

The Decentralization of Poland 1989-2018: From Partisan Disagreement to a Vehicle for Successful Absorption of EU Cohesion Funding

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ABSTRACT This article draws the main lines of development of the territoriality of the Polish state, taking into account the divergent dynamics of its regional evolution. Building on a historical account, it describes how the decentralization process unfolded, leading to the reform in 1998/1999, which administratively decentralized the state without, however, changing its unitary nature. By analysing the complexity and diversity of the EU's cohesion policy, the paper also addresses questions that are central to theoretical arguments about EU influence on the divergence of regions. It concludes that even if the EU cohesion policy can be seen as a success in Poland, the amount of funding was not sufficient to reduce the differences between the Polish voivodships, which have been growing in recent decades. Paradoxically, the successful use of EU funding did not prevent the massive electoral wins of an EU-sceptic party in the poorer eastern regions, which were supported by a special EU fund.

KEYWORDS Poland; decentralization; regionalization; EU cohesion policy; PiS; voivodship funding; unitary state.

Introduction

When in December 2017 the European Commission initiated the so-called Article 7 proceedings against Poland, experts started to look more closely at the “rebel” member state. The Polish development was surprising, because before the Eurosceptic Law and Justice (PiS) government came to power in 2015, Poland had been seen as an exemplary accession candidate and quickly

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became a trustworthy partner after joining the EU in 2004. In the following decade, it was the top performer economically among the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries; one of the reasons for this was its efficient use of the EU cohesion policy.

Not only its insistence on the “Polish” way to reform the judicial system and the Constitutional Court—which went against EU law and values—surprised the Europeans; the EU also denounced Poland’s lack of solidarity in the refugee crisis. Suddenly, Poland was seen as a state which, while taking advantage of EU funding, did not comply with EU values or rules. This new-found tension between a successful absorption of EU funds and open infringement of EU law provoked a discussion about the future distribution of EU funds and possible punishment mechanisms for “non-compliant” member states.

While an analysis of all the reasons for the Polish “rebellion” is beyond the scope of this article, by examining the regional development and decentralization process, this paper is one of the first to solve at least part of the puzzle. The decentralization of Poland and its integration into European structures may have produced losers during the transition who later supported Euro-sceptic parties. With good reason some authors point out that the eastern Polish voivodships have been the electoral stronghold of the PiS government since 2005. The voting patterns in the east, which is also called “Poland B”, stand in opposition to the economically successful “Poland A” in central and southern/western Poland, which widely disapproves of EU-sceptic policies.

In this article I will analyse the political and territorial development of Poland into a strong unitary, albeit administratively decentralized, state. I will then examine the reasons for the current territorial differences. I will go on to examine the state structure, placing emphasis on the process of decentralization and how this process influenced the regionalization of Poland and the role the EU played in that process. I will then show the different political decentralization preferences of the actors after 1989 and examine how these preferences have changed. By taking a closer look at the Europeanization of Polish regional policy, I will show that after an unruly beginning to the decentralization process, the EU became an important player, strongly influencing Polish regional policy. Nonetheless, EU funds were not able to close the gap between the regions. Finally, I will analyze these developments against the background of the recent EU-Poland crisis.

This article will draw the main lines of development of the territoriality of the Polish state, focusing on all the divergent dynamics of its regional evolution. By analysing the complexity and diversity of the EU cohesion policy, the paper also addresses questions that are central to theoretical arguments about EU influence on the divergence of the regions. The answers to this puzzle may enrich research on territorial politics, regionalism, EU cohesion policies and EU studies.

Decentralization and regionalization in the literature

In a unitary state sovereignty remains at the centre. The sub-state regions have only those powers which the centre transfers to them and which the central government can withdraw at any time. This transfer of political powers to a regional unit has been called “devolution”. The non-division of sovereignty makes the conceptual definition of a unitary state relatively sharp. However, unitary states may differ, especially in terms of their degree of decentralization. They can take many forms, such as centralized unitary states (Greece, Portugal) or decentralized unitary states (the Netherlands, France).

Compared to the term “unitary”, “decentralization” is more difficult to define. Examining the distinction between federal and unitary states, Falleti suggests subdividing decentralization by analysing how many fields of authority transfer it covers. In line with this approach, we are able to distinguish three types of decentralization: administrative, fiscal and political.

Administrative decentralization refers to the range of policies that have been transferred to the sub-state units in the form of social services such as education, health or social welfare. Fiscal decentralization refers to the set of policies which have been designed to increase the revenues and fiscal autonomy of the sub-state units. Political decentralization has been defined as a “set of constitutional amendments and electoral reforms designed to open new or activate existing, but dormant or ineffective, spaces for the representation of subnational polities”.

The distinction offered by Hicks & Kaminski focuses more on Eastern Europe where, during the transition years after 1989, a unitary version of the state with some of the traits of decentralization prevailed. They distinguish

between three modes of decentralization: devolution, deconcentration and delegation.

