

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF EU REGIONAL POLICY IN POLAND AND ITS IMPACT ON EUROPEAN IDENTIFICATION OF POLISH CITIZENS**by **Elżbieta Opiłowska**

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

The perspective of the accession to the European Union, mainly the need for candidate countries to adopt *acquis communautaire*, has influenced the reform processes in East Central Europe. In order to manage the structural funds, the accession countries were forced to reorganise their administrative structures at the regional level. Moreover, the emphasis on multi-level governance has grown within the European Union, increasing the importance of sub-national units of authority (Bachtler 1992).

Following decades of ideological and institutional uniformity, Poland at the beginning of the 1990s was free to start the important processes of regionalisation. At that time state structures in Poland were highly centralised and over-bureaucratised. Decisions in the communist system were taken at the party-state level, while the lower levels of the party-state apparatus carried out decisions. Sub-national institutions were mere appendages of the central government (Yoder 2003).

Moreover, the economic development in Poland after the World War II was based on central planning and therefore provided little incentive for lower-level managers and workers to take responsibility in their work. The service sector and light industry, especially in the high-technology field, were neglected in favour of heavy industry. The spatial distribution of industry under communism focused on industrial-urban agglomerations, industrial 'zones' or 'axes'. These "very large, vertically-organised agricultural and industrial enterprises and infrastructure required organisation at the national level rather than regionally or locally" (Bachtler 1992). The administrative reform conducted between 1973 and 1975 even increased the centralisation of the state. Within 49 smaller, weaker voivodeships it was easier for the central government to control them. The territorial changes created several small, economically nonviable regions, whose boundaries ignored traditional ties and spatial economic, social and cultural relations. At each level of administration 'national councils' directly supervised the authorities and acted as instruments of the central party. However, despite the communist regimes' endeavours to impose uniformity, regional disparities remained. The three different development paths from the partition's period shaped Poland's economic and political development until present time.

Therefore, in the 1990s, the OECD noted several obstacles when implementing administrative reform in Poland, including a history of underdeveloped local and regional government structures. There was a concern that regional economic disparities would grow, tendencies for regionalism would become ethnically-based and the fact that, with vertical economic and administrative sectorial organization, regional thinking and decentralising efforts would be stifled (OECD 1996: 102). However, undoubtedly the EU accession process was an important catalyst for the development of the Polish regional policy system.

This contribution is aimed at presenting an overview of the development of regional policy in Poland and at analysing the correlation between EU cohesion policy and citizen identification with the EU. It is based on an evaluation of secondary sources and exploitation of European and national surveys on Polish attitudes, identities and appraisals of

EU policies. Poland belongs to the major beneficiaries of the European cohesion policy and can, therefore, provide indicators of effectiveness of EU instruments in this area.

## II. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EU COHESION POLICY IN POLAND

The political and economic transformation in the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) and the enlargement process of the EU have led to a reform of cohesion policy and structural funds. The decentralisation and the strengthening of sub-national authorities were preconditions for candidate countries in the accession process. The EU regional policy promotes greater involvement of regional-level institutions in economic development, with potential for wider changes in regional governance structures (Hooghe 1996). In the case of Poland, the decentralisation reforms have also had a significant bearing on regional development policy.

In March 1990 the Polish Lower Chamber, the Sejm passed the Law on Local Self-Government, which granted new powers of self-government to the parishes. This reform introduced democratic elections at local level, transferred the ownership of communal property from central to local governments, and introduced local administration and local budgets separate from the central government. Additionally, it opened up new areas for political activism, gave more administrative and executive responsibility to local governments, and put the collection and disbursement of revenues in the hands of local authorities (Yoder 2003). Further, on 1 January 1999 the administrative reform became more effective. It reduced the number of 49 voivodeships to 16.

In Poland there is a dual administrative structure at regional level. The voivodeships councils (sejmiki) are responsible for the development and implementation of regional economic policies; their task is to stimulate business activities and improve competitiveness and innovation in the region. These bodies are independent legal identities with independent budgets (such as the districts and villages). The sejmiki are elected in general elections and are headed by elected marshals. On the other hand, the voivodes, are state appointed officials who represent the central government at a regional level. Furthermore, they are responsible for all services related to public security. The voivodeships can enter into bilateral and multilateral cooperation with foreign partners.

