 2021–2022 [Aguirre & Casares, 2024].

4. Central banks' responses to the rising inflation

As global inflation began to soar, central banks faced the need to radically tighten their monetary policies [English, Forbes, & Ubide, 2024]. Initially, during the pandemic, the focus was placed on lowering interest rates and on launching QE programs to support economies. However, as early as 2021, it became clear that the rapid demand growth and supply disruptions were creating strong price pressures [Ball & Gorodnichenko, 2024].

- In the **United States**, the Federal Reserve raised interest rates from near zero to around 5% between 2022 and 2023 and extinguished a broad QE program [Federal Reserve Bank, 2024].
- The **European Central Bank**, after a decade of low rates, raised them to 3.75% and cut PEPP reinvestments to dampen inflation driven primarily by energy prices [European Central Bank, 2023].
- In **Poland**, the NBP, faced with inflation reaching 16.1%, raised the reference rate to 6.75%. This was justified as an attempt to cool rapidly growing demand, especially in mortgages. The reserve requirement rules were also changed to tighten credit creation.

All these measures were united by an aggressive tightening of monetary conditions, aimed at lowering demand and stabilising inflation expectations. Simultaneously, the difficulties of rapid rate changes became apparent: the cost of

servicing debt rose, raising the risk of a debt crisis in some countries [Bernanke, 2022]. Experts also emphasise the role of communication: clear signals of a willingness to maintain restrictive policies help anchor price expectations and curb core inflation [Binici et al., 2022].

5. Data and research methodology

The study covers the period from Q1 2015 to Q4 2023 to capture the dynamics of variables before the pandemic, which serves as a baseline, as well as during and after it. To understand high inflation in Poland and assess monetary policy effectiveness, three main variable groups were distinguished:

- **Monetary policy variables:** These include interest rates (primarily the NBP reference rate), the scale of quantitative easing (QE, measured by total bond purchases by the NBP), and forward guidance. Interest rates are a traditional tool influencing credit costs. During the pandemic, unconventional instruments like QE gained importance.
- **Inflationary variables:** These measure price dynamics, with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) being most relevant for Poland. Core inflation, which excludes food and energy prices, is also tracked to separate global factors from permanent domestic phenomena.
- **Macroeconomic variables:** These include GDP, the unemployment rate, and the current account balance. These are essential for determining economic health and recognising whether inflation changes are due to excess demand or supply-side distortions.

Methodologically, the study uses a multi-faceted approach combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. The core of the analysis is a Vector Autoregression (VAR) model, with the lag order selected based on the information criteria (AIC/BIC), used to capture the interplay between inflation, interest rates, and other macroeconomic variables. The VAR method makes it possible to study dynamic feedbacks. The stationarity of the time series was confirmed with the ADF test (variables proved stationary after differencing CPI and QE). Secondly, quantitative modeling is complemented by **comparative analysis** – a comparison of the scale of rate hikes and price dynamics in Poland with other countries. Thirdly, to grasp the role of inflation expectations and communications, a **qualitative analysis** of reports, public speeches by NBP representatives, and expert studies is envisaged.

QE is measured as the cumulative nominal value of purchased assets to reflect the total scale of the intervention. To ensure the reliability of the results, robustness checks were conducted, including using alternative lag lengths in the VAR model and testing the stability of the estimates under a different ordering of variables in the Cholesky decomposition. These checks confirmed the robustness of the model's main conclusions.

6. Statistical analysis and econometric modeling for Poland

6.1. Statistical tests and stationarity analysis

The first step was a preliminary analysis of macroeconomic data to test whether the collected time series have the properties necessary for correct estimation in the VAR model. As part of the initial phase, a basic descriptive analysis was conducted, including the calculation of means and standard deviations, to capture the characteristics of the variables. The next step was to create visual representations (line graphs) to identify trends. For example, in the case of the NBP reference rate, it became apparent that there was a sharp increase to a level exceeding 6% from 2021, which could be compared with the accompanying jump in CPI. The next step was to check the stationarity of the time series using the Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test, as most VAR models require stationary variables. The results indicated a lack of stationarity for CPI and QE in levels, but stationarity was obtained when the first differences were applied. The final element was to check correlations between variables, which showed, for example, a highly positive correlation between Brent oil prices and CPI inflation, confirming the dominance of cost and global factors in Poland [Knicker et al., 2024].

6.2. VAR modeling and IRF analysis

A VAR(2) model was estimated using the NBP reference rate in its level and CPI and QE in their first differences (ΔCPI, ΔQE). The results of the estimated coefficients are presented in Table 1.

The estimation results confirm the expected relationships. In the inflation equation (ΔCPI), there is a lagged negative effect of interest rates – the 2-quarter lag of the NBP rate has a significant negative coefficient (-1.497), indicating that a rate increase reduces inflation with a lag of several months. Over a shorter

horizon, the effect of rates tends to be positive (L1 coefficient is positive), which may reflect the "price puzzle". The effect of QE on ΔCPI is small and short-lived. The reference rate equation shows high autocorrelation, implying inertia in the central bank's decisions.

Table 1. The estimated coefficients of the VAR model

Parameter	ΔCPI	Rate ref.	ΔQE
Fixed	0.628***	0.093	0.536
L1. ΔCPI	0.586***	0.243	0.772
L1. Rate	1.242***	1.673***	-3.111
L1. ΔQE	0.067**	0.028	0.838***
L2. ΔCPI	-0.512***	-0.138	0.570
L2. Rate	-1.497***	-0.710**	3.046
L2. ΔQE	-0.076**	-0.022	-0.221

Notes: Asterisks indicate statistical significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, delays 2.
Source: the author's own elaboration.

A key element of the analysis was the study of Impulse Response Functions (IRFs), identified using the Cholesky decomposition, which show how one variable responds to a shock in another over time. The Cholesky decomposition employed the following ordering of variables: commodity prices, the NBP reference rate, CPI. This ordering reflects the assumption that global commodity prices are exogenous to Poland's monetary policy, and that monetary policy reacts to inflation with a certain lag.

- **Response to Interest Rate Shock:** The IRF (Figure 1) shows that initially, there is no direct dampening effect; in the first quarters after a rate hike, inflation may temporarily rise (the "price puzzle"). This "price puzzle" in the Polish context could result from firms preemptively raising prices due to higher financing costs, an insufficient exchange rate reaction, or de-anchored inflation expectations stemming from inconsistent signals in 2021 [Michalski, 2022]. Only after about 2–3 quarters is a decline in price dynamics visible. The maximum reduction in CPI occurs around the 4th-6th quarter after the shock, confirming the theory of delayed monetary transmission. The magni-

tude of the effect is assessed as limited: a one-time rate hike of 1 p.p. lowers annualised CPI inflation at its peak by approximately 0.3 percentage points.

- **Response to QE Shock:** The IRF for a QE shock (Figure 2) shows that an impulse to expand the bond-buying program causes inflation to rise slightly in the short term, with the effect peaking within ~2 quarters. However, this is a very short-lived effect; after about a year, the impact expires, suggesting QE's direct impact on price processes is limited.

Figure 1. Response of CPI inflation to interest rate shock (+1 pp)

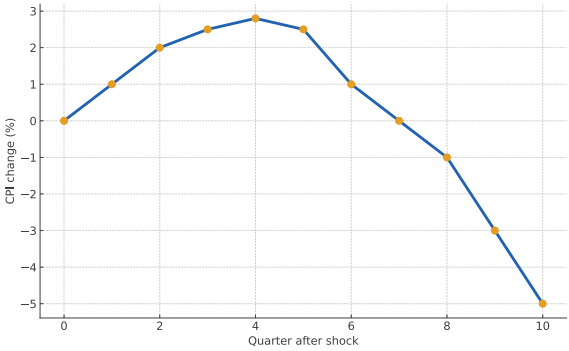
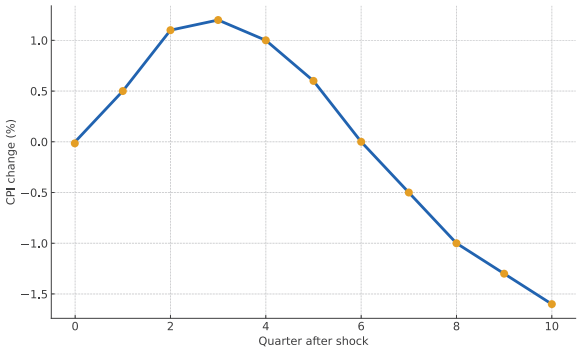


Figure 2. CPI inflation response to QE shock (+10 billion asset purchase)



Source: the author's elaboration.

6.3. Granger Causality Test

A Granger causality test was used to verify the hypothesis that changes in one variable precede and explain future changes in another. The results are in Table 2.

Interpretation of results: The tests show that **interest rates Granger-cause CPI** for lags of 3 quarters, confirming the existence of unidirectional causality (rate hikes → CPI). The reverse flow is not statistically significant. In the case of **QE, a two-way relationship was observed**: QE → CPI at a 1-quarter lag, and CPI → QE at a 2-quarter lag, confirming that inflation and non-standard monetary policy interacted. For domestic factors (**GDP, unemployment**), there was no statistically significant causality with inflation in either direction. This lack of effect indicates that domestic demand and the labor market were not the main source of the inflation explosion; it had external sources. In contrast, global factors clearly preceded domestic inflation. The increase in the price of **oil (Brent) → CPI** turned out to be strongly significant at a short lag, confirming the dominance of external supply shocks.

Table 2. Granger causality test results (lags 1, 2 and 3 quarters)

Null hypothesis (H0)	F (1Q)	p (Q1)	Decision (Q1)	F (2Q)	p (2Q)	Decision (Q2)	F (3Q)	p (Q3)	Decision (Q3)
Interest rates do not affect the CPI	0.8	0.37	Not	2.7	0.08	Not	4.2	0.01	Yes
CPI does not affect interest rates	1.4	0.25	Not	1.1	0.34	Not	1.0	0.40	Not
QE does not affect CPI	4.0	0.049	Yes	1.7	0.20	Not	0.9	0.45	Not
CPI does not affect QE	0.5	0.50	Not	3.5	0.03	Yes	2.9	0.06	Not
GDP does not affect the CPI	0.4	0.55	Not	1.5	0.24	Not	0.8	0.49	Not
CPI does not affect GDP	0.6	0.45	Not	2.0	0.14	Not	2.5	0.09	Not
Unemployment rate does not affect CPI	0.7	0.41	Not	0.9	0.40	Not	1.3	0.28	Not
CPI does not affect the unemployment rate	1.0	0.33	Not	1.8	0.18	Not	2.0	0.14	Not
Brent oil price does not affect CPI	8.5	0.005	Yes	4.0	0.03	Yes	1.0	0.39	Not
CPI does not affect the price of Brent crude oil	0.2	0.66	Not	0.1	0.90	Not	0.4	0.72	Not

Source: the author's own elaboration

7. Discussion and comparative analysis

7.1. Interpretation of the monetary policy transmission

The VAR model coefficients and IRFs reveal a monetary policy transmission mechanism characterised by significant lags. The response of inflation to an interest rate shock is not immediate; a statistically significant dampening effect appears only after approximately two quarters, with the maximum impact occurring around the 4th to 6th quarter. This finding is consistent with the classical monetary theory but also highlights the challenges faced by the central bank in real time. The magnitude of the effect was moderate, which supports the hypothesis regarding the limited effectiveness of traditional instruments amid global shocks. The role of QE appears consistent with its primary role being to stabilise financial markets rather than to serve as a primary tool for inflation control.

7.2. Causality and the dominance of external factors

The Granger causality test results provide further insights. The unidirectional causality from interest rates to CPI (at a 3-quarter lag) confirms that monetary tightening did precede a decline in inflation. Crucially, the tests show a strong, rapid causality running from global oil prices to the Polish CPI, but not the other way around. This provides strong evidence that external cost-push factors were a primary driver of the inflationary surge. The lack of significant causality from GDP or unemployment to inflation further suggests that the inflation was not primarily of domestic demand-pull origin, but rather cost-driven.

7.3. Comparative context and policy effectiveness

A comparative analysis with selected economies was carried out [OECD, 2023]. A comparison with the **Czech Republic** revealed that earlier and more decisive rate hikes by its central bank limited the rise in core inflation more effectively. This suggests that a faster monetary response could be linked to more effective control of inflation expectations. At the same time, Eurozone countries saw varying rates of disinflation. In **Italy or Greece**, high levels of public debt forced more measured action by the ECB. A comparison with non-European economies, mainly the **US and Canada**, further highlights the importance of local factors. In the U.S., aggressive rate hikes by the Fed allowed inflation to fall relatively quickly from 9.1% to around 3–4% [World Bank, 2023]. In contrast, the Bank of Canada managed

to bring inflation down but at the expense of a noticeable decline in investment growth [Bank of Canada, 2023]. Against this background, Poland stands out for its strong dependence on energy and food prices. Econometric analyses showed that the key to the decline in inflation in Poland in 2023 was the stabilisation of oil and natural gas prices on world markets.

7.4. Structural analysis: decomposing shocks with DSGE and ABM models

To move beyond the statistical correlations of the VAR model, this section introduces findings from structural and agent-based models.

- **DSGE Model Findings:**.Analyses based on DSGE models provide a framework to structurally decompose the sources of the post-pandemic inflation peak [Harding, Lindé, & Trabandt, 2023]. The analysis provided a clear explanation for the "price puzzle," showing that the NBP was raising interest rates in anticipation of future cost shocks. Such models allow for an approximate decomposition of the 16.1% peak inflation rate:
  - External Cost Shocks: These were the dominant factor, accounting for approximately 8 to 10 percentage points.
  - Domestic Fiscal Shocks: Contributed about 3 to 4 percentage points.
  - Domestic Demand Shocks and Second-Round Effects: The remaining 2 to 3 percentage points.

  Counterfactual simulations often suggest that had the rate hikes begun two quarters earlier, the inflation peak would have been lower (approx. 13–14%), but at the cost of a deeper slowdown in GDP growth.
- **Agent-Based Model (ABM) Insights:** Agent-based models (ABMs) can be used to explore heterogeneous effects. Such models often confirm DSGE findings and can reveal that an earlier reaction would have led to a higher rate of bankruptcies among credit-constrained firms. This granular analysis exposes a fundamental **"distributional trilemma"** faced by the NBP. Every policy choice involved a trade-off affecting different social groups:
  - Maintaining low interest rates would have prolonged the "inflation tax" that disproportionately harms the poorest households.
  - The aggressive rate hikes that were implemented placed a heavy burden on the indebted middle class.
  - The earlier QE program, while necessary, contributed to rising asset prices, benefiting the wealthiest.

8. Conclusions

The analysis carried out in this study confirms that in a post-pandemic environment, monetary policy's effectiveness is constrained. The findings for Poland suggest that while tools like interest rate hikes are essential for curbing domestic demand and anchoring inflation expectations, they are not sufficient to counter inflation driven by global cost shocks. The main hypothesis (**H.1**), which assumes that the pandemic significantly changed the relationship between monetary policy and inflation, is confirmed. The shocks caused by global constraints made traditional instruments less effective.

Regarding the specific hypotheses:

- **H.2: Quantitative easing (QE) had a greater impact on stabilising financial markets than on lowering inflation itself.** This is confirmed. VAR modeling and Granger tests show that QE in Poland stabilised the bond market and secured liquidity, but its impact on reducing inflation was limited.
- **H.3: Global factors had a stronger impact on inflation than domestic monetary decisions.** This is confirmed. Econometric tests confirmed that fluctuations in global commodity prices were the most significant driver. This conclusion is consistent with the findings from structural models, which estimate that external cost shocks were responsible for 8 to 10 percentage points of the 16.1% inflation peak.
- **H.4: The effectiveness of the NBP's monetary policy was lower compared to some more developed economies.** This is confirmed. Comparative analyses have shown that in countries like the Czech Republic, earlier and stronger central bank responses contributed to a more effective reduction in core inflation. In Poland, with a high share of food and energy prices in the inflation basket and a relatively late start to the hiking cycle, the disinflationary effects became apparent only when international commodity prices began to fall.

In the context of achieving the research objectives, the analysis clearly showed that the effectiveness of monetary and unconventional instruments is subject to significant limitations under conditions of cost inflation. The analysis also revealed a fundamental "distributional trilemma", where each policy decision carried significant costs for different social groups. This highlights that the NBP's discretionary choices involved navigating not only macroeconomic but also complex social

trade-offs. From a long-term perspective, the biggest challenge will be to strike a balance between containing price growth and avoiding excessive economic downturns. In practice, this means the need for close cooperation between monetary policy and fiscal policy, as well as intensified structural reforms, to reduce the vulnerability of economies to further potential external shocks.

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VISUALISING IDENTITY. A CASE STUD USING PHOTOGRAPHIC PRESENTATION

Abstract

- *Goal* – This article aims to explore selected aspects of the visual identity of young people transitioning into adulthood.
- *Research methodology* – The author conducts an analysis of the photographs submitted by the research participants.
- *Score/result* – This study draws upon photographic self-representations produced by student participants as the primary research material. I define this method of visual content presentation as photographic self-presentation. The objective of this work is to reconstruct the process by which individuals construct their identity within the context shaped by this visual exercis The analysis presented in this article allows for the identification of fundamental dimensions of young individuals' identity. Among them there are: ties to childhood, participation in popular culture, personal interests and hobbies, the emotional significance of pets, and the shifting role of expressing one's worldview.
- *Originality/value* – This work illustrates a non-traditional approach to studying identity, diverging from classical sociological methodologies. It highlights the potential of combining photography with the participants' narratives to construct and present identity through visual means.

Keywords: sociology, identity, visuality, photography, visual identity

1. Visuality and Identity – Introduction

The integration of sociology and visuality within research and sociological theory is by no means a novelty today. The origins of sociology (1837) and the invention of photography (1839) occurred almost simultaneously. Nevertheless, it was not until the end of the 19th century that sociologists began to utilise photography in their research – for instance, in the American Journal of Sociology – either as illustration or as empirical evidence to support their theses [Konecki, 2005: 42]. Gradually, the camera came to be perceived as just another method of documentation. As Howard Becker noted, photography became yet another "tool for exploring society" [Becker, 1974: 3]. For Becker, sociology and photography shared similar characteristics: both facilitated the study of society, both treated material in analogous ways, both influenced the collected data, and in both, the researcher's personal style left an imprint on the final results.

Photography quickly became a tool of scholarly inquiry in the social sciences, exemplified by figures such as Bronisław Malinowski and Margaret Mead. The act of photographing and the photograph itself constitute rich materials that enable the analysis of distinctly sociological issues in ways previously unavailable. This led to the emergence of concrete research, publishing, and institutional practices, collectively known as visual sociology. When superimposed upon the contemporary culture – in which the image holds an exceptional status and has become an indispensable element of communication – this development becomes even more relevant. Each day, we produce and disseminate massive quantities of photographs. According to estimates from Photutorial and MaxPhoto, approximately 12 trillion photographs have been taken globally to date, with around 54 400 new photos created each second. Notably, 92.5% of these images are captured using smartphones [www 1].

Many of these photographs find their way onto social media platforms, significantly expanding their potential audience and enabling them to exist independently of their creators. On popular platforms such as Instagram or Pinterest, images and short videos function as primary carriers of information. Visuality today increasingly centers around the mobile phone, which offers an optimal, always-available method for recording the self and the surrounding environment. Equipped with software and artificial intelligence, smartphones now afford practically unlimited editing capabilities. This includes conscious modification via apps (e.g., Pixlr, Facetune, Snapseed, Lightroom), as well as automatic adjustments made by the phone or by social media platforms themselves. We are able

to take photographs in virtually any context and share them instantly. This marks a significant leap, allowing us to observe and archive ourselves through images, to collect frames that we deem meaningful – snapshots of the life selected for remembrance. The phone thus becomes an ubiquitous, compact, personal tool for capturing, altering, distributing, and archiving photographs.

However, a critical issue arises in interpreting visual materials within the context of identity. To what extent do the images shared on social media reflect the genuine elements of identity, and to what extent are they acts of self-presentation, curated personas, mere trend-following, or even part of a monetised personal brand? Public display of photographs may itself impose constraints. Such publication invites judgment via audience reactions and comments, and subjects content to self-censorship. What defines this self-censorship? Should photos be technically correct in terms of composition and sharpness? Should they adhere to societal norms, legal requirements (e.g., displaying only those who consented, or objects not protected by copyright), or the aesthetic and topical standards of specific platforms? Moreover, should they reflect current stylistic trends, including favoured filters or framing techniques?

Photography accompanies us from the earliest moments of life, becoming a biographical record from the childhood onwards. Initially, others photograph us; later, we document significant moments ourselves using cameras or smartphones. The phone's memory becomes a diary of trivial and important events, a visual notepad of daily life. Over time, photography may even substitute memory. Taking pictures becomes automatic, requiring neither specialised skill nor equipment. Increasingly, photos exist solely in digital form – in phone storage, on social media (following a selective process), or on personal computers – rarely printed. Thus photography becomes an element of biographical identity, a support for memory. As Nicholas Mirzoeff aptly observed, human experience has become more visual and visualised than ever before, to the extent that the visual encompasses phenomena previously unseen as visual [Mirzoeff, 2012: 158].

We view more, photograph more, and produce and consume more visual elements of culture. Our sense of self is increasingly saturated with images. Our memory is refreshed and sustained by previously stored photographs; in fact, certain memories may only resurface upon viewing related images, which may have gone unnoticed in the rush of events. Contemporary history reveals the growing permeation of images into everyday life. As modern communication technologies evolve and new ones emerge, older forms are reconfigured. A persistent trend is evident: the pursuit of easier methods of visualizing and integrating images into

online communication. Today, photography becomes an increasingly creative domain, diverging from the direct recording of reality or the authentic self. With the aid of applications, software, and artificial intelligence, we can enhance, distort, or completely fabricate images, creating virtual representations or generating entirely fictional personas through keywords and AI-driven narratives. Idealised or wholly false "images of the self" – such as deepfakes – illustrate the extreme potential of such technologies. These visuals, which may convincingly mimic reality, are often difficult to verify online.

The relationship between identity and visuality is now highly dynamic. Typically, "visual identity" refers to the branding of enterprises, organisations, or products – a single logo or a collection of design elements distinguishing a brand. However, the focus here is on the visual identity of the individual. A selfie, for instance, may function as a distinct element of visual identity – alongside portraits or a curated selection of images considered meaningful in terms of experience or memory. Individuals craft visual identities by consciously sharing specific types of images, shaping a persona – be it that of a professional, family-oriented person, or athlete. We reconstruct our personal biographies by browsing phone galleries or revisiting digital archives. Our visual identity comprises the images that articulate who we are, what matters to us, and what cultural universe we align ourselves with. These include both publicly displayed images and those kept private.

Among the most emblematic practices of visual identity in the virtual world there is the selfie. It encapsulates several core issues of identity sociology: authenticity, self-expression, image construction via selected elements, and narrative formation within specific contexts – daily or exceptional routines, social practices, or affiliations. Despite its self-centered focus, the selfie also reflects the search for an audience, a momentary "we," indicating a timeless need for connection [Liubinienė, Keturakis, 2014: 4]. From the perspective of this work, the selfie may also be viewed as a process contributing to the embodiment, exploration, and formation of the self [Lasen, Gomez-Cruz, 2009: 26]. Some scholars argue that in the virtual world, the selfie becomes a transmedia extension of one's real identity [Elwell, 2014], forming a legitimate component of the self-image we construct – a part of our private and public narrative.

The concept of identity is now widely utilised across disciplines such as sociology, psychology, marketing, and economics. Some authors point out that contemporary identity theory deals with a highly complex, multi-layered term. It is elusive – at first, due to the overlapping dimensions it encompasses: individual, social, cultural, biographical, collective, national, etc. Recent scholarship

introduces further distinctions, including fluid identity, gender identity, digital identity, and visual identity. Secondly, identity is approached from diverse theoretical perspectives. Thirdly, identity is "problematic" from the standpoint of the subject (individual or collective), who must situate themselves in a postmodern world marked by constant change and thus faces ongoing choices among often conflicting or indistinct alternatives [Smolarkiewicz, Kubera, 2017: 7]. Kenneth J. Gergen's concept of the "saturated self" illustrates this, portraying a fragmented self lacking coherence or authenticity [Gergen, 2009].

Two principal research traditions concerning identity are commonly recognised. The first, derived from Erik H. Erikson's work, views identity formation as a process leading to a relatively stable self, centered on an "identity crisis" during adolescence. Contemporary studies, however, suggest a prolonged, deferred formation process – the theory of emerging adulthood [Arnett, 2000: 469–480]. J.J. Arnett identifies a novel life stage between adolescence and early adulthood, occurring roughly between the ages of 18 and 25 – a period when many Polish youth enter higher education, and thus directly relevant to this study [Brzezińska et al., 2010: 82]. The second tradition is linked to thinkers such as William James, Charles H. Cooley, Robert E. Park, and George H. Mead, with Mead's work playing a pivotal role in developing the interactionist model of identity. This model holds that identity is constructed and maintained through interaction, making identity itself an intersubjective phenomenon [Melchior, 1999: 36]. Self-identity is thus shaped through relationships with others – through "reading the image of ourselves in the eyes of others," which forms the basis for self-awareness [Krzemiński, 1986: 70]. The individual is not a static set of traits, but rather a dynamic actor, equipped with self-definitions emerging from interaction [Bokszański, 1989: 32]. This interactional grounding of identity has much in common with visual identity – especially as presented on social media, where content is curated and shaped by audience feedback. Thus, identity is highly dynamic, constantly in flux, shaped by societal influence and individual agency. As Marek Ziółkowski notes, interactionism underscores the "primacy of social consciousness over individual awareness" [Ziółkowski, 1981: 80].

In its simplest form, individual identity may be defined as how one understands oneself, how one identifies, and what elements are considered meaningful. It is a unique essence of the individual – an autoconcept revealed through the experience and understanding of the self as both singular and temporally continuous. When analysing the concept of individual identity, we can distinguish two core dimensions: the personal (biographical) and the socio-cultural. Anthony

Giddens limits personal identity to the biographical dimension – deeply individual and unique. Identity is not a characteristic or set of traits, but rather the "self" as interpreted biographically. It implies continuity in time and space, but this continuity is understood and reflected upon by the individual [Giddens, 2001: 75]. In this view, individual identity lies deep within personal experiences; its uniqueness and biographical continuity may constitute a singular core of identity. It must also be remembered that identity has a narrative character. It consists of stories we tell about ourselves and the social world that surrounds us. The process of constructing one's identity should lead to the development, within the individual, of a sense of constancy in the knowledge of "who I am," coherence among the various components of identity, and a sense of distinctiveness [Mamzer, 2002: 52–59], regardless of the passage of time and changing circumstances. However, it must be acknowledged that today, the notion of stable self-knowledge has become increasingly problematic. The internalised values and roles – anchoring the fundamental elements of identity – are considered to be the "hard" points of reference, along with the socio-cultural center and collective identity forms, such as national identity.

A less stable view of identity is presented by Sheldon Stryker, who describes identity as a salience hierarchy. He argues that an individual possesses multiple identity elements, the configuration of which may vary over time depending on external events and the degree of engagement in specific roles. Consequently, the hierarchy of particular identity components may shift, and new elements may be incorporated into it.

The concept of postmodern, fluid identity is reflected in the work of Zygmunt Bauman. James Clifford describes identity as a temporary and improvised construct: "it is easy to build an identity – there are numerous options, instructions, incentives, and prefabricated components readily available. What is difficult, however, is to maintain it – and sustaining identity is not the primary objective of identity strategies in postmodernity or late modernity" [Clifford, 2000: 22].

2. Research method

The study was conducted in four rounds among students at the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Białystok in 2023. It thus presents elements of visual identity specific to students – young individuals approximately 20 years old. I employed photography as a specific strategy, understood – similarly to Krzysztof

Konecki – as "found materials linked with elicited materials, that is, narratives and verbal commentaries provided by the respondents in reference to the photographs presented to them" [Konecki, 2005: 44]. The only difference lies in the fact that in this case, the photographs were shown by the participants themselves, not by the researcher.

The study involved 31 students, including 19 women and 12 men, aged between 19 and 21. I define this study as photographic self-presentation – in short, a public presentation of key identity traits, as perceived by the participants themselves, conveyed through visual materials. The central visual element was to be photography. Each student was asked to present between 10 and 15 photographs, or, in cases where this was not possible or desirable, alternative visual materials. The photographs chosen were meant to characterise who they are, to portray their identity, to show how they see themselves and what or who is important to them. The imposed limitation on the number of photographs was intended to encourage deeper reflection on the selection process and help students identify the most meaningful elements of their self-presentation.

The participants were informed that the photographs could be either their own or taken by others. They were also made aware that these photographs would be presented and discussed publicly – in front of their seminar group, composed of peers familiar to them. All the photographs were presented in this setting, and each was accompanied by the participant's commentary explaining what it depicted, what was significant about it, and which element of their identity it expressed. These participant-generated explanations – rather than the subjective interpretation of the researcher – served as the basis for identifying the primary theme of each image. In the research process, photographs must be interpreted, and such interpretation becomes a concrete act of meaning-making [Olechnicki, 2003].

Thus, the dimension of identity and the interpretation of the images were carried out primarily by the participants themselves. It must be emphasised that the photographs were an intentional and autonomous choice of visual materials used to present how the individual sees themselves – taking into account the public nature of the presentation. The audience consisted of fellow students from the seminar group – people the presenter already knew.

In total, the students presented 361 photographs, averaging 11.6 photographs per person. The smallest number of photos shown by an individual was 8, and the largest was 17. The vast majority of the photographs were taken by the participants themselves or sourced from personal family archives. Approximately 10% of the images were taken from external sources. The quality of the photographs varied;

some were poorly framed, blurry, or technically flawed. However, this was often acknowledged by the students themselves, who emphasised that the importance of the photo outweighed its technical shortcomings. In my view, the technical quality of the photographs was a secondary matter. From the researcher's perspective, the content conveyed by many photographs was often surprising to the viewing group – suggesting that the participants were, to some extent, opening up in front of their peers.

The central research question concerns which domains of identity are presented by the students. My intent was to explore which aspects of a young person's identity are disclosed in a specific, semi-public context – not in a one-on-one interaction with the researcher, but in a setting where others are present during the moment of identity presentation. These others were not anonymous spectators but known individuals, which constituted a particular kind of filter. On the one hand, this acted as a constraint – since the public nature of the presentation encourages the display of socially accepted content. On the other hand, the audience could function as a falsifier of the presented identity claims. The presenters were not anonymous, and group members already possessed some knowledge about their peers, which could inhibit the display of false or highly exaggerated content – commonly seen on social media platforms. Thirdly, the presentation in front of familiar peers – briefly and without permanence (unlike on social media) – could facilitate the sharing of more personal information that is not always disclosed in online contexts.

It should also be noted that, in this research design, the participant is the main and sole source constructing and expressing their identity. This study aims to reconstruct how individuals construct their identity within this elicited environment. It is their own reflection – not a choice among predefined survey answers, theoretical constructs, or questions imposed by the researcher – that determines what is presented.

Can we trust photographs in sociological research? A crucial issue concerns how we relate to the photographs themselves. I am aware of the immense creative and manipulative potential of photography. The internet is filled with idealised portrayals, staged events, and heavily edited travel photos that distort reality. These are often modified according to the creator's skill and intent. In our case, however, this is largely irrelevant. Firstly, the vast majority of visual materials used in the study were only minimally altered. Secondly, their primary purpose was to illustrate or symbolize particular meanings, places, or events. One could agree with Drozdowski [2006: 53], who argues that images are worth trusting when practicing visual sociology.

3. Research results

The first, and somewhat self-evident, category of the presented photographs consisted of those featuring the image of the participant. There were 40 such photographs in total. Interestingly, the majority of these (16) depicted the participants as children – images of toddlers, preschoolers, or early primary school pupils. These photographs predominantly illustrated a happy childhood, the so-called "sweet" moments, and were clearly drawn from family archives. These images reflect the biographical memory of childhood still present in the students' identities – references to the earliest remembered self-image, which continues to function within them. This is likely not only a self-image but also one nurtured through parental narratives.

The next most frequently occurring theme was "me at work," appearing in 11 instances. These photos represented a new role in life – typically part-time or seasonal employment undertaken during holidays or spare time. This reflects a more adult aspect of identity, associated with autonomy and the adult world. The participants tended to emphasise relationships with co-workers rather than the act of earning money itself.

In third place (10 instances) there were images explicitly focused on the self, labeled "this is me." These included selfies taken in various contexts or full-body portraits captured on different occasions. Few resembled the stylised selfies typical of social media. Instead, the photos conveyed a natural and spontaneous character. The photographs showing participants with their pets – cats or a lizard (4 in total) are als noteworthy. These were described as "me with my favorite animal." Remarkably, the pet-related photos were among the most frequently shared in the entire study: 45 images, mostly of animals belonging to the participants or to their families. Cats were the most common (23), followed by dogs (15), and other animals – including a cow, a rabbit, and a bird – appeared in seven photographs.

Another important dimension of identity presented through photographs was the presence of the significant others – individuals with whom the participants identified through social belonging and collective identity. This category included family members, friends, and acquaintances. Immediate family appeared in 21 photographs: siblings (7, including two nieces), parents (4), grandparents (2), and group family portraits (8), described by participants as "my family." Two participants included genealogical trees. When presenting images of close family members, participants often emphasised deep affection, using phrases such as "my beloved dad" or "my favorite niece."

Next among significant others were friends (12) and acquaintances (10). These included a variety of photos: individual portraits, group shots, and images taken during various events, meetings, and trips. A smaller subset of six photos depicted romantic partners, labeled "my boyfriend" or "my girlfriend."

Only marginally did participants include images of real or historical figures as role models or idols. These featured footballers Messi and Ronaldo, the author J.R.R. Tolkien, and Alexander the Great – mentioned by only two individuals.

Another key dimension of identity revealed in the photographs concerned physical and environmental spaces. In 18 cases, students highlighted their immediate surroundings – neighborhoods, buildings, or rural areas – as significant. This often involved a strong connection to nature. In several instances, stock photos or postcards were used, yet participants clearly identified these spaces as meaningful parts of their identity – places where they felt comfortable, rested, or experienced important events.

In 11 instances, photos related to education appeared, showing the participants' former schools (9) and their current university (2). Previous schools were generally depicted as positive spaces associated with fond memories worth sharing as part of one's biography and identity.

Another prominent theme, present in 25 photographs, involved travel. These included family and friend trips, both from the distant past and recent times. Most destinations were within Poland, followed by foreign travel. Almost all had a leisure-oriented, holiday character.

The most extensive set of photographs represented interests and activities, forming approximately one-third (116) of all the shared images. The most frequently mentioned ones were:

- Music (20): including specific artists, concert attendance, and personal music-making such as singing (4) or playing instruments (3)
- Watching films and series (17): including manga and anime (6)
- Sports (14): including dance, basketball, swimming, and volleyball
- Food-related activities (13): both preparation and consumption
- Reading books (12)
- Football fandom (12): support for teams and players
- Playing video games (9)
- Drawing (8)
- Beauty and grooming (8): including hairstyling, makeup, and manicure
- Driving one's own car (7)
- Handicrafts (6)

- Board games (6)
- Theatre and opera (5)
- Shopping (4)
- Partying (4)
- Gardening (4)
- Nature and the environment (4)
- Writing poetry (2)
- Scouting (5): represented by one individual only

The other mentioned identity elements – though less frequently – included feminism, environmentalism, shooting sports, religious pilgrimages, Barbie dolls, sailing, volunteering, sleeping, darts, and even the colour green, which one participant felt best represented their identity.