Seen from this “unitary” viewpoint, devolution is the greatest division of powers and is defined as a transfer of authority to moderately autonomous bodies which are not under the control of central authorities. In this case, the regional authority is a legal self-governing entity, where the people elect the regional council and the executive bodies are either elected or appointed by the central government. The other two types of decentralization are weaker. Delegation is defined as the allocation of managerial responsibilities for specific tasks to public bodies. These may include local governments or special agencies, which act as agents of the central government. Similarly, deconcentration entails only the transfer of limited responsibility to lower levels of administration. In brief, while devolution refers to a transfer of powers to an independent body, the terms deconcentration and delegation are used by a strong central government which delegates power to organs completely dependent on them.

In contrast to decentralization, in the literature the term “regionalization” describes a procedure or an action which has as its goal the establishment of territorial divisions for the purposes of practical action, i.e. the organization of the state. This process is usually led by the government, which debates and studies proposals, legislates and implements reforms which are founded on endogenous or exogenous conditions such as history, current territorial divisions or socioeconomic dynamics. Bachtler & McMaster argue that the deconcentration of central government responsibilities to regional offices is the most common form of regionalization.

Literature review

From the beginning of the 1990s, scholars argued for an administrative reform of Poland, which finally took place from 1998 to 1999. Gwiazda has divided the accompanying decentralization process into five phases, which will also form the backbone of this analysis. The first two phases are the stage before the administrative reform, which coincides with the EU pre-accession period from 1990 to 1998 and the stage after the reform or the “EU accession stage” from 1998 to 2004. The third period is after Poland joined the EU in

2004 and before the start of the first Regional Operational Program (ROP) (2004-2006). The final two phases are related to the EU cohesion policy and the ROPs, which were developed by the member states for the programming periods of 2007-2013 and 2014-2020. This cross-fertilization between national and European factors is a permanent feature of any analysis of Poland's decentralization.

The discussion about the conditions which influenced the administrative reform has been lively, with many actors arguing whether national, European or both factors were decisive in its final shape. In this literature, Gorzelak & Kozak and Brusis point to the pre-communist and communist past as the most important factor. Also Hughes, Sasse and Gordon contend that historical factors are more relevant than EU conditionality when explaining regional policy. Sturm & Dieringer see the Polish model as a “compromise between acceptance of the requirements of EU accession, the logic of democratization including the principle of self-governance, and the striving for government control in order to secure Polish statehood”.

Tending to favour EU conditionality as the most significant factor, authors such as Yoder, Pitschel and Bauer argue that it was primarily the EU which influenced the regionalization processes. Swianiewicz claims that Europeanization was one of the crucial factors during the Polish reform. The literature agrees that in the run up to accession, the Commission may have influenced policy and institutional development in Poland in several ways, both directly and obliquely.

However, a critical evaluation of the administrative reform has barely been undertaken in the literature. This is surprising given the major impact the reform has had. At the same time, it might imply that Polish or international experts such as the European Commission or the OECD did not see larger problems in the territorial reform. Since Poland's accession to the EU, some contributions on Poland and the evaluation of the EU cohesion policy have emerged, albeit with cautious evaluations. Surprisingly, it is hard to find an accurate account of the impact of EU cohesion policy on Polish institutions.

The political system of Poland

The semi-presidential system in place was established by the 1997 Constitution. The head of state is the president, who since 2015 has been Andrzej Duda from Law and Justice (PiS). The president is elected directly by a popular vote for a five-year term. However, the powers of the president are weak and in fact limited to his or her power of veto, which may be overruled by a three-fifths majority of the lower chamber, the *Sejm*, where the real power lies. The parliament has 460 MPs, which are elected by a proportional system. The upper chamber is the Senate with 100 senators elected by a majority system. The Senate is not a territorial chamber, and there is little inclination to make it one.

The development of the political party system could be divided into two parts. The first is the period of “instability” between 1991 and 2005-2007 when governments took the form of coalitions, which lost all of the subsequent national elections. In this period, the main ideological cleavage was between the post-communist leftist coalitions and the post-Solidarność parties. They were, roughly speaking, divided into a liberal side, with parties such as the Liberal Democratic Congress (KLD), the Freedom Union (UW) and the Civic Platform (PO); and the conservative-nationalists, which unified first in the Centre Agreement (PC) or Christian National Union (ZChD), and later in parties such as Law and Justice (PiS). During this period no political party won enough votes to govern independently and usually needed a coalition partner. Before 2005, this partner was often the farmers’ party, the Polish People’s Party (PSL). In this unstable period, support for individual parties was very volatile, with old parties disappearing and new ones emerging.

In 2001, a corruption scandal, the so-called Rywin affair, shook Polish politics. It involved efforts by the Polish film mogul Lew Rywin to bribe the editor of Poland’s most popular newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Adam Michnik. This scandal not only revealed major flaws in democratic rule in Poland, but also discredited the governing post-communist party Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and led to its electoral defeat in 2005. After this scandal some of the characteristics of the party system changed. Since the 2005 elections, the post-Solidarność Civic Platform and Law and Justice have divided the political stage between them. These are the only parties to have provided a prime minister or president since 2005. During this period we have also

seen a rise in populist parties, such as Self-Defence (Samoobrona), the League of Polish Families (LPR), Klub Palikota or Kukiz'15, all of which have won representation in the Polish parliament. The first two were able to form government coalitions and the others had a major influence on Polish politics.