The EU launched different programmes in order to help the CEECs implement cohesion policy. In 1991 the European Commission established the ECOS-Ouverture programme for inter-regional cooperation between local authorities in the EU and CEECs. The PHARE Programme, as an EU pre-accession instrument, supported candidate countries in stabilising the external border of the EU and developing cross-border relations between old EU members and potential candidate countries.<sup>1</sup>

The implementation of the cohesion policy is the largest structured public intervention in Poland (Bienias; Gabski 2014). For this purpose, national strategies and programmes (National Development Plan 2004–2006 and National Strategic Reference Framework 2007–2013) have been developed. The distribution of EU structural and cohesion funds is still mostly coordinated on a national level by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development, which also evaluates the effectiveness of implementing the cohesion policy. However, since Poland entered the European Union, the regional governments have also managed EU Structural Funds. Bachtler and Gorzelak (2007) emphasise some added values of EU Structural Funds:

- Leveraging additional resources for economic development;
- The multi-annual planning process, which encourages participants to adopt a 'strategic' approach to regional development, leading to the introduction of new ideas and approaches, better project selection and greater coherence of co-financed projects;
- Partnership. The principle of Structural Funds programming has brought enhanced transparency, cooperation and coordination to the design and delivery of regional development policy, and better quality regional development interventions as a result.

In the period 2004-2015 almost EUR 104 billion (from the EU budget and domestic public co-financing) will be allocated to the implementation of cohesion policy in Poland (Bienias/Gabski 2014). The funds are spread between regions, not equally but according to their GDP level. The largest beneficiaries are the eastern and southern voivodeships as follows: Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Podkarpackie and Świętokrzyskie (Zaleski 2013: 24). Most of the funds are allocated to development and modernisation of physical infrastructure, production sectors and human resources (ibid: 1). The evaluation of effectiveness of cohesion policy in Poland proved that it is an efficient instrument for the socio-economic development of regions. However, as Bianias and Gabski argue, success depends on good coordination and precise targeting of public interventions in order to identify market failures (Bienias/Gabski 2014: 42). According to the evaluation, the lowest level of effects could be observed in the case of highly innovative and R&D projects (Ambroziak 2014: 134).

Within the regional policy Poland has taken significant steps toward decentralisation and regionalisation. However, there are still regional disparities in the development process. The western part of Poland has shown positive signs of regional development, while eastern Poland struggles to keep up. The problem with Polish decentralisation is that the regions do not possess enough resources to solve their problems (Yoder 2003). The following map illustrates the GDP per capita in Polish regions in 2008 and its increase between 2004 and 2008. As we can see, the Mazowieckie voivodeship, with Warsaw as the capital, is the richest one and here the GDP per capita has also risen significantly. The eastern voivodeships (Podkarpackie, Lubelskie, Podlaskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie) have the lowest GDP per capita in Poland.

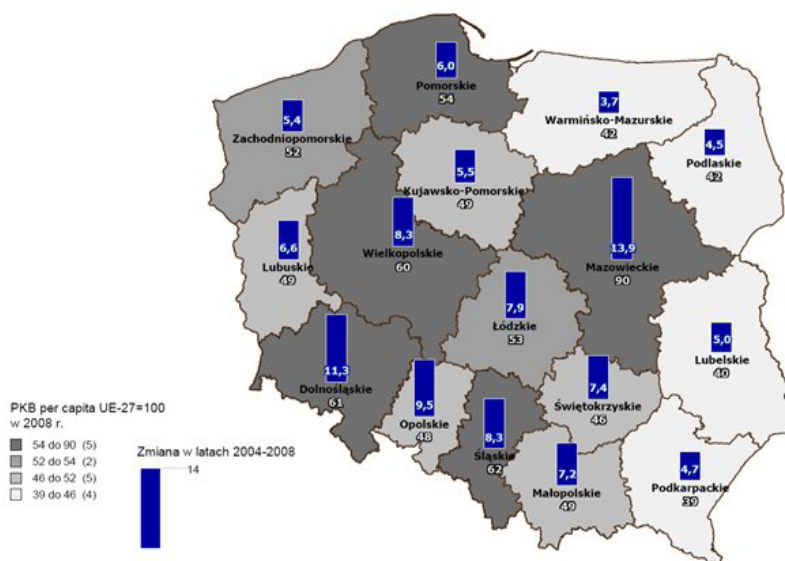


Fig. 1. The GDP per capita, UE=100. Source: Wpływ funduszy europejskich na gospodarkę polskich regionów i konwergencję z krajami UE [The impact of EU funds on economy of Polish regions and on convergence with EU states], Raport 2010, Warszawa 2010.