4. Conclusion

In outlining the fundamental dimensions of identity presented by the participants, it must first be emphasised that these are individuals aged 19 to 21, just entering adulthood and beginning to interpret and make sense of the surrounding world. This is reflected in the study's findings, which point to Arnett's concept of a "prolonged moratorium," during which the core structures of an "adult" identity have yet to fully form. The primary dimension of their identity is linked to hobbies, entertainment, and the development of interests typically associated with media consumption, sports, music, gaming, drawing, and similar activities. These are areas to which the participants devote considerable attention and which they chose to present as meaningful reflections of who they are. When speaking about these, they expressed significant engagement and described the roles such interests play in their lives.

Some activities – such as music, sports, or drawing – were described as fundamental, long-term commitments that have accompanied them for years and form a crucial part of their sense of self. This world of interests and leisure appears as a completely natural component of this developmental phase. One might refer to this source of identity as a form of the "cultural supermarket" [Mathews, 2005], from which young people select elements of popular culture that suit them best at a given time. It may also be assumed that, despite being the most numerous, this dimension of identity is likely to be relatively fluid – prone

to change as new interests emerge and replace the old. This sphere of identity is dynamic, with shifting roles, activities, and commitments accompanying the transition into adult life.

A second, and somewhat surprising, identity dimension – given its emotional weight and frequency – was the participants' relationships with animals, accounting for 12.5% of the total dataset. Again, the participants highlighted the deep emotional bonds they share with their pets, which are described as integral to their daily lives and objects of substantial care and affection. Many statements emphasised the importance of animals in their routines, expressing strong feelings of responsibility, attachment, and emotional investment. This trend may help to explain the enduring popularity of pet photography on social media, particularly of cats – not only as visually appealing but as a meaningful form of self-identification and emotional expression.

On a deeper level, the emotional intensity and frequency of the pet-related photos might suggest a shift in focus from human relationships to those with animals. Pets, in this interpretation, become the closest and safest recipients of emotions – potentially a sign of withdrawal or escape from the complexities of the external, social world.

Another noteworthy finding is that the participants more willingly presented themselves through the lens of early childhood than via current self-representation, such as selfies. This suggests a persistent emotional connection to childhood, and to an imaginative self-image rooted in the past. Rather than perceiving themselves as adults, they stand with one foot still in childhood. This challenges the widespread social media culture of the stylised selfie. When showing current images of themselves, participants often appeared uneasy. The selfies they did share were casual and unposed – taken incidentally in elevators, in cars, or at family gatherings – devoid of the curated aesthetic typical of platforms like the Instagram.

Interestingly, participants rarely referred to worldview-related elements as important to their identity. Christianity was mentioned twice, and ecology, feminism, and veganism once each, with the latter three named by a single individual. Ideologies or political views were largely absent. There were also virtually no references to national identity or "Polishness." Instead, participants showed connections to local identities – related to their hometowns, neighborhoods, or football clubs.

In summary, the identities of the student participants center around several core dimensions:

- Types of activities they engage in (hobbies, interests)
- Relationships with domestic animals, particularly pets
- Significant others, especially friends and acquaintances
- Local spatial identity, linked to home environments and familiar landscapes

Their own image appears mostly in the context of childhood, holidays, or work experiences, rather than as a deliberate, stylized self-representation.

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RURAL WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS (KGW) AS A PILLAR OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN POLAND

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article is a two-fold analysis of the phenomenon of Rural Women's Associations:
  - Legal and Systemic Analysis: To present the legal framework and historical context of the establishment, functioning, and development of KGW, with particular emphasis on the Act of November 9, 2018, on Rural Women's Associations.
  - Popularisation and Research Aspect: To illustrate the role of KGW as dynamic entities embodying the idea of civil society, by presenting their diverse activities and "good practices" through examples of the selected Rural Women's Associations from various regions of Poland.
- *Research methodology* – The following research methods will be used to achieve the stated aims:
  - Legal and Doctrinal Analysis: Examination of legal acts regulating the activities of KGW (primarily the KGW Act of 2018) and analysis of relevant literature in administrative law, theory of state and law, and social sciences concerning civil society and the third sector.
  - Analysis of Existing Data: Usage of statistical data from the National Register of Rural Women's Associations maintained by the Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture (ARiMR) to present the scale and distribution of KGW in Poland.
  - Case Studies: Presentation and analysis of selected examples of the activities of three KGW from different regions of Poland (KGW in Kościelisko, KGW Luba in Lubajny, KGW "Łapianka na Obcasach," and KGW in Dzikie Kolonia "Dzikie Baby"). The selection of associations was made based on the recommendations from the

Polish Homemaker Foundation, which is implementing the project "Rural Women's Association on Lithuanian Soil." The analysis will be based on information available from social media (Facebook) and other publicly accessible sources.

- Analysis of Support Programs: The examination of the available forms of funding and support for KGW, such as the Government Program for Civic Initiatives (NOWEFIO), grant competitions from local and regional self-governments, competitions from the National Centre for Agricultural Support (KOWR) (e.g., "Battle of the Regions"), and initiatives of the National Rural Network (KSOW).

- *Score/results* – This article is not only a legal analysis, but it also presents good practices of the KGW and attempts to define the role of these organisations in building community spirit in rural areas. The author presents the threats stemming from the desire to politically exploit the circles' activities and values, but also the opportunities to leverage the circles' potential in light of new threats such as war, disinformation, and lack of trust.
- *Originality/value* – The article concerns the institutional development, changes and challenges faced by some of the largest women's organisations in Poland.

Keywords: Rural Women's Associations (KGW), civil society, third sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local development, civic engagement, civil defense, disinformation, public policy, NGO funding, rural areas, Poland

1. Introduction

This article focuses on **Rural Women's Associations (Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich – KGW)** – one of the oldest and most numerous forms of association in Poland. KGW represent a unique legal and social construct that distinguishes itself from other non-governmental organisations the primary substrate of which is the human factor (e.g., associations, political parties, Volunteer Fire Departments). This paper will highlight the significant role of KGW in the development of local communities, particularly in rural areas, where they diligently preserve folk culture, art, and culinary traditions, as well as fulfil integrative and educational functions.

In light of the contemporary challenges, such as the new geopolitical reality following Russia's attack on Ukraine and the ongoing hybrid and disinformation warfare, KGW may face new tasks, for example, in the realm of civil defense or building social resilience. A legal analysis of the conditions for the establishment, functioning, and development of KGW is crucial for understanding their potential within the idea of civil society. The inspiration for an in-depth analysis of these

associations' operations came from the conference "Activities of the Third Sector in the Baltic Sea States – Experiences and Development Perspectives," held on June 12–13, 2025, at the University of Białystok Branch in Vilnius. Interestingly, the present-day Vilnius Region also has experience with KGW from nearly a century ago, although today this legal form is completely forgotten and non-existent in Lithuania.

2. Civil society: a theoretical perspective

To understand the role of KGW in building civil society, a prior definition of this key concept is necessary. As Václav Havel aptly put it, "Civil society is the muscle of democracy. Without it, democracy becomes powerless." Professor Andrzej Pułło [A. Pułło, 2012;.275–289] emphasises that the idea of civil society belongs to the most important ideas of political philosophy, and while not *expressis verbis* stated in the Polish Constitution, it is constructed by legal doctrine based on its provisions.

The literature on the subject highlights that the concept of a modern democratic state assumes "a specific model of relations between the state and society. This model, in short, is based on the assumption of inviolable limits for state interference in the sphere of citizens' rights and fundamental freedoms, while simultaneously establishing an appropriate proportion between group interest and public interest" [Blicharz, 2012: 55].

Wiktor Osiatyński, in his work *Rzeczpospolita obywateli* [Osiatyński. 2004: 120], stated that: "Simply put: civil society is the space between the family, the state, and the market, where grassroots social organisations operate. In this space, citizens engage in debate, resulting in social solutions developed for the common good."

Osiatyński points out that civil society is a necessary element for balancing power, offering society the chance to express its interests and needs as a manifestation of common concern, and the possibility to influence public decisions. He emphasises the necessity for civil society to possess its own structures, woven from networks of interpersonal connections and not controlled by the State and its apparatus [Osiatyński, 2004: 120 and next].

E. Wnuk-Lipiński understood civil society as "the sum of non-state institutions, organisations, and civil associations operating in the public sphere. These are structures relatively autonomous from the state, arising from the grassroots,

and generally characterized by the voluntary participation of their members." [Wnuk-Lipiński: 117–138], in turn, stated that "civil society is the space of uncoerced association among citizens, with a dominant network of social relations filling that space." [Walzer, 1997: 85 and next]

The above mentioned definitions indicate the complexity of the concept of **civil society**, which on the one hand refers to a set of ideas, and on the other, is a collection of legal regulations granting the right and possibility to build communities, structures, and organisations for the purpose of self-management, independent of state structures. A common feature in these definitions of civil society is the preservation of **autonomy and independence** from the state, which allows for the creation of grassroots actions by members of local communities for the benefit of their social environment. Rural Women's Associations, as a legal entity and a form of non-governmental organisation, perfectly fit this definition of civil society.

3. Rural Women's Associations as a social organisation: status and statistics

Rural Women's Associations are among the oldest and most numerous social organisations operating in Poland. They have permanently embedded themselves in the fabric of territorial communities, constituting unique organisations with a tradition stretching back over 150 years. The first organisation to be named "Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich" was founded in 1877 in the village of Janisławice (the Łódź Voivodeship) by Filipina Płaskowicka. From the outset, KGW primarily united women, residents of rural areas. From the beginning of their activity, Rural Housewives' Circles (Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich – KGW) primarily brought together women living in rural areas. The first circles functioned as a kind of reinforcement of the activities of agricultural associations. Their activities focused on educating residents and on modernising rural areas, which often served as a countermeasure to the policies of the occupying powers. During the interwar period, much of the circles' activity concentrated on self-education through organizing courses, e.g., in food preservation, tailoring and sewing, embroidery, and rational household management. Until World War II, the circles were among the most popular women's organisations, numbering about 4 000 and gathering over 100 000 women.

During the Polish People's Republic (PRL), like most organisations, the KGWs were centralised and politicised. In the 1950s, the circles played a new role by

combating shortages in various economic and social spheres and the lack of access to various goods and services in the countryside. They organised summer vacations for children in rural areas, took care of hygiene and bringing in doctors, continued to conduct cooking courses, and stimulated rural women's entrepreneurship. By the end of the PRL era, there were 31 000 KGWs with over 1.1 million members. [Report, "Stocznia", 2014: 14.]

In a report prepared in 2014 by the Laboratory of Social Research and Innovation "Stocznia," titled *Rural Housewives' Circles – Not Just About Cooking*, the state of KGWs as of 2014 and the analysis of the legal forms in which they operated until the enactment of the 2018 KGW Act are presented. The report points to the ambiguous legal status of these organisations. By definition, the circles were to be one of the forms of agricultural self-organisation – a component of agricultural associations, whose activities were still regulated by a law from the 1980s. According to that regulation, the circles were to be affiliated with a nationwide federation of agricultural organisations. The representative body of the federation was the National Council of Rural Housewives' Circles. In practice, however, the formation and self-organisation of the circles looked quite different and did not fit into the existing legal framework.

Almost half of the Circles operated as informal groups, 15% chose to establish associations, and 36% were affiliated with a central organisation. According to the report, these were usually circles whose activities had been initiated during the Polish People's Republic (PRL) era. There were also cases of circles functioning as women's units of the Volunteer Fire Brigade (OSP), even though their activities had nothing to do with the primary role of the OSP, which is firefighting. It seems, therefore, that the legal form was of secondary importance compared to the desire for local activity and engagement. The report also indicates that 2004 was a turning point when the Rural Housewives' Circles began to formalise more strongly. This may have been a result of Poland's accession to the European Union and the availability of funding to support non-governmental organisations. [Report "Stocznia", 2014: 15–17].

Currently, the status of KGW is defined by the **Act of November 9, 2018, on Rural Women's Associations**, although previously they operated as associations or informal groups.

According to data from the National Register of Rural Women's Associations maintained by the Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture [www 1, as of July 1, 2025], the number of registered associations was **20 040**.

Table 1. Number of registered KGW according to data from the National Register of Rural Women's Associations – Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture

No.	Voivodeship	Number of Registered KGW
1	Lower Silesian	915
2	Kuyavian-Pomeranian	1167
3	Lublin	1925
4	Lubusz	364
5	Łódź	1615
6	Lesser Poland	1223
7	Masovian	2524
8	Opole	344
9	Subcarpathian	1231
10	Podlaskie	697
11	Pomeranian	709
12	Silesian	593
13	Świętokrzyskie (Holy Cross)	1090
14	Warmian-Masurian	849
15	Greater Poland	2398
16	West Pomeranian	2396
TOTAL		20 040

Source: www 1.

4. Subject and scope of KGW activities in light of the Act

The KGW Act emphasises that KGW are a form of **voluntary association of individuals, independent of government and self-government administration**. Article 2(1) indicates that it is a **self-governing organisation of rural residents**, supporting the development of entrepreneurship in rural areas and active engagement for rural communities. KGW therefore fall within the category of

entities classified in Polish legal doctrine as **third sector organisations**, and their activities primarily focus on rural areas. The self-governance of Rural Women's Associations means possessing certain qualities guaranteeing their independence, such as: operating within a specific area, having their own organisational structure with representative bodies, their own goals, and effective tools to achieve them (e.g., self-financing, the ability to form associations).

According to Article 4 of the KGW Act, members must be at least 18 years old. With the consent of a legal representative, individuals who have reached 13 years of age may participate in the association's activities, and they may also form youth and children's organisations to support the achievement of the association's goals.

The subject matter of KGW activities, as indicated in Article 2 of the Act, is to improve the socio-professional conditions of rural women and their families, as well as to support the comprehensive development of rural areas. Analysis of the Act indicates that the legal personality of these associations is linked to the rural environment, and in practice, almost 99% of the members are women. Article 2(4) of the Act specifies that these organisations may also have their seat and operate in villages located within the administrative boundaries of cities and towns with up to 5 000 inhabitants.

The scope of KGW activities is enumerated in Article 2(3). KGW tasks include, in particular:

- Conducting socio-economic and educational-cultural activities in rural areas.
- Conducting activities for the comprehensive development of rural areas.
- Supporting the development of women's entrepreneurship.
- Initiating and conducting activities to improve the living and working conditions of women in rural areas.
- Promoting and developing forms of cooperation, management, and rational household management.
- Representing the interests of Rural Women's Associations to public administration bodies.
- Developing folk culture, including local and regional culture in particular.

The phrase "in particular" indicates that this is not an exhaustive list, and the practice of KGW activities shows that their scope is very broad and largely depends on the specific characteristics of the region, the composition of the organisation's members, and the possibilities of obtaining external funds for various activities.

5. Good practices of KGW: examples from the field

For the purpose of this article, the activities of 3 selected KGW from different parts of Poland will be presented, recommended by the Polish Homemaker Foundation, which is implementing the project "Rural Women's Association on Lithuanian Soil." The examples presented illustrate the diversity and dynamism of KGW activities.

I. **The Rural Women's Association in Kościelisko (the Małopolskie Voivodeship)** KGW in Kościelisko is a continuation of an association founded in the 1950s. Formally established as an association in 2014, and registered in the National KGW Register in 2018. It currently has 25 female members. In addition to traditional sewing and cooking courses, their main goal today is to empower women. Regular activities include:
   - Culinary and liqueur competitions ("Mountain Sweets," "Flavors of Indian Summer").
   - An annual themed carnival party for residents and tourists.
   - A competition for a herbal bouquet on Our Lady of the Herbs Day.
   - Further training courses funded externally (English language, computer skills, embroidery, herbalism, floristry, stained glass, fabric painting, carving).
   - Active participation in communal celebrations, regional fairs, and culinary competitions (always in regional costumes).
   - Participation in popular TV programs ("Familiada," "Jaka to melodia") – proceeds allocated to charity.
   - Organisation of charity concerts.
   - Publication of the "Old Times" calendar [2020] promoting old customs.
   - Activity during the pandemic (sewing masks, helping seniors) and production of film series ("Memories of People from Polana," "Tales of Podhale Village") promoting local history and traditions. [Source: www 2].

II. **The Rural Women's Association Luba in Lubajny (the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship)** Registered in the KRKGW in 2019. Its regular activities include:
   - Preparing harvest wreaths and participating in competitions.
   - Culinary competitions.
   - Organising local events (e.g., "Bread Festival in Lubajny," "Pumpkin Day").

- Activities promoting the region (local products, folk costumes, customs).
- Creation of a theatre group and performances of the Masurian legends ("About the Golden Shilling").
- Creation of the Table Theatre.
- Organisation of winter runs "Winter Family Run" The association's goal is also to integrate the local population, often newcomers after World War II, create new common traditions, and eliminate divisions. They emphasise strong cooperation with local and regional self-government. [Source: www 3].

III. **KGW "Łapianka na Obcasach" from Łapy Dębowina (the Podlaskie Voivodeship)** Registered in the KRKGW in 2019, consisting of 11 founding members, including four men. The association operates dynamically within the Podlaskie KGW network created by the Okno na Wschód Foundation. The flagship activities include:

- Organising Children's Day.
- Culinary workshops.
- Activities commemorating women distinguished for the commune (mural project for the legendary village head, Marianna Łapińska).
- Health prevention (especially breast cancer).
- Maintaining Easter and Christmas traditions (family and intergenerational workshops).
- Celebrating Women's Day.
- Charity actions. It is worth noting that members of this association are between 35 and 45 years old, focused on contemporary challenges in the rural environment. [Source: www 4].

IV. **The Rural Women's Association in Dzikie Kolonia "Dzikie Baby" (the Podlaskie Voivodeship)** Registered in the KRKGW in 2022. The list of founding members includes 30 people, of whom 11 are men, and among the 3 representatives, 2 are men. The association's goal is intergenerational integration and improving the lives of community members, where some are native residents and others are "new residents" (due to natural attractions and proximity to Białystok). The association focuses on:

- Pro-ecological activities (joint forest cleaning).
- Organising the Potato Dumpling Festival.
- Commemorating local history (documentary films).
- Activities related to neighborly integration.

6. The initiative, establishment, and structure of KGW

The KGW Act states that the initiative to establish a KGW can come from at least **10 individuals** whose place of residence is the village where the association operates, a village located within city limits, or residents of a city with up to 5 000 inhabitants. This number is significantly higher than for an ordinary association (3 people) or a registered association (7 people) as defined by the Associations Law Act.

The initiators establishing the association adopt its **statute** and elect an **organising committee**. The statute is the most important document regulating the functioning of the association and must contain a number of legally required elements, specifying, among others: the name and seat, scope of activity, goals and tasks, scope of income-generating activity, method of acquiring and losing membership, rights and obligations of members, contributions, bodies and their competences, assets, rules for creating funds, procedures for amending the statute and liquidation. The required conditions for the KGW statute align with those stipulated in the Associations Law Act for registered associations. A helpful element in drafting the statute is the model KGW statute, the content of which is specified in the annex to the KGW Act.

The National KGW Register is maintained by the **Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture (ARiMR)**, which is another difference compared to registered associations, whose registration takes place in the National Court Register.

7. KGW bodies

The KGW Act provides for two basic bodies:

- **The General Meeting of Members** – the decision-making body. Its competences, specified in Article 15 of the KGW Act, include, among others: electing the management board, adopting directions of activity, examining and approving substantive and financial reports, granting discharge, passing resolutions on the disposal of real estate, joining other organisations, forming unions, division and liquidation of the association, adopting statute amendments, and ongoing supervision and control of activities. The meeting should be convened by the Management Board at least once a year, within six months after the end of the financial year. A minimum of three members

of the association can request the convocation of a meeting. Resolutions are adopted by a simple majority of votes with at least half of the members present (unless the statute provides otherwise). Minutes are taken from each meeting and stored for at least 10 years.

- **The Management Board of the Association** – the executive body. Its role is to manage the current affairs of the association and represent its interests externally. The composition and number of persons on the board are specified in the statute. The board may be a single-person body. Members of the board and the chairperson are elected by the general meeting of members.

8. Assets and funding of KGW

The primary form of KGW funding is **membership fees**. The association can also be financed by donations, inheritances, bequests, income from its own activities, income from the association's assets, and public offerings. As in other corporate associations belonging to the non-governmental sector, income from the association's activities is allocated to achieve statutory goals and tasks and cannot be distributed among members (Article 21(3) of the KGW Act).

A Rural Women's Association can receive **specific-purpose grants** for activities listed in Article 2(3) of the KGW Act, as well as **financial aid from the state budget** (no more frequently than once a year) for the same activities. This aid is granted upon the association's request by decision of the head of the county office of ARiMR. This is a significant support opportunity that legal provisions do not guarantee to other non-governmental organisations.

Rural Women's Associations, like other NGOs, can also apply for **grant competitions** organized by various entities. The practice of the analysed associations indicates that they applied to programs such as the Civic Initiatives Fund (FIO) in regional programs (Małopolskie Lokalnie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie Lokalnie, Podlaskie Lokalnie). Currently, the **Government Program for Civic Initiatives for 2021–2030 (NOWEFIO)** is in operation, which is a continuation of government programs aimed at the non-governmental sector. The main goal of the program is to promote social activity and to activate and shape civic attitudes [www 5]. Within NOWEFIO, organisations, including KGW, can submit proposals in five priorities, covering micro-initiatives, support for civic organisations for the common good, increasing the presence of organisations in public life, strengthening their competencies, and technical assistance.

Another source of funding are **competitions conducted by local and regional self-governments** for the execution of their own tasks in cooperation with social organisations. Information about such competitions is available on the official websites of communes and voivodeships.

The **National Centre for Agricultural Support (KOWR)** also finances KGW activities. One of the popular competitions is the culinary "Battle of the Regions," whose goal is to popularise traditional regional dishes and highlight the diversity of Polish cuisine, as well as to promote KGW [www 6].

It is also worth mentioning the **National Rural Network (KSOW)** [www 7] which is a network for exchanging information and cooperation between organisations and institutions working to improve the quality of life for residents of rural areas and small towns. KSOW is open, and various entities involved in rural development, including KGW, can be network partners. An example of a KSOW project dedicated to KGW was the "Educational Project for KGW and Rural Entrepreneurship Creators (KPW)" implemented in 2023 by the Hugo Kołątaj University of Agriculture in Krakow, which included training, a study trip, and a conference, supporting networking, clustering, and KGW competency development.

9. Associating rural women's associations and forming unions

The KGW Act also provides for the possibility of individual KGW associating into **unions of rural women's associations**. This is an important aspect of building stronger civil society structures at the regional and national level, enabling greater influence on public policies and more effective actions for the rural environment.

10. Conclusion and findings: KGW – between tradition, development, and new security challenges

Rural Women's Associations (KGW), with their deeply rooted history and undeniable contribution to the development of local communities, constitute one of the pillars of Polish civil society. Their activities, including cultivating cultural heritage, empowering women in rural areas, supporting entrepreneurship, and working for the common good, prove their indispensable role in building and maintaining social ties. The legal analysis, confirming their status as autonomous and self-governing organisations, along with impressive numerical statistics, indicates

their enormous potential in shaping grassroots civic initiatives. Good practices presented by KGW from various regions of Poland illustrate their ability to adapt and respond to contemporary needs, from education to support in crisis situations.

10.1. Critical perspective on the role of KGW in the political context

However, to ensure a full understanding of the phenomenon of Rural Women's Associations, it is necessary to address their changing position in the political landscape, especially during the rule of Law and Justice (PiS). The introduction of a dedicated act in 2018, the simplification of registration with the Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture, and the creation of new, preferential funding pathways undoubtedly improved the formal and financial condition of KGW. Increased access to state budget funds, often administered by agencies subordinate to government ministries, as well as nationwide competitions directly aimed at KGW, created a **privileged position** compared to many other non-governmental organisations.

This favorable situation, though theoretically intended to support the development of civil society in rural areas, also became the subject of **criticism and public debate**. Many commentators and representatives of the third sector expressed concerns that the increased support for KGW could have been an element of a **political strategy** aimed at gaining support in rural areas. The participation of politicians in events organised by KGW, the promotion of their activities in the context of a narrative about tradition and national identity, and the management of funds through state institutions, raised questions about the **politicisation** and potential **instrumental use** of these organisations.

For some non-governmental organisations, especially those operating in other areas (e.g., human rights, ecology, urban culture), the privileging of KGW could be perceived as **unequal treatment** and a lack of consistent policy towards the entire civic sector. This created the impression that organisations whose profile and scope of activity were more aligned with the vision of the ruling party were being favoured.

10.2. KGW in the face of contemporary threats: potential in civil defense and the fight against disinformation

The new geopolitical reality, shaped by the full-scale war in Ukraine and the escalating hybrid and disinformation warfare, presents the Polish society, including Rural Women's Associations, with urgent and unprecedented challenges. In this

context, the **potential of KGW extends beyond their traditional cultural and social functions**, gaining new, strategic significance.

Due to their deep roots in local structures, knowledge of the rural environment, and a network of trust and mutual aid, KGW can play a **key role in the civil defense system**. Female and male members of these associations often possess practical skills necessary in crisis situations (e.g., large-scale cooking, organizsing shelter, providing first aid, local knowledge). They can be effective contact points and coordination centres for aid in the event of natural disasters, evacuations, or other threats. Their ability to mobilise quickly and organise grassroots actions, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic (sewing masks, supporting seniors) or after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (organising aid for refugees), makes them a valuable resource in building state resilience.

The potential role of KGW in the **fight against disinformation is equally important**. As trusted entities in their local communities, KGW can become an important channel for verifying information and disseminating reliable data. In an era of escalating propaganda and fake news, their authority and direct contact with rural residents can be invaluable in building civic awareness and strengthening information resilience. Educating local communities about disinformation threats, promoting critical thinking, and pointing to reliable sources of information are new, yet extremely important tasks for which KGW are naturally predisposed.

10.3. KGW in the future: independence or further challenges?

In light of these observations, the future of Rural Women's Associations requires continuous reflection. On the one hand, their potential in building social capital, cultivating traditions, and responding to local needs is indisputable. On the other hand, the key question becomes how to maintain their **autonomy and independence** from political influence. It is essential that KGW can develop based on genuine grassroots initiative and self-reliance, without the risk of becoming a tool in the hands of any political party.

Further research should focus not only on the formal aspects of KGW functioning and their successes but also on the perception of their role in local communities, the extent of their actual independence, and the impact of changing political contexts on their dynamics. Only in this way will KGW be able to fully realise their mission as true "muscles of democracy," working for the common good, regardless of current political trends, while effectively engaging in the state's security system.

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THE WARSAW STOCK EXCHANGE COMPARED TO OTHER EUROPEAN STOCK EXCHANGES

Abstract

- *Goal* – The purpose of the article is to analyse the position of the Warsaw Stock Exchange in relation to the market position of other European stock exchanges.
- *Research methodology* – The verification hypothesis was formulated as a statement that the Warsaw Stock Exchange is the capital center of Central and Eastern Europe. The basis of the study was secondary data published in the reports of both the Warsaw Stock Exchange and the Federation of European Securities Exchanges (FESE). The comparative analysis of European stock exchanges covered the years 2014–2018.
- *Score/results* – The comparative analysis determining the position of the WSE compared to other European stock exchanges enabled a positive verification of the research hypothesis confirming that the Warsaw Stock Exchange is the capital center of Central and Eastern Europe.
- *Originality/value* – The analysis of the research results confirmed that the Stock Exchange is the capital center of Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the Warsaw Stock Exchange faces many challenges, including: the low value of public offers, low liquidity ratio, competing for both issuers and investors with other European stock exchanges, etc. This justifies conducting regular surveys verifying the position of the Warsaw Stock Exchange in relation to other global stock exchanges, especially the European ones, undertaking both spatial and temporal analysis.

Keywords: stock exchange, capital market, capitalisation, investment, economic system

1. Introduction

The literature on the subject suggests that "[...] without stock exchanges, the civilisational leap of the last century, associated with the development of new information and telecommunications technologies, among other things, would not have been possible, and no public authority is capable of allocating capital as effectively." [Rydzewska, 2017: 157] Therefore, one of the basic segments of the financial market is the capital market, which, owing to the entities, mechanisms, and devices operating on it, facilitates meetings between capital providers and capital recipients and the execution of transactions between them. This allows one party to raise capital for future investments, while the other party can invest their savings and diversify their sources of income. The stock exchange is considered the heart of the capital market, as its mechanisms improve and increase the flexibility of this segment of the financial market.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the position of the Warsaw Stock Exchange SA in relation to the market position of other European stock exchanges, measured by basic indicators. The paper was prepared using a hypothetical-deductive approach. The hypothesis was formulated as a statement that the Warsaw Stock Exchange is the capital center of Central and Eastern Europe.

Literature studies, descriptive analysis, and comparative analysis were used to achieve the intended goal. The study was based on secondary data published in reports by both the Warsaw Stock Exchange and the Federation of European Securities Exchanges (FESE).

2. The functions of the stock exchange as the center of the capital market

The stock exchange is treated as the center of the capital market, enabling the optimisation of the distribution of funds between users and providers of capital [Szymański, Wojtalik, 2022: 290]. The stock exchange is a meeting place for capital seekers, i.e., entrepreneurs looking for capital for further development of their entities, and capital providers looking for investment areas that allow them to multiply their savings [Gorban, Buga, Puscas, 2024: 15–19].

Due to several factors, the stock market is associated with the model concept of a perfect market, including its characteristic large number of participants, full transparency of operations, homogeneity of objects – in this case: securities, and the relative ease of entry and exit [Aluchna, 2007: 236]. Moreover, according to

W. Tarczyński's analysis, the stock market is considered an example of an efficient market due to the factors mentioned above [Tarczyński, 1997: 521–538].

The efficient operation of the stock exchange allows it to perform functions that are crucial both from the point of view of the financial market as well as the economy as a whole, including [Dziawgo, 2012: 229]:

- Capital mobilisation – savings resulting from foregoing current consumption can be converted into investments. In return, investors gain opportunities to multiply their capital, which is a reward for their current self-sacrifice and the risk they take. "Investor engagement depends on the attractiveness of the financial instrument (expected financial results), the ease of its acquisition and disposal (market organisation), and the risk associated with the issuer's operations" [Banaszczak-Soroka, 2019: 17–18]. At the same time, billions of dollars are mobilised to support economic and state initiatives [Dobosiewicz, 2013: 36].
- Capital allocation – which entails the transfer of free financial resources from entities with a surplus to entities that need them. "Through the institutionalised securities market, institutional and individual investors finance the development activities of the entities that issue these instruments by purchasing shares and bonds" [Rydzewska, 2017: 158]. At the same time, this solution allows investors to diversify their investment forms on the one hand, and on the other hand, it gives issuers access to financial resources [Granier, Revest, Sapio, 2019: 43–67]. The free flow of funds allows for the injection of capital into those sectors of the economy which, in the opinion of investors, are able to multiply the entrusted funds by offering effective use of the entrusted capital.
- Capital transformation – it emphasises the role of the stock exchange in transforming the capital derived from savings into investment capital, which is useful from the point of view of both the economy and the state. The renunciation of current consumption or unproductive saving enables the investment of capital resources in equity or debt securities offered by stock exchange issuers [Dobosiewicz, 2011: 101–105].
- Appraisal of the capital value and risk – owing to the exchange quotations, it is possible to determine the market value of the enterprise, as well as the value of the issued shares [Banaszak-Soroka, 2019: 17–18]. Financial investment is accompanied by the risk linked to the uncertain results of the undertaken investment. The valuation of the issued securities, which is carried out on an ongoing basis and reflected in the published indicators, is often treated by the investors as one of the possible assessments of the investment results, as well as the accompanying risk [Adamska, 2019: 7].

- Money circulation – owing to the financial market institutions and financial instruments, it is possible to transfer capital between different locations safely, efficiently, and cheaply [Harwood, Konidaris, 2015; Wiśniewski, Wyrzykowska-Antkiewicz, 2014: 49].
- Economic barometer – "it is widely accepted that changes in the stock market signal changes in the economic situation in advance, if the economy is adequately represented on the stock exchange. This is because changes in stock prices and stock market indices are the result of decisions made by stock market investors who, on the basis of their predictions about the future, determine the most effective investment directions" [Widz, 2016: 157–158]. Investors' predictions of an improving economic situation have a positive impact on stock market indices, which is the result of the increased financial investments that are positively reflected in real investments [Gorban, Buga, Puscas, 2024: 16]. Conversely, a negative assessment of economic development prospects results in a decline in stock market indices, hampering real investments. This confirms the view that the value of stock market indices precedes the economic situation [Eberhart, Eesley, 2018: 2644; Switzer, Picard, 2016: 106; Galariotis, Giouvris, 2015: 44].

The functions listed above demonstrate the significant role of the stock exchange in the economic system [Czaja, 2020: 19]. This can be seen both at the microeconomic level – through the valuation of companies and their shares, the activation of accumulated savings, and their secure transfer between entities operating within its structures – as well as at the macroeconomic level – by reflecting the economic situation and its forecasts, or by assessing the effectiveness of the use of entrusted capital by individual sectors.

3. Characteristics of the Warsaw Stock Exchange

The history of the stock exchange in Poland dates back to 1817. The current Warsaw Stock Exchange (Giełda Papierów Wartościowych w Warszawie SA) began operating on April 12, 1991. The rules governing the functioning of the stock exchange are set out in legal acts, including [www 1]:

- Act of July 29, 2005, on Trading in Financial Instruments [Journal of Laws of 2005, No. 183, item 1538],
- Act of July 29, 2005, on Public Offering, Conditions Governing the Introduction of Financial Instruments to Organized Trading, and Public Companies [Journal of Laws of 2005, No. 184, item 1539];

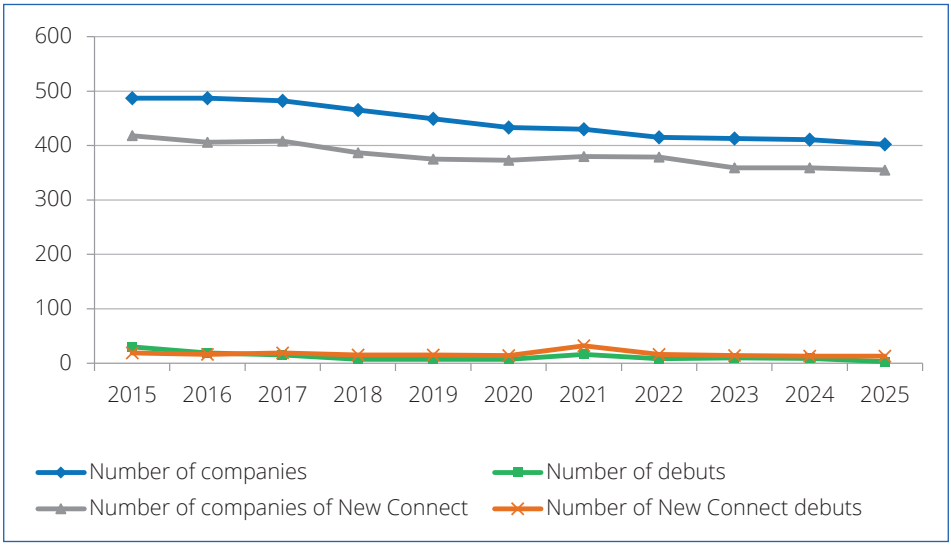
- Act of July 21, 2006, on Financial Market Supervision [Journal of Laws of 2006, No. 157, item 1119];
- Act of July 29, 2005, on Capital Market Supervision [Journal of Laws of 2005, No. 183, item 1537].

On this basis, a stock exchange is defined as an enterprise operating in the form of a joint-stock company whose business consists of trading in financial instruments [www 2].

Almost thirty years of operation have led to the development of the Warsaw Stock Exchange, as evidenced by the indicators it has achieved, including: the number of companies listed on the stock exchange, the market capitalisation of domestic companies, and the volume of trading on the stock exchange. Starting with five companies whose shares could be purchased during the first session in 1991, in 2015–2016 the Warsaw Stock Exchange had already 487 issuers offering their shares on the main market and 418 on the New Connect market in 2015.

