



**The effects of implementing European Cohesion Policy
in Opolskie Voivodship, 2014-2020
in the economic, social and institutional dimensions
*EXPERIENCES, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS***

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ABSTRACT

The study analyses the importance of conducting modern development policy at the regional level. In Poland, following its accession in 2004, the European Union became a catalyst for such a policy, as about 50% of public investments are financed from structural and cohesion funds. For the periods 2014-2020 and 2021-2027, about 40% of the EU Cohesion Policy funds were and are managed by voivodship local governments. EU support has fostered a highly favourable development trajectory for all regions of the country, without exception, in the period from 2004 to 2019 [1, p. 20].

Opolskie Voivodship is an exceptionally interesting case of the successful implementation of European development policy at the regional level. This results from a range of factors, including the highest quality governance at the regional level in Poland, the decentralisation of the multilevel model for the programming and implementation of EU funds, and high staff stability. The voivodship strategy has been properly translated into operational documents. The territorial approach has been strengthened by using the potential of sub-regions. This coherence-centred regional policy is leading to a systematic reduction in the disparities within Opolskie Voivodship. This is accompanied by the exceptionally careful management of the European Social Fund, functionally integrated with the European Regional Development Fund, and the stimulation of partnership in the Cohesion Policy.

Having evaluated the experience of the 2014-2020 programming period, conclusions and recommendations for 2021-2027 have been proposed, which may also be relevant for other European regions as best practices.

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to European integration, Poland has advanced on an almost unprecedented scale within such a short timeframe. Qualitative changes are evident at the national, regional, sub-regional, and local levels. To a large extent, the favourable development trajectory of Poland and its regions has been related to European Cohesion Policy, which has made a significant improvement in the scale and targeting of public investments.

Poland's success in implementing European Cohesion Policy greatly depends on the regional level [2][3]. The experience of Opolskie Voivodship in this matter is unique and, in many cases, can be used as a benchmark. The aim of the study is to present the measures adopted in Opolskie Voivodship for the implementation of EU funds in the years 2014-2020. They can be a point of reference for the development of European Cohesion Policy measures for 2021-2027 at the regional, sub-regional and national level in terms of economic, social and institutional regional policy. At the same time, it is a valuable laboratory of applied tools in terms of the effectiveness and efficiency of the implementation of European funds. The research included analytical, statistical and qualitative techniques.

In Opolskie Voivodship, a participatory model for the programming and implementation of structural funds has been applied based on two pillars: the regional decentralisation of a multilevel governance system for the programming and sustainable implementation of funds, and efficient spending of funds in the region. Success is illustrated by the rise in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in purchasing power standard since Poland's accession to the European Union and by the criterion of governance quality. These two variables are influenced by a clearly designed territorial approach in the disbursement of EU funds, introduced on the basis of the existing sub-regions, and the drafting and implementation of modern strategic documents, including a regional strategy, strengthened by a broad process of the multilevel implementation of EU funds and staff stability. Over the two consecutive implementation periods for European Union structural funds in Opolskie Voivodship, 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, particular attention should be paid to measures taken to implement partnership projects, as well as the integration of the European Regional Development Fund with the European Social Fund and other public funds.

The study consists of three parts. The first outlines the benefits stemming from European Cohesion Policy through a presentation of GDP differentiation and changes in voivodships and a description of the decentralised model for structural fund implementation in Poland. The second part describes a model of strategic management for the implementation of structural funds in Opolskie Voivodship, including the characteristics of quality of governance at the regional level; the importance of the decentralisation of multilevel programming and implementation of EU funds through the territorial approach and the programming of voivodship strategy, as well as the efficient management of EU funds. The third part focuses on the importance of partnership in implementing Cohesion Policy, which has been demonstrated through the quantitative characteristics of partnership projects, implemented in Opolskie Voivodship, supplemented by examples of leading, model partnerships and the solutions adopted in the region.

BENEFITS OF EUROPEAN COHESION POLICY

1.1. Economic conditions, including gross domestic product changes in voivodships

The benefits of Poland's accession to the European Union (from the point of view of the average citizen) include new roads, motorways, sewage treatment plants, i.e. new infrastructure, but also a higher level of innovative entrepreneurship providing new jobs, and education, including lifelong learning [4, pp. 9–55]. All these components contribute to a better quality of life for each Polish citizen. From an analytical point of view, the actual benefits are noticeable in the increasing economic, social, territorial and environmental cohesion achieved throughout the region.