If we examine president-parliamentary relations, we find several periods of “cohabitation” between the president and the parliamentary majority. These were especially important before the reform of the presidential system in 1997, when the president had more powers. The first period was between 1993 and 1995 with Lech Wałęsa as president (1990-1995) and several different prime ministers led the SLD/PSL government (1993-1997). The second “cohabitation” period is of particular interest for this analysis. It began when Aleksander Kwaśniewski (1995-2000) from the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SdRP), which was part of the SLD coalition, became president. However, the Prime Minister, Jerzy Buzek, came from the Solidarność camp (Solidarity Electoral Action/AWS). This second “cohabitation” played a major role in the decentralization reform.

The history of decentralization in Poland

The partition of Poland between Russia, Prussia and the Austrian Habsburg Empire between 1772 and 1795 is still considered a major event and plays a similar role in Polish collective memory as the French revolution for the French. After the partition, the three divided parts developed differently. In the part controlled by Prussia in the west there was rapid industrialization and Germanization. A liberal approach was taken and there was some autonomy under the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the south. Under Tsarist Russia in the east there was less industrialization and Russification.

These development patterns were a challenge for the unification of Poland after it gained its independence in 1918. In the Interwar Period, 1918-1939, Poland was a multi-national state with minorities such as the Lithuanians, Belarusians, Germans and Ukrainians. It also allowed Upper Silesian autonomy in the south. This period would influence the future perception of territorial organization. The conflicts between Poles, Germans and Silesians in Upper Silesia and between different national minorities in the east were the basis for a future fear of radical decentralization and any kind of strong regional autonomy.

After the end of World War II in 1945, Poland did not regain full sovereignty and became a part of the Warsaw Pact under the direct control of the Soviet Union and the country's borders shifted dramatically. In accordance with the agreements reached at the conferences in Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam, the eastern lands of pre-war Poland with Ukrainian and Belarusian minorities were incorporated into the Soviet Union while the German regions east of the rivers Oder and Neisse remained in Poland. The new authorities took the form of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN), which was established in July 1944. One of its first measures was to abolish the administrative structure introduced by Nazi Germany and initially restore the pre-war administrative division of Poland. Many adjustments followed, among them the cancellation of Upper Silesian autonomy.

Throughout socialist rule the Polish state was unitary with a strongly centralized government. This did not represent a Polish preference, but rather the nature of the regime in power. Built on “democratic centralism”, the state was controlled directly by the Politburo of the United Polish Workers Party (PZPR). Between 1950 and 1975 the administrative division of the state was based on three layers: 17 voivodships (*województwo*), nearly 400 poviats (*powiat*) and a changing number of municipalities (*gromady*).

The centralization of the state increased with the reform of 1975, when a two-tier system was introduced. The reform increased the number of voivodships from 17 to 49, abolished the poviats, and reduced the number of municipalities to 2,500, changing their name back from *gromady* to *gmina* (see Table 1).

Table 1. Territorial administrative structures in Poland after 1918

Period	Number of:		
	voivodships/ <i>województwa</i>	poviats	municipalities/ <i>gminy</i>
1918-1939	16 (plus 1 city)	279 + 13	3,195 <i>gminy</i>
1944-1950	14 (plus 2 cities)	299	3,005 <i>gminy</i>
1950-1975	17 (plus between 2 and 5 cities)	391	from 8,800 <i>gromady</i> in 1954 to some 4,500 in 1973, 2,366 <i>gminy</i> in 1973
1975	49	abolished	from 2,327 to 2,343 <i>gminy</i>
since 1999	16	307 (314) + 66	2,478 (2018) <i>gminy</i>

Source: Gorzelak (2011), modified by the author

This reform left the new voivodships even more dependent on the control of the central government, and the administrative units become agents of central power.

Decentralization of Poland after 1989

After the crisis in the 1980s, the future shape of the state was decided at the Round Table Talks held in 1989 between the communists and the opposition forces of *Solidarność*. This was the first opportunity to discuss regime reforms and among them the question of decentralization. While the communists were in favour of a centralized state, the *Solidarność* members favoured decentralization and regional autonomy on the grounds of democracy, efficiency and accountability. In this first meeting, the discrepancies between the two camps were so great that a “statement of disagreement” had to be signed in the chapter on local government.

The poor condition of the Polish regions inherited from the socialist economy was a serious obstacle to the transformation of Poland in the 1990s. Poland was on the brink of an economic crisis with high unemployment rates. Foreign companies were reluctant to invest in this high-risk scenario. Under these circumstances, only a few attempts at an active, or even defensive, Polish regional policy were made. The first defensive measures were directed at neutralizing possible political time bombs in the region around Lodz with its heavy textile industry and the industrial coalmines of Upper Silesia, which suffered during the transition to a capitalist economy.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the two-tier administrative division was maintained. However, while the 49 voivodships worked well as a control mechanism of the socialist party, they were not the optimal solution for the new liberal-democratic Poland. The surviving voivodships were considered to be too small and too weak to become important regional actors. They were also bereft of academic and scientific centres, which could have helped to create regional strategies and programs.