However, an analysis of the number of companies listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange in 2015–2025 shows a worrying trend of a decrease in the number of issuers (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of companies listed on the Main Market of the Warsaw Stock Exchange in 2015–2025



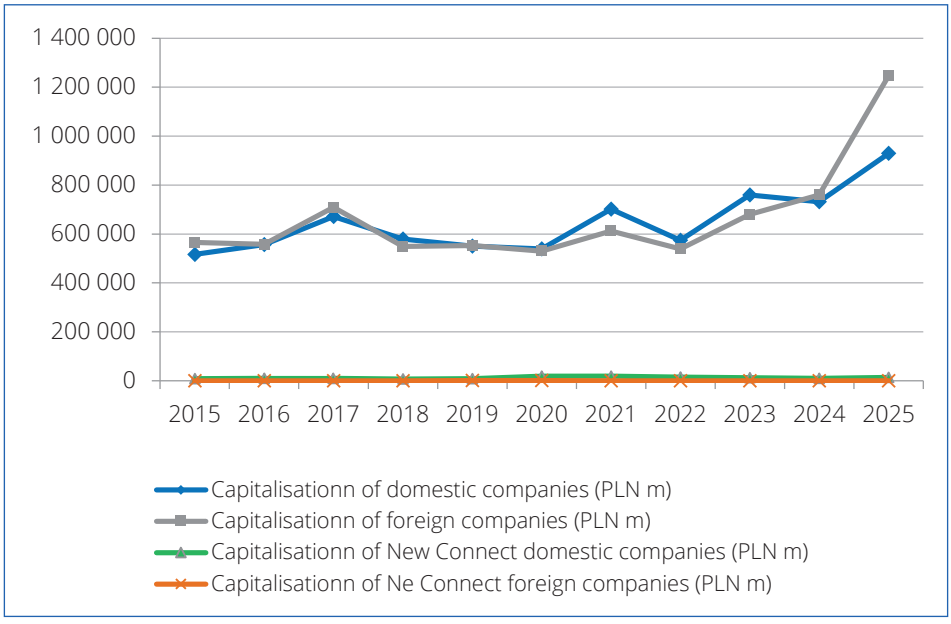
Source: the author's own study based on [www 3; www 5].

In 2025, there were 402 of them on the main market and 335 on the New Connect market, which indicated a decrease by 85 entities on the Main Market and 6 on the New Connect market compared to 2015.

The observed trend highlights one of the challenges faced by the Warsaw Stock Exchange – the declining value of the IPO index. In 2025, there were only three IPOs on the WSE, compared to 30 in 2015, and 13 on the New Connect market, compared to 19 in 2015.

Another area that enables the assessment of the level of development of the Warsaw Stock Exchange is capitalisation, which determines the market value of the companies listed on the WSE (Figure 2). The highest value was achieved in 2025. The capitalisation of domestic companies listed on the main market amounted to PLN 929 277 million, while the capitalisation of foreign companies reached PLN 1 246.707 million. In the case of the New Connect market, the capitalisation in 2025 amounted to PLN 14 278 million for domestic companies and PLN 34 million for foreign companies. There is a clear increase in interest in the Warsaw Stock Exchange on the part of foreign entities operating on both the main market and the New Connect market [Doukas, Hoque, 2016: 378].

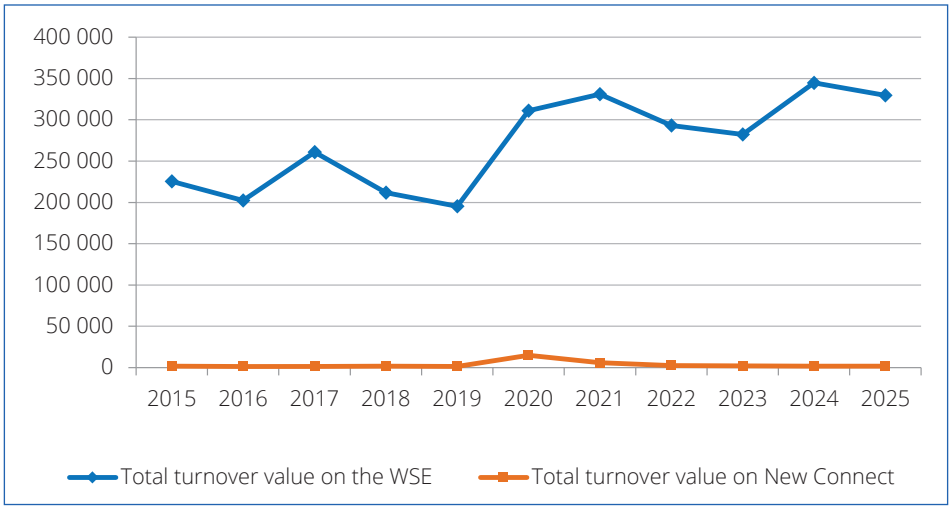
Figure 2. Capitalisation of companies listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange in 2015–2025 (PLN million)



Source: the author's own study based on [www 3; www 5].

The value of the total turnover is also important for assessing the development of the Warsaw Stock Exchange (Figure 3). The highest level was reached in 2024, which meant an increase of 153% compared to 2015. The highest turnover on the WSE was generated by shares, classified together with bonds in the first category, and those belonging to the second category – futures contracts – i.e. instruments whose price depends on other primary instruments. According to A. Zaremba, "[...] this segment of the market is the fastest growing one in the world" [Zaremba, 2013: 66].

Figure 3. Total turnover on the Warsaw Stock Exchange in 2015–2025 (PLN million)



Source: the author's own study based on [www 3; www 5].

The basic data characterising the Warsaw Stock Exchange confirm, on the one hand, its dynamic development over the analysed period, and on the other hand, signal the challenges it faces, including the desire to increase the number of issuers, striving to increase the value of trading in individual financial instruments, the increasing interest in the capital market among a wide range of investors, and the competition for investor capital. The Warsaw Stock Exchange must also cope with growing competition from both other forms of investment and other European stock exchanges.

4. The Warsaw Stock Exchange compared to European and global stock exchanges

The basis for further assessment of the development of the Warsaw Stock Exchange, as well as its position in relation to other European stock exchanges, was secondary data published by the Federation of European Securities Exchanges (FESE), taking into account the following issues: the number of employees working on European stock exchanges, the number of companies listed on stock exchanges, capitalisation, and the value of share trading. In addition, for the purposes of the study, the stock exchange liquidity index was used, calculated as the quotient of trading and capitalisation. The analysis covered the years 2020–2024, which enabled to carry out a comparative analysis (Table 1).

The Warsaw Stock Exchange is the fifth largest stock exchange in Europe in terms of the number of employees. This position remained unchanged in 2024 compared to 2020, although there was a change of one of the leaders in this area. In 2020, Deutsche Börse, Euronext, and SIX were the leaders. In 2024, however, the leaders in terms of employment were BME, Deutsche Börse, and SIX. When comparing the number of employees to the number of companies listed on the stock exchange, it can be seen that in 2024, there were 1.4 companies per WSE employee. In 2020 there were 1.8 companies per WSE employee.

Table 1. Number of employees on European stock exchanges in 2020–2025

STOCKS	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Athens Stock Exchange	230	228	236	254	254
Bme	798	809	938	946	×
Börse Stuttgart	350	348	258	233	233
Bratislava Stock Exchange	×	×	×	×	16
Bucharest Stock Exchange	101	105	100	106	114
Budapest Stock Exchange	62	61	63	62	61
Bulgarian Stock Exchange	51	50	54	58	65
Cyprus Stock Exchange	63	63	63	60	60
Deutsche Börse	7238	10200	11078	14502	15495

STOCKS	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Euronext	1138	2126	2203	2324	2518
Ice Futures Europe	202	201	203	×	204
Luxembourg Stock Exchange	197	206	140	139	146
Malta Stock Exchange	52	51	51	47	52
Nasdaq Nordic	475	505	502	467	440
Prague Stock Exchange	81	78	78	77	78
Six	111	132	136	140	4431
Vienna Stock Exchange	81	87	88	87	89
Warsaw Stock Exchange	**454**	**475**	**493**	**598**	**583**
Zagreb Stock Exchange	36	39	39	36	36

× – no data

Source: the author's own study based on [www 4].

What determines the attractiveness of a stock exchange from the point of view of both investors and issuers is the number of companies listed on it. Their presence determines the market capitalisation, trading value, and liquidity of trading. An analysis of the number of companies listed on European stock exchanges shows that the vast majority recorded a decline in the number of issuers compared to 2020. In the case of the Warsaw Stock Exchange, the number of issuers decreased by 6 entities. The highest percentage loss in the number of issuers in the period under review was recorded by the Cyprus Stock Exchange (-59.85%), the Prague Stock Exchange (-45.45%) and the Zagreb Stock Exchange (-25.24%). In the case of the WSE, the decline amounted to only 0.62%. Nevertheless, some European stock exchanges achieved higher results in this area, e.g. the Malta Stock Exchange (+762.96%), SIX (+106.4%), and the Budapest Stock Exchange (+53.33%), indicating growing competition in the region.

Table 2. Total listings on European stock exchanges in 2020–2025

STOCKS	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Athens Stock Exchange	176	160	159	156	149
Bme	2,961	2585	1498	284	×
Börse Stuttgart	×	×	×	×	×
Bratislava Stock Exchange	×	×	×	×	31
Bucharest Stock Exchange	83	82	83	85	86
Budapest Stock Exchange	45	50	63	67	69
Bulgarian Stock Exchange	259	440	252	253	253
Cyprus Stock Exchange	259	108	108	107	104
Deutsche Börse	485	493	481	433	477
Euronext	1,493	1995	1966	1924	1812
Ice Futures Europe	×	×	×	×	×
Luxembourg Stock Exchange	173	130	127	119	115
Malta Stock Exchange	27	30	33	34	233
Nasdaq Nordic	1071	1236	1251	1221	1178
Prague Stock Exchange	55	55	59	30	30
Six	250	232	227	855	516
Vienna Stock Exchange	809	873	864	222	872
Warsaw Stock Exchange	**806**	**810**	**799**	**788**	**801**
Zagreb Stock Exchange	103	97	91	86	77

× – no data

Source: the author's own study based on [www 4].

Attracting new issuers is also crucial to the development of European stock exchanges [Vismara, Paleari, Ritter, 2012: 352–388]. The Polish stock exchange ranked 6th in 2024, compared to the 4th place in 2022 in this respect. In 2024, the Malta Stock Exchange was the most effective in terms of the number of new obtained companies, attracting 124 new entities (Table 3).

Table 3. New listings on European stock exchanges in 2020–2025

STOCKS	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Athens Stock Exchange	×	×	4	6	4
Bme	×	×	34	26	×
Börse Stuttgart	×	×	2	0	8
Bratislava Stock Exchange	×	×	×	×	2
Bucharest Stock Exchange	×	×	1	3	3
Budapest Stock Exchange	×	×	14	7	3
Bulgarian Stock Exchange	×	×	6	6	7
Cyprus Stock Exchange	×	×	0	0	×
Deutsche Börse	×	×	10	6	8
Euronext	×	×	83	64	53
Ice Futures Europe	×	×	×	×	×
Luxembourg Stock Exchange	×	×	5	3	7
Malta Stock Exchange	×	×	3	1	124
Nasdaq Nordic	×	×	63	29	32
Prague Stock Exchange	×	×	5	1	0
Six	×	×	5	2	28
Vienna Stock Exchange	×	×	5	15	39
Warsaw Stock Exchange	**×**	**×**	**29**	**24**	**22**
Zagreb Stock Exchange	×	×	2	0	0

× – no data

Source: the author's own study based on [www 4].

One of the key factors influencing the development of the stock exchange, apart from the number of companies, is the closely related market capitalisation value, which determines the total capitalisation of all companies listed on the stock exchange. Thus, its value depends, on the one hand, on the number of issuers, the number of the issued securities and their market price expressed in share price.

Table 4. Market capitalisation on European stock exchanges in 2020–2025 (EUR m)

STOCKS	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Athens Stock Exchange	41 758	52 311	55 139	73 673	82 508
Bme	621 764	684 899	621 575	697 235	x
Börse Stuttgart	x	x	x	x	x
Bratislava Stock Exchange	x	x	x	x	2 236
Bucharest Stock Exchange	20 847	28 514	27 042	43 327	45 495
Budapest Stock Exchange	22 787	27 798	22 253	35 242	39 894
Bulgarian Stock Exchange	14 497	15 738	15 429	7 926	8 932
Cyprus Stock Exchange	14 497	4 991	6 102	9 404	11 398
Deutsche Börse	1 870 685	2 210 189	1 764 946	1 973 316	2 132 151
Euronext	4 458 593	6 475 616	5 664 213	6 241 462	6 052 738
Ice Futures Europe	x	x	x	x	x
Luxembourg Stock Exchange	42 234	54 034	47 538	48 764	43 662
Malta Stock Exchange	4 161	4 254	4 071	4 669	4 472
Nasdaq Nordic	1 728 450	2 258 163	1 734 186	1 920 369	1 868 797
Prague Stock Exchange	21 767	33 048	26 949	31 335	33 179
Six	1 637 776	2 043 339	1 714 030	1 822 604	2 692 121
Vienna Stock Exchange	108 176	143 831	114 927	125 602	125 975
Warsaw Stock Exchange	**146 368**	**174 282**	**137 837**	**191 453**	**189 064**
Zagreb Stock Exchange	18 362	18 599	18 057	22 971	29 013

× – no data

Source: the author's own study based on [www 4].

In this case, the highest positions were consistently held by Euronext, Deutsche Borse AG, Nasdaq Nordic, Six, and BME during the analysed period. The Warsaw Stock Exchange ranked sixth, ahead of the other stock exchanges of Central and Eastern European countries, which proves its leading position in the region.

Undoubtedly, the Warsaw Stock Exchange is an important center of the Central and Eastern European financial market, which may be due to several factors. Firstly, its competitive advantage over the leaders is cost-related, which means that both Polish and foreign companies can operate on the capital market at a relatively lower cost compared to other European stock exchanges. The demand potential of the Polish market is also significant. "[...] foreign companies place their assets on the Warsaw Stock Exchange either to raise capital for development in Central and Eastern Europe, or to be able to develop on the Polish market [Przybylska-Kapuścińska, 2008: 128]. In addition, foreign companies practice dual listing, which means issuing securities on several stock exchanges, thereby improving their statistical data.

At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the last decade of the WSE's operation proves the challenges faced by the Polish stock exchange, as also pointed out by K. Kowalke [Kowalke 2017: 273–286]. These include: growing competition from other European stock exchanges, a decreasing number of issuers, and low liquidity.

5. Summary

According to the prevailing paradigm, the development of the financial sector through the more efficient use of resources demonstrates a high level of economic maturity [Karagiannis, Kvedaras, 2016; Breitenlechner, Gächter, Sindermann, 2015: 31–33; Apergis, Artikis, Kyriazis, 2015: 42–64; Panizza, 2014: 35–65; Balta, Nikolov, 2013: 7–18; Beck, Levine, Loayza, 2000: 261–300]. "From relatively simple intermediaries of capital transfer, they have become institutions conducting diversified activities. Stock exchanges open up new trading markets, e.g. for innovative small and medium-sized enterprises, create new products, and take over functions within the value chain that were previously performed by separate institutions" [Rydzewska, 2017: 159]. Owing to modern technologies, stock exchanges are going beyond the domestic market, competing for foreign investors and their capital, as well as for foreign issuers [Gorczyńska, 2012: 33–35]. Thus, the stock exchange has become a key institution of the financial market, creating opportunities for trading securities.

Over the course of nearly thirty years, the Warsaw Stock Exchange has established itself as the leader in the region. An analysis of the condition of the Warsaw Stock Exchange, based on indicators determining the number of companies listed

on the exchange, its turnover, as well as the capitalisation of domestic companies, allows to recognise the maturity of the Polish stock exchange. Similar conclusions were reached on the basis of a comparative analysis determining the position of the WSE in relation to other European stock exchanges. Thus, the research hypothesis was verified positively.

Nevertheless, the Warsaw Stock Exchange faces many challenges, including: low value of public offerings, low liquidity ratio, opportunism of issuers in terms of transitioning from the New Connect market to the Main Market, as well as competition for both issuers and investors from other European stock exchanges. This justifies conducting regular studies verifying the position of the Warsaw Stock Exchange in relation to other global stock exchanges, especially European ones, undertaking both spatial and temporal analysis.

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THE BEGINNINGS OF MACIERZ SZKOLNA – THE ASSOCIATION OF POLISH SCHOOL TEACHERS IN LITHUANIA: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article is to present the beginnings of Macierz Szkolna and to discuss its main areas of activity in the interwar period (1918-1939) in the Vilnius Region.
- *Research methodology* – An archival and library search was conducted, and a review of the literature was performed. The article is based mainly on the preserved archival sources deposited in the archives of the Lithuanian Central State Archives.
- *Score/results* – The research findings reveal the essence of the Educational Society in the eastern territories and the role the organisation played in the Vilnius region. To operate effectively, the Educational Society carried out tasks such as educating children, establishing schools, conducting training courses, and assisting in the dissemination of education.
- *Originality/value* – Issues related to the activities of the Macierz Szkolna (School Society) in Poland are of interest to researchers, but not in the Vilnius region during the interwar period. This article is an attempt to take a closer look at the activities of the Macierz Szkolna – an organisation that contributed to reducing illiteracy levels in the Vilnius region.

Keywords: Macierz Szkolna Society, interwar Vilnius region, social organisations, interwar education, interwar period

1. Introduction

One of the key educational organisations operating in the Polish community in Lithuania is Macierz Szkolna – *the Association of Polish School Teachers in Lithuania.* With over 130 years of history, this organisation has been continuously working to develop and protect Polish education in this country. Macierz Szkolna plays an important role in promoting national culture and building the identity of the Polish community, while also serving as a bridge between Poles in Lithuania and the Republic of Poland. The contemporary forms and directions of Macierz Szkolna's activities are the result of the constant activity and commitment of many people, continuous response to the needs of Poles, and a long-standing tradition.

The aim of this article is to present the beginnings of Macierz Szkolna and discuss its main areas of activity in the interwar period. The analysis covers the historical context of the Association's establishment and operation – from its founding in the Vilnius Region, through its activities until 1939, to the outbreak of the Second World War. Particular attention was paid to the role of Macierz Szkolna in the reconstruction of the Polish state and in eliminating high levels of illiteracy in the eastern lands.

Much research attention has been devoted Polska Macierz Szkolna [in English: The Polish Educational Society] in various aspects of its activity and in specific periods. Research in this area has been conducted by, among others, Hanna Markiewiczowa, Józef Stemler, Józef Kwiatkowski, Mieczysław Jackiewicz, Jarosław Góralski, Marta Meducka, and Elwira J. Kryńska. This study is based on historical sources deposited in the archives of Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas [in English: The Lithuanian Central State Archives], where the files of Starostwo Grodzkie Miasta Wilna Rzeczpospolita Polska [in English: The Municipal Office of the City of Vilnius of the Republic of Poland] contain statutory documents and annual reports on the organisation's activities. The reports on the activities of Macierz Szkolna, compiled by its founder and long-time director Józef Stemler [Stemler, 1926], were invaluable. They contain important information about the origins of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands, its basic cultural and educational goals, the political conditions in which they had to be implemented, and the organisational and financial work of the Polish Educational Society. Another valuable source is "Gwiazdka – tygodnik dla dzieci i młodzieży" [in English: A Little Star – a weekly for Children and Youth] published by the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands. The analysis was supplemented

by publications contained in the pre-war magazine "Szkoła Powszechna. Kwartalnik poświęcony sprawom szkolnictwa polskiego" [in English: Primary School. A Quarterly Devoted to the Polish Education]. This paper also includes valuable excerpts from an interview with Józef Kwiatkowski, long-standing president of the Association, who contributed significantly to the development of the organisation and the continuity of the Polish education in Lithuania. The following article is of a contributory nature and provides only an outline of the issue, which is the subject of broader research interest by Rita Tamašunienė, MA.

2. Social initiatives in Vilnius at the beginning of the 20th century

In 1905, in response to the increasing Russification and the restriction of Poles' rights in the Russian partition, the Polish Educational Society was established in Warsaw on the initiative of Józef Świątkowski, engineer. The first president was Henryk Sienkiewicz, a winner of the Nobel Prize for writers, and the president of the Main Board was Antoni Osuchowski, a lawyer and a journalist. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Polish Educational Society played a key role in organising independent education in the Polish lands, which were under three partitions. Owing to social activism, the local circles of the Polish Educational Society were established, as well as folk schools, orphanages combining the functions of an orphanage and kindergarten, libraries, reading rooms, community centres, courses for illiterate people, home schooling groups, and various lectures and discussions were organised. By the end of 1907, over 900 educational institutions were operating, and their number and reach were steadily growing. In 1917, the Polish Educational Society ran, among others, 419 primary schools, 23 secondary schools, 7 teacher training colleges, 187 supplementary courses and 206 libraries. It also ran a publishing house and supported individual teaching. The development of the Polish Educational Society's activities was possible primarily in places where favourable conditions existed – communities supportive of national education and people willing to undertake social work.

Social, charitable and educational activities were particularly important in the Eastern Borderlands, where needs were enormous and the community often undertook work on its own, without central support.

The first official reports indicate that in 1870, there were two secret schools operating in Vilnius, one in Zawalna Street in Franciszek Chądzyński's flat, and the other in Honorata Puciato's house in Kazimierski Alley. Within this period,

secret youth circles were formed, which established bookshops and reading rooms. Underground education for adults also developed, led by Eliza Orzeszkowa, who established a bookshop and reading room called "E. Orzeszkowa i S-ka" in 1879, which was closed down two years later by the tsarist authorities, who considered it illegal and a source of Polish agitation [Zięba, 2015: 192–194].

Furthermore, in 1882, the brothers, Bronisław Piłsudski and Józef Piłsudski, founded "Spójnia" [in English: Coherence], one of the first secret self-education circles after the January Uprising in Vilnius, which brought together a dozen or so colleagues from the Vilnius government gymnasium, including: Alfons Machwica, Augustyn Wróblewski, Bronisław Przybylski and Kazimierz Chodźko. The pupils formed a library and met to read and discuss together [Kuczyński, 2015: 12–13].

In 1890, Witold Węsławski, a doctor, and Emma Dmochowska, née Jeleńska, a writer, founded *Towarzystwo Oświaty Narodowej* [in English: The National Education Society] in Vilnius. The Society's activities brought together the most active educated Poles. During the period of intense Russification, the Society's activities were focused on promoting Polish education in the Vilnius Region.

The Society organised secret schools, courses and educational activities aimed at young people and adults *Państwowa Szkoła Przemysłowo-Handlowa Żeńska im. E. Dmochowskiej w Wilnie* [in English: The E. Dmochowska State Industrial and Commercial School for Girls in Vilnius], Warsaw 1929: 3–4).

The situation of social organisations improved somewhat when, in the wake of liberal activities, as a result of the 1905 revolution, growing social discontent and the lost war with Japan, the tsarist authorities issued the so-called 'tolerance decree' [Łupiński, 2001], which allowed teaching in Lithuanian and Polish in two-class elementary schools and municipal secondary schools, as well as the organisation of meetings and the use of Polish in public spaces. Taking advantage of favourable legislation, the Polish community began to organise and establish legal societies. On 10 September 1906, an organisational meeting of Towarzystwo "Oświata" [in English: The Education Society] was held, with Eliza Orzeszkowa as its honorary member. The aim of the Society was to raise the level of education and learning in society. The Society implemented its ideas of grassroots and organic work by establishing orphanages, bookshops and libraries, reading rooms, organising assistance for youth in education and courses for illiterate adults. The Society covered the communities of Eyshishok, Kernave, Olkeniki, Koshedary, Hlybokaye, Zhaludok and Smarhon (currently in Belarus) [Kwiatkowski, 2015: 8–9]. However, the liberal attitude of the tsarist authorities towards the Polish community in the Vilnius Region lasted only two years, because on 15 February

1908, the Education Society was closed down for conducting secret teaching in Polish, establishing orphanages and documenting its activities in Polish.

As declarations of freedom and respect for the rights of the Polish community were not observed, and the tsarist authorities once again prohibited the establishment of private Polish schools and the use of the Polish language at political meetings and in religious education classes, educational activities once again began to take on a conspiratorial character. Despite the closure of the Education Society, other organisations continued to operate in parallel, such as Towarzystwo Opieki nad Uczącą się Młodzieżą [in English: The Society for the Care of Learning Youth] (founded by Józef Montwiłł), Wileńskie Towarzystwo Opieki nad Dziećmi [in English: The Vilnius Society for the Care of Children], Towarzystwo św. Zyty [in English: The Society of St. Zita] and Towarzystwo Filaretów [in English: The Filaret Association], which brought together secondary school youth from Vilnius, Kaunas, Daugavpils and Minsk [Kwiatkowski, 2015: 8–9]. All the initiators had one goal in mind: to make Polish schools accessible, to impart the Polish language and culture, and to make education the foundation of the Polish identity.

Over time, they began to consolidate their activities, and organisations pooled their resources in order to operate more effectively. One example is Komitet Edukacyjny [in English: The Educational Committee], established in 1915, which united many educational organisations and associations in Vilnius and the Eastern Borderlands, with Witold Węsławski, PhD., as its president. The Education Society and Towarzystwo Katolickie Polskiej Szkoły Ludowej [in English: The Catholic Society of the Polish Folk School] in Vilnius merged to form Polska Macierz Szkolna [Towarzystwo Katolickie Szkoły Polskiej w Wilnie, 1916]. That same year, the following schools were established: 4 secondary schools (2 for boys – 425 pupils, 2 for girls – 390 pupils), 8 municipal schools (4 for boys – 580 pupils, 4 for girls – 480 pupils), 30 elementary schools, attended by approximately 4 500 pupils. In total, approximately 6 375 pupils were educated in Vilnius. There were 120 primary schools and three co-educational junior high schools in the province of Oszmiana, Święciany and Vileyka. The Education Committee also ran a wide range of courses and training programmes, including university-level academic courses, agricultural courses (in cooperation with Towarzystwo Rolnicze [in English: The Agricultural Society], economics and trade courses, general education courses in Antokol, two Sunday courses and six courses for illiterate adults, teacher training colleges (short-term and two-year), four-year evening commercial schools, four vocational schools, general education courses for workers, Uniwersytet Ludowy

im. Adama Mickiewicza (in English, the Adam Mickiewicz Folk University), and established publishing companies specialising in the publication of textbooks [Kwiatkowski, 2015: 10].

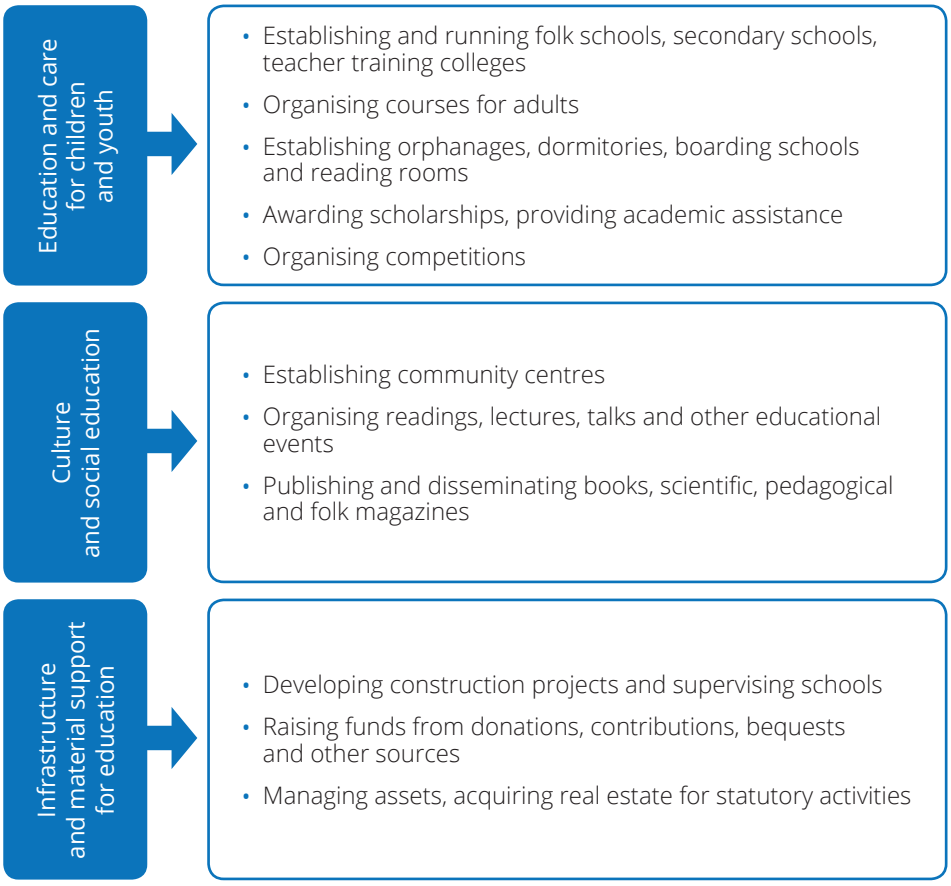
At the beginning of the 20th century, associations in the Vilnius Region became a national symbol of resistance to assimilation, of the national struggle and of the need for social action. The educational activities undertaken by the Polish patriots to preserve the Polish identity were fundamental, and their intense activity, despite unfavourable circumstances, was a response to the social needs of the time and also set the direction for further action. Therefore, social initiatives in Vilnius were the seed of the Polish Educational Society's activities, giving rise to organised efforts to promote national education.

3. The activities of the Polish Educational Society in the Vilnius region (1918 to 1939)

After Poland regained independence in 1918, there was an ongoing armed conflict with the Soviet authorities and a dispute over Vilnius, which delayed the process of organising, developing and shaping Polish education compared to other areas of the Republic of Poland. A distinctive feature of the Polish education in the Vilnius Region was the presence of numerous national and ethnic minorities and religious groups, which obliged the Polish government to take into account the social needs and the ethnic structure of the Second Polish Republic. Furthermore, the census conducted in 1921 showed that 33.1% of the population over 10 years old could not read or write, and in the Vilnius district alone, the illiteracy rate was 66% [*Rocznik Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, Warsaw 1927: 29; *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny*, Warsaw 1937: 29]. An additional difficulty was posed by the government attempts to consolidate and unify various education systems and to implement compulsory schooling [Gąsiorowski, 66]. It is true that *Dekret z 7 lutego 1919 roku o obowiązku szkolnym* [in English: Decree of 7 February 1919 on Compulsory Schooling] introduced compulsory attendance at school for children of 7 to 14 years old and laid down rules for the training of teachers in five-year colleges. However, in practice, the implementation of this proposal was difficult due to the limited availability of schools. The development of education and public schooling in the Vilnius Region was also influenced by "reforma Jędzejewiczowska" [in Enlish, the Jędzejewiczowska reform] and adopted *Ustawa o ustroju szkolnictwa* [in English: The Act on the Education System]. The

structures of all school levels were completely reorganised, and the principle of "patency" between stages of education was introduced. Education at the primary level, i.e. *seven years of primary school*, was a statutory obligation. Furthermore, in the 1930s, the situation regarding school accessibility and equal educational opportunities in areas with poorly developed infrastructure in the Vilnius School District was improved by the implementation of the "Plan budowy 100 szkół" [in English: The Plan to Build 100 Primary Schools] (and ultimately 120) named after Marshal Piłsudski. In 1936, the number of primary schools increased by 15 in the Braslav District, by 13 in the Disensky District, by 9 in Ashmyany District, by 11 in Postavy District, by 14 in Sventsiany District, by 11 in the Vileyka District, by 8 in the Maladzyechna District, and by 19 in the Vilnius-Trakai District [Srebrakowski, 2019: 151–152]. Owing to the more even distribution of schools across the region, there was a marked increase in public education [Surwiło, 1992: 18]. Despite legislative support from the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Education, the process of spreading education in the Vilnius Region was a long and arduous task. Social and educational organisations undertook many activities to overcome the deficiencies and differences resulting from the partitions, reduce illiteracy and promote education. The integration and aforementioned merger of the social and educational organisations of the National Education Society in Vilnius with Towarzystwo Oświaty Narodowej [in English: The Catholic Society of Polish Public Education] was important for the development of education in the Vilnius Region [Kwiatkowski, 2015: 10]. As a result of joint arrangements, on 21 August 1919, an independent Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands (hereinafter – PESEL) was established, covering Vilnius Region, Nowogródek and Białystok Voivodships. It had its own organisational structure and programme [*Statut Polskiej Macierzy Szkolnej Z.W.*, 1927: 1]. Witold Węsławski, PhD., the former head of the Education Committee, was reappointed as president of the newly established organisation. The seat of the PESEL was located at 2/3 Benedyktyńska Street in Vilnius [2005: 10]. The aim of the cultural and educational work of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands was 'to promote and support education in the Christian and national spirit and to provide moral and material care for children and youth in education' [*Statut Polskiej Macierzy Szkolnej Z.W.*, 1927: 1]. In order to achieve the above aims and take into account the social and educational situation in the eastern lands, the Polish Educational Society, in accordance with its statutes, organised its work in three areas: education and care for children and youth, culture and social education, and infrastructure development.

Figure 1. Areas and Forms of the Activity of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands



Source: the authors' own work based on *Statut Polskiej Macierzy...,* 1927: 1.

The work and activities of the Polish Educational Society in the Vilnius Region were intense. In 1919, during the first months of the PESEL's operation, there were: 9 schools in Vilnius, 85 schools in the provinces, including 70 schools under the care of local circles of the PESEL, 2 teacher training colleges (for women and men), junior high schools and primary schools in Święciany, Ashmyany and Vileyka. Two Polish language courses for adults were organised, and a Vocational School Association was established. In 1920, there were 331 Polish schools operating throughout the Vilnius Voivodeship, employing 583 teachers. This was the first period of organising Polish education in the region, which had only just

come under the Polish administration. Between 1920 and 1922, the number of Polish schools in the Vilnius Voivodeship almost doubled (from 331 to 617), and the number of teachers increased significantly (from 583 to 1 170). These data testify to the intensive efforts of the Polish state to develop education in the eastern lands, where it was important to strengthen national and cultural identity [Wareński, 1929:12].

Table 1. Education in the Vilnius Region in 1923 to 1925

Type of school	Number of state schools	Number of private schools	Number of pupils/listeners
Secondary schools	11	28	6107
State schools	52	27	14535
Vocational schools	2	12	No data available
Teacher training colleges	3	5	771

Source: Wareński, 1929.