In terms of economic cohesion, following the recession associated with the financial crisis of 2008-2011, the trend is again towards a reduction in the disparities between regions in terms of GDP per capita and employment levels [5, pp. 1–20]. In the less developed regions, the increase in GDP per capita relative to the EU average is due primarily to faster growth in labour productivity and secondarily to an increase in employment [6, pp. 1–20].

The financial crisis stalled the improvement that had been made in social cohesion. Following the economic collapse, it was a few years before the employment rate and unemployment rate returned to pre-crisis levels. Large differences in unemployment and income levels between regions forced some residents to migrate in search of better employment or to escape poverty.

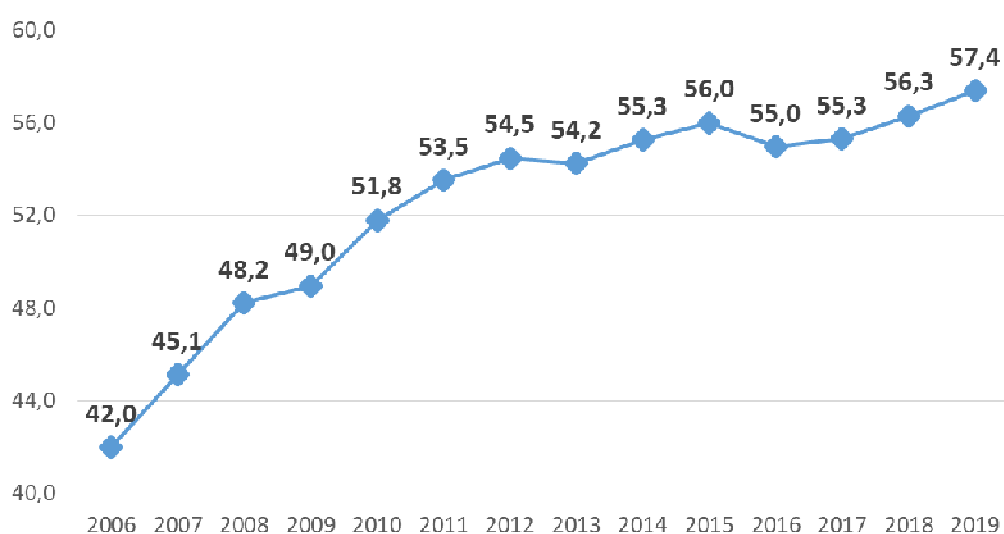
If we examine territorial cohesion, significant progress has been made in improving access to public transport, municipal infrastructure, and reducing energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, to list just a few examples. Positive environmental effects have been achieved mainly by increasing energy efficiency, as well as increasing the share of renewable energy and implementing a mode of circular economy [7].

Poland's membership in the European Union has led to a favourable development trajectory, as demonstrated by GDP per capita at purchasing power standard. The gap between Poland and the EU average continues to narrow, but there are still significant differences between regions. In the years 2006-2019, in all Polish voivodships, GDP saw double-digit growth in relation to the EU average. In Poland's case this came to 20.8 percentage points (Table 1), while for Opolskie Voivodship it was 15.4 percentage points, which ranks the region in the middle of Polish voivodships (Chart 1).

Table 1. GDP per capita at purchasing power standard in the voivodships in 2006-2019 in relation to the EU-27 average

Voivodship	GDP per capita in PPS (% of EU average)		
	2006	2019	difference 2006-2019 (p.p.)
POLAND	52.0	72.8	20.8
MAZOWIECKIE	81.0	117.9	36.9
WIELKOPOLSKIE	55.0	78.8	23.8
DOLNOŚLĄSKIE	56.0	79.5	23.5
ŁÓDZKIE	48.0	68.6	20.6
POMORSKIE	51.0	70.8	19.8
MAŁOPOLSKIE	47.0	66.7	19.7
ŚLĄSKIE	55.0	74.4	19.4
OPOLSKIE	42.0	57.4	15.4
PODLASKIE	38.0	52.6	14.6
PODKARPACKIE	37.0	51.0	14.0
LUBELSKIE	36.0	49.7	13.7
ZACHODNIOPOMORSKIE	47.0	60.3	13.3
KUJAWSKO-POMORSKIE	45.0	58.0	13.0
LUBUSKIE	47.0	59.0	12.0
ŚWIĘTOKRZYSKIE	41.0	51.9	10.9
WARMINSKO-MAZURSKIE	39.0	49.7	10.7