The Polish Ministry for Infrastructure and Development regularly monitors the impact of the cohesion policy on the socio-economic development of Poland. According to the latest report<sup>2</sup> from June 2014, the impact was expressly positive. In the period 2004-2013, the GDP in Poland grew by 48.7%. The Ministry estimates that about 20% of mid-year growth resulted from enterprises that were realised with the support of EU funds.

Apart from positive impacts of the EU cohesion policy on Poland, there are still some faults and challenges to be addressed in the current financing framework (2014-2020). According to the evaluation reports, the projects realised with EU funds are not strategic but rather local-scale and do not have enough synergy effects. The system for managing regional policy has proved to be centralised and complicated. Its main characteristics include: inflexibility of procedures, lack of transparency in decision-making with all the negative consequences of this; undue efforts wasted on direct implementation instead of work on policy and strategy, and poor staff selection mechanisms (Kozak 2007).

Therefore the aims and procedures of the cohesion policy for the period of 2014-2020 have been redefined:

- a) linking allocation of the Cohesion Policy funds with the Europe 2020 objectives;
- b) reinforcing the territorial dimension of the cohesion policy;
- c) the imposition of conditionalities;
- d) stronger monitoring and evaluation;
- e) the increased role of repayable instruments (re-use of the initial funds) as opposed to non-repayable grants;
- f) change of the paradigm underlying the Cohesion Policy of the European Union.

In line with the Strategy Europe 2020 the Cohesion Policy will become a standard bearer for the objectives of smart, inclusive, and sustainable growth in the Europe 2020 strategy in all EU regions and will not only exclusively cover the least developed parts of the EU (Ambroziak 2014: 134).

In addition, the voivodeship governments in Poland administer in the period 2014-2020 more resources than in the years 2007-2013 when they had close to 25% of all funds for Poland at their disposal. In the new financial perspective they will have nearly 40% of the entire pool and 60 % of ERDF and ESF (37 % in 2007-2013).<sup>3</sup>

### III. THE EU COHESION POLICY AND IDENTIFICATION OF POLISH CITIZENS

From the beginning of Poland's accession to the European Community, the aim of national, and also regional, policy was a "return to Europe". In this regard, local politicians promoted identifying with Europe. However, there was a danger that the heavy-handed

2. Ministerstwo Infrastruktury i Rozwoju, Departament Koordynacji Strategii i Polityk Rozwoju (Ministry of Infrastructure and Development, Department for Coordination of Development's Strategy and Policy) (2014), Wpływ polityki spójności na rozwój społeczno-gospodarczy Polski i regionów w latach 2004-2013 (The impact of cohesion policy on socio-economic development of Poland and regions in the period 2004-2013), Warszawa.

3. <https://www.mir.gov.pl/Strony/glowna.aspx> (last accessed 10.5.2014).

promotion of the European identity may have turned it into an empty catchphrase and a “festivalisation of politics” (Häußermann; Siebel 1993). In practical terms, this ‘return’ signalled a drive to join European institutions, especially the European Union. Following the acknowledgement of this aspiration by the EU in the mid-1990s, as Kataryna Wolczuk argues, the ‘return to Europe’ has taken on the technocratic form of implementing the ‘acquis communautaire’, comprising more or less specified prescriptions. So the accession process opened the applicant countries up to influences from external actors in areas which traditionally belonged to the realm of national sovereignty for EU member-states (Wolczuk 2002: 203-4).

Moreover, in the 1990s the struggle to de-communise and Europeanise Poland was connected with a revival of minority and regional identities, which inspired calls for greater regional autonomy (especially in the Upper Silesia). “The removal of the communist political straitjacket dispelled the myth of national and territorial homogeneity propagated by many communist regimes” (Ibid.). Therefore the regionalisation process in Poland was intrinsically connected with creating Europeaness that helped to escape from the national typecasting. For example in the Northern and Western territories of Poland, that used to belong to Germany before 1945, the regional cultural heritage (German, Polish, Czech, Jewish) has been redefined after 1989 in the framework of common European legacy.

So far there has been a little reflection on the issue, how the citizen’s identity has been shaped by redefinition of regional, national and European territory. Do Polish citizens discern the regional legacy? Do they recognise the EU funds? What is the point of reference for their identification – city/region, state or Europe? The following section aims at presenting the survey results regarding the aforementioned questions.

According to the Eurobarometer 384 “Citizens’ awareness and perceptions of EU regional policy”<sup>4</sup>, conducted in 2013, Polish citizens with 80% are placed at the top of the range regarding awareness of EU co-financed project. As the map below demonstrates, there is a strong link between a country’s eligibility for EU regional funds and the level of awareness of EU co-financed projects. Moreover, in comparison to 2010 the awareness has recorded a growth of 12%. 93% of Polish respondents also think that the EU funds have had a positive impact on the development of their city or region.