The expansion of the school network was also linked to the need to employ the qualified teaching staff who had been trained at teacher training colleges. Teachers made use of the resources of teacher training libraries and drew knowledge and inspiration from the pedagogical press. The Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands had Centralna Wypożyczalnia Książek [in English: The Central Book Lending Library], which served approximately 1 200 readers [Kwiatkowski, 2005: 10]. From 1924 to 1928, the number of books increased from 12 791 to 19 000 [*Rocznik Statystyczny*…, 1930: 250]. However, as early as 1920, the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Education in Warsaw published "Szkoła Powszechna" [in English: Primary School], a quarterly for teachers. This magazine was an important source of information and methodological support for teachers in the Polish primary schools in the eastern lands of the Republic of Poland. The magazine published articles on pedagogy and psychology, as well as on teaching methodology, teacher training, teacher documentation, and pedagogical movements in Poland and abroad [Michalska, 2019: 35]. The Polish Educational Society also enriched its school and library collections with pedagogical publications, i.e. "Oświata Polska" [in English: The Polish Education], "Nasza Praca" [in English: Our Work], "Oświata i Wychowanie" [in English: The Education and Upbringing],

"Nasz Program" [in English: Our Programme), "Oświata Pozaszkolna" [in English: The Extracurricular Education], "Przegląd Oświatowy" [in English: The Educational Review], "Przewodnik Oświatowy" [in English: The Educational Guide], "Polacy za Granicą" [in English: Poles Abroad], "Biuletyn Oświatowy" [in English: Educational Bulletin], "Siew Młodej Wsi" [in English: Sowing of the Young Village], "Plon" [in English: The Harvest], "Przewodnik Wiejski" [in English: The Rural Guide]). However, as early as 1925, on the initiative of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands, "Gwiazdka – tygodnik dla dzieci i młodzieży" [in English: A Little Star – a weekly for Children and Youth] was published in Vilnius. Its first volume comprised 40 issues published from the beginning to the end of the year. It was an illustrated weekly for children and youth, containing educational, literary and popular science content, illustrated and adapted for young readers: educational stories and fairy tales, historical and patriotic articles, poetry for children and drawings. The Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands was developing rapidly. By 1925, it had 244 local organisational units, known as Circles of the PESEL, with a total of 18 274 members. In addition, 539 libraries and 510 adult education courses were organised [Kwiatkowski, 2005: 10]. In the 1930s, the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands intensified the activities of its local Circles, which entered into formal employment contracts with teachers. In addition to the basic teaching duties, these contracts also included a provision on the necessity to conduct courses for illiterate persons and actively to participate in organising the cultural life of the local community. Teachers employed by the circle of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands often served simultaneously as librarians, school principals and organisers of various educational and cultural events [Markiewicz, 1994: 222].

In order to raise the level of elementary education and promote preschool education, between 1929 and 1930, the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands established nine preschools, including four in Vilnius, providing care for a total of 140 children. The activities of the existing Women's College in Vilnius were also expanded to include an additional course, and the T. Zan Men's College was established. The Society also involved in the development of vocational education, establishing three vocational schools, including the Women's Vocational School of Tailoring in Nova Vileyka [Kryńska, 2000: 92–93].

The problem most often faced by the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands was undoubtedly the lack of funds, but also public awareness. Faced with difficult living conditions, the priority for many families was to secure the basic means of subsistence, often at the expense of their children's

education. Daily economic needs often took precedence over education, which meant that many parents decided not to send their children to school so that they could help them with paid work or on the farm. One of the reports on the activities of the PESEL for 1929 provides that: "Economic issues are absorbing the attention of society, pushing cultural matters into the background – to the detriment of both issues, as they are closely related" [Polska Macierz Szkolna…, 1930; Kwiatkowski, 2014: 12]. In addition, a significant number of children did not attend school due to population dispersion, lack of educational infrastructure and difficult social conditions (the lack of clothing, footwear, long distances to schools). The Main Board of the Polish Educational Society emphasised the importance of nationwide involvement in education in the Eastern Borderlands. The Polish Educational Society appealed to the entire society for financial assistance, organising, among other things, fundraisings and collections [*O Ziemie wschodnie*…, 1936: 7, 8, 11]. Despite the difficulties described above, in 1936, the Polish Educational Society took care of a total of 8 068 children, including 2 139 in the Vilnius Region [*O Ziemie wschodnie*…, 1936]. According to the data of 1936, there were 30 circles of the Polish Educational Society, 48 primary schools educating 2 132 children, 6 dormitories and orphanages, and 147 libraries in the Vilnius Region, which was one of the highest rates among the eastern regions.

4. Summary

The Eastern Lands were both unique and problematic, and the educational situation in the region was complicated. The economic crisis of the 1930s, inadequate school facilities, overcrowded classrooms, lessons held in rural huts, a lack of qualified teaching staff, difficulties in transitioning between stages and continuing education at higher levels, and poor attendance meant that many pupils ended their education after completing the fourth grade of primary school [Markiewicz, 222; Kryńska, 92, Gąsiorowski, 73]. Despite these difficulties, the Vilnius Region was one of the most active areas of operation for the Polish Educational Society in the eastern lands of the Republic of Poland. The involvement of the Polish Educational Society of the Eastern Lands contributed to an increase in compulsory school attendance to 85% at the end of the interwar period. This was a fairly good result, considering the initial illiteracy rate in the eastern lands. It is worth noting that in 1939, only the City of Warsaw

and the Voivodeships of Silesia, Poznań, Pomerania and Kraków were close to achieving 100% compulsory school attendance [*Mały Rocznik Statystyczny*, 1939, Mauersberg, 1998].

Unfortunately, the further development of the Polish education in the Vilnius Region was interrupted on 17 September 1939, when the Red Army troops entered the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic. The outbreak of World War II halted the development of the Polish Educational Society [Gąsiorowski, 2014: 86]. During World War II, the occupying authorities in the Vilnius Region changed five times. The following authorities ruled there in succession: the Russians (from 19 September to 28 October 1939), the Lithuanians (from 28 October 1939 to 15 June 1940), the Russians again (from 15 June 1940 to 24 June 1941), the Germans (from 24 June 1941 to 13 July 1944), and the Russians again (from 13 July 1944). An analysis of the rule of successive occupiers clearly shows that their policy was aimed primarily at, if not the complete extermination, then at least the infliction of significant losses on individual ethnic groups in the area [Szczurowski 2012: 174]. As a result of military operations and occupation policies, some Polish schools were closed down or Lithuanianised. Teaching in Polish was restricted, though not completely banned [Gąsiorowski, 2014: 87]. However, as a result of the closing of Polish schools in the Vilnius Region between 1939 and 1945, a phenomenon of secret teaching developed, continuing the pre-war traditions of the Polish Educational Society. During those dramatic years, Polish teachers, intellectuals and clergy were the guardians of Polish culture and the native language. Owing to these measures, educational continuity was maintained and staff was prepared for post-war social and cultural life [Kamilewicz-Rucińska, 2017: 121–139]. It was only the political changes of the 1980s in Lithuania that created the conditions for the revival of Polish national life. As early as 1988, Stowarzyszenie Społeczno-Kulturalne Polaków na Litwie [in English: The Social and Cultural Association of Poles in Lithuania] was established, which gave rise to Związek Polaków na Litwie [in English: The Union of Poles in Lithuania], an organisation that made education one of its pillars. In this context, there was a need to reactivate the Polish Educational Society as an institution supporting the development of the Polish education. The reactivation of the Polish Educational Society and the aforementioned activities were crucial for the survival and development of Polish education in the new political reality of independent Lithuania. All the more so because the Polish Educational Society is much more than an educational organisation – it is a community of people united around the idea of education, upbringing and protection of national identity. Its activities

in the Vilnius Region – both in the interwar period and in the post-war and contemporary times – prove that it is an association of a unique nature: responsive to the needs of the times, active regardless of political and social realities, always ready to take on new challenges.

From the beginning of the 20th century to the present day, the Polish Educational Society has been one of the most important pillars of social life for Poles in Lithuania – it is an institution that permanently combines the cultivation of tradition with care for future generations. The activities of Polish Educational Society are an example of a social effort by an organisation that requires constant commitment, competence and determination. The long-term, multi-generational dimension of the activities of the Polish Educational Society in the Vilnius Region is a topic that will continue to be developed by the authors in order to highlight the nature and specific forms of activity, as well as to commemorate those who were involved in the development of this educational institution.

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THE NORTHERN TRADE FAIR SOCIETY IN VILNIUS – AN INSTITUTION AT THE INTERSECTION OF ECONOMY, CULTURE, AND EDUCATION. OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article is to present the idea behind the Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius and the activities of the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius.
- *Research methodology* – The article was written after archival and library research. The article is based mainly on the preserved archival sources and selected press information concerning the analysed initiative of the Northern Trade Fair and the Society.
- *Score/results* – The results of the research show the essence of the Northern Trade Fair and the role played by the Society in its organisation. The Society operated in the areas of economics, education, and culture in order to effectively organise the Fair.
- *Originality/value* – Issues related to the interwar economy of the Vilnius region and, more broadly, the North-Eastern Lands are of interest to researchers. This article is an attempt to examine in more detail the Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius and the activities of the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius.

Keywords: The Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius, interwar Vilnius region economy, social organisations, interwar education, interwar period

1. Introduction

The Second Polish Republic was diverse and determined by the policies of the partitioning powers, which is why the Polish government attempted to standardise the economic, political, and social situation. The interwar period was a time of intensive economic reconstruction, the introduction of new technological solutions, and a clear tendency to popularise and promote regional and local products. The situation in the Eastern Borderlands was completely different from the rest of Poland. The area of the North-Eastern Lands, comprising the provinces of Vilnius, Nowogródek, Poleskie, and Białystok provinces, covered an area of 121 076 km2 in the interwar period, which constituted about 1/3 of the entire area of the Second Polish Republic. Of the 5 million inhabitants living in this area, 4% made their living from trade, 10% from industry and crafts, and about 75% of the population made their living from agriculture [*Targi Północne*…, 11]. The lower competitiveness of the north-eastern lands compared to central Poland was a consequence, on the one hand, of the unfavourable shape of the eastern borders of the Second Polish Republic, where the Vilnius region was deprived of its markets and trade routes, and on the other hand, of the persistent economic backwardness resulting from the policy of the Russian partition [Srebrakowski, 2004: 781–782]. Local and economic authorities, including the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the Chamber of Crafts, and the Vilnius Chamber of Agriculture, were well aware of the need to improve the economic situation. To this end, the Association of Cities of the Vilnius and Nowogródek Provinces was also established, bringing together 19 borderland cities and towns with the aim of contributing to their economic and cultural development by developing a joint strategy for the development of the Vilnius region [Magistrat miasta Wilna, 1930]. Despite their commitment, organising numerous meetings, conferences, lectures, and publishing articles in trade press, the proposed activities were mostly regional in nature. The proposed initiatives did not have a decisive voice in the central arena of the Polish economic policy, when measures were taken that were intended to promote the economy of the Second Polish Republic. Therefore, following the example of the Poznań International Fair and the Lviv Eastern Fair, representatives of Vilnius' economic circles and the intellectual elite sought opportunities to organise similar events in Vilnius. As early as 1928, the Northern Trade Fair began to be organised in Vilnius, which, owing to the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius established in 1937, began to more intensively promote the ideas of economic development in the north-eastern lands.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the idea of the Northern Trade Fair and the activities of the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius, which set the direction for the further development of the economic initiative. The article was written after thorough archival and library research, based on preserved archival sources and press information found in publications such as "Kurjer Wileński, Nowogródzki, Grodzieński, Suwalski, Poleski i Wołyński", "Przegląd Wileński: tygodnik polityczny, społeczny i literacki" and "Rolnik: tygodnik rolniczy ilustrowany poświęcony sprawom gospodarstwa wiejskiego z jego wszelkimi gałęziami".

The subject matter has not yet been the subject of any in-depth scientific analysis. Although the economy of the Vilnius region is a subject of research interest, all editions of the Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius have not been the subject of a monograph. An noteworthy paper on the subject is the article from 2004 entitled *Targi Północne w Wilnie w latach 1928–1939*, written by A. Srebrakowski.

The presented issue was developed on the basis of the available source materials, widely scattered across libraries. The information published in the Kurjer Wileński newspaper, especially from 1938–1939, during the active period of the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius, as well as in the trade press, was particularly valuable. The Statute of the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius, published in 1938, as well as reports and programs, were also used. Another valuable source was the publication *Targi Północne w Wilnie: czym były – czym są – czym mają być* [Eng. *The Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius: What They Were – What They Are – What They Are to Be*], published in Vilnius in 1939 by the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius, which provided a reliable overview of the activities of the Northern Trade Fair. A list of source materials can be found in the bibliography. Due to the innovative nature of the topic, this article is the first attempt to address this issue and thus heralds further analysis of the activities of the Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius.

2. The Idea and the beginnings of the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius

The first idea to organise the Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius appeared in 1926 in Warsaw, when Professor Stefan Ehrenkreutz of Stefan Batory University, a professor of law at the Institute for Research on the Economic Situation of the Eastern Lands, proposed organising an Exhibition of the Eastern Lands of the Republic of Poland. Originally, the exhibition was to be organised in the capital, but as a result of strong pressure from entrepreneurs and scientists in Vilnius, who obtained honorary patronage for the event from Marshal Józef Piłsudski, they decided to

organise the initiative in Vilnius. This was particularly important because the North-Eastern Lands, which were covered by the Northern Trade Fair, were areas with a tradition of textile industry (e.g. Białystok) and developing wood, paper, linen, food, electrical, and haberdashery industries. The north-eastern lands were agricultural in nature, hence the agricultural economy was modernised through the expansion of infrastructure and networks of agricultural organisations and the establishment of agricultural schools. In addition, the north-eastern lands, as well as Vilnius itself, were characterised by tourist attractions, and by the developing forms of sightseeing strengthened regional values. The geographical location of Vilnius, as the northernmost Polish city, also opened up new opportunities for economic contacts with the countries of north-eastern Europe. It is also worth mentioning that an additional argument in favour of organising the fair was the Vilnius fair tradition, which dates back to the 15th century, when Kazimierz Jagiellończyk established two-week fairs in Vilnius, one in January on the Epiphany and the other in August on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the 17th century, the tradition of the Kaziukas Fair was initiated, commemorating the canonization of Prince Casimir and his recognition as the patron saint of Lithuania. However, at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, as a result of military operations, the position of the Vilnius fairs changed and they began to take on a more local character. The partition of the country almost completely interrupted the fair tradition and halted international trade. As a result of a decision by the authorities, the Russian partition began to organise annual month-long St. George's Fairs [Pol. *Jarmarki Świętojerskie*] in April. However, these fairs were definitely national in character and served as a space for the Russian government to sell domestic goods. In addition, fairs and markets were also common in other towns in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and their tradition survived and remained popular in the interwar period.

Considering the above reasons, the pre-war Vilnius was to become a city continuing the market traditions and at the same time setting new directions for action in the economic reality of the time. The idea of the Vilnius Northern Trade Fair and Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition arose from the need to emphasise the importance of Vilnius as a major industrial and commercial centre on the economic map of the Second Polish Republic. The event was also intended to be the culmination of many years of intensive efforts to strengthen the economic development of the Vilnius region. The aim of the fair was to bridge the geographical gap and to establish economic cooperation between the Baltic Sea countries, which made the Northern Trade Fair unique and did not compete with

the Poznań or Lviv Fairs. This was all the more so because the first decade of the independent Second Polish Republic was a period of relatively good economic conditions, when the country was becoming increasingly vibrant in every area. The aim of the Fair was to showcase the progress made by the Vilnius region in agriculture and the agricultural industry, to familiarise farmers with the latest agricultural machinery and tools, to promote mutual understanding of the needs of farmers, producers, and consumers, and to familiarize merchants from the Baltic countries with the Polish industry [Vade Mecum…, 1928].

3. Four editions of the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius

The 1st Northern Trade Fair was organised by the Vilnius City Council in co-operation with the local economic institutions and lasted from August 18 to September 9, 1928. A 1 200 m2 pavilion was set up in the Bernardine Garden in the city centre, and the buildings of the Industrial and Commercial School, the Summer Theatre, and the Faculty of Fine Arts of Stefan Batory University were also used. Sixteen industrial and commercial sections participating in the 1st Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius were arranged in this space. Many exhibitors also built stands on the premises, a large part of which was devoted to the Breeding Exhibition. It should be noted that the 1st Northern Trade Fair attracted more interest than the organisers had originally planned, with around 180 000 people attending. Nevertheless, there were also critical voices in the press at the time, saying that the event did not attract much interest from abroad. [“Przegląd Wileński…” 1928: 3–5].

The next, 2nd Northern Trade Fair took place two years later, in 1930, from September 14 to 28. The organisers paid special attention to issues related to the linen industry, which was to become the leading economic sector in the North-Eastern Lands of Poland. To this end, an Exhibition of Folk Art and Folk Industry was organised, with a focus on flax and the flax industry. In addition, the 2nd Northern Trade Fair featured companies and institutions from the metal and metal-technical industries, land improvement, construction, electrical engineering, automotive, textile, chemical, agricultural, wood, leather, ceramic, confectionery, manufacturing and clothing, pharmaceutical and cosmetic-perfumery products, and monopolies. Glassworks, manufacturers of sports equipment and bicycles, musical instrument factories, and furniture factories also exhibited their products at the Fair. The decorative and handicraft industry was represented by

21 exhibitors involved in handicrafts. There were also representatives of the paper and publishing industries. In total, over 200 exhibitors presented their products [*II Targi Północne…*, 43–60].

Another three years had to pass before the next, 3rd Northern Trade Fair was organised, which took place in 1933, lasted from August 26 to September 10, and was accompanied by the Linen Exhibition in Vilnius. It was also organised under the patronage of Józef Piłsudski and Lucjan Żeligowski, who was a promoter of the Polish linen production. The exhibition program was enriched with lectures and film presentations on flax cultivation, processing, and weaving, and an 8-day linen course was organised, which included teaching: flax cultivation, spinning and weaving principles, fabric standardisation, flax processing, the use of flax in fashion and the military, and ways to increase the efficiency of flax and hemp cultivation. In addition, participants of the Fair could purchase a guide to the linen exhibition, as well as publications and the magazine "Przegląd Lniarski" [Eng. *Linen Review*] published by the Linen Society. The main purpose of the exhibition was to promote flax cultivation and convince the community of the Vilnius region to use linen, which, owing to textile technologies, could be used in a wide range of clothing industries, as well as to encourage farmers to improve the conditions for flax cultivation. It was also about drawing attention to the fact that since linen production was one of the main branches of the state economy, the cultivation of flax and the production of linen fabrics could be the main area of economic development for the Vilnius region, which ranked sixth in Poland in terms of flax and hemp cultivation [*Przewodnik po wystawie…*, 1933: 5–6]. As part of the Northern Trade Fair, the following exhibitions were also organised: Fishing, Beekeeping, Poultry and Fur Animals, as well as a display of craftsmanship from the Vilnius region. Helena Wolska wrote in an agricultural weekly magazine about her impressions of the 3rd Fair, saying that "The Fair pavilions, scattered among the greenery in the Bernardine garden, create a picturesque and impressive whole. There is considerable activity everywhere. (…)"[1] ["Rolnik: tygodnik rolniczy…", Vol. 65, 1933, No. 38: 603].

The next, 4th Northern Trade Fair was organised from September 17 to October 2 1938, after a five-year break. As part of the Fair, an exhibition of poultry, pigeons, dogs, fur animals, and horses was organised. In a smaller pavilion, the Social Insurance Company organised a Hygiene Exhibition, where special attention was paid to social diseases. The fair was accompanied by additional attractions,

[1] Pol. "Pawilony Targów, rozrzucone wśród zieleni w ogrodzie po bernadyńskim, tworzą całość malowniczą i efektowną. Wszędzie znaczne ożywienie. (…)".

such as harvest festivals, boxing competitions, revues, and fashion shows, as well as an outdoor display of Władysław Ludwik Anczyc's play "Łobzowianie" and a bustling with joy lunapark.

The last, 5th Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius began on August 19 and it was supposed to last until September 3, 1939, but was cut short by the outbreak of World War II. It was to include trade fair sections and exhibitions in the fields of industry and trade, agriculture, crafts, and small industry, combined with the 5th International Fur Fair and Auction, Pig Exhibition and Auction, National Medicinal Herbs, Mushrooms and Vegetable Preserves, Horse Breeding Exhibition, National Poultry, Dog and Fur Animal Exhibition, Beekeeping Exhibition, Forestry and Hunting Exhibition, and Fishing Exhibition. The fair was to be accompanied by events such as the National Beekeepers' Convention ["Kurjer Wileński…", No. 217 of 1939: 4] or the National Congress of the Young Village Association in connection with the 20th anniversary of the ZMW, combined with harvest celebrations and an artistic program. In addition, participants of the Fair could enjoy attractions such as: "Fun Fair" [Pol. *"Wesołe Miasteczko"*] with an amusement park and circus, a fashion show, boxing competitions, and theatrical performances featuring artists from the Vilnius region, Warsaw, and the Baltic-Scandinavian countries.

Table 1. Interest and Participation of Exhibitors at the Northern Trade Fair in 1928–1938

TARGI	UDZIAŁ WYSTAWCÓW										Ilość zwiedzających	WYSTAWY ZORGANIZOWANE W RAMACH TARGÓW PÓŁNOCNYCH
	OGÓŁEM	WEDŁUG BRANŻ W %				WEDŁUG ZIEM W %						
		Przem. i hand.	Rolnictwo	Rzemiosło	Kultura	Płn.-wsch.	Centr.	Zach.	Połud.	Zagran.		
I-e 1928 r. 18.VIII — 9.IX	316	34	58	—	7	63	20	6	8	3	Około 180 tys. osób	1. Wystawa Rolniczo-Przemysłowa
II-e 1930 r. 14—28.IX	185	100	—	—	—	60	19	3	10	6	Około 107 tys. osób	1. Wystawa Sztuki Lniarskiej i Przemysłu Ludowego
III-cie 1933 r. 26.VIII — 10.IX	232	69 [1]	30	—	—	68	17	8	7	—	Około 150 tys. osób	1. Wystawa Lniarska 2. Wystawa Rybacka 3. Wystawa Pszczelarska 4. Wystawa Hodowlana i Remont Koni 5. Wystawa Drobiu i Zwierząt Futerkowych
IV-te 1938 r. 17.IX — 2.X	203	67	22 [2]	8	2	47	20	18	15	—	Przeszło 100 tys. osób	1. Wystawa Drobiu, Psów i Zwierząt Futerkowych 2. Pokaz i Remont Koni 3. Wystawa Higieniczna

[1]) Łącznie z rzemiosłem. [2]) Łącznie z eksponatami handlowymi.

Source: original table from [*Targi Północne w Wilnie*…: 5].

As can be seen from the above data (Table 1), the interest in the Fair was considerable. The first Fair was visited by approximately 180 000 people, the second by approximately 107 000 people, the third by approximately 150 000 people, and the fourth by over 100 000 visitors. Each year, over 200 exhibitors presented their products (in 1928 there were 316 exhibitors, in 1930 – 185; in 1933 – 232; and in 1938–203), mostly from the north-eastern lands.

4. Activity of the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius

Despite constant interest in the Fair, its frequency was not consistent. As a result of the lack of a suitable venue, the deteriorating economic situation, ongoing conflicts between the organisers, and the lack of a permanent organisational team, the organisation of the Northern Trade Fair was suspended for over five years, which greatly weakened the initiative. The next Fair in Vilnius was not organised until 1938, a year after the establishment of the Northern Trade Fair Society, which replaced the organising Committees.

The issue of the Northern Trade Fair became an increasingly important matter in the economic development policy of the Vilnius region. The following entities became interested in and took charge of the organisation of the Fair: the Vilnius City Council and local economic authorities, including the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the Chamber of Agriculture, and the Chamber of Crafts. In order to develop the idea of the Vilnius Fair, local authorities established the "Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius" [Pol. *Towarzystwo Targów Północnych w Wilnie*] at a meeting on March 22, 1937, as a permanent institution tasked with organising the Northern Trade Fair, exhibitions, and shows in Vilnius every year. The 4th Northern Trade Fair in 1938 was organised for the first time by the Northern Trade Fair Society, which was established for this purpose.

The Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius was a permanent organisation, registered and operating on the basis of the Statute of the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius. The purpose of the Society was to improve the economic condition of the North-Eastern Lands by organising trade fairs, exhibitions, shows, and other events promoting the economy. The Society intended to achieve its statutory goal by promoting fairs in the press and trade periodicals, participating in meetings, conferences, and public and occasional speeches. The founding members of the Society were people from the Vilnius City Council, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the Vilnius Chamber of Agriculture, and the Chamber of Crafts

[*Statut Towarzystwa Targów*…, 1938]. Kazimierz Grodzicki, the Vice-President of the City of Vilnius, was elected the President of the Society's Board. Picture 1 shows a photo of the grand opening of the 4th Northern Trade Fair, with the president of the Society, Kazimierz Grodzicki, the third from the right.



Picture 1. Grand Opening of the 4th Northern Trade Fair. Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe [www 1].

The three vice-presidents of the Society were: Mieczysław Żejmo, a member of the Board of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce; Władysław Szumański, the former president of the Chamber of Crafts, who could also be replaced by Aloizy Niemiec, the director of the Chamber of Crafts in Vilnius, and Senator Władysław Kamiński, the president of the Vilnius Chamber of Agriculture. Wojciech Gołębiowski, the councilor of the city of Vilnius, became a secretary, and Edmund Kowalski, a honorary member of the Association of Christian Merchants and Industrialists, held the position of the treasurer. In addition to the presidium, the following were elected to the board: T. Nagurski, the vice president of Vilnius, J. Cholem, member of the board of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Vilnius, Ł. Kruk, the vice-president of the Chamber of Crafts in Vilnius, Col. B. Wędziagolski, a member of the Board of the Vilnius Chamber of Agriculture, Maj. S. Krassowski,

a representative of the army, Piotr Hermanowicz, a representative of the Christian Craftsmen's Union, J. Oskwarek-Sierosławski, the director of the Polish Bank in Vilnius, W. Łuczyński, a lawyer in Vilnius, Ł. Chomiński, the president of the Grain, Commodity, and Linen Exchange in Vilnius. Among the deputy members of the board were: S. Barański, a member of the Board of the Vilnius Chamber of Agriculture in Vilnius, and M. Biernacki, the director of P.K.O. in Vilnius. The revision committee consisted of: M. Bohdanowicz, the president of the Association of Polish Industry of the Eastern Lands in Vilnius, E. Kudrewicz, the councillor of the city of Vilnius, E. Prużan, the vice-president of the Association of Jewish Merchants in Vilnius, W. Tomaszewski, the director of the Association of Christian Merchants and Industrialists in Vilnius, J. Uziałło, the vice-president of the Chamber of Crafts in Vilnius, E. Kukulak, the director of the Bank of the Union of Profit-Making Companies in Vilnius. The role of deputies of the Revision Committee was filled by J. Szabad, the advisor to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Vilnius, and T. Teńczyński in Vilnius. The executive body of the Northern Trade Fair Society was the Fair Management, which included the secretariat, the accounting, press and the propaganda department, the exhibition department, and the technical and artistic department. The press and publicity department was responsible for preparing and disseminating press releases concerning the progress of organsational work. The Fair included thematic exhibitions organised by the exhibition Committees responsible for financial and organisational matters. In addition, the Society's activities were supported by advisory bodies dealing with informational and artistic issues. The press and propaganda committee consisted of: Dr. Walerian Charkiewicz, the president of the Vilnius Journalists' Syndicate; F. Hryniewicz, a member of the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius; K. Ołdziejewski, the head of propaganda for the Northern Trade Fair; W. Patrycy, the director of Pat in Vilnius; Ł. Pągowski, a representative of the Vilnius Station of Polish Radio; K. Sakowicz, a publisher and editor of "Przegląd Handlowo-Gospodarczy" [Eng. *Trade and Economic Review*] in Vilnius, and engineer R. Węckowicz, the editor of "Tygodnik Rolniczy" [Eng. *Agricultural Weekly*] in Vilnius. The Technical and Artistic Committee, as an advisory body on matters relating to the planning and expansion of the Fair grounds, outdoor advertising, stand equipment, decorations, events, and publications, included: engineer S. Bukowski, the city architect, as the chairman of the Committee, and four other members. In addition, the Society cooperated on an ongoing basis with the League for the Promotion of Tourism, the Vilnius Region Tourist Propaganda Association, "Orbis", the Vilnius School Board, and with other social organisations.

One of the first activities of the Society was the development of the area for the Northern Trade Fair in 1938. The place where the Fair had previously been organised, i.e. the post-Bernardine garden, proved to be insufficient for such a widespread initiative. The Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius received 8 hectares of land from the Vilnius city council, a square between the then Legionowa and Wiwulski streets, which facilitated the organisation of subsequent fairs. It was not yet possible to build a permanent building, because in 1938 the plans for the construction of the Northern Trade Fair grounds were ready and a tender was announced for the facilities for the new Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius grounds on Wiwulski Street. However, the area, which was already owned by the Northern Trade Fair Society, was developed in a modern way: sewage, electricity, and its own railway siding were installed, and two temporary pavilions were built. A restaurant, a café, and many pavilions and kiosks of various companies were built on the square. The space of the plot was developed in a very modern way, attractive to visitors and comfortable for exhibitors. Despite the makeshift conditions, it met the expectations of the audience.

Due to the Society's activities, the entire concept of the 4th and 5th Fairs was well thought out, and the information dissemination department functioned very effectively, publicising the event in the local press. The Society saw the need to involve the public in the organisation of the fair, as exemplified by the Herbal Fair Poster Competition, announced in the pages of Kurier Wileński ["Kurjer Wileński…" No. 45 (4721), 1939: 8]. The Society's activities are noticeable in the organisation of the fair. They are methodical and well thought out. An example of this is the organisation of the 5th Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius, which was preceded by an analysis of needs conducted by the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Vilnius, which showed great interest in the Fair from Finland, Italy, Hungary, Spain, the United States, Japan, Germany, and England. The program of the 5th Northern Trade Fair was systematic and concrete.

5. Conclusions

The Northern Trade Fair in Vilnius began to make its mark on the city's economic landscape, becoming an important factor in the economic life of the North-Eastern Lands. Undoubtedly, the initial lack of systematic organisation, unplanned long-term activities, the lack of a concrete vision and mission for the Fair, and the failure to fully utilise the potential of local government delayed the full

development of the initiative. The next three editions of the Northern Trade Fair were organised by ad hoc organising Committees, which was not great for the organization of the event and did not allow for long-term planning. It was difficult to maintain the continuity of work, and it was not possible to use the grounds, pavilions, and other facilities outside the time of the fair. Therefore, an association was needed to consolidate the organisation of the Fair. It was only after the Fair was taken over in 1937 by the Northern Trade Fair Society in Vilnius, established for this purpose, based mainly on the City Council and the Vilnius Chambers: the Industry and Trade, the Agricultural, and Craft Chambers, directed the organisation of the Fair, which became a permanent initiative with a crystallised organisational form and work program. The Society established its financial foundations, carried out the adaptation and construction investments, and gained popularity and trust in numerous economic circles in the country and abroad. The Northern Trade Fair thus became an undeniable instrument of the economic exchange between industrialised Western and Central Poland and the agricultural regions of North-Eastern Lands. They also became an important area of economic contacts between Poland and Lithuania. The proximity of Vilnius to the Baltic-Scandinavian countries, the normalisation of the Polish-Lithuanian economic relations, and finally, the conclusion of a trade and tourism agreement with Lithuania, provided an opportunity for the Fair to play an important role in economic exchange. As a result of the subsequent political events, the further development of the Fair was abruptly interrupted.

It is also worth noting that the Society used educational forms to promote its idea. For example, during the 5th Northern Trade Fair, as part of educational exhibitions, participants could also attend lectures and film presentations on flax cultivation, processing, and weaving, and those interested were given the opportunity to participate in an 8-day flax course consisting of 58 educational hours. In addition, vocational schools took part in the Fair, presenting their products, but also bringing students on school trips to familiarise them with the economy of the Vilnius region. The Society used various forms of promoting economic initiatives, operated in the field of education and culture, and became a kind of umbrella organisation setting further directions for the development of the Northern Trade Fair, which was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II.

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WHO SUPPORTS PROGRESSIVE INCOME TAX AND REDISTRIBUTION? GENDER DIFFERENCES IN REDISTRIBUTIVE PREFERENCES AMONG FEMALE AND MALE STUDENTS

Abstract

- *Goal* – The study aims to identify gender-based differences in preferences regarding the progressivity of personal income tax (PIT) and redistribution models among students, representing the young generation entering the labour market.
- *Research methodology* – The analysis is based on a survey conducted among students of economics and management faculties. Statistical significance of gender differences was tested using the chi-square test at $\alpha = 0.05$.
- *Score/results* – The findings confirm significant gender differences in attitudes toward PIT progressivity and redistribution. Women were more likely to support progressive taxation, moderate redistribution and universal basic income while men preferred proportional taxation, minimal state intervention, and redistribution targeted to families and disabled persons.
- *Originality/value* – The study provides new empirical evidence on gender-based differences in preferences for progressive income taxation and redistribution among young adults in Poland. It highlights the importance of incorporating gender-specific attitudes into the design of fiscal policy and tax reforms. The results also emphasise the need for stronger fiscal education to reduce uncertainty and increase acceptance of redistributive measures among future taxpayers.

Keywords: progressive taxation; redistributive preferences, gender differences

1. Introduction

Would fiscal policy take the same shape if women were the dominant force in institutions of power? Women's participation in decision-making is increasing, yet not at the same pace across countries – a difference shaped by cultural conditions, economic and social development, and the extent of social inequality. The literature provides evidence that women and men differ in decision-making behaviour, attitudes toward risk, and preferences regarding competition, prosocial, equality, and efficiency [e.g., Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007; Almås et al., 2010]. This article focuses on identifying differences in the perception and acceptance of redistributive models between women and men, as determined by their distinct social and economic situations and cultural norms.

Studying differences in preferences regarding income tax progressivity (PIT) and redistribution models is important for several reasons. Firstly, in democratic systems – in which political decisions, including those concerning fiscal policy, are shaped by voters – understanding the gender gap in redistributive preferences allows for better forecasting of electoral dynamics and public support for tax reforms.

Secondly, ignoring these differences can lead to inefficiencies in public policy. If women, who represent over half of the electorate, generally prefer stronger redistribution through progressive taxation, neglecting these preferences may result in dissatisfaction and a sense of unfairness among a large segment of voters. It can also be seen as a form of discrimination against the majority of society (in Poland, there are approximately 933 men per 1 000 women). Thirdly, incorporating women's pro-redistribution attitudes can support the design of more progressive tax systems, which in turn promote macroeconomic, social, and fiscal stability. Progressive income taxation serves as a macroeconomic stabiliser, reduces income inequality and social tensions, and enhances public finance sustainability by generating higher revenues – crucial in light of growing public expenditures.

The aim of this article is to identify differences in the preferences of young women and men regarding the progressivity of the personal income tax and the model of redistribution. Understanding young people's views – including those of students – on income tax progressivity and the scope of redistribution is crucial for shaping future fiscal policy. The study is based on the hypothesis that preferences regarding redistribution and progressive personal income taxation differ significantly between women and men.

Gender-based differences in redistributive preferences have been widely studied. The present study was conducted among university students – representatives of the young generation entering adult social roles, such as citizens (voters), employees, employers, taxpayers, and household providers. Listening to their opinions about tax structure and redistribution is important for creating conditions conducive to their development and well-being, as well as for shaping the future fiscal policy.

The research focuses on students' views concerning the increase progressivity of the PIT in Poland, the application of higher progressivity to the selected income sources, identification of redistribution beneficiaries, and redistribution models that incorporate PIT progressivity. These findings significantly enrich the existing research and highlight potential directions for future studies on redistributive preferences.

2. Related literature

Social preferences regarding the redistribution of wealth are shaped by numerous factors at the individual and macroeconomic levels. Analysing these preferences and the factors that differentiate them is crucial for understanding the dynamics of public decision-making processes – particularly in the context of designing policies that take into account the needs and expectations of various social groups. Economic development, the level of income inequality, and cultural conditions are the main determinants at the global level. At the individual level, the following factors are identified as key determinants of citizens' preferences: income level, gender, acceptance of income differences as a reward for effort and talent, level of education, age, beliefs about fairness, perceptions of corruption, trust in the legal system, and attitudes toward social justice.

This article focuses on gender as a differentiating factor influencing preferences toward the progressivity of personal income tax (PIT) and redistribution models. There is evidence that women exhibit stronger support for income redistribution than men [Corneo & Grüner, 2002]. According to M. Bozzano and S. Scabrosetti [2024], the general gender gap in redistributive preferences widens as a country's per capita income or gender equality increases. T. Buser, L. Putterman, and J.J. van der Weele [2016] conducted studies on gender differences in attitudes toward redistribution in European countries and the United States. In their experiment, women were more likely to support higher tax rates. This tendency may stem

from women's greater risk aversion, as redistributive government activity serves as a form of protection against future economic shocks.