The adoption of the Local Government Act in 1990 introduced elected local government at the municipal level, while the upper tiers of territorial divisions continued to be managed by the state administration. The chief of

regional administration (*województwo* or governor) was appointed by the prime minister. The 1990 reform was the first step towards decentralization, which was expected to stabilize the democratic structures and minimize the danger that state reforms would be sabotaged by a local post-communist administration.

The 1990 reform was followed by a period of reflection about the future shape of Polish territorial division. While most actors agreed that some kind of decentralization was necessary, opinions regarding the potential autonomy of some regions were more divided.

In parts of the *Solidarność* camp, regional reforms were seen as part of their “self-limiting revolution”, where the most important value for the future state was liberty (*wolność*) and the development of a civil society. The strongest advocates for a decentralized state with some regional autonomy were regional organizations in the Regional Social Movement (SRR), which included the Upper Silesian Association (USAS), Kashubian-Pomeranian Association (ZKP), Great Polish Union (UWi) and the Silesian Autonomy Movement (RAŚ).

The only significant non-regional organization that participated was the liberal circle around the Liberal Democratic Congress (KLD), in whose ranks could be found the future Polish prime minister and current President of the European Council, Donald Tusk. At the beginning of the 1990s, when in the EU the idea of a “Europe of the Regions” was gaining strength, this liberal circle argued in favour of strong and effective regions. However, in the following years, the liberals slowly slipped into a position similar to that of the other Poland-wide parties, which were reluctant to grant requests for autonomy.

For most of the centre-right parties, regionalization was also of some interest, albeit in a very limited way. The conservative-nationalist arm of *Solidarność*, such as the Christian National Union (ZChD), or other nationalist forces such as the Confederation of Independent Poland (KPN), were against decentralization reforms because they would trigger cross-border collaboration between Polish voivodships and their western regions which would threaten the Polish nation and its values. The Polish People’s Party (PSL) also wanted to maintain the status quo. They were in favour of the old two-tier government, arguing that new voivodships in Western Poland would eventually

connect with the German *Länder* and destabilize the integrity of the Polish state. PSL's other worry was that it would lose power at the local level in the agricultural regions, where the party had important electoral strongholds.

Though generally supportive of decentralization in theory, the post-communist party maintained the position that it had defended at the Round Table, arguing that any regionalization of the country would weaken the Polish state. This position was supported by several interest groups, such as members of the central bureaucracy and of the regional administrative elites, who felt threatened by the prospect of regional reform.

The decentralization process came to a halt in 1993, when the post-communist camp regained control of the government. The Polish Peasant Party (PSL), as the junior coalition partner, was the main driver of the pause. The post-communists, as the senior partner, were reluctant to break the coalition due to the decentralization reform and supported the PSL's position.

At the same time as the discussion on decentralization was occurring, the political actors were working on a new constitution, which would replace the "small constitution" of 1992. The final version was a compromise between the ruling government of the SLD-PSL (1993-1997) and part of the opposition within the Freedom Union (UW).

The constitution clearly establishes the limits of decentralization with Art. 3, where Poland is declared a unitary state. However, it also states in Art. 15.1 that "the territorial system of the Republic of Poland ensures the decentralization of public authority". The second part of this article (15.2) states that all further decisions are to be specified in a new law. We find another reference to local government in Article 16.1 of the constitution, which says that "the general population of the units of the basic territorial division is by law the self-governing community".

Even though the articles referring to decentralization were not considered to be unduly controversial, the constitution as a whole was highly contentious and was rejected by most of the conservative forces. It was subsequently approved by a small majority of Polish citizens in a nationwide referendum.

Compared to other states such as Italy or Spain, which position themselves in between a unitary and a federal state and permit regional autonomy, or

Great Britain, which allows the devolution of legislative and executive power, in Poland the main transfer is of administrative power. The principle that the local government holds only administrative power was strengthened by a Constitutional Court (CC) sentence in 2000. The CC declared that local government is not sovereign, that it should follow central state laws and that it is controlled by central state institutions. In a subsequent ruling in 2005, the Constitutional Court declared that the Polish state is based on the principle of decentralization and not regional autonomy.

The subsequent decentralization reform had to be carried out in accordance with these constitutional rules of the game. The reform began in 1997, when a *Solidarność*-based coalition formed by Solidarity Elected Action (AWS) and the Freedom Union (UW) came to power and passed a large reform package, including not only administration, but also education, pensions and the health system. The decentralization reform was based on a draft by a policy research institute with ties to the first *Solidarność* government called the Institute of Public Affairs.