Source: own calculation based on EUROSTAT

Chart 1. GDP per capita in Opolskie Voivodship in 2006-2019 in relation to the EU-27 average (%)

Source: own calculation based on EUROSTAT

A tangible effect of the cohesion-oriented implementation of European funds in Opolskie Voivodship is the reduction of internal disparities. In the years 2004-2016, the difference between the *poviats* with the highest and lowest value of the indicator, i.e. in relation to the average in the voivodship, changed by 33.9 percentage points, as shown in Table 2 [8, p. 28]. The relative increase in GDP per capita, compared to the voivodship average, was recorded in the *poviats* of Opolski (rural), Namysłowski, Strzelecki, Oleski, Brzeski, Prudnicki, Krapkowicki and Nyski. The remaining *poviats* saw a relative decrease in this indicator, which overall resulted in a flattening of the differences between the *poviats*.

Table 2. GDP per capita in the *poviats* of Opolskie Voivodship in 2004-2016, in relation to the voivodship average

Poviat	GDP per capita (voivodship = 100)		Change in the years 2004-2016
	2004	2016	
City of Opole	209.1	179.6	-29.5
Kędzierzyńsko-Kozielski	121.6	115.8	-5.8
Opolski (rural)	88.2	101.9	13.7
Krapkowicki	95.1	99.5	4.4
Strzelecki	85.9	93.6	7.7
Kluczborski	88.7	88.3	-0.4
Brzeski	79.6	85.9	6.3
Oleski	75.0	82.9	7.9
Namysłowski	70.2	78.4	8.2
Głubczycki	79.6	74.2	-5.4
Nyski	70.6	73.4	2.8
Prudnicki	64.8	69.2	4.4
Difference between extreme values	144.3	110.4	

Source: T. Brodzicki, D. Ciołek, J. Szlachta: *Gross domestic product in the poviats of Opolskie Voivodship – conclusions for voivodship regional policy*, Development Institute, Sopot 2019, p. 28.

Development based on the region's increasing internal cohesion is highly characteristic for Opolskie Voivodship. Generally, a flattening of the indicator is taking place in the whole voivodship, while in the Głubczycki *poviat* a decrease is visible in 2016 compared to 2004 against the regional average (Table 2). Hence, the regional and local authorities are taking and will continue to take joint actions based on dedicated Cohesion Policy instruments targeted at the Czech-Polish border region, which has the lowest GDP per capita in purchasing power standard.

1.2. Decentralised model for implementing structural funds in Poland

Analysis of the basic indicators for the effectiveness of the implementation of EU funds confirms the relationship between the effectiveness and the existing model for the implementation of European funds in a given country.

The decentralised model for implementing EU funds is present in 12 European Union countries. In Poland about 58% of structural fund resources are managed by voivodship local governments. A similar share of funds is at the disposal of regions in Spain and Italy, while in Germany about 85% of funds are spent by the Länder (federal states). Analysis of the level of expenditure already made in individual EU countries allows us to conclude that the decentralised model is more effective. Indeed, these countries have achieved higher levels of structural fund spending than countries operating under a centralised model [9].

In Poland, this decentralised model is a systemic solution in national regional policy [1, pp. 21–22]. It allows operational programmes to be better tailored to the specific needs of the regions in which they are implemented. Regional authorities create such solutions in their structural fund management systems, which foster an effective development trajectory for the supported areas with the simultaneous efficient absorption of EU funds.

Opolskie Voivodship has based its participatory model for the programming and implementation of structural funds on two pillars. On the one hand, there is a regional decentralisation of the multilevel governance system of programming and sustainable implementation of funds with the use of sub-regions. At the same time, this is accompanied by extremely careful use of the European Social Fund and its coordination with the European Regional Development Fund, while stimulating partnerships throughout projects. The second pillar of the Opolskie model is efficient spending in the region. Such a system of cooperation between institutions has been in development over several years. It is based on people, their competence, experience in implementing EU projects and good relations. This occurs both at the level of cooperation between the Managing Authority and Implementing Authorities and the Ministry responsible for EU funds and the European Commission, as well as between regional institutions and the beneficiaries of EU assistance.

**STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT
OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF STRUCTURAL
FUNDS
IN OPOLSKIE VOIVODESHIP**

2.1. Quality of governance at the regional level

The effective implementation of structural funds rests on several foundations, among which quality of governance is a leading metric. For the European Commission, the core metric of institutional quality at the regional level in the EU is the European Quality of Government Index (EQI), devised by the Quality of Government Institute at the University of Gothenburg [10]. Institutional quality is defined as a multidimensional concept whose criteria are a high level of impartiality and the prominence of public service delivery, as well as low levels of corruption.

The purpose of the European Commission-funded analyses of Quality of Government Index conducted in the years 2010, 2013, 2017 and 2021, is to learn how average citizens perceive and experience corruption, and to what extent they rate public services in their region of residence as impartial and of good quality.

In 2021, compared to 2017, decreases in national averages were observed in Poland and Hungary, resulting in a decrease in the EQI in all Polish and Hungarian regions during the period in question, with the exception of Opolskie Voivodship and Pest in Hungary (Table 3) [10].

Table 3. Value of EQI in NUTS 2 regions in Poland in 2010, 2017 and 2021
(standard deviation, EU=0)

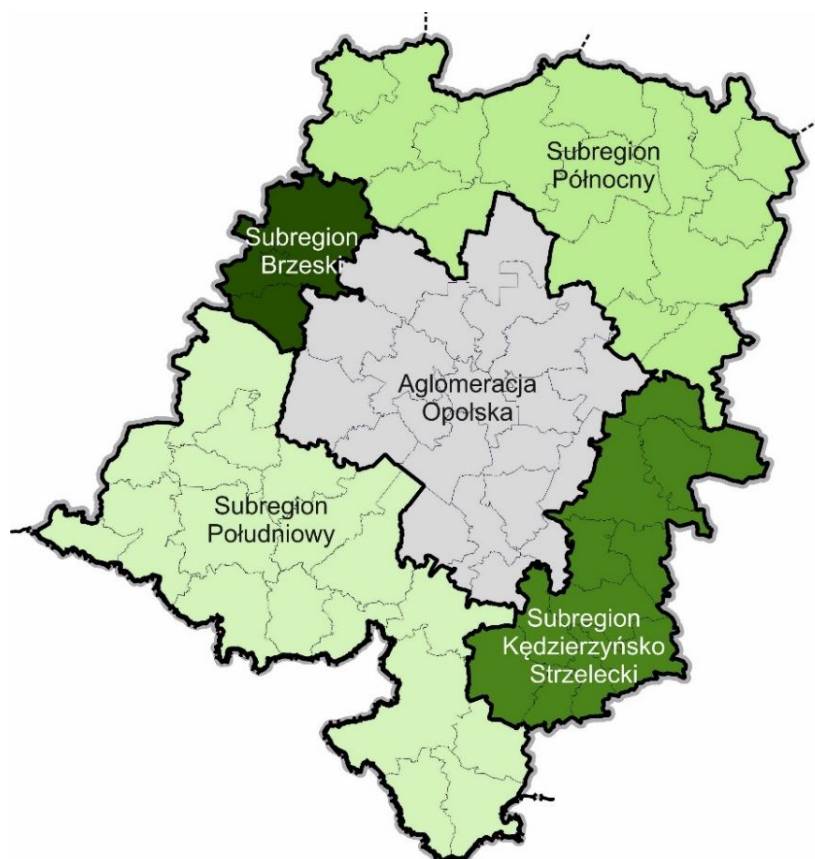
Region	EQI value			Change in the years 2010-2021	Change in the years 2017-2021
	2010	2017	2021		
Opolskie	-1.0280	-0.4130	-0.3400	0.6880	0.0730
Pomorskie	-0.6430	-0.2720	-0.4890	0.1540	-0.2170
Śląskie	-1.0260	-0.4150	-0.5570	0.4690	-0.1420
Lubuskie	-0.8450	-0.5680	-0.5570	0.2880	0.0110
Wielkopolskie	-0.9280	-0.4020	-0.5870	0.3410	-0.1850
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	-0.5940	-0.2240	-0.6890	-0.0950	-0.4650
Podkarpackie	-0.8000	-0.5600	-0.7110	0.0890	-0.1510
Małopolskie	-0.8270	-0.3350	-0.7140	0.1130	-0.3790
Mazowieckie (regional)	-0.9240	-0.4570	-0.7480	0.1760	-0.2910
Dolnośląskie	-0.8680	-0.3420	-0.7700	0.0980	-0.4280
Świętokrzyskie	-0.7950	-0.5940	-0.7830	0.0120	-0.1890
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	-0.8830	-0.2650	-0.8100	0.0730	-0.5450
Łódzkie	-0.8030	-0.0590	-0.8520	-0.0490	-0.7930
Podlaskie	-0.8890	-0.3920	-0.8780	0.0110	-0.4860
Zachodniopomorskie	-0.8180	-0.3030	-0.8880	-0.0700	-0.5850
Lubelskie	-0.7590	-0.4470	-1.0890	-0.3300	-0.6420
Warsaw (capital city)	-0.9240	-0.4570	-1.2290	-0.3050	-0.7720