Concerning the question on personal benefits from projects funded by the ERDF Polish respondents are placed in the first position, with 59% having heard about the funds.

On the question “At which level should decisions about EU regional policy projects be taken?” 35% of Polish respondents mention local, 30% – regional, 18% – national and 11% EU level.

In summary, according to the survey, there is a very high awareness of the EU co-financed regional projects and a relatively positive evaluation of their results. Further polls confirm the positive attitude of Poles toward European integration. The Polish Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) conducted a survey “10 years of Poland’s membership in the European Union” in February and March 2014, according to which the acceptance of Poland’s membership in the EU is very high.

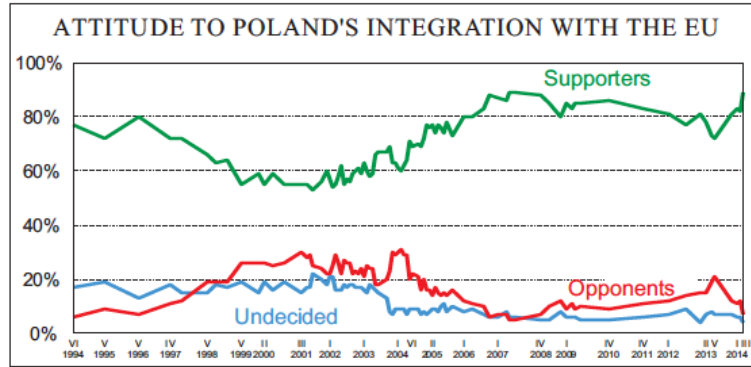


Fig. 2: Attitude to Poland's Integration with the EU, in: CBOS: 10 years of Poland membership in the European Union, source: Polish Public Opinion: April 2014.

In the opinion of respondents, the Polish membership in the EU brings more benefits for Poland than for them personally. However, since 2004 the number of people evaluating Polish membership as positive for Poland, and from an individual perspective, has increased gradually.

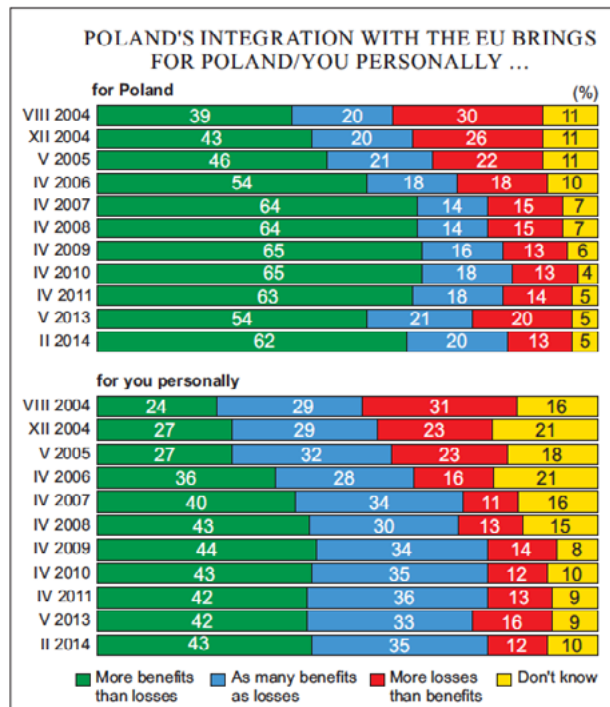


Fig. 3: Evaluation of Poland's Integration with the EU, in: CBOS: 10 years of Poland membership in the European Union, Polish Public Opinion: April 2014.

Poles perceive the positive consequences of EU membership above inter alia for agriculture (73%), improvement of material standard of living (53%) and improvements in roads and infrastructure (in the last 10 years the number of people noting progress in this area increased from 56% in 2004 to 83% in 2014).<sup>5</sup> In public opinion, EU membership has had a positive influence on international security of Poland (51% in 2005 and 72% in 2014). However, 67% of respondents think Poland does not have sufficient influence on EU actions and decisions, although 74% see that EU membership increased the importance Poland within the international arena.