The political conflict between the new post-*Solidarność* government and the former post-communist block, represented by President Aleksander Kwaśniewski (1995-2000), was not about the possible depth of decentralization, but was limited to the discussion about the number of future voivodships. The government advocated around 11-13 voivodships, which should be based on the network of large metropolises or bigger cities of national importance such as Białystok, Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Katowice, Krakow, Lublin, Lodz, Poznań, Szczecin, Warsaw and Wrocław. Smaller cities such as Rzeszów or Olsztyn could be included to fill the relatively empty spaces in some parts of the country. The idea to create around a dozen large and strong regions was influenced not only by the ideas of the liberal and conservative circles of the government, but was also in line with the Commission's criteria for the purposes of administering regional aid and developing strategies for regional development that complied with the NUTS II classification.

The Buzek government's proposal produced losers among the former 49 voivodship capitals, many of which would lose their regional capital status. Even though not all of them fought to recover their autonomy, President Kwaśniewski (SLD), who had the power of veto, offered an alternative which involved creating 17 voivodships, including some of the unhappiest regions. The final compromise was closer to the president's suggestion.

Figure 1. The 16 voivodships in Poland after the reform in 1999



Source: www.nationsonline.org

The Regional Reform of 5 June 1998, which came into force on 1 January 1999, created 16 voivodships. The reform also divided the territory of Poland into 308 (after January 2003, 314) poviats and 2,489 (in 2018, 2,478) municipalities. In the new system, the municipalities (*gminy*) constitute the basic level of public administration, protected by the constitution and endowed with all the powers not specifically reserved for other levels. The poviats became the middle layers and were responsible for local issues which, based on the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, could not be granted to the municipalities.

Apart from transferring local and regional powers, an important element of the administrative reform was the implementation at the voivodship level of a combined administration concept. In this case, the regional government is represented by the regional councils (*sejmiki*), which are elected in direct proportional elections. This organ elects the chief executive officer (marshal)

who represents the region. These regional units of self-governance have formal responsibility for, among other things, planning a regional development strategy. The *sejmiki* are responsible for higher education, specialized health services and cultural activities at the voivodship level. They can also collaborate with foreign governments, regions or private companies.

In this dual system, the regional councils are counterbalanced by the governor (*wojewoda*), who is appointed by the prime minister and represents the central state. The governor checks the legality of decisions made by all three tiers of the territorial governments and ensures the unity of the state. As a representative of the state treasury, he or she also controls finances. While Swianiewicz argues that the functions of the central state and self-government institutions are separate and that there is no hierarchical subordination between them, other authors argue that the regional level is subordinate to the central level.

Influence of the EU on Polish regional policy

The dispute about the administrative reform of 1998/1999 was the last big debate about decentralization in Polish politics. With EU funding within its reach, all political parties accepted the new administrative order. A good example of a partisan agreement is the National Development Plan for 2000-2002, where a new regional policy was presented. The voting showed that all parties voted in favour: 394 deputies supported the bill, nobody voted against it and six abstained. Apparently, the possible paybacks from fulfilling EU cohesion policy compensated for the immediate costs for all actors.

Another example of the new paradigm of cooperation was that although the post-communists regained power after the 2001 elections, the new government did not review the administrative reform. The Polish government focused on EU integration by adopting EU principles of regionalization and subsidiarity.

Since the early 2000s, the EU has had a major influence on regional policies in Poland and the development of Polish regions. From the start of accession preparations, Ferry identifies a conditionality of EU membership obligations. Other authors argue that in the pre-accession period, Poland and other CEE countries underwent a process of external governance. Being part of the EU club meant submitting to EU rules. That allowed the EU to influence the

restructuring of domestic institutions and the entire range of public policies in these states.

Poland and other candidate states must meet two requirements: first, adopt the entire body of EU legislation, and second, decentralize power. Chapter 21 of the *acquis communautaire* dealt with the field of “Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments”, focusing on launching a “suitable” form of territorial organization for the implementation of Structural Funds. The candidate states concluded that the Commission preferred the establishment of democratically elected, regional self-government. Even though before 1998 there were no formal written exchanges between the Commission and Poland on the content of regional policy, the Commission’s preferences were conveyed through other informal means. The pre-accession EU funding programmes, such as PHARE, ISPA and SAPARD, gave direct assistance to Poland and established the necessary informal channels. Other informal methods were through bilateral meetings at the ministerial and expert level or working papers, where the European Commission created an incentive structure for reforms. From 1997 onwards, the Commission’s formal views were set out in regular reports.

The decentralization reform of 1998/1999 met most of the EU requirements laid down in Chapter 21, however, suddenly it was not clear if the Commission itself sticks to its decentralization goals. From early 2001, the Commission proactively emphasized a clear preference for the centralized management of structural funds in the CEE, which resulted in Poland pushing regional authorities to the side. Apparently, the Commission doubted the ability of regional authorities to cope with programme management responsibilities, and only some tasks were decentralized.

The EU has gradually come to dominate Polish regional policy since 2000. National, regional and local elections started to be driven by the motivation to obtain the largest possible amount of pre- and post-accession structural and cohesion funds. Swianiewicz went so far as to ironically call the Ministry for Regional Development, established in 2005, the “Ministry of EU Funds”.