Source: <https://www.gu.se/en/quality-government/qog-data/data-downloads/european-quality-of-government-index>.

2.2. Decentralisation of multi-tier programming and implementation of EU funds

The first pillar in the participatory model for the programming and implementation of structural funds in Opolskie Voivodship is its regional decentralisation based on cooperation and communication. This is reflected in the active public participation of many stakeholders. Thus, the region's authorities aim to increase effectiveness when applying the most important elements in the system of territorial management dedicated to the residents of Opolskie Voivodship and the system of territorial cohesion at the intra-regional level. In this approach, the sub-regions (Map 1) are strategic partners for Opolskie Voivodship Board. They play an important role in the process of strategic programming for the regional implementation of European funds.

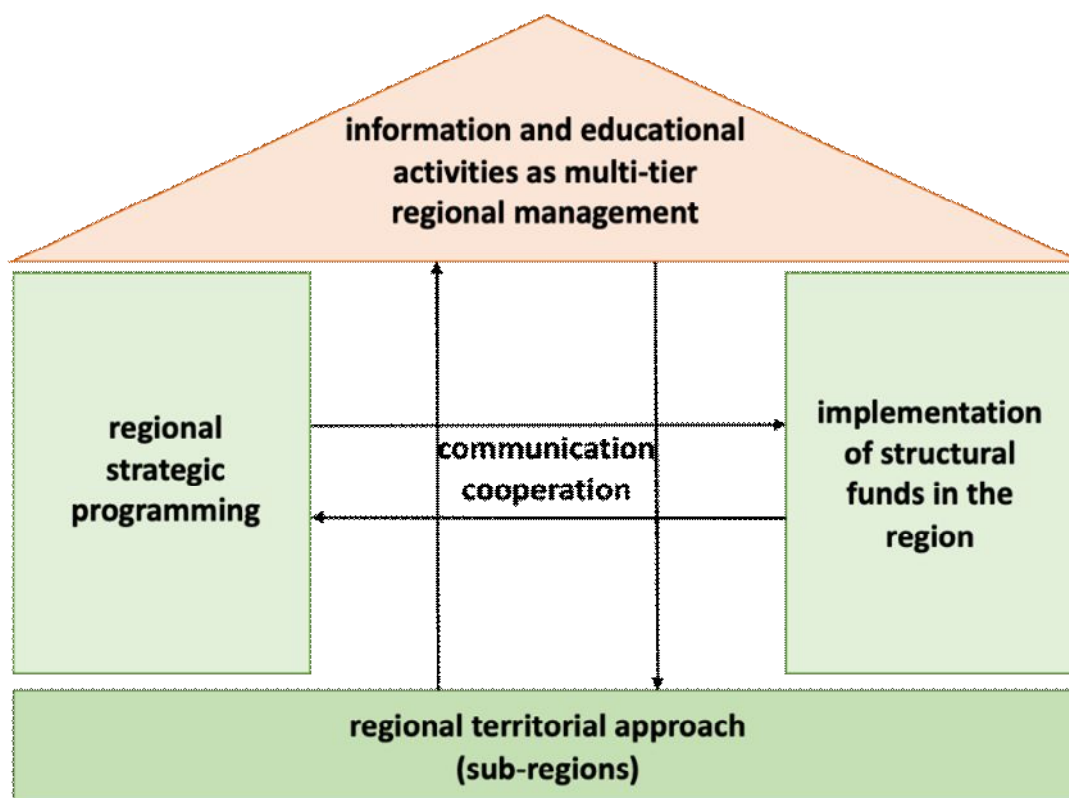
Map 1. Division of Opolskie Voivodship into sub-regions



Source: Own study.