5. CBOS: 10 years of Poland membership in the European Union, Polish Public Opinion: April 2014, p. 2.

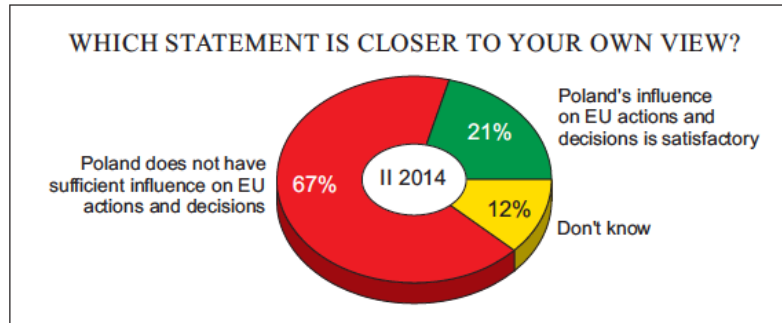


Fig. 4: Poland's influence on EU actions and decisions, in: CBOS: 10 years of Poland membership in the European Union, Polish Public Opinion: April 2014.

As demonstrated in the previous section, in the opinion of the majority of Polish citizens, EU membership has had a positive impact on the economic development of Poland. However, there arises a question on Europe as a point of reference for personal identification of Poles. The CBOS survey shows that 55% of respondents see themselves only in national categories – as Poles. 41% feel Polish as well as European. Only 2% prefer the European identity to the national, however this seems to be falling.

Do you see yourself as...?

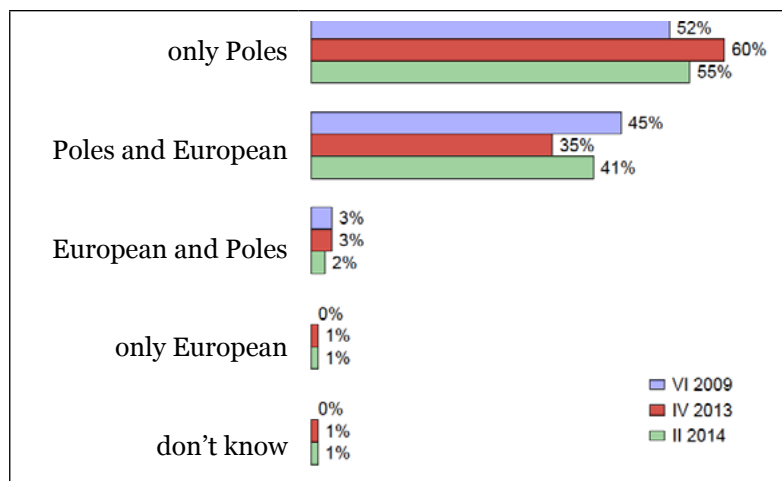


Fig. 5: National and European identification of Poles, source: Roguska, Beata (2014), 10 lat członkostwa Polski w UE, Komunikat z badań CBOS, Nr 52, Warszawa.

The survey of Eurobarometer 81 (Spring 2014) indicates slightly different results in favour of European identification. According to the poll rating, 36% of Polish respondents see themselves as nationality only and 55% as nationality and European.

Regardless of discrepancy between the Eurobarometer and CBOS assessments of self-identification of Polish citizens, it can be claimed that the EU membership of Poland has not impaired the Polish national identification.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Poland is the major beneficiary of the EU cohesion policy and the evaluations of the effectiveness of its implementation demonstrate that EU programmes have had an explicitly positive impact on Poland. The EU funds contributed to economic and investment growth, internal and external economic stability and improved the labour market

situation. According to the above cited reports, the EU funds accelerated the GDP growth in Poland and, therefore, alleviated the effects of the global economic crisis. Thanks to cohesion policy, the divergence between the economy of Poland, in comparison to EU member states, has been reduced, even though there is still a substantial difference overall. The pressure from the EU to adopt the 'acquis communautaire' in the pre-accession phase induced the decentralisation and regionalisation process of Polish governmental systems. Moreover, since 2004 regional governments have been systematically gaining more competence in management of regional policy and funds.

Taking into consideration the impact of membership on attitudes and identifications of Poles with the EU, it proved to be positive, too. According to surveys, Poles see numerous benefits from EU membership regarding economic growth, regional and local investments, labour market and national security. However, in their opinion, Poland profits more as a state than they do as individuals. Despite their acknowledgment of positive effects of EU membership, Polish citizens define themselves above all through nationality. The majority of respondents indicated only Polish nationality as a point of reference and the comparison to previous polls veers towards an opinion that the national identity will play a major role in the future. So far there are no dates on regional differences in identifications process of Poles and it is impossible to answer the question in correlation between EU support and European identification.

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