Besides that, the need to comply with EU standards in many policy fields influenced local political discourse. Poland willingly followed the logic of fulfilling the *acquis* conditions because these were balanced by the opportunities offered by EU membership and participation in EU Cohesion policy

programmes. By issuing regular reports on progress, the Commission assumed a “gate-keeping” role, exercising considerable influence over policy development and governance. The weight of the Commission was also different. Despite the fact that, following the failure of the European Constitution in the 2000s and the economic crisis in the 2010s, the Commission lost most of its strength, the Commission of the 2000s has been a strong institution, driven by the intention not only of widening but also deepening the EU.

Nonetheless, once Poland became a member state of the EU, even the “strong” Commission lost its gate-keeping role. Since 2004, the EU’s cohesion policy has been decided during the bargaining about the European Union budget for 2007-2014 and 2014-2020, where the Commission is only one of the actors.

Surprisingly, only one year after joining the EU, Poland turned slightly Euro-sceptic. The elections in 2005 were won by the right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS), which formed a coalition with other Euro-sceptic parties such as the League of Polish Families (LPR) and Self-Defence (Samoobrona) for a short period of time. Despite its partially anti-EU narrative, this coalition did not renege on the commitment to take full advantage of the EU cohesion policy. In the 2005 election manifesto, the PiS underlined the importance of EU structural funds for Poland’s economic development and was critical of limiting the EU budget and structural funds. The liberal opposition of the Civic Platform did not dispute these policies.

The development of the Polish regions before 2004

At the beginning of the 1990s we see few differences between Polish regions. This is mainly due to the centrally planned communist economy, which led to a cohesion policy based on the centralist state approach. It tried to divide economic resources equally amongst most regions. Nonetheless, at the same time, the communist state, following the doctrine of heavy industrialization, created new regional “champions” or strengthened some of the old economic powerhouses. These were in the big steel and industrial complexes of Gdańsk, Warsaw, Upper Silesia, Lodz and Krakow. With the transition, the rules of the game totally changed. In the newly introduced democratic-capitalist system, one of the main divergent factors was the flow of foreign capital. This capital tended to choose well-developed regions with human capital and an appealing infrastructure or geographic position.

Following the creation of the 16 voivodships in 1999, it is possible to start to compare Polish regions. Between 1998 and 2004 Poland in total grew steadily in per capita/GDP terms. While in 1998 per capita income in Poland was 36% the EU-15 average, by 2004 it had grown to 50.7% the EU-25 average. Nonetheless, development was not even. While all Polish voivodships made progress, some voivodships took bigger steps than others (Table 2). The biggest development took place in the Masovian voivodship with its capital Warsaw (+24), then Silesian (+17), Lower Silesian (+16), Greater Poland (+16) and Łódzkie (+15). The regions in the east also grew, albeit at a much slower pace, with Subcarpathian (+8) and Lubelskie (+2) closing the list.

Table 2. The development of Polish voivodships 1998-2004 (GDP/capita in PPS)

Voivodship/Polish name	Capital	GDP/capita in PPS (Index, EU-15 = 100), 1998	GDP/capita in PPS (Index, EU - 25 = 100), 2004	(+) Difference between 1998-2004
Masovian/ <i>Mazowieckie</i>	Warszawa	53	77	24
Silesian/ <i>Śląskie</i>	Katowice	40	57	17
Lower Silesian/ <i>Dolnośląskie</i>	Wrocław	36	52	16
Greater Poland/ <i>Wielkopolskie</i>	Poznań	38	54	16
Łódzkie/ <i>Łódzkie</i>	Łódź	32	47	15
Pomeranian/ <i>Pomorskie</i>	Gdańsk	36	50	14
Lubusz/ <i>Lubuskie</i>	Gorzów W./Zielona Góra	33	45	12
Opole/ <i>Opolskie</i>	Opole	32	44	12
Kuyavian-Pomeranian/ <i>Kujawsko-Pomorskie</i>	Bydgoszcz/Toruń	33	45	12
Świętokrzyskie/ <i>Świętokrzyskie</i>	Kielce	27	39	12
Western Pomeranian/ <i>Zachodniopomorskie</i>	Szczecin	35	47	12
Podlaskie/ <i>Podlaskie</i>	Białystok	27	38	11
Warmian-Masurian/ <i>Warmińsko-Mazurskie</i>	Olsztyn	28	39	11
Lesser Poland/ <i>Małopolskie</i>	Kraków	33	43	10
Subcarpathian/ <i>Podkarpackie</i>	Rzeszów	27	35	8
Lublin/ <i>Lubelskie</i>	Lublin	33	35	2

Note: PPS, purchasing power standard.

Source: Eurostat (2007)

There are different explanations for this development. There is no doubt that Warsaw, as a metropolitan capital, was the primary beneficiary of “networkization”, which allowed it to integrate successfully into the global economy. Besides that, cities with a population of over 500,000 such as Poznań, Wrocław, Kraków, Gdańsk and Łódź have grown thanks to newly emerged service companies, which triggered a surge in development in their surrounding areas, pushing their voivodships to the top of the table, when one analyses GDP/capita in PPS. While these more developed regions experienced greater inflows of foreign capital, economically weaker regions had to cope with major structural difficulties. In the eastern part of Poland these regions have fused into a large macro-region sharing similar economic difficulties.