Information and promotional activities carried out by regional authorities are, in turn, the foundation of the multilevel process for the programming and implementation of regional EU funds, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Model of the multilevel process for regional strategic programming and implementation of structural funds in Opolskie Voivodship



Source: Own study.

The intra-regional decentralisation of the programming and implementation of EU funds which took place in the years 2014-2020 has bolstered the implementation of European Cohesion Policy in Opolskie Voivodship. The process has been further strengthened by the interaction of local governments across the five sub-regions. It is the local government authorities who feel that they are jointly responsible for European funds in the region, as they co-decide the system for their effective implementation. Based on a stakeholder dialogue, the sub-region identifies strategic, partnership-based investments and soft projects aimed directly at its residents. Such solutions reduce intra-regional disparities in the voivodship, thus resulting in greater social and economic cohesion. They also contribute to a favourable climate for the development of partnerships between individual stakeholders.

2.2.1. Territorial approach

In the period 2014-2020, policymaking for the implementation of European funds in Opolskie Voivodship was based on territorial instruments. Areas for Strategic Intervention include sub-regions, cities and city districts in need of revitalisation, centres of depopulation and border areas [11, pp. 70–72]. In the next financial perspective 2021-2027 the territorial approach in the region will be demonstrated by focusing on sub-regions and the revitalisation of cities, urban-rural and rural *gminas*, as well as national Areas for Strategic

Intervention, i.e. cities which are losing their socio-economic functions and areas threatened with permanent marginalisation [12, pp. 48–49].

In Opolskie Voivodship five sub-regions have been established (Map 1). Only the Opole Agglomeration has the status of Integrated Territorial Investment. The five sub-regions in the voivodship operate as voluntary associations of local authorities, i.e. *gminas* and *poviats*. Regional authorities in cooperation with local governments and individual sub-regions devise measures for the disbursement of EU funds in the region via peer-to-peer discussions, resulting in specific amounts for individual sub-regions, calculated on the basis of criteria accepted by all the local governments in the sub-regions (Table 4). The sub-regional territorial system in Opolskie Voivodship creates an interesting solution in the pursuit of internal cohesion in a region strengthened by EU co-financing. Local government units of individual sub-regions have also actively participated in the drafting of the voivodship strategy and developed their own strategies.

The sub-regional strategies are the basis for receiving funds from the Opolskie Voivodship Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020. The Opole Agglomeration, which has the status of Integrated Territorial Investment, also participates in the process of project selection. The voivodship authorities allocated 15% of the Programme funding to the activities carried out in the sub-regions. Both the Opole Agglomeration and the other sub-regions have specific pools of funds earmarked for individual measures. The main criterion for allocating resources to sub-regions is population (Table 4). Areas of intervention in which the territorial approach was applied in 2014-2020 include: the development of investment areas, the preparation and implementation of low-carbon strategies, energy efficiency in public buildings, cultural heritage and culture (the Opole Agglomeration and Southern Sub-region) and education (only the Opole Agglomeration). Under the new financial perspective, the sub-regions are due to receive 28% of the European fund allocation for Opolskie 2021-2027. In addition to investment measures funded by the European Regional Development Fund, there are also measures funded from the pool of the European Social Fund Plus, which marks a significant change in approach. In addition to comprehensive projects in the field of education, health or social services, the sub-regions will be able to implement local grant projects. Each sub-region will have a separate pool of funds at its disposal. Calls for proposals will be announced by the Managing Authority in agreement with the sub-region.