R.M. Gärtner, J. Mollerstrom, and D. Seim [2017] demonstrated a positive correlation between risk aversion and demand for redistribution decrease in risk aversion results in a reduction in demand for redistribution. The authors argue that this relationship helps explain why women and older individuals tend to favour redistribution more strongly. Similarly, the experiment by E. Ranehill and R.A. Weber [2022] showed that women consistently voted for more egalitarian redistribution, but gender gap persisted regardless of the level of risk. The existence of gender differences in redistributive preferences was also influenced by expectations regarding future economic conditions.

L.C. Keely and C.M. Tan [2008] emphasised that, in addition to gender, factors such as race, age, and socioeconomic status significantly shape redistributive preferences in the U.S. population. Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were among those most supportive of redistribution. According to G. Grimalda, T. Buser, L. Putterman, and J. van der Weele [2020], men's relatively greater (and often excessive) confidence in their own abilities, compared to women, leads them to favour lower levels of redistribution. Men tend to believe more strongly in their agency and skills in determining income, and therefore prefer lower redistribution, as they do not see themselves as its potential beneficiaries.

S. Domonkos [2016] found that support for progressive taxation declines as acceptance of income inequality as a natural consequence of effort and talent increases. This can also be linked to men's preference for lower redistribution, given their stronger belief in personal merit and capability in earning higher incomes. A. Alesina and G.M. Angeletos [2005] likewise confirmed that the belief that individual effort is the main determinant of income leads to support for lower taxes and limited redistribution. Similar conclusions were reached by W.N. Lekfuangfu, N. Powdthavee, and Y.E. Riyanto [2023], who found that individuals are more likely to tolerate inequality when they perceive it as a result of effort rather than chance.

The perception of income as a reward for individual effort is closely linked to beliefs about equality of opportunity. According to R. Benabou and E.A. Ok [2001], support for redistribution can remain low even under high income inequality if citizens believe that everyone has an equal chance of social advancement. Similarly, A. Alesina and E. La Ferrara [2005] argued that people who attribute economic success primarily to effort and ability are less inclined to support redistribution. Conversely, those who perceive the market as a "rat race," where connections

and social status matter most, are more likely to favour state intervention in income distribution. H. Kim and Y. Lee [2018] demonstrated that the influence of economic status on attitudes towards redistribution weakens when individuals believe that success is not fully determined by personal actions.

In summary, the literature provides strong evidence of gender-based differences in redistributive preferences. These differences can be attributed to variations in social and economic position, levels of risk aversion, confidence in one's financial abilities, and beliefs regarding the causes of income and wealth inequality.

3. Research methodology

Redistribution preferences can be expressed explicitly, for example through surveys and opinion polls, or implicitly, through electoral choices or support for specific political parties and their redistributive policies. To achieve the objectives of this article, a survey was conducted among university students. The survey design was based on previous studies concerning redistributive preferences, including the work of P. Beramendi and P. Rehm [2016].

The study was carried out among 460 students of the Faculty of Economics and Finance at the University of Bialystok and the Faculty of Management Engineering at Bialystok University of Technology. The participants represented the following fields of study: Economics, Economic and Legal Studies, Management, Financial Management, and Accounting, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Surveys were administered in the presence of the researcher, and respondents were allowed to ask for clarification in case of uncertainty about any question. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the anonymity and voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time.

The questionnaire consisted of single-choice closed-ended questions. Tree questions concerned respondents' characteristics (gender, age, household income per capita). The remaining six questions focused on respondents' opinions concerning a fair tax system, the desirability of increasing the progressivity of the PIT in Poland, the application of progressive taxation to specific income sources, potential beneficiaries of redistribution and the preferred model of redistribution.

The questionnaire was pilot-tested on a group of 130 students in March 2025, which allowed for refinement of the wording and elimination of ambiguities. Data collection took place between June 1 and June 30, 2025, using an online platform

(Google Forms). Incomplete responses were excluded from the collected questionnaires, resulting in 452 fully completed surveys. The percentage distribution of responses for each answer option was calculated both for the entire sample of students and separately for women and men (only one respondent identified their gender as 'non-binary). To examine whether there were statistically significant differences in opinions expressed by female and male respondents, the chi-square test was applied. This test is based on comparing observed values with expected values. The test was conducted for each contingency table, with the significance level set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

4. Result

Table 1 presents data on respondents' gender, age, approximate household income per capita.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics of the respondents		Number	Percent
Gender	Women	276	61.1
	Men	175	38.7
Age	18–21	290	64.2
	22–25	144	31.9
	26–29	8	1.8
	30 and more	10	2.2
Monthly income (in PLN)	Below 2000 PLN	78	17.2
	2001–4000 PLN	155	34.3
	4001–6000 PLN	134	29.6
	6001–8000 PLN	46	10.2
	8001–10 000 PLN	15	3.3
	Above 10 001 PLN	24	5.4

Source: the author's own elaboration based on the survey data.

The sample is dominated by women, who account for nearly two-thirds of the respondents. The gender distribution (61.06% women vs. 38.7% men) indicates a clear overrepresentation of female students in the sample, reflecting the gender structure at the universities where the survey was conducted. The majority of respondents (64.2%) are young students aged 18–21, followed by 31.9% aged 22–25, while only 4% are over the age of 26. The largest group of respondents (34.3%) live in households with an income between 2 001 and 4 000 PLN per person, and a further 29.6% between 4 001 and 6 000. Together, these two groups constitute 63.9% of the sample, indicating that most students come from middle-income households. A total of 17.2% live in low-income households, while only 8.7% belong to high-income households.

Table 2. Distribution of students' responses to the question: *To what extent do you agree with the statement that the progressive personal income tax (PIT) contributes to reducing income inequalities?*

	Strongly agree	Rather agree	Hard to say	Rather disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	4.9	29.9	47.9	14	3.3
Women	5.1	30.8	54.0	8.7	1.4
Men	4.7	28.7	37.7	22.3	6.5

Source: the author's own elaboration based on the survey data.

Table 2 presents the distribution of female and male students' responses to the question concerning the impact of the progressive personal income tax (PIT) on reducing income inequality. The largest group of respondents remains undecided (47.9%), which may stem from either a lack of knowledge about the redistributive function of the progressive PIT or doubts regarding its effectiveness. This result suggests a need for education in the area of taxation and its influence on social welfare, as well as further research to determine whether indecision reflects insufficient knowledge or scepticism about the efficiency of the tax system (e.g., through in-depth interviews). Opinions supporting the view that the progressive PIT reduces income inequality (34.8% in total) prevail over negative opinions (17.3%). Women, compared to men, were more likely to agree that the progressive PIT mitigates income inequalities, yet they also displayed higher levels of uncertainty. Men, on the other hand, were more sceptical about the impact of

the PIT on inequality. The chi-square test confirmed the existence of statistically significant differences in opinions on the progressive income tax between women and men. The largest deviations were observed in the following responses: rather disagree (men were more sceptical than expected, while women were less so), strongly disagree (men more often than expected, women less often), and hard to say (women more often than expected, men less often).

Table 3. Distribution of responses to the question: *Which tax system do you consider the most equitable?*

	Strongly progressive	Moderately progressive	No opinion	Flat tax	Regressive
Total	8.4	55	8	28.5	0
Women	7.6	60.5	9.1	22.8	0
Men	9.7	46.3	6.3	37.5	0

Source: the author's own elaboration based on the survey data.

Table 3 presents the distribution of the respondents' answers to the question concerning the most equitable tax system. A total of 55% of respondents consider a moderately progressive tax system to be the most equitable, 28.5% prefer a flat tax, 8.4% support a strongly progressive system, and 8% have no opinion. None of the respondents selected the regressive tax system option. Women more frequently indicated a moderately progressive tax system and less frequently a flat tax. They also exhibited slightly higher indecisiveness. The chi-square test confirmed the existence of statistically significant differences in opinions on the most equitable tax system between women and men.

Table 4. Distribution of the respondents' answers to the question: *Do you support an increase in tax progressivity in Poland?*

	Definitely yes	Rather yes	No opinion	Rather no	Definitely no
Total	6.4	19.0	41.8	20.4	12.4
Women	5.4	16.3	49.6	20.3	8.3
Men	8.0	20.7	32.2	20.7	18.4

Source: the author's own elaboration based on the survey data.

Table 4 presents the percentage of the respondents who support or oppose an increase in tax progressivity in Poland. The largest group of respondents (41.8%) are undecided. Possible reasons for this may include a lack of understanding of the function of a progressive tax system or doubts about its effectiveness. More respondents oppose increasing progressivity (32.8%) than support it (25.4%). The relatively low share of strong opinions (6.4%). Women expressed less support for increasing progressivity and greater uncertainty. Conversely, men demonstrated greater decisiveness – both in supporting and in opposing a higher degree of progressivity. The chi-square test confirmed statistically significant differences in opinions on increasing tax progressivity in Poland between women and men. The greatest differences appear in the "No opinion" category and "Definitely no".

Table 5. Distribution of the respondents' answers to the question: *Which of the following sources of income should be subject to the highest level of tax progressivity?*

	Employment contract	Business activity	Rental income	Capital income	All sources of income – flat tax	All sources of income – progressive tax
Total	2.4	5.8	18.4	8.8	37.8	26.8
Women	2.5	4.0	17.8	10.5	37.7	27.5
Men	2.3	8.6	19.4	6.3	37.7	25.7

Source: the author's own elaboration based on the survey data.

Table 5 presents respondents' opinions on which sources of income should be subject to the highest level of tax progressivity. The largest group of the respondents (37.8%) prefer a flat tax for all sources of income, indicating strong support for a simple and uniform tax system without differentiating rates by income source. Progressive taxation of all sources (26.8%) is the second most popular choice. Rental income (18.4%) and capital income (8.8%) are more frequently indicated as types of income that should be taxed under a more progressive scale. Only 5.8% of the respondents selected business income, and 2.4% selected employment income. This may reflect the perception of rental and capital income as less "well-deserved" or more associated with wealth, whereas entrepreneurial activity or salaried employment may be viewed as requiring significant effort, making higher earnings appear as a deserved reward for one's work and initiative. Women more often supported progressive taxation of all sources and a higher progression for capital income. Conversely, men more frequently favoured higher

progression for rental income and business income. However, the chi-square test indicates that there are no statistically significant differences between women and men in opinions on which sources of income should be subject to the highest tax progressivity at the $\alpha = 0.05$ significance level.

Table 6. Distribution of the respondents' answers to the question: *Which social groups should benefit the most from the funds derived from redistribution?*

	Large families	Pensioners and retirees	Persons with disabilities	Low-income individuals	Universal basic income	Young people	Unemployed persons
Total	10.2	12.4	30.7	14	21.6	8.9	2.2
Women	7.2	12.3	29.3	13.8	25.6	9.1	2.5
Men	14.9	12.6	32.4	14.3	15.4	8.6	1.7

Source: the author's own elaboration based on the survey data.

Table 6 presents the distribution of students' opinions regarding the social groups that should benefit the most from redistribution. The highest percentage of the respondents indicated persons with disabilities (30.7%) reflects students' high awareness of the specific needs of this group. The second most frequently chosen option is universal basic income (21.6%). Other frequently mentioned groups include low-income individuals (14.0%) and pensioners/retirees (12.4%). The relatively low support for large families (10.2%) and young people (8.9%) may suggest that students perceive these groups as less in need of additional public assistance. The very low share of the respondents selecting the unemployed (2.2%) may reflect opinions about unemployment (e.g., viewing it as a temporary issue) or the belief that other groups have greater social needs.

Female students, compared with male students, were more likely to support the universal basic income for all and less likely to favour large families. Conversely, male students more often indicated persons with disabilities and large families, while showing lower support for universal basic income. Men's greater inclination to select large families may reflect a perception of this group as particularly deserving of support, or potentially linked to stronger endorsement of traditional family values. Preferences regarding persons with disabilities and pensioners/retirees were more balanced between genders. The chi-square test indicates statistically significant differences in opinions between women and men regarding which social groups should benefit most from redistribution, at the $\alpha = 0.05$ significance level.

Table 7. Distribution of the respondents' answers to the question: *Which model of redistribution do you support?*

	Minimal with a flat tax	Minimal with a progressive tax	Moderate with a progressive tax	Moderate with a flat tax	Moderate with a flat tax for business income and a progressive tax for other sources	Extensive with a progressive tax	Extensive with a flat tax for business income and a progressive tax for other sources
Total	29.7	23.9	16.7	6.1	9.7	8.6	5.4
Women	25.0	26,.5	18.1	7.2	8.7	9.1	5.4
Men	34.9	21.1	13.1	4.0	10.9	7.4	8.6

Source: the author's own elaboration based on the survey data.

Table 7 presents the respondents' opinions regarding their preferred model of redistribution. The strongest support for the minimal redistribution model with a flat tax (29.7%) indicates a preference for a simple tax system with limited state intervention in income redistribution. The minimal redistribution model with a progressive tax (23.9%) is the second most popular choice, followed by the moderate redistribution model with a progressive tax (16.7%). Low support for extensive redistribution (8.6% with progressivity, 5.4% for the mixed model) suggests limited acceptance of more intensive forms of redistribution that would likely require higher taxation levels. Female students more frequently than male students supported models with progressive taxation, as well as moderate redistribution with a flat tax. They also showed lower support for minimal redistribution with a flat tax. This suggests a stronger acceptance among women for redistribution and progressive tax systems aimed at reducing income inequality. Conversely, male students more often supported minimal redistribution with a flat tax and moderate redistribution mixed models. They also demonstrated lower support for progressive models. However, the chi-square test did not confirm statistically significant differences in the distribution of preferences for redistribution models between women and men at the 0.05 significance level.

5. Conclusions

The survey conducted among university students provided valuable insights into gender-based differences in preferences regarding the progressive personal income tax (PIT) and models of redistribution. The results confirm the main hypothesis, indicating statistically significant differences between women and men in their perception of PIT progressivity, its impact on income inequality, perceptions of tax fairness, support for increasing PIT progressivity in Poland, and preferred redistribution beneficiaries. Despite the observed differences between women and men in certain redistribution models and in opinions on income sources that should be subject to higher progressivity, the chi-square test did not confirm that these differences were statistically significant.

Compared with men, women were more likely to agree that a progressive PIT reduces income inequalities, yet at the same time exhibited a higher degree of uncertainty in this regard (as seen in responses about increasing PIT progressivity in Poland too). Women also more frequently identified moderately progressive PIT as fair and supported moderate redistribution. They more often pointed to capital income as the income source that should be taxed more progressively and expressed greater support for a universal basic income.

In contrast, men more often favoured minimal redistribution, identified the proportional tax as the fairest system, opposed increasing PIT progressivity in Poland, and expressed scepticism about its effect on income inequality. They more frequently pointed to income from business activity and rental property as suitable targets for higher progressivity. As potential beneficiaries of redistribution, men more often identified large families and people with disabilities, which can be interpreted as an indication that redistribution should be targeted toward groups requiring special "protection and care" due to limited earning capacity or high living costs, such as childcare or medical expenses.

It may thus be inferred that men value simplicity in the PIT structure and minimal state intervention. In light of the studies cited in this article, these attitudes can be attributed to greater risk tolerance, higher self-confidence in achieving financial goals, and a reluctance to bear the costs of redistribution, which they may perceive as a penalty for effort and productivity. According to **V.** Valero [2022], individuals tend to attribute income inequality to effort when they earn high incomes, and to luck when they earn low incomes. Hence, men may perceive income inequality as a natural outcome of effort and ability.

The fact that women more frequently selected responses such as "no opinion" or "hard to say," while men more often expressed polarised views, suggests that male students exhibit higher confidence in their knowledge and the perceived outcomes of economic measures.

In the context of fiscal policy design, the findings highlight the necessity of considering gender-based preferences in shaping tax reforms. The growing participation of women in social, political, and economic life underscores the importance of incorporating their preferences into the structure of PIT and redistribution mechanisms – particularly their support for tax progressivity, moderate redistribution, and universal basic income.

At the same time, men's scepticism toward greater progressivity and preference for proportional taxation point to the need for a simple and transparent PIT system and redistribution targeted at specific groups with special needs, such as people with disabilities and families with children. The findings also suggest the need to intensify fiscal education efforts, increasing awareness of the role and effects of fiscal policy. This could reduce uncertainty and improve acceptance of future reforms among young people entering the labour market.

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THE UPPER SILESIAN INDUSTRY AND ITS EMPLOYEE DURING THE GREAT ECONOMIC CRISIS

Abstract

- *Goal* – The article aims to analyse the situation in the Upper Silesian industry during the great crisis of 1930-1935. Due to the large concentration of mines, factories and steelworks in a relatively small area and the highest population density in Poland, the crisis was particularly severe for the workers whose main source of income was the work in industry. The lack of a plot of land from which to derive additional income made the situation difficult. The decline in industrial production resulted in layoffs and a lower standard of living.
- *Research methodology* – The article uses the method of literature analysis, source analysis and the descriptive method.
- *Score/results* – The analysis of data from the main route in the Upper Silesia shows that all working families experienced a decline in their quality of life. The tragic situation is particularly acute for those families with a special role. German industrialists were the first to expel Polish workers. The assistance from the Silesian provincial authorities was instrumental. Therefore, calls for the socialisation of mines and steelworks are frequently heard.
- *Originality/value* – The pre-war source materials as well as studies by pre-war and post-war authors were used regarding the condition of the Upper Silesian industry. Some data were taken from the press published in the Polish Upper Silesia.

Keywords: Upper Silesian industry, the great economic crisis, the situation of workers

1. Introduction

The great economic crisis, which reached Poland with a slight delay, only at the beginning of 1930, but which lasted two years longer due to the agricultural nature of the country, had a negative impact on our economy. It was particularly severe for the population of the Upper Silesia, which was the most industrialsed region of the country. The decline in industrial production resulted in an increase in unemployment, which was reflected in the standard of living of working-class families. The aim of the article is to analyse the course of the crisis in this area and the situation of the residents for whom work in industry was the only source of income. Based on source materials and on the pre- and post-war literature on the subject, an attempt was made to present the nature and effects of the crisis, especially for the residents of this region.

The article uses the method of analysing sources and compact studies and the method of description. An attempt was made to present as much data as possible confirming the depth of the economic collapse.

2. Ownership relations in the Upper Silesian industry

After part of the Upper Silesia was annexed to Poland, as much as 75% of the Upper Silesian industry was in German hands, which could not be changed due to the Geneva Convention. In order to limit the influence of German capitalists in Silesia, the government tried to encourage French, English and Italian capital to invest. Only the French responded favourably. Later, American capital joined in and during the years of the Great Depression, German capital accounted for only 52% of the total [Utis, 1934: 53]. However, American capital did not act in favour of Polish interests; it reached an agreement with German capital and represented its interests. French capital acted in a similar way to a large extent. Moreover, the desire for good relations with Germany, characteristic of the capital's government spheres, required very careful handling of the apparent abuses of German capital. This is evidenced by the agreement concluded on 31 October 1929 in Warsaw, Article III of which read: "The Polish Government declares that it waives any liquidation that the Polish Government has carried out or could carry out, using or complying with the provisions of Articles 92 and 297b of the Peace Treaty in relation to the German assets, rights and shares in Poland, still in the hands of their owners on 1 October 1929". This agreement was ratified in April

1931 [Ibid.: 16]. There are also known actions of German industrialists aimed at preventing the industry located in the Polish Upper Silesia from competing with the German industry on the international arena. For example, the director of the "Wspólnota Interesów", Bernhard, forced to select several Poles for managerial positions, ordered less valuable railway tracks to be exported to Brazil, forging stamps in order to accuse the Silesian industry of poor quality of production and to withdraw from the trade with it. As a result, this largest mining and metallurgical concern had low turnover, paid low taxes and dismissed workers. The whole affair ended with the company being placed under judicial supervision. The years of crisis strengthened anti-German tendencies in the Upper Silesian society, and especially in the opinion of the Silesian provincial authorities. It was emphasised that "large industry in Silesia is the object of the game and speculation of foreign financial tycoons" and, therefore, "it is natural and mature to postulate the creation of such conditions in which the industry would be forced to take into account both the interests of the state as a whole and the area in which it operates" [*Założenia i postulaty*..., 1932: 31]. Michał Grażyński, the Silesian voivode, at the congress of economic activists in September 1933, strongly emphasised that the Polish state must take control of the Silesian industry, and the shared capital of Silesian companies should be transferred to the greatest possible extent to the possession of Polish citizens *[Zjazd Działaczy*..., 1933: 17 and next]. German companies were indebted to D-banks, which were dependent during the crisis years on the government and treasury of the Reich, which became the main creditor of the Silesian industry. Jan Jakub Kowalczyk, a Silesian senator writing under the pseudonym Teofil Utis, calculated that the share capital of all companies in the Polish Upper Silesia in September 1933 amounted to 932 million zlotys. The debt amounted to 807 million zlotys. The state treasury had 186 million zlotys here and did not participate in the debt. After deducting this sum from 932 million, it constituted 746 million zlotys of the value of foreign share capital in the Upper Silesian enterprises. Hence, the heavy industry of the Upper Silesia had to send 70 million zlotys abroad each year in the form of interest to enrich the D-banks and the Reich treasury [Utis, 1934: 55]. Economic activists therefore put forward a postulate to nationalize the share capital ["Polska Zachodnia", 1932, No. 72: 7; 1934, No. 78: 5 and 7]. This was to consist in: state participation in enterprises, making all the employees of these enterprises shareholders and having delegates on supervisory boards, and allowing wide groups of domestic consumers to purchase shares [Utis, 1934: 64–65]. The idea was not implemented due to the still strong influence of German and other foreign capital.

In order to weaken the importance of German ownership, the Polish government tried to encourage other foreign capital to enter the market by granting various privileges. The American Harriman group, which was locating in the zinc industry, took advantage of them. Harriman demanded guarantees that within 25 years Poland would not impose, either import or export duties on zinc and lead ores and their products, would not expropriate the enterprise and would not collect property tax [Landau, Tomaszewski, 1968: 150 and next]. Unfortunately, foreign capital did not take over all of the shares of German enterprises, but only part, which meant that the Germans still had an advantage in them and could benefit from the granted privileges [Długoborski, 1974: 51–52]. Harriman's capital was linked to Flick's German capital and during the years of crisis it hindered investments in the Polish part of the Upper Silesia, did not pay taxes and other obligations to the state. Hence, the Silesian authorities began to implement a policy of Polonising heavy industry, which was reflected in the removal of German directors, but also of German workers loyal to the Polish state. The Upper Silesian Coal Convention (Górnośląska Konwencja Węglowa) was replaced by the Polonized Polish Coal Convention (Polska Konwencja Węglowa) (1931) [Ibid.: 62–63], and the Union of Polish Mining and Metallurgy Industry (Unia Polskiego Przemysłu Górniczo-Hutniczego) (1932) was established in place of the dissolved Upper Silesian Union of Mining and Metallurgy Industrialists (Górnośląski Związek Przemysłowców Górniczo-Hutniczych) [Biały, 1967: 213–215].

Unable to change the ownership relations in the Upper Silesian enterprises, the Polish state administration tried to at least carry out their internal Polonization, which consisted in introducing Polish as the official language and filling managerial positions with the largest possible number of Polish engineers and technicians [Jaros, 1969: 154–155]. In 1931, out of 305 engineers employed in 13 concerns, 240 were Poles, including 182 mining engineers. In 1935, the number of the Polish engineers increased to 376 (including 263 mining engineers). This constituted 91% of the engineering staff. Most of them did not come from Silesia. The Polonization of the administrative staff was also progressing. As of July 1935, out of 8270 technical and administrative officials employed in the mining and metallurgical industry, 5429 were Poles [Ibid.: 156]. The Hohenlohe Works resisted this process the most, where in the mid-1930s 32% of the concern's officials were Germans [Szaraniec, 1976: 188].

Tax abuse and concealment of real profits by German owners were common practices. Financial records were falsified by concealing or underestimating the

value of some transactions, and profits were transferred to Germany. Patents, materials and equipment were purchased abroad at exorbitant prices, prices of the exported goods were underestimated, high commissions were paid for the alleged trade intermediation, prime costs were inflated, etc. [Jaros, 1974: 76–77]. Hohenlohe built the "Sośnica" mine on the German side with profits earned on the Polish side [Landau, Tomaszewski, 1968: 74]. The list of companies accused of financial abuses was long. It is worth mentioning: Zjednoczone Huty "Królewska i Laura" S.A., Giesche S.A., Zakłady "The Henckel von Donnersmarck Beuthen" Ltd. [Ibid.: 74–79; Popkiewicz, Ryszka, 1959: 192–194; Jaros, 1969: 70–73]. This led to the gradual takeover of the largest concerns by the Polish state. In April 1934, 52% of the shares of the Huta "Pokój" were taken over. Also in 1934, the District Court in Katowice established judicial supervision over the largest concern "Wspólnota Interesów".

3. The condition of the Upper Silesian industry during the crisis years

The crisis reached the Upper Silesia at the end of the first quarter of 1930. The bottom of the crisis came in 1932, when the index of general industrial production, compared to 1928, fell by 36.5%. Coal extraction in the country fell from 46 million tons in 1929 to 27 million tons in 1933[1], i.e. by almost half [Popkiewicz, Ryszka, 1959: 303–305], while the production of steelworks and blast furnaces in 1932, compared to the previous year, fell by 46.9% and 42.8%, respectively [Ibid.: 310–311]. The collapse in heavy industry affected the decline in production of other branches of industry. Losses were recorded in the chemical, processing and energy industries. The crisis conditions of the Silesian economy forced the use of dumping prices, which in turn reduced its profitability. Although it was possible to maintain almost all sales markets during the crisis years, they did not bring profits due to low prices and high transport costs. In order to apply for tax relief, lower railway tariffs and wages, foreign mine owners hid part of their revenues from the Polish tax office [Jaros, 1974: 73]. Losses in export were to be covered by high prices on the domestic market.

[1] In 1930, the Silesian Basin supplied 28.4 million tons of coal, in 1931 – 28.7 million tons, in 1932 – 21.5 million tons, in 1933 – 20 million tons, in 1934 – almost 22 million tons and in 1935 – 21 million tons. *Mały rocznik statystyczny*, 1936, GUS, Warszawa, p. 73.

The Polish Coal Convention raised coal prices so significantly that it caused the development of poor mines.

The table below shows the extraction and production rates of selected products during the crisis years.

Table 1. Production of selected products in the Polish part of the Upper Silesia in the years 1929–1933 (year 1928 = 100)

Years	Production of pig iron	Production steel	Production of zinc	Production of lead	Hard coal mining
1929	102.7	95.5	104.6	96.6	112.4
1930	69.8	96.4	112.6	108.5	92.5
1931	57.4	60.5	88.0	84.7	94.4
1932	32.0	27.8	60.0	31.8	70.6
1933	51.6	62.6	58.9	32.7	65.5

Source: Urząd Wojewódzki Śląski/PH 232: 33–38; 1303 II: 310; PH 224: 345–346, Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach.

In the next two years, the situation did not differ from the previous ones and only in 1936 a clear improvement could be noticed.

During the crisis years, German owners and plant managers forced semi-finished products from the Polish part to be refined in plants on the German side, which was detrimental to the Polish coking plants, rolling mills and steelworks [Długoborski, 1974: 51]. The unfavourable policy of the Upper Silesian industry, which pursued German interests, intensified the pro-intervention activities of the Polish government. Although they were inconsistent with the prevailing liberal doctrine, they were justified by the belief that they resulted from the immoral attitude of private initiative ["Polska Jutrzejsza Gospodarcza", 1934, No. 39]. Where private capital could not cope, the state stepped in. During the crisis years, the process of cartelisation intensified, visible especially in the Upper Silesian industry. The government, initially supporting monopolisation, changed its attitude during the crisis, because the cartels maintained high prices of their products and despite several attempts to reduce them, it failed to effectively counteract this policy. A good example is the Polska Konwencja Węglowa (Polish Coal Convention), which made it possible to maintain high coal prices throughout the crisis.

4. The crisis and the working and living conditions of industrial workers in the Upper Silesia

In the Upper Silesia, some provisions of German labour law were in force, adopted before the division of the plebiscite area, which advantageously regulated the issues of representation of workers' crews, collective agreements or reduction of workers. Works councils, arbitration committees and the office of the demobilization commissioner owed their existence to the Geneva Convention [Biały, 1967: 183]. The dismissal of an employee was dependent on the consent of the demobilization commissioner, and collective agreements were given universally binding force [Jaros, 1969: 126]. Pay varied and depended on the collective agreement. Lower-level white-collar workers were entitled to free housing or a housing allowance, higher-level employees – directors, managers, department managers – were paid on the basis of individual agreements and, in addition to the basic salary, official housing and coal allowance, received high bonuses and royalties. A mine director in the Upper Silesia earned 4–5 thousand zlotys per month, in the Zagłębie Dąbrowskie 2–3 thousand [Jaros, 1969: 135–136]. There were also differences in the workers' earnings in favour of the Upper Silesians. Miners were, in a sense, a privileged professional group; with hard and dangerous work they earned much more than workers in the processing industry; food products were relatively cheap and the network of shops was dense. Insurance for miners against illness, disability and old age was provided by the Górnośląska Spółka Bracka in Tarnowskie Góry and the Pszczyńskie Bractwo Górnicze in Katowice. There was also unemployment insurance, but during the crisis it proved insufficient [Jaros, 1969: 147–149]. Miners were associated in numerous trade unions, often with political overtones. During the crisis years, 50–70 thousand workers in the mining industry belonged to them, which constituted about 50% of the employed [Jaros, 1969: 151]. White-collar workers had separate, industry-specific unions. It should be remembered, however, that the engineering and technical staff were mostly German; Poles constituted the majority of the workers.

The great economic crisis lowered the standard of living of workers and contributed to the growth of unemployment, which was a serious problem in such an urbanised and industrialised area. Although the situation was more favourable in comparison to other regions of Poland, because German legislation was more favourable to workers, unfavourable changes occurred in this area during the crisis years. Already in 1932, the regulations concerning unemployment insurance were amended to the detriment of workers. The following year brought changes

for the worse in the area of legislation concerning working time, vacations and health insurance. Expenditures on kindergartens, nurseries and housing construction were reduced. Nominal wages were reduced and overtime pay was reduced by 50% [Wanatowicz, 1974: 85–86]. The provincial authorities tried to mitigate the effects of such actions and often took on the role of the mediator between employers and employees, often taking the side of the workers. They tried to prevent the complete closure of a plant, mine or steelworks, directed orders to private companies on condition that previous employment was maintained, they organised public works (which, however, shrank due to falling revenues to the Silesian treasury), established independent workshops for the unemployed and allocated them plots of land. However, these last two forms of assistance were not accepted by the unemployed. In 1931, the Silesian authorities put forward a proposal to establish work camps for unemployed youth, which began to be implemented throughout Poland in 1933. They also developed an emergency aid campaign in the form of distributing food, clothing and cash. However, when the crisis worsened, they gave up on financial assistance [Ibid.: 89–92]. Benefits in kind included basic foodstuffs (potatoes, flour, sugar, rice, salt) as well as soap, clothing, footwear and fuel.

The Silesian provincial authorities did not agree to reduce employment and to close unprofitable plants, fearing strikes and riots. Since the balance sheets showed losses, dividends were no longer paid to shareholders. At the same time, the owners of mines and steelworks transferred money abroad [Jaros, 1974: 74]. The reduction in employment was associated with an increase in labour productivity, which often enabled an increase in extraction and production.

Partial employment, or part-time work, was a common form. The employees worked only part of the week, which was reflected in their wages. The so-called holiday breaks (unpaid breaks from work) were used, the number of which increased with the deepening crisis. In 1930, they constituted 15% of the daily wages due, in 1932–25.06%, in 1933–19.8% [UWŚl/PH 1310: 49; 52: 1; 224: 103–105]. In the Hohenlohe Plants, which most often used this form of employment, in 1931 there were 34 holiday breaks per employee, and in the following year already 74 [Szaraniec, 1976: 164–165]. Employment "with reverse" was used, consisting of temporary, one- or two-month employment, and then dismissal of the employee after a 14-day notice period with his written consent. This form was particularly burdensome, because it took away family benefits, the right to leave and insurance [Pabisz, 1956: 519–525]. Vacations were used in rotations, lasting even several months. For example, from mid-1932, vacations were introduced

in the Hohenlohe concern, resulting from the order of the governor Grażyński for the Association of Employers of the Upper Silesian Mining and Metallurgy Industry, which clearly stated that in those plants where the principle of vacation employment was applied, there could be no holidays. However, the practice was far from the regulations [*Dyrekcja Policji*, sygn. 174: 246–247]. The Prince of Pless of Pszczyna also very often used this form of employment. Vacations could not be shorter than 1 month or longer than 3 months. The list of workers dismissed in rotations was transferred to the Unemployment Fund, despite their simultaneous inclusion on the list of employees. In this way, plants regulated their actual employment status depending on financial calculations. Returning from rotations meant hiring again, which deprived workers of their deputies. At the same time, the Employers' Union recommended that subordinate plants not pay insurance premiums to the Bracka Company for workers on rotational leave [UWŚl/PH 304ł: 44]. On the other hand, the Union conducted an aid campaign for the unemployed and partially employed, providing workers with potatoes and coal.

The Table 2 below shows the number of unemployed people during the crisis years.

Table 2. The number of unemployed people in Upper Silesia in the years 1929–1936 in thousands of people (data for October)

Years	Workers					Employees white-collar	Juveniles	Total
	miners	ironworkers and metalworkers	other industries	unskilled	other professions			
1929	0.5	0.5	0.7	1.6	0.1	0.7	0.1	4.2
1930	5.8	5.6	4.5	18.0	0.3	2.6	0.6	37.4
1931	9.5	9.1	8.9	27.1	0.6	6.3	0.9	62.4
1932	15.5	15.5	12.9	16.3	1.4	8.4	0.5	70.5
1933	25.6	17.8	11.5	7.8	1.9	12.3	1.5	78.4
1934	22.6	15.0	10.1	27.8	8.0	9.9	1.0	94.4
1935	20.3	11.4	6.9	40.8	1.2	7.9	0.3	88.8
1936	19.4	9.9	6.9	37.0	1.3	6.8	0.2	81.5

Source: *Liczebność i struktura...,* 1961: 486–487.

As you can see, the lowest unemployment occurred in 1929. PUPP registered only 4000 unemployed people, including only 500 miners and the same number of steel and metal workers. However, unemployment increased significantly the following year and grew with each subsequent year of the crisis. However, this is not a true picture of the tragedy, because not all unemployed people could register. This concerned seasonal workers and adolescents looking for work. While in 1929 35.3% of unemployed people were entitled to the benefit, in 1931 only 28% were entitled to it, and in the following years it decreased to 13%, because in 1932 the act on unemployment insurance was amended – the period of work entitling to the benefit was extended from 20 to 26 weeks before dismissal and the amount of the benefit was reduced by 22% [Danowska-Prokop, 2013: 129]. The voivodeship officials made their own calculations and according to them the number of unemployed during the years of the Great Depression ranged from 52.1 thousand in 1930 to 132.4 thousand in 1933 [UWŚl/PH, 2500 and 2635]. After adding the families of the unemployed, this number increased to 320 thousand [Hrebenda, 1974: 99–116]. No wonder that strikes were a frequent form of protest on the part of the crews, even though it was associated with a high risk of dismissal.