The development of the Polish regions after 2004

The regional debate after the Polish accession to the EU in 2004 dealt above all with questions relating to how to implement EU cohesion policy successfully. While some experts called for the need to invest in the innovative and knowledge-based economy, political elites were interested in policies with an immediate effect, such as infrastructure reform. In the end, the second approach prevailed. Besides that, we find a discussion over which regions to support. While some experts wanted to focus on the most developed regions by creating “growth engines” others preferred an equal division of the funds to decrease the gap between poor and rich regions.

Following the two years of the Law and Justice (PiS) government, which did not question the necessity of absorbing EU funds, in 2007 the Civic Platform (PO) under Prime Minister Donald Tusk came to power. Ruling in coalition with the Polish People’s Party (PSL), the PO maintained the territorial division.

Donald Tusk, born in Kaszuby, a region with a slightly different ethnic make-up from the rest of Poland, had expressed sympathy in the 1990s for the regionalization of Poland, with possible autonomy for some of the regions. Tusk moderated his preferences a decade later, partly because of the radicalization of his former partner in the Social Regional Movement (SRR), the Upper Silesian autonomist party Silesian Autonomy Movement

(RAŚ), which asked for asymmetrical decentralization for Upper Silesia. Tusk and the PO favoured symmetrical decentralization but refused any form of asymmetry.

Since 2004, Poland's economic development has been remarkable. It was the only country in the EU which did not suffer the recession after 2008 and whose GDP has grown steadily, at least until 2018. However, focusing on regional development, we can see that the polarization of the voivodships has increased. We see the outstanding performance of the Masovian voivodship, which grew by +32 points from 2004 to 2016. The next six voivodships are the same regions which were already better off in 1998. In this group, the Lower Silesian and Greater Poland voivodships grew by more than 20 PPS points, while the Lesser Poland, Pomeranian, Łódzkie and Silesian voivodships grew by between 19 and 14 points. The Subcarpathian voivodship, with a growth of 13, is the first of the Eastern voivodships and occupies the 8TH position. Despite constant growth in all Polish voivodships, the east and the north have fallen back compared to the western and southern regions.

The differences have grown, despite the fact that the EU launched a unique supra-regional programme for less developed regions in the EU (at that time five eastern Polish voivodships) in the form of the Operational Development Programme of Eastern Poland (*Program Operacyjny Rozwój Polski Wschodniej*) between 2007 and 2013 with around 2.4 billion euro. When that ended, a follow-up programme called the Eastern Poland Programme (*Program Wschodnia Polska*) with a budget of 2 billion was set up between 2014 and 2020. It focused on supporting entrepreneurship, the development of road infrastructure and urban transport and improving the quality of railway infrastructure in the Eastern macro-region.

While the east has been included in EU funding and there are some positive trends in some of the regions, such as the Subcarpathian voivodship, the north is becoming the new loser in regional development, with Podlaskie, the Western Pomeranian and Warmian-Masurian voivodships at the bottom of the table. Only the Pomeranian voivodship with the Gdańsk/Sopot/Gdynia metropolitan centre is developing positively in the north (+16).

Table 3. The development of Polish voivodships 2004-2016 (GDP/capita in PPS)

Voivodship/Polish name	GDP/capita in PPS (Index, EU - 25 = 100), 2004	GDP/capita in PPS (Index, EU - 28 = 100), 2016	(+) Difference since becoming a member of the EU, 2004 - 2016
Masovian/ <i>Mazowieckie</i>	77	109	32
Lower Silesian/ <i>Dolnośląskie</i>	52	76	24
Greater Poland/ <i>Wielkopolskie</i>	54	75	21
Lesser Poland/ <i>Małopolskie</i>	43	62	19
Łódź/ <i>Łódzkie</i>	47	64	17
Pomeranian/ <i>Pomorskie</i>	50	66	16
Silesian/ <i>Śląskie</i>	57	71	14
Subcarpathian/ <i>Podkarpackie</i>	35	48	13
Lublin/ <i>Lubelskie</i>	35	47	12
Lubusz/ <i>Lubuskie</i>	45	57	12
Opole/ <i>Opolskie</i>	44	55	11
Kuyavian-Pomeranian/ <i>Kujawsko-Pomorskie</i>	45	56	11
Świętokrzyskie/ <i>Świętokrzyskie</i>	39	49	10
Podlaskie/ <i>Podlaskie</i>	38	48	10
Western Pomeranian/ <i>Zachodnio- pomorskie</i>	47	57	10
Warmian-Masurian/ <i>Warmińsko-Mazurskie</i>	39	49	10

Note: PPS, purchasing power standard.

Source: Eurostat (2007, 2018)

Regional policy after the change of government in 2015

In 2015, Law and Justice (PiS) won the parliamentary and the presidential elections, taking over the institutions of the Polish state. This electoral success was not thanks to special promises for the eastern voivodships, but on electoral promises for all Poles, such as child support, the so-called 500+ (awarding 500 złoty for every second child, and also for the first child if the family income is less than 800 złoty/person) or lowering the retirement age to 65 years for men and 60 for women. Nonetheless, during the electoral campaign

in 2015, the PiS politicians warned about the growing divergences between east and west, claiming that more funds for eastern Poland were necessary.