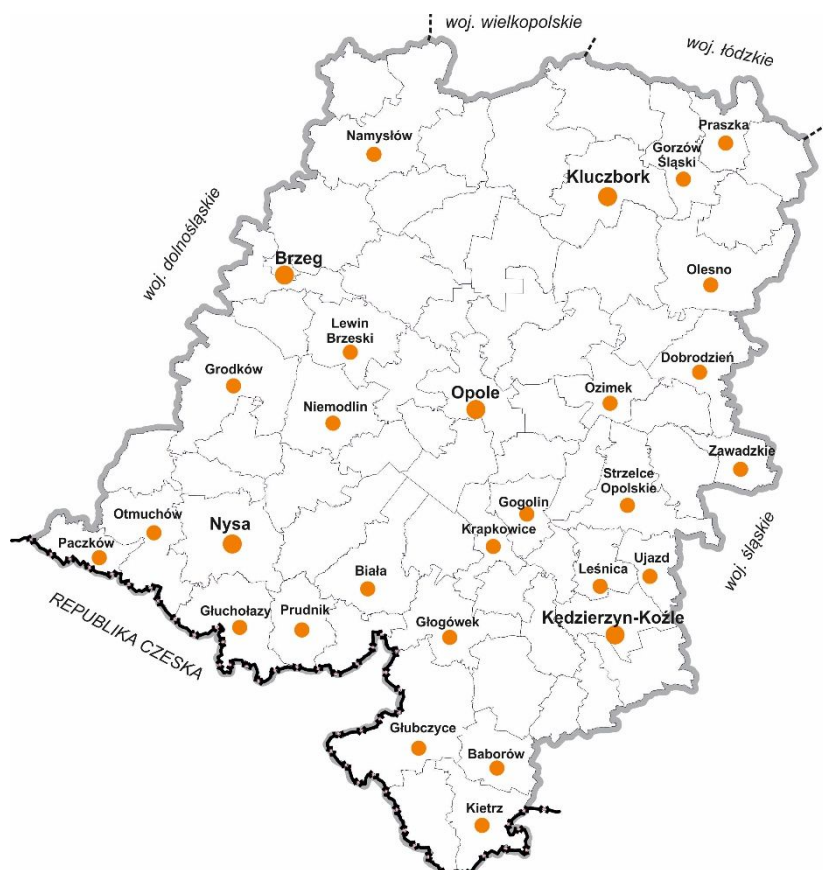
Table 4. *Population in sub-regions of Opolskie Voivodship and allocation for sub-regions within the ROP OV 2014-2020*

Sub-region	Population	%	Allocation ROP VO 2014-2020 [PLN]
Opole Agglomeration	332,824	34.1	345,232,560
Brzeski	76,438	7.8	24,040,967
Kędzierzyńsko-Strzelecki	161,511	16.5	71,364,966
Southern	234,644	24.0	121,818,749
Northern	171,357	17.5	73,229,612
Voivodship	976,774	100.0	635,686,854

Source: Own study based on GUS data (as of 31.12.2020)

An important role in the regional territorial approach is played by activities aimed at the revitalisation of designated areas in Opolskie Voivodship. The Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020 identifies five sub-regional centres and twenty-four other localities (Map 2), all of which have been included in Local Revitalisation Programmes. 3.5% of the programme allocation was earmarked for this purpose. Five towns will receive 45% of the indicated allocation, with 55% going to the others.

Map 2. Towns in Opolskie Voivodship covered by Local Revitalisation Programmes (as of 19.04.2017)



Source: Own study.

In Opolskie Voivodship, urban revitalisation investment projects are often combined with initiatives for local communities financed from the European Social Fund. In the case of these investments, own contributions total up to 50%, and not 15% as assumed in the model. This is important evidence that the local authorities consider supporting such projects to be sensible. In the years 2021-2027, support for revitalisation will be increased to 6% of the allocation under the regional programme. At the same time, it was assumed that the entire area of the voivodship is covered by the revitalisation, both cities and their peripheral areas, as well as rural *gminas*.

Within Opolskie Voivodship, Areas for Strategic Intervention include *poviats* bordering on the Czech Republic, which can be justified in socio-economic terms. Analyses of the number and potential of businesses, as well as the structure of the population, clearly indicate that this part of the voivodship still needs supporting with additional financial instruments [13].

2.2.2. Programming the voivodship strategy

Creating a friendly climate for residents, investors and tourists in the region requires strategic thinking and action at the regional and local level [14, pp. 241–247]. This strategic approach is bolstered by stability and continuity in the regional development policy. The Opolskie Voivodship Development Strategy reflects this way of thinking and is an integral part of the participatory and decentralised regional programming and implementation of EU funds.