The reductions mainly affected the unskilled workers employed in heavy industry, especially in mining and metallurgy – these were often group layoffs. The situation was worst in the years 1931–1932. The largest layoffs affected miners from the "Radzionków" mine (700 people dismissed), the "Hildebrand" mine (600 people), the "Knurów" mine (550 people), the "Florentyna" mine (520 people), the "Hoym" mine (470 people), and in the "Wirek", "Wujek" and "Maks" mines 400 workers were dismissed each – in total over 4 thousand people lost their jobs. According to M. Grzyb, in the Silesian voivodeship in 1932 132 thousand people were looking for work, and in 1933 149 thousand [Grzyb, 1978: 142]. A similar situation occurred in the Upper Silesian steel industry, where in 1932 the number of employees was 61% of the level from 1929, when almost 42 thousand people worked [Popkiewicz, Ryszka, 1959: 275]. Mass reductions were carried out in the "Królewska" and "Laura" steelworks (over 6 thousand workers and 599 officials were dismissed, i.e. 40% of manual workers and 34% of the administration). Also in the "Pokój" steelworks 1300 workers were dismissed [UWŚL/WP, 224: 324–335]. It was easier to dismiss Poles than Germans, because the latter appealed to the Arbitration Commission for Citizenship or to the Arbitration Tribunal in Bytom, emphasising that the reason for dismissal was their German citizenship and not economic reasons, which was obviously untrue [Grzyb, 1978: 149].

Various methods of combating unemployment were considered in the press and in the Sejm. For example, W. Olszewicz put forward a proposal to expand the processing industry based on its own raw materials. He emphasised that the Upper Silesia had cheap coal, cheap electricity, a good communication network and an intelligent worker; therefore, it should use these advantages and focus on processing [Olszewicz, 1930: 463]. R. Brzeski believed that it was necessary to focus on international action, to abolish restrictions on the exchange of goods, services and capital, and, at the same time, to develop public works [Brzeski, 1931: 163]. Public works were discussed many times, drawing attention to the fact that "they should not contribute to the increase in the production of factory or food products, but should create opportunities for increasing internal consumption in the future, by creating new domestic markets, especially sales markets, increasing the areas of gravity, cheaper prices, transport, etc." [W., 1932: 37]. It was therefore about non-productive investments. The author also proposed to establish an Economic Council at the Silesian Voivodeship Council, with the participation of economists, lawyers and sociologists, similar to the Economic Committee at the Council of Ministers. This idea was supported by F. Gerstman, who asked at the same time how new sales markets could be created with the help of public works? [Gerstman, 1932: 75]. E. Zaczyński proposed giving the unemployed a house and a piece of land, arguing that since the crisis would recur, this solution would to some extent make workers independent of fluctuations in the economy. The resettlement action was to consist in creating settlements for the unemployed on unused areas [Zaczyński, 1932, No. 11: 197].

In the face of the drastic reduction in employment, the mood among the workers became radicalised. When the management of the Giesche mine decided to dismiss 3100 workers, the outraged crew decided that this was not the way to maintain the workshops. Savings should be found, for example, by dismissing 12 unnecessary engineers who did not perform any function but received high salaries. However, it turned out that they were Poles and could not be dismissed, because the crew had to be Polonized. Such a policy was often used: Polish engineers were employed for high salaries and it was believed that they were not suitable for responsible work, so they could not replace Germans, but since the government and the Silesian provincial authorities demanded such a policy, it should be implemented, although it increased the costs [*Dyrekcja Policji*, 1933, sygn. 174]. On February 12, 1933, a congress of Workers' and Officials' Crews' Councils and trade union representatives was convened in Katowice, demanding the abolition of coal cartels, which increased coal prices by 50%, the introduction

of a 40-hour work week, and the cessation of employment reductions [Ibid.]. Very often, workers opposed the policies of the Upper Silesian concerns, demanding statutory regulation of coal sales, the establishment of a coal commissioner, and even the expropriation of mines (e.g. the "Ficynus" mine). They protested against high compensation for retiring directors, the employment of foreigners and the policy of German directors carrying out orders from Berlin [Ibid.: 40]. At a meeting of the treasury mine staff in Bielszowice on 9 March 1934, a resolution was passed demanding:

1. "control of the predatory economy and exploitation of workers (...), complete abolition of unfair royalties and additional remunerations.
2. absolute limitation of excessive salaries and additional benefits received by various managers and directors, which only burden the efficiency of the worker.
3. socialisation or nationalisation of those mines which, through the predatory economy of coal barons and foreign capital, deprive Polish workers of work and bring thousands of hungry citizens to the state, who are able to work and become a burden to the Polish State" [Ibid.: 83].

Radical solutions were put forward by Silesian socialists. MP P. Glücksman (PPS) put forward demands for increasing coal sales on the domestic market, reducing administrative costs in industry, revising export policy, returning 300 million zlotys illegally taken from the state treasury, settling the unemployed on the land, reducing directors' salaries, socialising mines, steelworks and factories, expropriating large landed estates for settlement purposes, carrying out an agricultural reform and reducing land prices, and controlling cartels [Rechowicz, 1971: 258]. The Silesian Sanation submitted a motion concerning state control over the economy of heavy industry and establishing the institution of an extraordinary commissioner to combat unemployment, removing foreigners from industry and replacing them with Poles, and statutory termination of all private-law contracts providing for disproportionately high service salaries in industry [12 pos. S. Śl., 1931…].

The Labour and Social Welfare Committee submitted similar proposals, also demanding: stopping dumping, regulating world coal prices and reducing them on the domestic market, revitalising the domestic market by reducing the costs of state administration, stopping appointing people without education to high positions in industry, appointing a politically independent economist with legal training to the position of demobilisation commissioner, delegating factory

councillors to the supervisory boards of the province, centralising coal sales in one nationwide syndicate, employing Poles first, granting loans for the construction of flats and carrying out public works, stopping further mechanisation of work in industry, stopping the collection of overdue taxes from individuals and companies that are threatened with ruin, stopping rotational holidays, introducing a 6-hour working day, awarding orders to the Upper Silesian industry first, amending the legislation to eliminate the arbitrary dismissal of workers, helping the unemployed in kind and in cash [14 pos. S. Śl., 1932…].

However, when the 14th International Labour Conference was held in Geneva in May 1930 and England submitted a project to shorten work in the coal industry to 7.5 hours, the Polish delegate M. Szydłowski strongly opposed [Biały, 1967: 188].

The postulate of control over the industry, elimination of cartels and reduction of administrative costs was often repeated in resolutions and speeches of numerous organisations in the Upper Silesia [*Sprawozdanie z działalności*…, 1936: 49–50]. This opinion was shared by Governor Grażyński himself, speaking at the conference of the Miners' Union in 1933: "I am aware that as far as the coal industry is concerned, it is now necessary to put an end to the overgrowth of cartels and to establish government control over the entire activity of heavy industry" [Ibid.: 53]. In view of the harmful activities of monopolies, the Council of the Polish Trade Union demanded "the liquidation of cartels, concerns, conventions, etc., the expansion and strengthening of state control over large-scale industry and the establishment of a permanent institution to study the costs of production and exchange with the participation of the employee factor" [Ibid.: 74]. The idea of nationalizing mines and steelworks and government control over production and sales was present in many resolutions, which was characteristic of this region. Nowhere else did such a postulate resound so loudly and unanimously, both from workers and provincial authorities. The government in Warsaw had a different view of the issue. The most mature and comprehensive program for combating the crisis was presented by the Silesian Sanation at the economic congress in September 1933. "Against the background of discouragement and stagnation into which the ruling camp in Poland was sinking, the Silesian Sanators showed a great deal of energy and (…) proved that they had a certain program", which, despite limited possibilities, was quite broad and took into account the interests of hired workers. In January 1934, the Economic Council was established to supervise the implementation of the adopted postulates [Długajczyk, 1983: 193–194].

5. Conclusions

The great economic crisis left its mark on the financial situation of the Upper Silesia. Due to its industrial nature and weak links with agriculture, the living conditions of workers significantly deteriorated. The financial condition of the partially employed and unemployed was even worse. The large share of foreign capital (especially German) in the industry of this region certainly played a negative role. Frequent actions to the detriment of the Polish state and the Silesian provincial authorities contributed to the deterioration of the situation. The transfer of profits abroad, falsification of financial reports, failure to pay taxes, limiting production in order to provide employment and sales to plants remaining on the German side, firing Polish workers at first, all this had a negative impact on the financial situation of the residents and the provincial budget. At the same time, the authorities made efforts to provide financial assistance to the Silesian residents, especially the unemployed, although this assistance was not sufficient. In addition, the attitude towards the process of monopolization of industry, which was progressing during the crisis, changed. Demands for the socialisation of mines, steelworks and other plants here in Upper Silesia appeared during the years of crisis not only from workers' organisations but also, characteristically, the provincial authorities acceded to this postulate.

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FINTECH AS A KEY TO THE FUTURE FINANCIAL INCLUSION AND REDUCTION OF FINANCIAL EXCLUSION

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of the article is to assess the impact of the fintech sector on financial inclusion and the reduction of financial exclusion, with particular emphasis on the access to financial services and its role in the socio-economic development.
- *Research methodology* – The article adopts an integrated methodological approach, combining scientometrics and desk research to analyse the evolution of knowledge about fintech and its impact on financial exclusion. The desk research involves reviewing literature, statistics, and reports to identify key trends and challenges. Descriptive, comparative analyses, and case studies illustrate how fintech increases access to financial services and supports inclusion.
- *Score/results* – Fintech holds significant potential for promoting financial inclusion and economic development by integrating underserved groups, emphasising the need for further research to reduce barriers to financial access.
- *Originality/value* – The article provides a significant contribution to the debate on the role of fintech in society, encouraging an analysis of its impact on the future development of financial services and the issue of financial exclusion.

Keywords: fintech, financial exclusion, financial services, financial inclusion

1. Introduction

The negative consequences of the contemporary civilisational progress highlight the issue of systemic exclusion of individuals who, despite being potentially

capable of participating in economic life, lack access to the necessary means and resources for various reasons. As M. Grząba points out, financial standing determines the ability to benefit from market goods, leaving many people on the economic margins [Grząba, 2019: 101]. In Poland, this phenomenon takes on particular importance in the context of financial exclusion, which limits access to basic services such as banking, saving, or making online payments.

This article examines the role of the fintech sector in reducing these barriers, referencing data from the reports by the World Bank, Eurostat, and Statistics Poland (GUS), which confirm the potential of modern financial technologies to increase access to banking tools for socially excluded groups.

However, the rapid development of the fintech sector, while being a significant step towards financial inclusion, also raises new research questions about its impact on various socio-economic aspects. On the one hand, fintech solutions can effectively remove barriers to financial services. On the other hand, there is a risk that they may contribute to the emergence of new forms of exclusion – technological, educational, or regulatory. One key challenge is the partnership between fintechs and traditional financial institutions, which may prove essential for the effective integrating of the marginalised groups.

Another dilemma worth highlighting is how to balance innovation in the sector with the need to protect user privacy and to introduce regulations that support the sustainable development of financial technologies without hindering their adaptability. In this context, a crucial question arises: Does fintech development truly enable the full integration of the excluded social groups into the financial system, or does it generate new barriers that limit their participation in the digital economy? These are the issues that must be explored in order to fully understand both the transformational potential of the fintech sector and its limitations in creating a more inclusive society.

2. The concept of financial exclusion and its determinants in the context of the fintech sector development

In Poland, the concept of "social exclusion" emerged at the beginning of the 21st century [Klimczak et al., 2017: 8]. It refers to the process of limiting various groups' access to rights and opportunities, leading to marginalisation and a lower quality of life [Becker-Pestka et al., 2017: 10]. This phenomenon is linked to an

unfair distribution of entitlements, which hinders social integration [Kacperska, 2021: 184].

Financial exclusion is considered an integral part of social exclusion [Szpringer, 2009: 101] and involves limited access to the basic financial services [Ziemba et al., 2014: 146]. Foundational work by A. Leyshon and N. Thrift in the 1990s contributed to a deeper understanding of this issue. They defined it as the set of processes that restrict access to the financial system, primarily affecting low-income groups [Leyshon, Thrift, 1995: 313–314].

S. Smyczek and J. Matysiewicz define financial exclusion as a process in which individuals have difficulties accessing and using financial services that meet their needs – services that are essential for social functioning [Smyczek, Matysiewicz, 2014: 80]. This definition highlights the importance of both access to and the usage of services for achieving social integration.

M. Zdanowska describes financial exclusion as the inability of individuals, households, or social groups to use essential financial services [*Wykluczenie finansowe…*, 2013: 136]. The reasons may include the lack of availability, high costs, weak marketing, poor financial education, or self-exclusion resulting from negative experiences or attitudes towards debt. This aligns with the European Commission's definition [www 1], which describes difficulties in accessing appropriate financial products.

Financial exclusion is not limited to the physical lack of access – it also includes insufficient fulfilment of the clients' financial needs by banks [Solarz, 2018: 33], which highlights the need for solutions aimed at reducing exclusion [Warchlewska, 2020: 125].

The literature identifies various levels of financial exclusion [Hańderek, 2017: 21], and addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that enhances social integration and improves the quality of life for the affected individuals.

Fintech, as a rapidly growing industry, plays a key role in countering financial exclusion by offering innovative solutions that facilitate access to financial services for underserved populations. Through digital technologies, mobility, artificial intelligence, and data analytics, fintech has the potential to lower barriers to financial access, to promote financial inclusion, and to support economic development by integrating the marginalised social groups. Fintech companies adapt their solutions to the needs of those who previously lacked access to the full range of financial services.

The term FinTech combines "finance" and "technology" [Dorfleitner et al., 2017: 5–10; Kim, 2015: 137], and refers to innovative financial services based

on ICT technologies, targeting the financial sector and its clients. The Basel Committee defines fintech as technological financial innovations that impact business models, processes, and products, significantly transforming how financial markets and institutions operate. The main goal of fintech is to improve the efficiency and accessibility of financial services [Milic-Czerniak, 2019: 41].

Partnerships between fintech companies and traditional financial institutions allow for the development of technology and access to capital, while banks gain opportunities to enhance their products, to improve operational efficiency, and to reduce costs. This type of collaboration is especially beneficial for the low-income clients who seek more affordable and convenient financial solutions. The integration of modern technologies with traditional banking models allows for better tailoring of services to the needs of these groups, while also promoting financial inclusion.

In her publication [Harasim 2020: 46–55] defines fintech as a sector encompassing entities outside traditional financial institutions that use innovative technologies to efficiently deliver financial services and create new value for customers. Unlike banks, fintechs are characterised by flexibility and the ability to rapidly adapt to client needs, offering fast, convenient, and often cheaper services. However, they face challenges such as product concentration, the lack of a stable customer base, limited capital resources, and difficulties in risk and regulatory management.

3. The impact of the fintech sector on the level of financial exclusion in Poland – data and trend analysis

The level of banking penetration, a key indicator of access to financial services, affects the degree of financial exclusion. The lack of access to services such as bank accounts, credit, insurance, or the ability to save may lead to both social and economic marginalisation. In 2021, according to World Bank data [*The Global…*, 2021], banking penetration in Poland reached 96%, representing a 26-percentage-point increase compared to 2011. Additionally, 81% of the population reported using bank cards [*Ubankowienie w Polsce…*, 2023].

A high level of banking penetration indicates broad access to financial services, which supports the reduction of financial exclusion and enables the effective personal finance management. Nevertheless, groups vulnerable to exclusion – such as low-income individuals, the elderly, and residents of rural areas – are still facing barriers to accessing these services.

Financial exclusion in Poland remains a significant social challenge, manifested through various indicators and trends. Despite the high level of banking penetration, the issue continues to affect a substantial part of the population. This includes limited access to financial products, over-indebtedness, and a lack of financial stability. The key indicators of financial exclusion include difficulties in accessing credit and loans, low levels of credit card ownership, overdue payments, the lack of insurance and savings, and limited ability to engage in cashless transactions. These indicators highlight diverse dimensions of financial exclusion, ranging from basic access issues to the consequences of financial scarcity.

Savings exclusion is a growing concern – in 2022, 42% of Poles reported having no savings [*Oszczędności Polaków…*, 2022], and by 2023, that figure rose to 46% [Raport CBOS, 2023]. At the same time, indebtedness remains a serious challenge, with 2.6 million Poles having unpaid debts in 2023 [Szymański, 2024].

Consumer bankruptcies and business insolvencies also reflect this issue. The number of consumer bankruptcies dropped to 14 800 in 2022 [Miernik, 2023] but increased to 21 000 in 2023 [Miernik, 2024], possibly reflecting deteriorating economic conditions. A 16% increase in business bankruptcies in 2023 [Raport, 2024] further indicates that financial exclusion also affects the business sector.

These indicators demonstrate the complexity of financial exclusion, from the lack of access to services to the broader consequences of financial hardship, which ultimately affect the country's socio-economic stability.

The metrics of financial exclusion identify particularly vulnerable groups, such as the homeless, persons with disabilities, incarcerated individuals, the poor, those with low education levels, and the unemployed [Warchlewska, 2020: 134]. In 2024, a research by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy showed that the homelessness crisis affected approximately 31 000 people [*Ogólnopolskie badanie…*, 2024], although aid organisations estimate this number may be higher. Homelessness severely limits access to banking services, deepening marginalisation. In 2023, about 2.3 million individuals with disability certifications also faced barriers in accessing financial services [www 3].

In the same year, around 70 000 incarcerated individuals in Poland were also affected by financial exclusion [*Informacja o zaludnieniu…*, 2024]. Poverty rates in 2023 were 6.6% for extreme poverty, 12.2% for relative poverty, and 4.1% for legal poverty thresholds [www 6], pointing to the worsening material conditions for some social groups, which in turn limits their ability to access financial services.

Although these indicators do not directly quantify financial exclusion, they reveal social groups especially vulnerable to such issues, largely due to real declines in material well-being.

The labour market also impacts financial exclusion. In December 2022, the number of unemployed individuals was 812 300, with an unemployment rate of 5.2% [www 5]. Although the number of people receiving social assistance fell from 910 000 in 2022 to 888 400 in 2023, these individuals remain financially vulnerable [www 4].

Educational disparities between rural and urban areas also matter – for instance, 25% of rural residents and 16.1% of urban residents had vocational education only, affecting their access to financial knowledge and personal finance management skills [www 2].

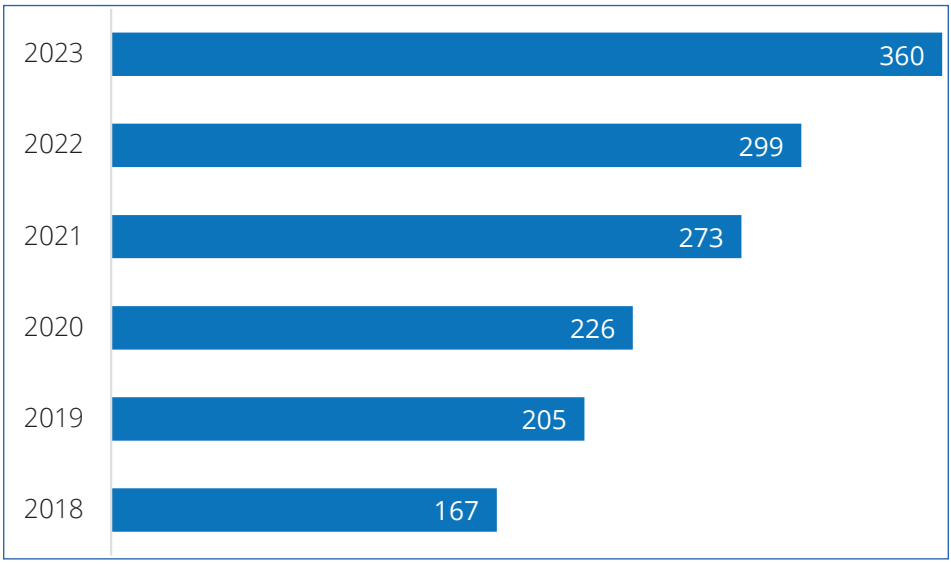
Fintech, encompassing innovative payment solutions, plays a key role in reducing financial exclusion. New technologies enhance access to financial services by removing cost and geographic barriers. Fintech is among the fastest-growing tech sectors – global investments in fintech companies rose from USD 2 billion in 2010 [*Report Accenture*, 2015] to USD 63 billion in 2022 [*Global fintech…*, 2023].

Poland is a leader in fintech, especially in the area of modern retail payments, making Polish banks a model for other countries [Milic-Czerniak, 2019: 38]. Notable partnerships in 2022 – such as Horizon Software's collaboration with Business France Poland and the acquisition of Team4U by Polskie ePłatności – demonstrate the sector's continued growth [Methri, 2022].

According to numerical data (Figure 1), the number of fintech firms in Poland has grown steadily from 2018 to 2023. In 2018, there were 167 fintech firms; in 2019, this rose to 205 – a 22.8% increase year-on-year. The most significant jump came in 2023, when the number reached 360 firms, a 20.4% rise from 2022. From 2018 to 2023, the fintech sector in Poland grew by approximately 115.57%. This increase reflects dynamic development driven by factors such as innovation, government and institutional support, and growing consumer and business interest in fintech solutions.

Despite economic challenges from the global COVID-19 pandemic, the fintech sector in Poland has shown resilience and robust growth, reflecting its capacity to adapt to difficult economic conditions. The steady year-on-year increase in fintech firms highlights Poland's appeal as a technology hub for financial innovation and its favourable investment climate for start-ups and foreign capital.

Figure 1. Number of Fintech Firms in Poland



Source: the author's own compilation based on [*Mapa polskiego fintechu...*, 2022: 11], [*Mapa polskiego fintechu...*, 2024: 14].

Figure 2 illustrates the structure of the Polish fintech market, showing the percentage share of each segment in 2023. The largest segment is "Payments" (22.2%), underscoring its dominance in the industry. The popularity of payment solutions reflects how fintech can make everyday transactions easier for a wide range of users, including those previously excluded from traditional banking.

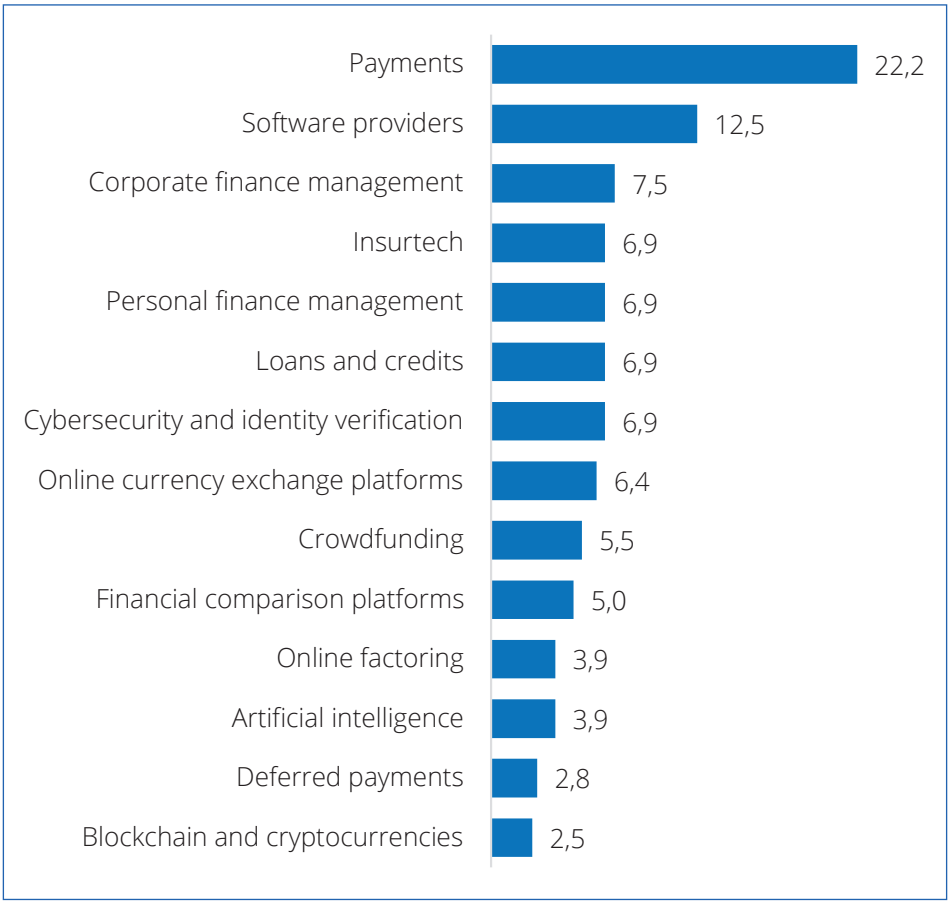
Other important segments include "Software Providers" (12.5%) and "Corporate Finance Management" (7.5%), reflecting the rising demand for tools to support businesses and financial operations.

Smaller but stable market segments include "Insurtech," "Personal Finance Management," "Loans and Credit," and "Cybersecurity and Identity Verification" – each with a 6.9% share. These segments play a critical role in expanding access and building trust in digital financial solutions, particularly among users sceptical of online banking.

Niche technologies such as "Blockchain and Cryptocurrency" (2.5%) and "Buy Now, Pay Later" (2.8%) hold smaller shares, but they offer potential to revolutionize value storage and transfer, enabling financial services without intermediaries and enhancing financial inclusion.

In regions where exclusion is caused by infrastructure gaps – such as rural and developing areas – fintech solutions like online currency exchanges or crowdfunding platforms can provide alternative sources of financing.

Figure 2. Share of Fintech Categories in Poland in 2023 (in %)



Source: [*Mapa polskiego fintechu...*, 2024: 14].

The fintech ecosystem is highly diverse, but the payments and money transfer segment play a central role in transforming the financial services market and in challenging traditional banks. The diversity of fintech offerings supports inclusion by delivering more accessible and secure services that reduce financial exclusion.

In Poland, payment methods dominate the fintech landscape, including innovations in payment cards, mobile payments, and cryptocurrency. A successful example is the BLIK system, which has seen a sharp rise in transaction numbers. Instant transfers (Express Elixir, Bluecash) and API standards aligned with the PSD2 directive have gained international recognition, helping to expand secure and fast online payment systems.

Legal regulations play a crucial role in governing and supporting fintech sector development, ensuring both user safety and financial system stability. An example is PSD2 (Payment Services Directive 2) – Directive 2015/2366 of the European Parliament and Council – which regulates payment services within the EU internal market. PSD2 introduced open banking, allowing fintechs access to banking data (with client consent), thereby supporting innovation in payments and finance management. It also improved transaction security (e.g., strong customer authentication) and consumer protection. While opening up new opportunities, PSD2 also imposes requirements like TPP licensing and GDPR compliance [Dyrektywa…, 2015].

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of electronic money, gradually reducing cash use. Forecasts suggest that by 2028, the value of e-transactions in Poland will reach nearly USD 109 billion, underscoring fintech's growing role in modern financial services [Shewale, 2024].

Reducing financial exclusion requires actions aimed at increasing the availability and usability of financial services for all social groups, including through financial education, the development of digital banking, and the creation of products tailored to the needs of individuals in more challenging economic situations. Fintech plays a key role in this process – especially in the Polish market – by integrating modern technologies with financial services. It offers more accessible, convenient, and often more affordable solutions that address users' specific needs, contributing to higher levels of banking penetration and a reduction in financial exclusion**.** Table 1 illustrates examples of initiatives that support this process.

Fintech significantly contributes to the democratisation of financial services by increasing their accessibility and convenience. Modern technologies eliminate traditional geographic and economic barriers, enabling users to manage their finances from anywhere. They offer alternative forms of financing that are more accessible to low-income individuals and reduce the costs associated with traditional financial services.

Table 1. Examples of fintech initiatives contributing to increased access to financial services and the reduction of financial exclusion

L.P.	Funkcjonalność	Przykłady
Easier access to banking services	Fintech enables remote access to banking services via the Internet and mobile devices, allowing users to open accounts, perform transactions, and manage finances without visiting a branch. This is particularly important for individuals in rural areas where access to bank branches is limited.	Applications such as Revolut, BLIK, mBank, IKO, and Alior Bank allow for remote account opening, transactions, financial management, and investing, eliminating the need to visit a branch – especially relevant in rural areas. Vivus.pl offers fast online loans for people without access to traditional banking services. Twisto provides "buy now, pay later" options and supports expense control through its mobile app.
Low-cost solutions	Fintech offers more affordable financial solutions, increasing their accessibility for individuals with lower incomes.	BLIK and other mobile payment systems enable cashless transactions, reducing costs and improving access to financing for low-income users. Vivus.pl provides fast online microloans for individuals with limited creditworthiness. Beesfund and Crowdway are crowdfunding platforms that offer a more affordable alternative to traditional forms of financing for start-ups and social initiatives.
Innovative financial products	Fintech introduces financial products tailored to the needs of various social groups, including the financially excluded. Examples include apps that support budgeting, saving, and investing, even with small amounts.	Revolut enables multi-currency accounts, favourable currency exchange, saving, and investing within a single app. IKO offers account management, BLIK payments, and savings options. Wonga provides quick online loans for individuals without access to traditional financial services. Absolvent helps students manage the student debt and find employment.
Financial education	Fintechs support financial education through advice, webinars, blogs, and budgeting tools, which raise user awareness and help reduce financial exclusion.	Revolut: A global fintech platform offering articles and guides on money management, saving, investing, and fraud prevention. mBank: Runs mAcademy, a series of webinars and educational materials on personal finance, investing, and using modern financial tools. PKO Bank Polski: Implements the "Everyday Economics" program and provides financial guides aimed at increasing the financial literacy of Polish citizens.
Inclusion of marginalised groups	Fintech has the potential to integrate traditionally marginalised groups, such as women, young people, and ethnic minorities, by tailoring services to their specific needs, thus supporting their inclusion in the financial system.	Spoko.app enables low-cost international money transfers, particularly benefiting ethnic minorities. Autenti provides e-signature solutions for young people, women, and minorities, facilitating online legal and financial formalities. Kontomierz supports budgeting and expense tracking. Absolvent assists young people with career planning and financial

Source: the author's own elaboration based on information from websites related to the fintech tools presented in the table.

In 2023, the global fintech market was valued at approximately USD 294.74 billion, with projections indicating continued growth to over USD 550 billion by 2030. An analysis of fintech adoption trends between 2019 and 2023 reveals a substantial increase in the global adoption rate – from 16% to 64% [Shewale, 2024]. This dynamic reflects the intensifying uptake of financial innovations driven by rising consumer awareness and the growing engagement of small and medium-sized enterprises in fintech services. This development highlights a shift in attitudes toward financial technologies and emphasises their increasing role in the economy.

Countries in which consumers most actively used fintech services included China and India (both at 87%). The lowest adoption rates were recorded in Japan (34%) and France (35%). Among the developed economies, the UK had the highest adoption rate at 71%, while others showed moderate or low levels – for example, 58% in Australia, 50% in Canada, and only 46% in the United States. Generally, higher adoption rates and stronger growth are observed not in developed economies, but in emerging markets [Shewale, 2024].

However, alongside the rapid development of the fintech sector – which is revolutionising access to financial services – there is an increasing debate about its actual impact on financial inclusion. The literature reveals significant discrepancies in researchers' perspectives. On the one hand, fintechs are viewed as tools that reduce economic barriers and promote social integration. On the other hand, they are seen as technologies that may generate new forms of exclusion and marginalisation.

A positive example is the study by G. Arunkumar and N. Manju, who argue that Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) significantly increase digital financial inclusion, particularly in marginalized communities. At the same time, the authors note that the lack of adequate technological infrastructure is a major limitation to these programs [Arunkumar, Manju, 2024: 159].

In contrast, M. Kim and M. Duvendack highlight the issue of over-indebtedness caused by easy access to digital loans, which may deepen economic exclusion among the poorest [Kim, Duvendack, 2024: 1–18].

Similar differences in opinion appear when it comes to technological challenges associated with fintech. C. Habasonda argues that the success of fintech depends on financial education, as a lack of digital skills limits people's ability to use such services [Habasonda, 2024: 153–164]. Meanwhile, H. Sadok and M. El Hadi El Maknouzi point to technological exclusion as a key issue, emphasising that individuals without access to the internet or smartphones remain outside the reach of modern financial services [Sadok, El Hadi El Maknouzi, 2024].

Another area of contention is the role of regulation. D.A. Zetzsche stresses the need for clear legal frameworks to ensure user privacy and prevent abuse [Zetzsche, 2024: 7]. In contrast, S. Sathyanarayana calls for flexible regulations, such as the Unified Lending Interface (ULI), that support innovation and operational efficiency in fintech while minimising entry barriers [Sathyanarayana, 2024: 45].

Globally, fintechs are also viewed as tools for reducing inequality, though not without criticism. B. Rolando argues that financial technologies can effectively reduce social inequalities, especially in developing countries, provided they are adapted to local needs [Rolando, 2024: 59]. However, E.F. Boamah, N.S. Murshid, and M.G. Mozumder emphasise that the lack of infrastructure – such as electricity or internet access – in many regions of the Global South hinders the effective implementation of fintech solutions, potentially exacerbating inequalities [Boamah et al., 2021].

These differing views in the literature underscore the complexity of fintech's impact on society and on the economy.

4. Conclusion

Fintech companies, by leveraging modern technologies, are effectively reducing financial exclusion by offering accessible and low-cost financial services. Process automation and innovative solutions allow them to operate at lower costs compared to traditional financial institutions, which is particularly important for low-income individuals. As a result, these individuals gain access to financial products tailored to their needs, breaking down both economic and geographic barriers. In doing so, fintechs contribute to broader financial inclusion by enabling more people to participate in the financial system.

Cooperation between fintechs and banks helps complement each other's weaknesses. Fintechs benefit from banks' resources such as risk management, regulatory compliance, and licensing, while banks gain access to new technologies and increased flexibility. This synergy enables fintechs to grow faster and helps banks respond more effectively to market demands and improve service quality [Szpringer, 2016: 58].

Fintechs expand service availability, reduce transaction costs, and offer transparent financial products, creating new business models adapted to customer needs. In Poland, sector leaders such as Blue Media, PayU, and Blik are promoting innovation and improving service quality. Through streamlined processes and

personalised products, fintechs are also reaching individuals affected by financial exclusion [Hornuf et al., 2018: 7].

The fintech sector plays a vital role in promoting financial inclusion and supporting economic development by integrating previously marginalized groups into the financial system. At the same time, collaboration between fintechs and traditional institutions helps them adapt to rapidly changing market conditions, positively impacting the quality of services offered. To fully realise the sector's potential, it is essential to continue research on consumer trust and adapt regulations to the sector's dynamic nature. The proposed legal frameworks, such as PSD3 (Payment Services Directive 3) and PSR (Payment Services Regulation), are key to improving the regulatory environment for fintech, supporting its sustainable growth. PSD3 and PSR may increase transparency and security in financial transactions, thereby building greater consumer trust. Additionally, research into public awareness of fintech and levels of consumer trust is needed. A higher level of technological awareness could lead to more effective use of fintech services across various social groups, especially those at risk of financial exclusion.

The development of the fintech sector is revolutionising access to financial services, opening new opportunities for financial inclusion. However, it also presents a range of challenges for both the society and regulators, which must consider the technological, social, and ethical dimensions of this transformation. While fintech reduces barriers to financial services, it can paradoxically create new forms of exclusion – such as digital illiteracy or lack of access to technology. Regulations like PSD2 have taken steps towards standardisation, but future frameworks must remain flexible to keep pace with rapid technological change.

On a global level, fintechs have the potential to reduce inequalities by delivering services in underdeveloped regions. It is crucial, however, to adapt technologies to local contexts and invest in financial education. Partnerships between fintechs and traditional financial institutions, especially in rural and developing areas, can accelerate the financial inclusion process by combining innovation with the experience of established players.

These observations underscore both the enormous potential of fintech as a catalyst for transformation and its limitations, which must be considered in shaping the sector's future.