The electoral result came as a surprise to many Western experts, who did not understand how Poland, as the main beneficiary of the EU cohesion policy, could vote for a party that many had defined as Eurosceptic. If we look at the territorial support for PiS we see that its strongholds are in the eastern regions, which have grown at a much slower pace than other voivodships over the last two decades. PiS got the most support in the eastern part of Poland, taking Subcarpathian (53.1%) and Lubelskie (49.9%) with an absolute majority and Podlaskie with 47.4%. The Catholic east stayed loyal to PiS, which during the campaign presented itself as opposed to the liberal establishment in Warsaw and the western part of the country. However, PiS' electoral win should not be reduced to its strongholds. They won in 14 out of 16 voivodships, although in the western voivodships they did so by a smaller margin. PiS won in most of the cities against the Civic Platform (PO) and in the villages against the Polish Peoples Party (PSL).

Apparently, the EU cohesion policy, which brought modern infrastructure and some economic growth to the eastern voivodships was not sufficient to change existing voting preferences. Experts analysing EU cohesion policy argue that while the EU funds reduced some of the differences between the voivodships, they were insufficient to eliminate all inequalities. Following this reasoning, although the state and the EU provide conditions that encourage the development of activities and the creation of new jobs through private capital, any increase in income and general wellbeing of the community in a free market economy depends on private investment. Apparently, the Eastern or Nordic voivodships have yet to attract this investment.

The PiS government has barely touched the territorial division since 2015, mainly because the proposal to separate the capital, Warsaw, from the Masovian voivodship failed due to resistance from some municipalities around Warsaw. Nonetheless, there was a division, but of a more statistical nature. While in recent decades Warsaw has attained high development levels very quickly compared to the EU average and will lose access to EU cohesion funds, the lack of administrative separation of Warsaw and its metropolitan area from the surrounding Mazovian voivodship has become a problem for the rest of the voivodship, which is poorer. Therefore, the Polish government submitted a proposal to divide the voivodship into two statistical second level

units (NUTS-2) at the beginning of 2016, which would allow the voivodship to use full EU funds after 2020.

The PiS government is planning territorial adjustments. It wants to create two new voivodships, one in the north, the so-called Middle-Pomeranian voivodship with two capitals, Koszalin and Słupsk, and the Częstochowian voivodships in the south of Poland. Already in 2015, the councillors from Częstochowa stated that the city and its surroundings have the potential to “meet all the challenges posed by the new province”. An economic argument has recently emerged as well. Being part of the Silesian voivodship, Częstochowa could soon exceed the EU average, which would result in important cuts of EU money.

Conclusions

With virtually no tradition of democracy in the past and after decades of suppression of regionalism under communism, Poland has taken significant steps toward decentralization and regionalization. It has reversed the centralist past with the introduction of democratic governance at the local level, mainly due to the sudden need to integrate into the global economy and the European Union.

In Poland, the process of democratization and possible decentralization took place at the same time. The tension between consolidating the nation-state and decentralizing authority to the regions finally led to a “light” form of decentralization, which was administrative in nature. In this period, the requests of regional minorities (Upper Silesia) for more autonomy negatively influenced the debate. Even politicians from the post-Solidarność camp argued that the decentralization reform should not endanger the unity of the reborn liberal-democratic state.

The administrative reform from 1998-1999 administratively decentralized the state but did not affect its unitary nature. Since the reform, structurally it resembles the French model of regionalization. The concerns about the cohesion of the state, advanced in the period preceding the introduction of the reform as the main argument against large voivodships, is not on the table any more.

The territorial redistribution has been widely accepted, with only a few critics. These usually focus on the excessive concentration of the development potential in Warsaw and other metropolitan areas, such as Wrocław, Krakow, Poznań and Gdańsk. Poland is not likely to move toward full regionalization or federalism. Such a development would be contrary to its historical tradition as well as public opinion.

The effectiveness of the territorial division introduced by the 1998/1999 reform had a great impact on the absorption of the EU cohesion policy. The reform created large voivodships, which became perfect containers for absorbing most of the EU funding. The decentralization of some of the regional functions of the state has largely contributed to the success in absorbing EU funds at the regional and local level. This success led to the perception of Poland as the country that best used EU funding.

Nonetheless, although Poland as a whole has grown, discrepancies between the regions have too. Even if the EU cohesion policy can be seen as a success in the eastern part of Poland, there has not yet been sufficient funding to reduce the differences and attract more foreign investment. Nor has it changed voting behaviour in this part of Poland, which is the electoral stronghold of the Law and Justice (PiS) government. Paradoxically, the successful use of EU funding did not prevent the electoral win of an EU-sceptic party, whose legal reforms triggered the so-called Article 7 proceedings against Poland. The position of the EU in this conflict is anything but easy.

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