The research conducted provides a multidimensional perspective on fintech's role in reducing financial exclusion in Poland. It shows that the sector plays a key role in promoting financial inclusion and supporting socio-economic development. The findings highlight the complexity of financial exclusion in Poland, while

also demonstrating the transformative potential of fintech. They offer valuable contributions to the academic understanding of the issue and provide practical recommendations for the development of the financial sector and for initiatives aimed at enhancing social inclusion.

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SELECTED ISSUES RELATED TO THE ACTIVITIES OF NON-GOVERMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN POLAND IN THEIR WORK FOR REFUGEES

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article is to analyse selected problems related to the activities of NGOs in Poland working for refugees. In particular, the following issues are discussed: the definition and types of NGOs, the legal basis for the activities of NGOs in Poland, actions taken by NGOs in connection with the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border.
- *Research methodology* – The research methods employed in this article include the legal analysis and descriptive methods.
- *Score/results* – This article discusses theoretical issues concerning NGOs, including their definition and types, as well as the legal basis for the activities of NGOs working with refugees in Poland. All this has made it possible to analyse specific actions taken by NGOs in relation to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border and to discuss specific problems faced by these organisations. Undoubtedly, the actions taken by these organisations are wide-ranging, complementing or sometimes even replacing the activities of the state. However, due to the problems faced by these organisations (in particular financial problems), their activities are limited.
- *Originality/value* – The article is unique because it collects and analyses the activities undertaken by NGOs on the Polish-Belarusian border and the problems they face.

Keywords: NGOs, refugees, legal basis, activities, problems

1. Introduction

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play an important role in shaping and supporting the development of civil societies, not only through their activities for various social groups, but also as actors involved in solving refugee problems at the local, national and international levels. In Poland, as in many other countries, NGOs have become an integral part of the social system, providing assistance in many areas. One of the key areas of their activity in recent years has been helping refugees who, fleeing persecution, seek shelter in Poland.

The current challenges related to migration are forcing countries to adapt their policies and strategies in order to ensure adequate international protection. However, despite the efforts of government institutions, there is a need to support NGOs in providing comprehensive assistance to refugees. This is mainly due to the voluntary and apolitical nature of NGOs' activities. It is particularly important, and even indispensable, in crisis situations.

The aim of this article is to analyse selected problems related to the activities of NGOs in Poland working for refugees. In particular, the following issues are discussed: the definition and types of NGOs, the legal basis for the activities of NGOs in Poland, actions taken by NGOs in connection with the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border.

The article uses legal analysis and descriptive methods.

2. Definition and types of NGOs

NGOs are a highly diverse group of entities operating in the social sector. However, there is no unified, universally applicable definition of NGOs, either at the international or national level. Nevertheless, there are certain common criteria that allow NGOs to be distinguished from other forms of organisations. The undisputed, universally recognised criteria are: 1) membership and 2) permanent bodies. These criteria allow us to distinguish NGOs from governmental organisations, the members of which are countries, or from conferences, which, despite the fact that they may bring together natural and legal persons, have a temporary character. Another criteria that should be noted is the legal basis for their establishment.

It should therefore be assumed that NGOs are associations bringing together natural persons, legal persons or associations of such persons, established as

a result of an agreement (which cannot be classified as an international agreement) and having their own permanent bodies [Zdanowicz, 1994: 24].

The main characteristics of NGOs that should be noted are:

1. independence – organisations are not part of public administration and are not controlled by state authorities,
2. voluntary nature – establishment and participation are based on the principle of voluntariness,
3. non-profit purpose – the organisation does not operate for profit, and any income is used to achieve its statutory aims,
4. social or public purpose – activities are aimed at the common good, e.g., social assistance, education, ecology, culture, human rights,
5. self-governance and autonomy – the organisation itself determines its goals, structure, and mode of operation.

NGO are diverse in terms of their status, scope of activity and their own structure. This also applies to NGOs working for migrants in Poland.

Taking into account the criterion of legal form, we can indicate, among others, associations and foundations. NGOs dealing with the problems of foreigners in Poland are much more likely to take the legal form of a foundation than an association. Although the vast majority of NGOs registered in Poland are associations, this is mainly because it is easier to set up a foundation and it is also less problematic to manage it [Pawlak, Matusz-Protasiewicz, 2015: 16]. It is also worth mentioning the Granica Group, an informal social movement bringing together NGOs, volunteers, activists, and people living near the border with Belarus. This group provides medical, legal, and humanitarian help to foreigners who find themselves in this area. The group was established in response to the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border [www 1].

Organisations also vary in size and scope of activity. A distinction should be made between organisations for which foreigners in Poland are only one of the recipients of their activities. E.g. Polska Akcja Humanitarna and Caritas Polska provide humanitarian aid in many places around the world and to various groups in need. The second group of organisations specialises in specific areas of activity (e.g., providing legal assistance) and also reaches out to refugees in this regard (e.g., Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej). The third group, which is fundamental to our considerations, consists of organisations for which matters related to the presence of foreigners in Poland are their primary field of activity (e.g., Centrum Wsparcia Imigrantów i Imigrantek).

The fourth category includes organisations that occasionally undertake activities for foreigners in Poland, focusing on other areas of activity [Pawlak, Matusz-Protasiewicz, 2015: 16–17].

3. Legal basis for the activities of NGOs working with refugees in Poland

The authorisation for NGOs to work with refugees comes from both international law, including the European Union law, and the national law. Due to the limited scope of this paper, only the most important regulations in this area will be mentioned.

The Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees provided in paragraph 8 that the High Commissioner shall provide for the protection of refugees falling under the competence of his Office by [the Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, General Assembly Resolution 428 (V) of 14 December 1950]: h) establishing contact in such manner as he may think best with private organisations dealing with refugee questions; i) facilitating the co-ordination of the efforts of private organisations concerned with the welfare of refugees.

The Statute of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, which is an internal legal act of an international organisation, is a source of international law [Zdanowicz, 1994: 40–41].

Article 22(2) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child directly obliges States Parties to cooperate with the United Nations and with other competent intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations in their efforts to provide protection and assistance to children seeking refugee status [Convention of 20th November 1989 – on the Rights of the Child, Journal of Law 1991, Nr 120, Item 526].

Article 35 of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, in conjunction with the above-mentioned provisions of the UNHCR Statute, may also serve as an indirect legal basis for the activities of NGOs working on behalf of refugees in the Contracting States [Convention of 28th July 1951 – relating to the Status of Refugees, Journal of Law 1991, Nr 119, Item 515].

In the context of refugee protection, reference should also be made to the international humanitarian law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians. Article 3 provides the basis for the provision of assistance by neutral humanitarian organisations, i.e. NGOs [Geneva Convention of 12 August

1949 – relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, Journal of Laws 1956, Nr 38, item 171, appendix].

One of the areas of activity of the EU is migration and asylum policy. The EU has adopted a number of regulations aimed, among other things, at harmonising the rules of procedure for persons seeking international protection.

Article 5(1) of Directive 2003/9/WE provides that Member States shall ensure that applicants are provided with information on organisations or groups of persons providing specific legal assistance and on organisations that may be able to assist or inform them about the reception conditions available, including healthcare [Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27th January 2003 – laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers, Journal of Laws L 31 z 6.2.2003, pp. 18–25].

Similarly, Article 27(5) of the Dublin III Regulation says that Member States should make sure the person has access to legal help and, if needed, language help [Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 – establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person, Journal of Laws L.2013.180.31].

Another important issue is the financing of NGOs involved in refugee protection. Article 4 of Regulation 2021/1147 specifies that NGOs, such as refugee organisations and organisations run by migrants, as well as national human rights institutions and equality bodies, and economic and social partners, may form partnerships for the use of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund [Regulation (EU) 2021/1147 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2021 – establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, Journal of Law L 251/1, 15.7.2021].

In the Polish law, it is mainly the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners that provides the legal basis for the activities of NGOs working on behalf of refugees. Article 54f(1) indicates that in proceedings for granting international protection and in proceedings for deprivation of refugee status or subsidiary protection, foreigners are guaranteed freedom to contact UNHCR representatives and international or non-governmental organisations providing assistance to foreigners, including legal assistance.

Another important regulation concerns ensuring that representatives of NGOs have contact with applicants who have submitted an application for international protection at a border crossing point (Article 29(2)). In addition, the Border

Guard authority competent to receive an application for international protection shall inform the applicant about organisations providing assistance to foreigners (Article 30). There are also detailed regulations concerning, e.g., unaccompanied minors. In such a situation, an application for international protection is submitted by a guardian or a representative of an international or non-governmental organisation providing assistance to foreigners, including legal assistance (Article 26(1)). The Act also contains an important obligation for the Head of the Office to adopt a list of NGOs conducting public benefit activities, authorised to provide free legal assistance in Poland (Article 69k(1)) [Act of 13th June 2003 – o udzielaniu cudzoziemcom ochrony na terytorium Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, Journal of Laws of 2003, Nr 128, item 1176 as amended].

On the website of the Office for Foreigners, the list of NGOs providing free legal aid includes only two organizations: Fundacja Instytut na Rzecz Państwa i Prawa oraz Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej [www 2].

The list of organisations providing assistance to foreigners includes 23 entities, among them: Centrum Pomocy Prawnej im. Haliny Nieć, Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, Fundacja "Multiocalenie" with a branch in Krynki, Fundacja " Ocalenie", Centrum Wsparcia Imigrantów i Imigrantek, Instytut na rzecz Państwa Prawa, Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej, CARITAS Polska [www 3].

4. Activities carried out by NGOs in relation to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border

The current situation on the Polish-Belarusian border is a unique one, unprecedented in Poland. Until mid-2021, the situation on this border was stable, but this has changed due to actions taken by the Belarusian and Russian regimes [Moraczewska, 2023: 302–303]. Due to the humanitarian crisis, Poland has found itself in an extremely difficult situation. Poland has taken numerous legal and other measures to deal with the problem [*Pushbacks at Europe`s Borders: a Continuously Ignored Crisis*, 2024: 5]. In the face of the indicated crisis in Poland, many NGOs have undertaken activities to assist and complement state action [Pawlak, Matusz-Protasiewicz, 2015: 14]. Therefore, it is justified to consider selected activities currently undertaken for refugees by NGOs in Poland in relation to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border.

The activities of NGOs providing assistance to refugees are currently focused not only on the border zone, but also concern, i.a. foreigners who live in open

centres and outside such centres. Moreover, NGOs activities also focus on support for independence after the procedure has been finished [www 4].

NGOs, which employ professional lawyers, provide free legal assistance within the scope defined in their bylaws or statutes. Legal activities mostly focus on providing free legal advice, legal information. Some organisations provide free legal assistance during all proceedings, some only before the Head of the Office for Foreigners.

NGOs are also working, i.a. to advocate changes in law, practice and improvements in the reception system as it relates to applicants [Pawlak, Matusz-Protasiewicz, 2015: 14.]. NGOs present their opinions on draft amendments to the Acts. This type of activity in the case of the Polish-Belarusian border appeared with the implementation of legislation on push-backs [www 5]. In addition, activities also include monitoring the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border [www 6; Klaus, 2022: 21].

Other activities undertaken by NGOs that are typical of the Polish-Belarusian border include, in particular:

1. material aid. These activities include, i.a. the provision of warm clothing, hygiene products, food. Next to the hospital in Hajnówka, where foreigners from the border are taken in, there is a so-called "hospital point" mainly with clothes, shoes, cleaning products. Most often, doctors inform the Egala staff what items they should bring to the hospital for foreigners [www 7]. Similar assistance at the hospital is also provided by the Bezkres Foundation [www 8];
2. providing medical and psychological assistance;
3. provision of interpreters. Organisations work with interpreters remotely or on site [Klaus, 2022: 21];
4. housing support. One organisation – Egala - has prepared a training housing programme. The foreigner is provided with free shared housing for about 2–3 months. This allows to adapt to a new reality, gives time to find a job and get a stable income, without having to worry about the basic necessities of life [www 9]. The Ocalenie Foundation has created the Refugees Welcome Poland programme, which aims to help people with refugee experience rent a cheap room in the home of a Polish family in or near Warsaw [www 10];
5. assistance with finding work;
6. educational activities, including learning the Polish language [www 11];
7. activities to support integration into society [Popławska, Gać, 2021: 62–63];

8. approaching and disclosing foreigners on the move to the Border Guard in such a way that they can make an application for international protection [www 12; www 13]. the assistance also includes trying to locate people who have gone missing on the road [Klaus, 2022: 21];
9. assisting the families of foreigners to bury people who have died on the border in the forest;
10. transport from Border Guard posts or guarded centres to open centres, i.a. at the request of the Border Guard.

Due to direct contact with foreigners in need of assistance, NGOs are more aware of the needs and problems of foreigners therefore they act more effectively than the state. Consequently, some tasks are delegated by the state to NGOs, in particular information activities and the provision of legal aid [Grzymała-Kazłowska, Stefańska, 2014: 216].

5. Problems faced by NGOs

NGOs providing assistance to people with refugee experience in relation to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border face a number of problems. Among them, we can emphasise in particular:

5.1. Funding

It is not entirely appropriate for the state to make NGOs responsible for assisting refugees, because the assistance provided by such organisations often depends on the funds they are able to obtain for their activities. If such funds are not obtained, it is either impossible to implement various projects related to assistance for foreigners or the support is significantly limited [Charycka, Bednarek, Belina, 2025: 10; www 14].

There have always been problems with funding. There have been situations when organisations have ended or reduced their activities due to a failure to obtain funding. E.g., the Ocalenie Foundation reported that as of September 2024, the Assistance Centres for Foreigners in Łomża and Łódź had stopped working [www 15].

Most recently, in January 2025, the US administration announced the temporary suspension of almost all aid programmes. This decision also extended to Poland and had a significant impact on the activities of NGOs [www 16].

Some organisations are publicly reporting funding problems and asking for support. The CPPHN, e.g., has reported on social media that after 23 years of operation they are threatened with closure, having lost almost 60% of their annual budget [www 17]. Nomada Association reported that the organisation received only 41% of its planned donation from UNHCR in 2025 [www 18].

Due to the reduction in funding, organisations have limited possibilities in continuing the activities indicated above. There are already problems in providing legal but also material assistance.

5.2. Disapproval of society and authorities/bodies

NGOs taking action on the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border also face disapproval from society and some state authorities and bodies [Charycka, Bednarek, Belina, 2025: 10].

There have been cases of people destroying things belonging to NGOs. E.g., the organisation Medycy na Granicy reported that unknown perpetrators had damaged their cars [www 19]. There have been cases of services detaining NGO members without giving a reason for the detention, confiscating medical equipment, and there are known cases of pointing guns at volunteers [Szymanek, 2023: 59–60; www 20].

5.3. Impersonation

Cases of impersonation of NGO staff are also known. E.g. the Polish Migration Forum Foundation reported that unknown persons create accounts similar to the Foundation's email accounts and send emails asking for data and sometimes promising services or funds in return [www 21].

5.4. The problem of finding accommodation

The problems of finding housing are of course related to the limited funds of foreigners and aid organisations, but also to the fact that people do not want to rent housing to foreigners either [www 22; Wencel, 2011: 4]. The Dialog Foundation points out that finding accommodation for foreigners is time-consuming, as it is often associated with the negative attitude of Poles towards refugees [www 23].

5.5. Staff problems

In addition to the problems identified, attention should be paid to burnout and exhaustion of NGOs staff and volunteers [Charycka, Bednarek, Gumkowska, 2024: 5]. This is due, among other things, to working overtime and heavy responsibility, which also causes conflicts within the team [www 24].

6. Conclusions

NGOs are very active in helping refugees in Poland. These organisations vary in terms of both their legal status and the scope of assistance they provide. The legal basis for the activities of NGOs working with refugees stems from both international law, including the European Union law, and the national law. These laws explicitly authorise the provision of such assistance.

Through their activities in support of refugees, NGOs contribute to raising the standards of public institutions and play an important role in complementing the activities of state entities.

Currently, providing assistance to refugees crossing the Polish-Belarusian border is largely based on the activities undertaken by NGOs, which, despite the numerous problems they face, continue to undertake numerous activities for the benefit of foreigners.

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ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY OF THE EU MEMBER STATES IN 2023

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of the paper is to evaluate economic sustainability of EU member states in 2023 and to analyse the relationships between economic sustainability and their level of development. The study concentrated on three research questions: Do the EU countries represent high diversity in terms of economic sustainability? Is the economic sustainability of member states related to their level of socio-economic development? Which elements of economic sustainability display higher interdependence with socio-economic development of the EU countries?
- *Research methodology* – TOPSIS method was used to classify the EU member states on their economic sustainability with division to classes of objects with similar features. The relationship between economic sustainability, as well as its partial variables, and socio-economic development was examined with the use of the Spearman's and Pearson's correlation coefficients.
- *Score/results* – The economic sustainability among the EU member states in 2023 displays medium level and low diversity. A strong positive relationship between economic sustainability and the level of human development was confirmed. The importance of innovation and monetary policy for economic sustainability has risen as another key finding of the research.
- *Originality/value* – The originality of the paper is represented by the chosen research method and by the set of diagnostic variables. The research identified features strengthening and hindering economic sustainability which can be treated as policy recommendations.

Keywords: sustainable development, economic sustainability, European Union, TOPSIS method

1. Introduction

Sustainability is a multifaceted concept, encompassing interrelated economic, social, environmental and institutional dimensions. Economic sustainability extends beyond the traditional notion of maintaining long-term economic growth, incorporating the capacity of an economy to allocate resources efficiently, foster innovation and ensure resilience against external shocks. It requires the integration of environmental constraints, such as resource efficiency and the reduction of ecological degradation, into policy design and implementation. Moreover, stable economic growth must be accompanied by improvements in human capital, employment opportunities and equity in income distribution. Institutional quality, governance and regulatory frameworks should ensure that short-term economic gains do not undermine the long-term welfare. Economic sustainability can improve international competitiveness of countries.

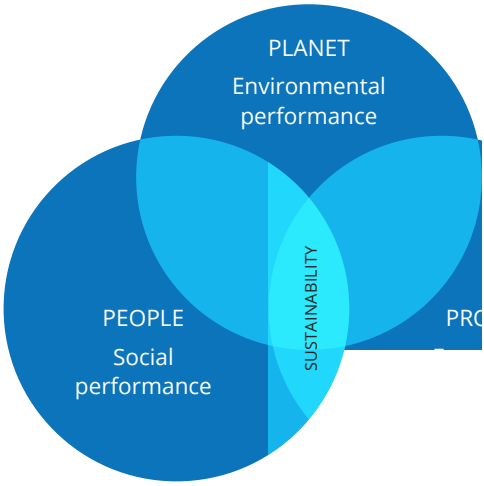
The aim of the paper is to examine the current state of economic sustainability of the EU member states in 2023, as well as to evaluate the interdependencies between their economic sustainability and the level of development. Three research questions were developed: Do the European Union countries display high diversity in terms of economic sustainability? Is the economic sustainability of member states related to their level of socio-economic development? Which elements of economic sustainability are interrelated to the higher extent with socio-economic development of the EU countries? The research methods included: literature review, TOPSIS method to calculate a synthetic measure of economic sustainability, the Spearman's and Pearson's correlation analysis to study relationships between economic sustainability and socio-economic development measured by HDI.

2. Sustainable development and economic sustainability – review of literature

Sustainability is a relatively new term in economic studies, scholars perceive it differently and no universally accepted view prevails. The concept was firstly introduced in 1972 at the Stockholm United Nations conference when the relationship between socio-economic development and environmental protection was emphasised. Over the last decades the original definition of sustainability has evolved, but still it seems to rely on the Elkington's Triple Bottom Line Theory originally designed to measure financial, social and environmental performance

of a company. These three dimensions forming the basics of sustainability have been extended to a broader spectrum, on the level of national economies [Shen, 2015: 60]. Figure 1 presents the components of sustainability.

Figure 1. Triple Bottom Line Theory



Source: [www1].

Sustainability has obvious economic and environmental implications, because it is related to the concept of sustainable development. There are many studies defining this complex phenomenon and proposing sophisticated methods of its measurement. Mostly, it is defined as development that satisfies the needs of the present without adversely affecting the conditions for future generations. Prosperous economy in the long run involves maintaining an ecological balance through the avoidance of depletion of natural resources, which exceeds the area of solely implementing renewable energy sources and improving energy efficiency [Ezimah, 2021: 29–31]. The most common definition of sustainable development bases on the concept of essential needs of the world's population, including also poor nations. The state of technology and institutions can constitute a limitation to meet the needs of present and future generations. Moreover, priorities and needs of nations evolve over time [Samuel et al., 2024: 7005].

Sustainable development aims to advance equity within and between generations, which is defined as equality of opportunities for well-being. To address the recent problems related to social injustice and climate change, the United Nations

has established 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030. Efforts must be focused on accelerating economic development in the least developed countries in order to accomplish SDG on time. Sustainable development is focused on sustaining a constant stream of consumption into the infinite future. To assure the aggregate stock of physical and natural capital remains constant over time, the Hartwick's Rule can be implemented through saving and investment rule retaining capital intact [Girma, Ayalew, Tazebew, 2025: 1–4].

Countries should determine a balance between their economy and ecology, because sustainable development necessitates achieving an equilibrium between economic, environmental, social and cultural progress at the local and global level. Each component of sustainable development must receive equal consideration in order to create a harmonious blend of economic growth, social advancement and environmental conservation [Hojnik, 2024: 193–194]. The paradigm of sustainable development is displayed below in table 1.

Table 1. Kahn's Paradigm of Sustainable Development

Component	Economic	Social	Environmental
Criteria	Growth Development Productivity	Equity Empowerment Accessibility Participation Sharing Cultural Identity Institutional Stability	Eco-system Integrity Carrying Capacity Biodiversity

Source: [Samuel et al., 2024: 7005].

Sustainable development can also be described as a pattern of social and structural transformation optimising the economic and other benefits available in the future. This process aims to achieve human development in inclusive, equitable, prudent and secure manner, pointing to interdependencies between ecological, social and economic pillars. The development of particular economies can involve rapid economic growth, and increased industrial and agricultural activities may lead to the rapid consumption of natural resources and to increased pollution. To avoid negative effects on the environment, countries should focus on policies compensating for environmental externalities and promoting social inclusion [Ezimah, 2021: 30–37]. Sustainable development can be achieved by substitution of different factors of production, while maintaining continuous economic growth [Horodecka, 2024: 5–6].

Rising the level of economic development positively correlates with achieving social and ecological goals, as investment in education, healthcare and environmental protection increase [Horodecka, 2024: 6]. Initially, economic growth implies increased production and consumption, increased fossil fuel use, possible deforestation, land reclamation, environmental degradation, increased emissions of greenhouse gases leading to a rise of global temperature. According to Kuznets, a non-linear relationship exists between the level of economic development and the pressure on the natural environment. Low income per capita is associated with environmental deterioration, but to a certain point, until increasing, the output maintains the priority during industrialisation process. As real income rises, the society becomes more concerned about environmental issues and the quality of life, and the level of degradation decreases. Higher consideration for clean climate, higher effectiveness of regulatory agencies and more investment on sustainability improve environmental conditions. Developed countries introduce better policies and regulations on environmental protection, as well as more efficient and environmentally friendly methods of production and consumption, because they can afford them [Samuel, 2024: 7005–7006].

Sustainability happens to be defined similarly to sustainable development as meeting the needs of present generation without a damage to the future ones. Sustainability is achieved when the broadly perceived well-being of society is maintained over time, especially in terms of welfare maximisation [Ezimah, 2021: 30]. Sustainability can be perceived as a set of interrelated economic, social and environmental dimensions ensuring social equity and economic prosperity in a clean natural environment. In developing countries, sustainable development can cause no trade-off between poverty reduction and environmental sustainability.

Sustainability requires balance between the scale of the economy and the supporting ecosystems, fair resource distribution and efficient allocation. Goodland suggests that economic sustainability is impossible without environmental protection. Measuring economic sustainability should represent a holistic approach, including economic indicators and quality of life. Economic component of sustainability extends beyond businesses, it manifests in the ability of the society to ensure stable employment, fair distribution of income and equal provision of public goods and services [Elsawy, Youssef, 2023: 24–25].

The literature emphasises the importance of entrepreneurship and innovation in promoting sustainability. Different studies have found a relationship between sustainability of cities and entrepreneurship, understood as creative and

innovative thinking of entrepreneurs leading to effective transformation of ideas and opportunities into lasting business activities. Youssef et al. [2018] proved that in certain African countries, both formal and informal entrepreneurial activities can hinder sustainability. However, when innovation and institutional quality reach high levels, the link between entrepreneurship and sustainability becomes strongly positive [Kpegba et al., 2024b: 520–522].

Economic sustainability as an integral component of sustainability refers to using, safeguarding and sustaining human and natural resources in order to preserve long-term values by optimal use, recovery and recycling. Sustainable economic growth leads to strong economies without losses to environment, job creation, health and livelihoods [Ezimah, 2021: 29–30].

The economic dimension of sustainability in terms of companies relates to accountability, financial and economic performance, corporate governance and stakeholder value. It signifies businesses' ability to endure and prosper in long term with respect to broader societal and environmental well-being. Companies representing strong sustainability performance exhibit superior financial performance and reduced risk in comparison to their counterparts. Most countries of the world do not question the significance of economic sustainability for economic development of a nation, though it forms a foundation of prosperity. Nevertheless, if social and environmental sustainability are not established simultaneously, economic sustainability will be temporary [Elsawy, Youssef, 2023: 27–28; Shen, 2015: 61].

Macro-level economic sustainability is related to the phenomena of economic growth and development. Economic growth refers to an increase in a country's quantitative production of goods and services. Development signifies the quantifiable and consistent rise in a nation's per capita output or income per person, accompanied by increased labour force, consumption capital, and trade volume. Economic growth can be also viewed as the use of technological advancement and institutional and ideological adjustment to supply increasingly diverse economic goods to its population [Samuel, 2024: 7005].

A significant negative relationship between GDP growth and SDG achievement was found by Gazi et al. [2024] in East Asia Pacific and South Asian countries. Their study stresses the importance of policy formulation and implementation, recognising that unchecked economic growth can hinder progress towards sustainable economic development [Islam, 2024: 3]. Inclusive growth requires policies enhancing access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities especially for marginalised nations [Chaturvedi et al., 2024: 9063].

Economic sustainability involves achieving more than just a stable economic growth, unsustainable in the long run, but improvement of the standard of living for present and future generations. Government policies, public expenditure on certain sectors of the economy and institutional quality are pivotal for national progress towards economic sustainability [Kpegba et al., 2024a: 6241–6242].

Economic sustainability goes beyond profit maximisation in the short term, but creates conditions securing long-term economic viability with the balance between the use of available resources and the needs of future generations. Investing in economic sustainability policies helps countries to withstand external shocks, such as financial crises or fluctuations of raw materials' prices. The implementation of sustainability practices into productive sectors attracts also foreign direct investment. Contributing to financial stability and enhancing technological innovativeness, economic sustainability can improve international competitiveness of an economy [Teixeira, 2025: 1].

Scholars underline the existing interplay between economic sustainability and sustainable environmental practices. Practices like the adoption of renewable energy sources, effective waste management and sustainable food production techniques prove to be vital to mitigating the environmental degradation and balancing economic prosperity and ecological well-being. The transition from conventional fossil fuels to alternative energy solutions like solar, wind, hydropower and geothermal energy offers independence from the use of limited resources causing greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. The core economic benefit of sustainable environmental practices refers to economy's technological advancement. Sustainability requires advancing technologies increasing efficiency and affordability of eco-friendly solutions to businesses and consumers, so technological innovation leads to enhanced energy storage solutions. Partnerships between public and private sector may induce collaborative research and development of initiatives fostering breakthroughs in sustainable technologies [Ukpoju et al., 2024: 384–389].

In the globalised world, the importance of the economic dimension of sustainability is growing. It addresses not only the issue of the development of economic performance, but the standard of living as well. Links between sustainability performance and competitiveness can be tracked, therefore suitable conditions and suitable resources for sustainable economic growth should be ensured. In the long run, improving sustainability can have a positive impact on the economy's competitiveness. Many studies confirm that the transition to a knowledge-based economy through the introduction of innovation significantly increases a country's

performance as well as living standards. Innovations are considered a fundamental factor in progress in the social, environmental and economic fields. They constitute an important determinant of sustainable competitiveness and the growth of the knowledge economy [Sira et al., 2020: 2].

In Polish literature, Nowakowska [2023: 107–108], referring to Goodland, links economic sustainability with a model of development promoting a balance between economic progress, social equity and environmental protection. Economic aspects of sustainable economic development involve equity, responsible production and consumption and balanced growth.

The economic benefits of sustainable economic development include [Nowakowska, 2023: 108]:

- economic stability;
- creating new jobs;
- building strong, resilient and sustainable economies;
- innovation and competitiveness;
- viability of businesses.

All the definitions of sustainable development emphasise the need to preserve the needs of all generations by maintaining the quality of growth with respect to poverty reduction and protection of the environment. It can be concluded that economic sustainability is an important component of sustainable development along the social and environmental dimensions. Despite the disagreement in the literature concerning the definition and the content of economic sustainability, achieving it constitutes a necessity for all countries. An increase in the level of economic sustainability leads to higher competitiveness and to increased population welfare.

Various methods and indicators are used to measure sustainable development and economic sustainability. Many studies mention genuine saving as a strong indicator capturing the level of sustainable development, because it exhibits the sustainability of national investment policies. The adjusted net saving becomes widely accepted as a sufficient indicator of sustainability in the long run due to its construction. They are computed as net national savings plus education expenditure minus energy depletion, mineral depletion, net forest depletion, damage from carbon dioxide and particulate emissions. Positive net savings signify increasing the present value of social welfare, while negative net savings suggest that the economy is on an unsustainable path. The adjusted

net savings measure the welfare of the countries, a positive relationship was found between them.

Using panel data for 12 Asian countries Koirala and Pradhan [2019] examine the determinants of sustainable development with the adjusted net saving measuring sustainability. Their results point to positive impacts of per capita income and of financial development, while inflation rate, natural resource rent and time proved to have a negative effect on sustainable development. Kaimuri and Kosimbei [2017] found that household consumption per capita, unemployment and energy efficiency negatively affected the sustainable development in Kenya. Resource productivity, real GDP per capita and terms of trade did not have any significant impact on sustainability. Research on the adjusted net saving in Malaysia [Pardi et al., 2015] confirmed the significant effect on sustainable development in short and long term of the following variables: per capita income, inflation rate, financial development and share of mineral exports in GDP [Girma, Ayalew, Tazebew, 2025: 5–6].

Kpegba et al. [2024: 6245–6250] have used static and dynamic panel regression models. They described the dependent variable of economic sustainability by variables of: public expenditure, institutional quality, inflow of FDI, trade openness, inflation rate and economic growth. Their research found a statistically significant positive impact of public expenditure and institutional quality measures, as well as inflation and economic growth on economic sustainability of Sub-Saharan African countries, while trade openness and foreign direct investment have proven to be insignificant for the SSA economies.

Samuel and al. [2024: 7007–7009] explored the relationships between environmental sustainability and economic growth in Africa. The study expresses environmental sustainability (proxied by greenhouse gaseous emissions) as a function of GDP growth rate, value-added manufacturing, value-added agricultural and foreign direct investment (as% of GDP). Using the Fixed Effect Method (FEM), the authors found that economic growth positively and significantly contributes to the environmental degradation through the emission of greenhouse gases but substantially declines with the further development of the economy. Moreover, value-added agricultural, value-added manufacturing and foreign direct investment have negative and significant impacts on greenhouse gas emissions, hence promoting environmental sustainability. In contrast, trade openness had positive but insignificant effects on greenhouse gas emissions.

Decoupling economic growth from resource consumption and environmental degradation requires circular economy principles which help to achieve prosperity

without depleting natural capital [Chaturvedi et al., 2024: 9063]. According to Teixeira [2025: 1–2] the circular economy complements economic sustainability. Recycling, reuse and intelligent product design contribute to waste reduction and optimisation of production costs. Practices of circular economy decrease external dependencies and increase resource efficiency enhancing innovative solutions. Thus, implementing policies promoting circular economy display positive results in terms of higher productivity and quality of life for populations. It may also lead to economic diversification, to creation of new jobs and to the development of new sectors of activity. As a result, countries may achieve more robust, equitable and sustainable economic development.

Sira et al. [2020] have proven that country's sustainable position in a competitive environment increasingly depends on human resources, knowledge and its creation, transfer and preservation. Litavcova et al. [2016] modeled the current economic sustainable development with the use of indicators such as inflation, unemployment and corruption, confirming a significant positive impact of those measures on sustainable growth. Dobrovic et al. [2018] researched the interdependences between innovation, economic sustainability and competitiveness within the EU member states, finding a positive relationship among composite indicators. Determinants of sustainable economic development in countries of the European Union were also investigated by Sofrankova et al. [2021]. Their conclusions point to a significant role of innovative potential, conditions for entrepreneurship, corruption problems and human resources in attaining sustainable economic growth [Sofrankova et al., 2021: 10–11]. Girma et al. [2025: 10–20] claim that sustainable development can be achieved by economic growth, reduction of CO_2 emissions, improvement of government quality and foreign direct investment, decrease of inflation rate, broadening tax base, use of external debt, technological advancement and investment in human capital. The influence of these variables on genuine saving in Ethiopia was tested taking into account the detrimental impact of CO_2 emissions, inflation rate and external debt stock on the economy's sustainability. The ARIMAX model proved to be fitted well with the data and valid. A ten-year forecasting predicted the importance of human capital investment, better management of natural resources, increased saving, economic diversity, technological advancement and sound governance for long-term future sustainable economic growth and development.

3. Research methodology

In economics, the analysis of complex phenomena influenced simultaneously by many factors and multidimensional comparison of objects is done using synthetic measures obtained from partial measurable diagnostic variables. Many authors assess the level of economic development and competitiveness with linear ordering methods such us TOPSIS, Hellwig's or Ward's, which allow ranking the objects. These methods are also used to evaluate progress in achieving sustainable development goals [Cheba, Szoppik-Depczyńska, 2019: 142; Mikuła, Raczkowska, 2024: 271].

In this paper a Technique for Order Preference by Similarity to the Ideal Solution (TOPIS) method was used to assess the level of economic sustainability of the EU member states. It represents one of the multidimensional comparative analysis tool, which bases on selecting the closest and the furthest alternative from the ideal solution [Proniewski, Zielińska, 2021].

The construction of a synthetic measure within the framework of linear ordering of objects includes the following stages [Mikuła, Raczkowska, 2024: 272]:

- selection and screening of diagnostic variables,
- determination of the nature of the variables (stimulant, destimulant),
- normalization of the variables,
- determination of the coordinates of the reference and anti-reference points,
- construction of the synthetic measure and determination of the linear ordering of objects.

The normalisation of variables was done according to two procedures:

- for stimulants:

$$\text{nij} = \frac{x_{ik} - \min_i \{x_{ik}\}}{\max_i \{x_{ik}\} - \min_i \{x_{ik}\}}$$

- for destimulants:

$$\text{nij} = \frac{\max_i \{x_{ik}\} - x_{ik}}{\max_i \{x_{ik}\} - \min_i \{x_{ik}\}}$$

where: $\min_i \{x_{ik}\}$ – minimal value of k index, $\max_i \{x_{ik}\}$ – maximal value of k index. The weighted normalized decision matrix was created by multiplying normalised

values by the criteria weights (equal weights) according to the procedure: $v_{ik} = w_k * n_{ij}$ for i = 1, 2, 3…m; j = 1, 2, 3…n, where the w_k is the weight of k-th index or criterion and $\sum_{i=1}^{n} w_k = 1$.

After calculations, the positive-ideal and the negative-ideal solutions must be selected with the use of the formula: $v^+ = \max_i \{x_{ik}\}$, $v^- = \min_i \{x_{ik}\}$;

The distance of each alternative to the positive-ideal and the negative-ideal solution was calculated by means of n-dimensional Euclidean metric:

$$d_i^+ = \sqrt{\sum_{k=1}^{m}\left(v_{ik} - v_k^+\right)^2} \quad \text{and} \quad d_i^- = \sqrt{\sum_{k=1}^{m}\left(v_{ik} - v_k^-\right)^2}$$

and synthetic measure was calculated using the formula:

$$q_i = \frac{d_i^-}{d_i^- + d_i^+}$$

where $0 \leq q_i \leq 1$, i = 1, 2, 3…n.

Eventually, objects are ranked by the value of q_i which measures their relative closeness to the ideal solution [Proniewski, Zielińska, 2018]. The synthetic variable q_i takes values from the interval [0;1]. The highest value of the aggregate variable indicates the best position of a given object, while the lowest value characterises an object with the worst situation in the analysed area [Mikuła, Raczkowska, 2024: 272]. Thus, the higher the q_i index, the higher economic sustainability of a given country.

In this paper, economic sustainability is understood as a separate dimension of sustainable development, which is affected by other aspects due to existing interdependencies between the economy, society and environment. Bearing on the presented literature review, availability of data and comparability, the author has identified twelve determinants of sustainability's economic pillar. Data was extracted from the Eurostat and the World Bank datasets. Research period covered the year 2023 (in case of 5 variables the latest data concerning 2024 was not available).

Among the included variables there are features describing mostly the economic environment, because sound economy constitutes a crucial foundation of economic sustainability. Due to the findings of the recent literature, the composite index includes indicators of a country's innovative potential (financial resources) and innovative position (patents). Also, the significance of education

and unemployment for the future economic activity was highlighted in other researches. In the presented study, the author selected: real GDP growth, inflow of FDI, government expenditure on education, total spending on R&D activities and patent application to EPO as stimulants of economic pillar of sustainability. As mentioned in the previous section, multifaceted relations exist between the natural environment and sustainability. Thus, energy productivity, use of renewable sources of energy, circular material use undoubtedly link economy and the environment influencing the level of a society's economic performance and sustainability in the long run. Meanwhile, the impact of inflation and government gross debt on future prosperity remains negative.

The exclusion of a given feature from the set was possible, if the variability level was below 10%. Based on variability levels, there was no need to eliminate any indicator from the set. Then, the correlation indices of variables were calculated using the inverse correlation coefficient matrix method [Młodak, 2006]. If the chosen indicators create too much exact interdependencies, its diagonal elements are greater than 10 [Zielińska, 2024: 314]. In the paper there is no significant correlation found between the features. The set of diagnostic variables used in the research is presented in Table 2.

In terms of economic sustainability, the most interesting variable to analyse might be the real GDP growth, which directly influences economic development. Most EU countries have experienced a positive real GDP growth in 2023. The highest rates were recorded by Malta (6.8%), Croatia (3.9%), Spain (3.5%) and Cyprus (3.4%). Negative real GDP growth rate was evidenced by Austria (-1.0%), Germany (-0.5%), Latvia (-0.4%) and Estonia (-0.1%). Poland's result (2.9%) can be regarded as relatively strong outcome in relation to the EU average (1.7%), as well as to other states.

In the researched period, the highest variation among the variables was recorded for the inflow of foreign direct investment measured in current USD per inhabitant. After the pandemics, the net inflows of FDI in comparison to GDP were even more volatile than the chosen measure. Foreign investors had withdrawn a lot of capital from Luxembourg, Ireland and Netherlands in previous years, while Malta became a very interesting direction of foreign direct investments. General government expenditure on education represented the lowest coefficient of variation in 2023. Sweden dedicated the highest amount of spending on education relative to its GDP (7.3%), while Ireland scored much below the EU average (2.8% against 5.0%).

Table 2. Variables describing economic sustainability of the EU member states in 2023

Symbol	Variable	Type of variable	Mean	Coefficient of variation (%)	Minimum value	Maximum value
X1	Energy productivity (EUR in PPS per kilogram of oil equivalent)	stimulant	12.7	34.41	6.7 Finland	29.3 Ireland
X2	Circular material use rate (%)	stimulant	10.3	69.15	1.3 Romania	30.6 Netherlands
X3	Share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption by sector (%)	stimulant	27.2	47.81	14.4 Luxembourg	66.4 Sweden
X4	Unemployment rate in group 15–74 years old (% of population)	destimulant	3.8	37.7	1.7 Czech Republic	8.0 Spain
X5	Trade openness (total exports and total imports as% of GDP)	stimulant	141.1	49.73	65.6 Italy	404.5 Luxembourg
X6	Foreign direct investment net inflow (current USD per inhabitant)	stimulant	-3139.6	-677.71	-94245 Luxembourg	45496 Malta
X7	Real GDP growth rate (%)	stimulant	1.7	98.39	-1.0 Austria	6.8 Malta
X8	Inflation rate (annual average rate of change (%)	destimulant	6.9	48.20	2.3 Belgium	17.0 Hungary
X9	General government gross debt (% GDP)	destimulant	65.1	54.03	20.2 Estonia	163.9 Greece
X10	General government expenditure on education (% GDP)	stimulant	5.0	19.81	2.8 Ireland	7.3 Sweden
X11	Gross domestic expenditure on R&D (% GDP)	stimulant	1.8	51.57	0.5 Romania	3.6 Sweden
X12	Patent applications to the European Patent Office by inventors' country of residence (per million inhabitants)	stimulant	127.1	106.98	6.0% Romania	425.4 Denmark

Source: the author's own elaboration

4. Economic sustainability of the EU countries in 2023

The ranking of the EU countries' economic sustainability in 2023, measured by the values of the synthetic measure, is presented in table 3.

In 2023, the average index of the European Union's economic sustainability reached the level of 0.451. Twelve member states have scored above this result, among which only four of them were classified in the first class. Moreover, the values of synthetic measures are relatively low – seven countries have obtained the results above 0.5. It signifies that economic sustainability among the EU member states displays medium level and low diversity. Despite the fact that the European Union represents relatively high level of sustainable development in relation to many other countries of the world and is making systematic progress on most SDGs, areas requiring more intensive actions still exist.

The highest level of economic sustainability in 2023 was reached by: Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands and Belgium. The leader of classification has achieved very high level of GERD in relation to GDP, the highest number of patent applications to the EPO per million inhabitants, high share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption and quite high energy productivity. Sweden has scored the best in general government spending on education (3.6% GDP), gross domestic expenditure on research and development (7.3% GDP), as well as the share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption (66.4%). The Netherlands distinguishes as the country with the highest circular material use rate (30.6% against the EU average of 10.3%), while Belgium has experienced the lowest inflation rate in 2023 (2.3% against the EU average of 6.9%).

The average level of economic sustainability was represented by 19 member states. There were eight objects classified in class II, above EU average Q_i: Malta, Germany, Austria, Finland, Luxembourg, Estonia, Ireland and Slovenia. Only three new member states have attained higher than average, but medium level of economic sustainability. Circular material use rate, trade openness, inflow of FDI and real GDP growth rate have contributed to the best position of Malta. Estonia distinguishes with the lowest general government gross debt (20.2% against 65.1% of the EU average), while trade openness, inflow of foreign capital, share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption and circular material use rate were relatively high. Slovenia has recorded lower than the EU average outcome in unemployment rate, while trade openness, inflow of FDI and spending on education were higher than in the EU on average.

Table 3. Ranking of the EU member states by their economic sustainability in 2023

Rank	Country	Value of synthetic measure of economic sustainability in 2023
1	Denmark	0.611
2	Sweden	0.579
3	Netherlands	0.552
4	Belgium	0.521
5	Malta	0.503
6	Germany	0.503
7	Austria	0.502
8	Finland	0.495
9	Luxembourg	0.482
10	Estonia	0.478
11	Ireland	0.474
12	Slovenia	0.467
13	Croatia	0.432
14	Poland	0.428
15	France	0.427
16	Czech Republic	0.427
17	Cyprus	0.426
18	Lithuania	0.422
19	Latvia	0.413
20	Bulgaria	0.411
21	Portugal	0.399
22	Slovakia	0.391
23	Italy	0.386
24	Spain	0.377
25	Romania	0.373
26	Hungary	0.361
27	Greece	0.335
	EU average Qi	0.451

Source: the author's own elaboration

Class III included eleven objects with synthetic measures below the EU average Q_i: Croatia, Poland, France, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Portugal, Slovakia and Italy. The group was formed by mostly new member states, only France, Portugal and Italy represented the old member states. France has exceeded the EU average rate of circular material use, FDI inflow, spending on R&D and patent application to EPO. Relatively high energy productivity, circular material use rate and medium attractiveness for the inflow of FDI characterised Italy, while in Portugal share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption, circular material use rate and inflow of foreign capital were slightly above the average EU values.

Spain, Romania, Hungary and Greece were classified in class IV. Each country has achieved the worst outcome in one of selected partial variables. Spain has achieved the highest unemployment rate in group 15–74 years old (8%), Hungary has experienced the highest inflation rate (17%), while Greece was leading in the area of general government gross debt (163.9%). Romania has represented the lowest results in case of circular material use rate, GERD and patent applications to EPO. The last indicator – patent applications to the European Patent Office by inventors' country of residence (per million inhabitants) – proved to be a weakness of all mentioned countries.

Within the European Union, Poland demonstrates a mid-level performance in economic sustainability in 2023. Our outcomes concerning unemployment rate, inflow of FDI, real GDP growth, general government gross debt and expenditure on education were favorable compared to the EU average results. Meanwhile, patent applications to EPO, inflation rate, energy productivity, use of circular material and renewable energy sources in gross final energy consumption (and production) constitute the strongest threats to our economic sustainability in future.

In the next stage, the author aimed to verify whether the developed countries of the EU display higher economic sustainability than the developing countries. Basing on the created ranking, twelve member states have been classified in the first or the second class of objects with the strongest or strong economic sustainability, among which nine represent the old member states. This may suggest that economic sustainability and the level of development are interrelated.

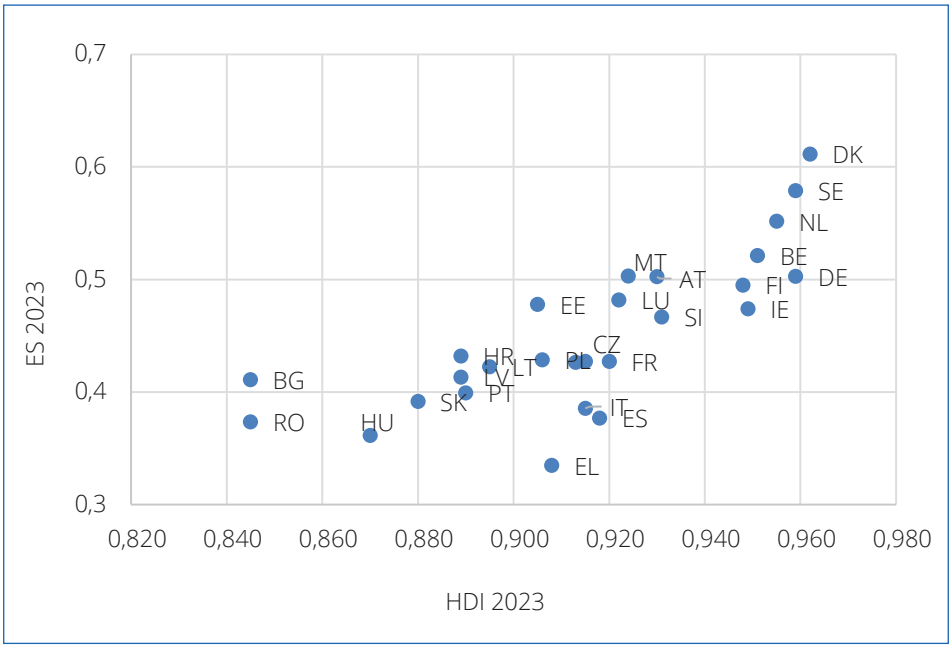
HDI was chosen as a the most suitable measure of socio-economic development. It is the geometric mean of normalised indices representing each of the three dimensions. The health dimension is assessed by life expectancy at birth, the education dimension is measured by mean of years of schooling for adults aged 25 years and more and expected years of schooling for children of school entering

age, while the standard of living dimension is described by gross national income per capita [United Nations Development Programme, 2025].

The relationship between HDI and ES seems to be bidirectional. Higher and better education and health, better social development and rising income create effective workforce, improve entrepreneurship and provide higher funding for sustainability. On the other hand, long-term, stable, and resource-efficient economic growth, sustainable policies and investments secure jobs and income, improving the income component of HDI and rising life expectancy.

The existence of a relationship between the rankings of economic sustainability and human development was examined using the Spearman's correlation coefficient. The result r(S)yx = 0.802 indicates a very strong positive relationship between the variables – a higher level of economic sustainability can be observed for countries representing higher level of human development. The correlation is bilaterally significant, reflecting the complexity of the phenomena and their mutual interdependence. The relationship between indices for particular countries is presented on Figure 2.

Figure 2. The relationship between the economic sustainability and human development for EU member states in 2023



Source: the author's own elaboration.

Sofrankova et al. [2021: 10] conducted regression analysis for 28 member states of the European Union and have found a significant impact of GII, HDI, CPI and DBI on their sustainable economic growth measured by SEDA index in 2011–2018. Three first synthetic measures influenced SEDA positively and the last indicator had a negative impact.

The next objective was to identify the elements of economic sustainability that exhibit the strongest interdependence with the level of development of the EU countries in 2023. The relationship between economic sustainability's single diagnostic variables and the level of socio-economic development measured by HDI was researched using Pearson's correlation. The values of the Pearson's linear correlation coefficients in 2023 indicate a strong positive linear relationship between HDI and innovativeness of the EU member states measured by gross domestic expenditure on research and development and patent applications to the European Patent Office per million inhabitants. A moderate negative linear relationship was found also between the level of socio-economic development and inflation rate which suggest importance of balanced monetary situation on economic sustainability and socio-economic development. Table 4 presents the Pearson's linear correlation coefficients between economic sustainability and HDI for the EU countries in 2023.

Table 4. Pearson's linear correlation coefficients for variables of economic sustainability and HDI for the EU countries in 2023

Symbol	Variable	Value of the Pearson's linear correlation coefficients
X1	Energy productivity	0.115
X2	Circular material use rate	0.433
X3	Share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption by sector	0.204
X4	Unemployment rate in group 15–74 years old	0.039
X5	Trade openness	0.111
X6	Foreign direct investment net inflow	–0.090
X7	Real GDP growth rate	–0.083
X8	Inflation rate	–0.617
X9	General government gross debt	0.056
X10	General government expenditure on education	0.291
X11	GERD	0.745
X12	Patent applications to the European Patent Office by inventors' country of residence	0.801

Source: the author's own elaboration

5. Conclusions

The European Union's economic sustainability in 2023 remained at the moderate level which is evidenced by:

- the value of the average index (0.451),
- the number of objects which have scored above 0.5 (seven countries),
- the number of objects classified in the second and third class (totally 19 member states).

Only four countries have achieved the highest performance compared to other objects, with Denmark exceeding the level of 0.6. The indices obtained by four worst performing countries have not fallen below 0.3. This leads to the conclusion that, among the EU member states, we can observe relatively low diversity in terms of economic sustainability. It may result from a general long-term commitment of the European Union to the issue of sustainable development.

High level of GERD in relation to GDP, the highest number of patent applications to the EPO per million inhabitants, high share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption and quite high energy productivity have mostly contributed to the best position of Denmark in the economic dimension of sustainability. Greece occupying the last position in the ranking represents the highest general government gross debt (163.9%), and other partial indicators such as unemployment rate and inflation rate were slightly higher than the EU average. Only indicators of real GDP growth rate and inflow of FDI were above the EU average. Patent applications to the European Patent Office per million inhabitants proved to be a weakness of the countries in the forth class.

The second research question referred to the existence of a relationship between the rankings of economic sustainability and human development. The Spearman's correlation coefficient at the level of $r(S)yx = 0.802$ indicates a very strong positive relationship between the variables. A higher level of economic sustainability is accompanied by a higher level of human development. The correlation is bilaterally significant.

The third research question covered the relationships between economic sustainability's single diagnostic variables and the level of socio-economic development. The values of the Pearson's linear correlation coefficients in 2023 have proven a strong positive linear relationship between HDI and innovativeness of EU member states measured by gross domestic expenditure on research and development and patent applications to the European Patent Office per million

inhabitants. A moderate negative linear relationship was found also between the level of socio-economic development and inflation rate. The importance of innovation and monetary policy for the economic sustainability has risen as a major implication of the research.

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SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF ROMA IN POLAND – BETWEEN MARGINALISATION AND INCLUSION

Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of this article is to present the process of social integration as assessed by Roma communities in Poland.
- *Research methodology* – The analytical material was obtained on the basis of a survey conducted among 200 representatives of the Roma community living in Poland. Interviews were conducted using an author's questionnaire.
- *Score/results* – Based on the collected empirical material, it can be concluded that Roma are an ethnic group with a strong sense of cultural identity, which contributes to their low level of integration into the country of residence.
- *Originality/value* – Many studies have focused on analysing the inclusion of Roma in European countries. At the same time, there is a shortage of scientific studies resulting from empirical research relating to the social integration of Roma. This issue is still a relatively new research area, which requires systematic research and in-depth analysis in order to design the most effective measures. The research results that have

been presented are of twofold nature, being both research and application-based. It is therefore possible that they may serve as a basis for integration. The identification of the expectations, views and needs of the Polish Roma may contribute to the design of social integration programs that are tailored to their needs.

Keywords: Roma, ethnic minority, social integration, local animation

1. Introduction

The Roma in Poland, are one of the four ethnic groups that have never had their own clearly defined territory. They are predominantly an urban population that resides in larger cities throughout the country [Lejb-Buryś, 2018: 188]. They are a heterogeneous social group that is culturally and anthropologically distinct [Ringold et al., 2005: 32]. In Roma communities the sense of strong attachment to traditions, values and culture is particularly important as it is a key element of their integration and community [Wojtanowicz, 2023: 10].

It should be emphasised that the current situation of Roma is the result of historical processes, decisions made over centuries to locate Roma communities away from society. In addition, they have negative experiences of forced assimilation, which has consequently led to ongoing and growing environmental antagonisms and the negative stereotype of the "gypsy-thief" [Bartosz, 2004: 36]. All this has contributed to the alienation of this group from the society of the country or region.

According to the Recommendation of the Council of the EU, social integration of the Roma, is a slow process in the social space, which is primarily aimed at empowering them to become active citizens of the country [*Recommendations of the Council...*, 2013].

According to Rabbit [1999], social integration is the bringing together of peoples, social groups or states into a certain whole on the basis of mutual contacts and actions in the name of a common idea. The author distinguishes between two planes in which the integration process takes place. The first one is the social-survival plane, in which the processes taking place in the group are experienced and lived out together. On the cognitive-intellectual plane, in turn, a process of shared learning develops. Integration is a set of interrelated changes leading to the merging of components of different domains and aspects of life [Turowski, 2001: 130].

Previous research among Roma communities in Europe has focused mainly on issues of poverty [Matache, Barbu, 2021; Anghel, Alexandrescu, 2022; León, Del Pino-Brunet, 2023] and exclusion [Hellgren, Gabrielli, 2021; Bracic, 2022]. There is a lack of broader research on programs supporting the social integration of Roma and their opinions on these programs. Therefore, the main aim of the research is to present the process of social integration as assessed by Roma communities in Poland.

1.1. Roma in Poland – historical and legal background

Roma in Poland belong to four groups: Polish Roma (Nizinni Gypsies), Lowars, Kelderash and the most numerous – Carpathian Roma (Bergitka Roma). In the 16th century, Gypsies from Germany, later referred to as the Polish Roma, migrated to Poland. The Kelderas and Lowarzy migrated from Transylvania and Wallachia only in the second half of the 19th century. Apart from the Bergitka Roma, all the arriving groups led a nomadic lifestyle engaged mainly in horse trading, crafts and divination. The Gypsies of the Carpathian Roma group made their living by providing services to the rural population [Bartosz, 2012: 9].

World War II was a period in which the Roma experienced great cruelty. They were considered antisocial people of Aryan origin by the Nazi regime. The number of Roma who were murdered during the Second World War is difficult to estimate. The Roma Association in Poland only gives a possible range: between 220 000 and 500 000 victims. This represents 30–60% of the European Roma population respectively.[1]

After World War II, the Polish government's efforts were directed towards achieving an ethnically homogeneous state. At the end of 1949, a census of the Gypsy population was carried out. Actions were also taken to provide material support to those groups that led a sedentary lifestyle. However, this did not encourage the nomadic Roma to stop wandering. On 23 March 1964, the ruling administration took direct action by checking the Roma's documents, living conditions, health situation, fulfilment of children's compulsory schooling, families' sources of income and the extent to which they used social welfare. The Roma were warned as to the consequences of their undertaking further migrations. As a result, by the end of 1969 almost all of them were settled [Sochaj, 2015: 27–36].

[1] The Roma Holocaust (1939–1945). Association of Roma in Poland [www 1].

The end of the 1970s was a period of deterioration of the economic situation in Poland and escalating hatred of the Roma. In the autumn of 1981, a pogrom against them took place in Konin and later also in Auschwitz [Adamczyk, 2013: 87].

The period of political transition initiated positive legal changes on the part of the state, including the status of minorities and the related rights enshrined in the Polish Constitution of on 2 April 1997, which raised hopes among Roma for an improvement in their lot and mobilisation movements. According to Gerlich [2001], this was a new approach, as Roma mobilisations had hitherto only occurred as a result of the occurrence of conflicts with the majority society. However, the changes brought about by the new state policy were initially received with great distrust.

The provisions regulating minority rights in Poland were contained in the *Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language* of 6 January 2005. In it, the Roma were recognised as an ethnic minority, i.e. not having a nation-state with which they could identify [Dz.U., 2005, No. 17, pos. 1–3]. In 2005, the Joint Commission of the Government and National and Ethnic Minorities was established – a consultative and advisory body to the Prime Minister. Within its framework, a Team for Roma Affairs was established, whose task is to monitor the situation of the Roma in Poland, especially paying attention to manifestations of discrimination and the operation of government programmes aimed at this minority. In order to counteract discrimination against minorities living in Poland, amendments were made to *the Labour Code*, *the Social Assistance Act*, *the Employment Promotion and Labour Market Institutions Act* and *the Equal Treatment Act*. The latter, in Articles 6, 7 and 8, speaks of the prohibition of discrimination in access to education, health and social care [Maciejewska, 2016: 14–21].

Currently, the largest number of Bergitka Roma reside in the southern part of Poland, mainly in small towns and villages located in the Podkarpackie, Małopolskie, Śląskie and Dolnośląskie Voivodeships. In contrast, the other groups reside mainly in cities: Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, Łódź, Puławy and Mielec. The different Roma groups in Poland differ significantly from each other in terms of their social status, traditions, dialects used and attitude to society [Paleczny, 2007: 155].

1.2. Challenges to the social integration of Roma – national and European examples

Since the beginning of the endeavour to join the European Union in 1994, measures for the integration of the Roma have become one of the priority tasks of

the Polish government. In view of their multidimensional situation, a number of analyses were carried out in order to develop appropriate remedial projects. Education was one of the priority tasks on which the activity of aid programmes was focused. The first to be created was a pilot government programme for the Roma community in the Małopolskie Voivodeship for the years 2001–2003. It met the expectations of its creators and was positively received by the Roma community.

Another document was the programme for 2004–2006, adopted by the Council of Ministers on 19 August 2004, which aimed to combat forms of exclusion of the Roma community. Assistance was developed in the field of education, improvement of the living and social situation, health care and support for entrepreneurship [*National Strategy*...: 67]. Measures were also taken for security and prevention of ethnic crime, civic education, culture and preservation of the Roma ethnic identity and promotion of knowledge of the Roma community among Poles. The final report of the evaluation study of the above-mentioned programme showed that as many as 88% of the Roma surveyed declared themselves satisfied with the assistance offered to them. Especially the elderly evaluated positively the measures taken [Palewicz-Kwiatkowska, 2013: 153; *Final Report*..., 2011].

Other tools fostering social integration were *the Programme for the Social Integration of Roma in Poland 2014–2020* and the current edition, *the Programme for the Social and Civic Integration of Roma in Poland 2021–2030*. The strengths of the measures taken in the previous initiative included the functioning of a network of Roma education assistants; the improvement of the educational situation, including the reduction of the percentage of Roma students in special schools; the empowerment and civic activation of Roma. However, the weaknesses are much more numerous than the strengths. The low level of education of students, the lack of effective strategies at the local level, and the lack of activities directly targeting Roma youth, women and girls were highlighted. Continuing to strengthen education in its broadest sense, which is most likely to make a real contribution to improving the situation of Roma, was identified as the most important objective of the new programme. Support will also continue in the area of improving the living conditions and professional activation of Roma [Bańka, 2018: 37].

As in Poland, in Romania the main problems of the Roma communities are related to the low level of education, unemployment and lack of employment opportunities. In 1990, the Romanian Ministry of Education initiated the first projects for the education of Roma, and since 1998, it is possible to speak of

a coherent strategy that makes today's "successful Romanian experience" unique not only at the European but also at the global level. The main objectives of this strategy are: the formation of a young Roma intelligentsia through access to secondary and higher education; the preservation of the Roma language, history and culture in the education system; the reduction of discrimination against Roma and their school absenteeism and dropout – this last objective is considered the greatest challenge of education policy in Romania [Szasz and Scesznek, 2019: 437].

Taking care of the preservation of the Roma identity, including Roma culture and language in the education system is also the responsibility of the Finnish authorities. Since 1994, it has had a Roma Education Department the task of whic is, among other things, to plan and implement education so that the Roma population can receive primary and vocational education on an equal basis. It is the duty of public radio and television, to provide services also in the Roma language. The most important Roma organisation is the National Advisory Committee for Roma, which has been operating since 1956. The National Advisory Committee for Roma. Its main tasks are to promote the equal participation of Roma in Finnish society, to improve living conditions and socio-economic position and to support Roma culture. There are a number of other nationwide Roma organisations. The oldest and largest of these is the Romano Missio, founded in 1906. Romano Missio. Its key activities focus on child protection, welfare and social work. The Finnish Roma Association was established in 1967 to provide social support, and the National Roma Forum of Finland was established in 2007 to empower the local Roma organisations [Swed, 2022: 24–25].

One of the most successful European countries in terms of Roma social inclusion is Spain [European Commission, 2018]. The comparative results of the European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II) conducted in 2017 show that the situation of Roma in Spain is better than in other EU Member States, with regard to areas of social inclusion such as access to health services and participation in education. Research in Spain also confirms that the quality of life of Spanish Roma has improved significantly in recent decades [Carrasco and Poblet, 2019: 24].

Although significant efforts are being made at national and European level to protect fundamental rights and increase the degree of social inclusion, the number of Roma facing extreme poverty, marginalisation and discrimination remains very high [Bańka, 2018: 38].

2. Research methodology

The proposed research area fills a gap in the scientific discourse on the issue of social integration of the Roma minority in Poland. The aim of the article is to present the process of social integration as assessed by the Roma minority living in Poland and to identify recommendations addressed to institutions dealing with minorities in Poland. In the context of the main aim of the study, the following two key issues were set:

a) attitudes and opinions of the Roma minority towards activities undertaken so far for their integration into the local environment;
b) local Roma activity in the cultural and civic sphere.

Primary research was carried out with 200 representatives of the Roma community living in Poland. A stratified random sampling was applied, where the counterparts of the strata were the macro-regions of Poland. Efforts were made to maintain proportions between the number of respondents from a given macro-region and the number of Roma living there (Table 1).

Table 1. the number of filled questionnaires in macro-regions

Macro-region	Number of respondents**	Percentage
Centralny	20	10
Mazowieckie Voivodeship	19	9.5
Północny	18	9
Północno-Zachodni	35	17.5
Południowy	47	23.5
Południowo-Zachodni	41	20.5
Wschodni	20	10

Source: the author's survey.

The research methods included: literature studies, a diagnostic survey and descriptive and mathematical statistics, while the techniques were telephone and face-to-face interviews and source document analysis. As mentioned, the research was conducted among 200 citizens of the Roma community. The respondents

were selected purposively and stratified, i.e. by cluster of residence (voivodeships/macro-regions). The respondents were categorised, inter alia, by place of residence, gender, age and education. The research was carried out between April and August 2024.

Due to the cultural distinctiveness of the studed group and the relatively small population nationally, the research required an extended period of fieldwork. During their implementation, there was a problem with reaching Roma communities. The reluctance of respondents was due to factors such as the hermetic nature of the environment and distrust and lack of belief in the validity of the research. In addition, many of the respondents felt that no one cared about their problems and that participating in the research would not change anything. It is also worth pointing out the lack of decisiveness or very limited decisiveness of the Roma women. It was necessary for them to obtain the consent of a male family member to be able to participate in the survey. A significant decrease in willingness to participate in the survey with age was also observed.

3. The results

The respondents were categorised by gender, age, education level and marital status. The heterogeneity and limited decision-making of Roma women translated into the structure of the respondents. More than 60 per cent of respondents were men. The vast majority of respondents were of working age (18–44 years – 54%, and 45–60/65 years – 36.5% of respondents). Half declared that they had primary education and nearly 40% had primary education. The majority of respondents were married (67%) (Table 2).

Cultural separation and a lower quality of life affect the degree of integration of the Roma community with non-Roma neighbours. The survey shows that 40% of the respondents have a sense of identification with their place of residence. One in four respondents declared a different opinion, while the rest were undecided. Most positive opinions were given by respondents who were members of families of five or more. Multiple Roma feel the need to engage with the local community for the sake of their children's future.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Demographic characteristics		Total		Macro-region						
				CEN	MAZ	PŁN	PŁN-ZACH	POŁ	POŁ-ZACH	WSCH
		NoR*	%	NoR						
Gender	female	75	37,5	11	5	6	14	14	14	11
	male	125	62.5	9	14	12	21	33	27	9
Age	18–44	108	54	8	9	15	16	24	25	11
	45–60/65	73	36.5	12	6	3	12	21	13	6
	60+/65+	19	9.5	0	4	0	7	2	3	3
Education	no education	1	0.5	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
	elementary	100	50	10	11	9	19	17	21	13
	secondary	20	10	2	2	0	2	9	5	0
	vocational	79	39.5	8	6	9	13	21	15	7
Marital status	divorced	5	2.5	0	1	0	2	1	1	0
	widow(er)	9	4.5	0	0	0	3	2	2	2
	single	52	26	0	5	8	8	12	14	5
	married	134	67	20	13	10	22	32	24	13
Ethnic group	Bergitka	44	22	0	3	0	3	19	7	12
	Kelderasze	4	2	0	1	1	2	0	0	0
	Lowarzy	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
	Polska Roma	150	75	20	14	17	29	28	34	8

Notes: Number of respondents (*); CEN – Centralny; MAZ – Mazowieckie Voivodeship; PŁN – Północny; PŁN-ZACH – Północno-Zachodni; POŁ – Południowy; POŁ-ZACH – Południowo-Zachodni; WSCH – Wschodni.
Source: the author's survey.

Only one in five Roma identifying with their place of residence stated that non-Roma were open and friendly to them (Table 3). The remainder expressed

negative feelings, claiming that the local community has a reluctant, distrustful or even hostile attitude towards Roma (68, 82 and 10 people respectively).

Table 3. Attitudes of local communities towards Roma

Characteristics	Number of respondents	Percentage
open and friendly	40	20.0
reluctant	68	34.0
distrustful	82	41.0
hostile	10	5.0

Source: the author's survey.

The presented results may be related to the actions dedicated to the Roma community. Only 4% of the respondents said that the measures taken so far to integrate Roma in the local environment were relevant and effective and helped them integrate into the local community. The opposite was true for 28% of respondents, while as many as 68% had not heard of such measures.

One form of the Roma integration into the local community is taking part in social, cultural and educational events in their place of residence. Only one in five respondents confirmed their participation in such meetings (Table 4). The others either did not participate (75 people) or stated that they were not interested in such meetings (44 people), or answered that they only meet in Roma groups (39 people). Among the 42 participating in integration meetings, young Roma were predominant (23 people aged 18–44).

Table 4. Participation of Roma in community integration meetings

Characteristics	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	42	21.0
No	75	37.5
I'm not interested in such meetings	44	22.0
We only meet in Roma groups	39	19,5

Source: the author's survey.

Slightly more than half of the respondents (107 people) rated *low* or *very low* the level of social integration and support for Roma (Table 5). *An average* rating was given by 78 people and *a high* rating by only 15 Roma respondents.

Table 5. The evaluation of the level of social integration and assistance for Roma

Assessment	Number of respondents	Percentage
very low	21	10.5
low	86	43.0
an average	78	39.0
high	15	27.5
very high	0.0	0.0

Source: the author's survey.

The respondents were also asked to give their opinion on measures for their integration into local communities in the regions where they live (Table 6). They were asked to indicate one of five ratings which, in their opinion, most accurately describes the reality:

1 – many actions are taken for Roma integration;
2 – various measures are taken, but they are generally not very effective;
3 – too little attention is paid to the rights of the Roma minority;
4 – there is a lot of talk about the Roma, but in practice there is a lack of appropriate action;
5 – I have no opinion.

Table 6. The opinions of Roma on measures to integrate into local communities

Ratings	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	4	2.0
2	29	14.5
3	53	26.5
4	55	27.5
5	59	29.5

Source: the author's survey.

A small number of respondents (4 out of 200 respondents) were keen to speak about the positive impact of the measures taken to integrate Roma into local communities. Almost 15 percent of respondents said that the measures were not very effective, and slightly more than half thought that there were few measures.

4. Conclusions

The social integration of the Roma is a multidimensional problem that requires continuous action and monitoring of its effects. On the basis of the carried out research, it should be concluded that the existing programmes for community integration have not been successful. Only 2% of the respondents gave a positive assessment of the measures taken so far by the local government and NGOs for community integration, while almost 15% said that they were not very effective. The predominant opinion is that *there is a lot of talk about the Roma, but that in practice there is a lack of appropriate action*, or *that too little attention is paid to the rights of the Roma minority in Poland* – such an opinion was expressed by more than half of the respondents (54%). According to the respondents, various measures are taken, but they are generally not very effective.

Less than half of the respondents identify themselves with their place of residence, while the feeling of integration is most noticeable among families with many children. Only 20% of the surveyed population said that the community they live among is open and welcoming to them. Negative feelings of rejection and local intolerance were the dominant responses among the respondents.

The presented research results indicate the necessity for further actions in the field of Roma integration in Poland, which should be oriented, on the one hand, towards the maintenance of cultural continuity, and, on the other hand, it should contribute to greater openness, with the simultaneous establishment of dialogue and cooperation with the non-Roma community. In the future, local, integrated programmes to support the integration of national minorities in Poland should be created, and the staff responsible for their implementation should be equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills in the area of animation and social integration. It is necessary to systematically expand cooperation between NGOs. The developed and implemented programmes should be multi-level and focused on open cooperation with the local environment.

It is disclaimed that, despite efforts, this study does not exhaust all the aspects of the issue. Therefore, the obtained results should be interpreted taking into

account the specificity of the described assumptions and ranges. Considering that the conducted study included a sample of 6 macro-regions of Poland this limits the generalisations that can be drawn from its results. At the same time, it should be emphasised that the presentation of a social integration of Roma in Poland is an important contribution to future research, not only on a larger sample, but also extended to other countries. The most interesting research questions in the context of further social integration of Roma include: Which programs implemented for the Roma community in Europe are most successful and why? What should be taken into account in the context of the cultural identity of Roma when developing social programs aimed at their inclusion in the regions where they live? Are European funds allocated to Roma social integration programs planned and spent effectively? We will try to answer these questions in the near future.

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