The Opolskie Voivodship Development Strategy “Opolskie 2030” was passed unanimously on 4 October 2021 by the members of the Opolskie Voivodship Assembly [14]. This is a unique case of shaping regional development because there are only 3 regions in Poland to have unanimously adopted such strategies up to 2030. The multilevel development of the document certainly must have had a large impact on the outcome of the vote. This is because a model way to organise the multilevel strategy was adopted, consisting of highly active public participation and the contribution of a large group of experts in various fields. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, such an approach was not easy to implement.

The concept for the 2030 strategy was framed in 2018 and it was then that the planning and organisational process began. From the outset, external partners were involved in the work, making sure that the document took a broad perspective on the development of the voivodship. 2019 saw the establishment of Advisory Groups which were composed of representatives of various local communities with know-how in specific areas. Also set up were Working Teams in three domains, society, environment and economy. These consisted of representatives from departments at the Marshall’s Office of Opolskie Voivodship and units subordinate to the Opolskie Voivodship Local Government. A total of about 300 people were involved. The years 2019-2020 were a time for numerous meetings, workshops and conferences, which were primarily held remotely.

Exceptional treatment was given to the public consultation that took place in the spring of 2021. To ensure that it had a wide audience, the relevant information was published in local and regional newspapers and broadcast on the radio. Great emphasis was placed on online information through, for example, sponsored posts, graphic advertisements, sponsored texts and advertising banners or posts on the voivodship’s Facebook profiles. The public consultations included an opening conference, 6 sectoral meetings on infrastructure, the economy, society, the environment, seniors, and youth, as well as a meeting of the Council on Activity for Public Benefit, a meeting with local government and 5 meetings in the region for sub-regional communities, all of which were held remotely. This extensive process resulted in more than 300 comments from a variety of backgrounds [14, pp. 72–78].

2.2.3. Information and promotional activities concerning European funds

A prerequisite for the successful absorption of structural funds is the planning of a large number of high-quality projects based on an effective pipeline of projects that can then be financed under European Cohesion Policy. This requires high quality information and promotional activities that guarantee the activity of economic, social and public administration entities in the spheres identified as priorities in the Regional Operational Programme.

The model for the programming and implementation of structural funds in Opolskie Voivodship is based on communication. The development of many innovative, region-wide projects is based on multi-partner collaboration, starting with the partnership-based crafting of high-quality project proposals, then launching the project process, seamlessly clearing them, and then connecting with residents. These four milestones require the use of a variety of communication methods: meetings, multi-level conversations, and social media such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter*.

The model for communication with the voivodship's inhabitants is mainly the result of numerous experiences from 2007-2013 and was based on two social initiatives: the "Opolskie Mother has Power" (*Opolska Mama ma Moc*) and "Opolskie Ambassadors to the EU" (*Opolskie Ambasadorki UE*). The former has been running since 2016 and the latter was launched in 2021. The "Opolskie Mother has Power" initiative has become a driving force for meetings of women and their families, and at the same time is an excellent chance to discuss new opportunities created by European funds and aimed at supporting local families at every stage of their operation. Under the initiative, numerous schemes have been launched, including prenatal tests, mobile rehabilitation of children under 2, antenatal classes, Opolskie nannies, i.e. support for children under 3, education at school, specially-coordinated vocational education, and lifelong learning within the framework of the European Participatory Budget. The "Opolskie Mother has Power" meetings were conducive to a discussion on foster parenthood and assistance to Opolskie-based families during the COVID-19 outbreak. They contributed to the launching of subsequent partnership projects co-financed by the European Social Fund, such as the "Marshall's Social Couriers" or "Sandbox"¹.

The "Opolskie Ambassadors to the EU" is the next stage in the multilevel process of implementing European funds in Opolskie Voivodship. The initiative covers 60 women from various walks of life, such as education, culture, entrepreneurship, social policy, environment and health, who, based on their experience, knowledge and attitude can testify to the importance of European funds in every area of life.

¹ Both ideas are part of the European Social Fund-financed projects "Closer to Family and Child" and "Not Independent, Not Alone" run by the Regional Social Policy Centre (for more information see pages 27-28).

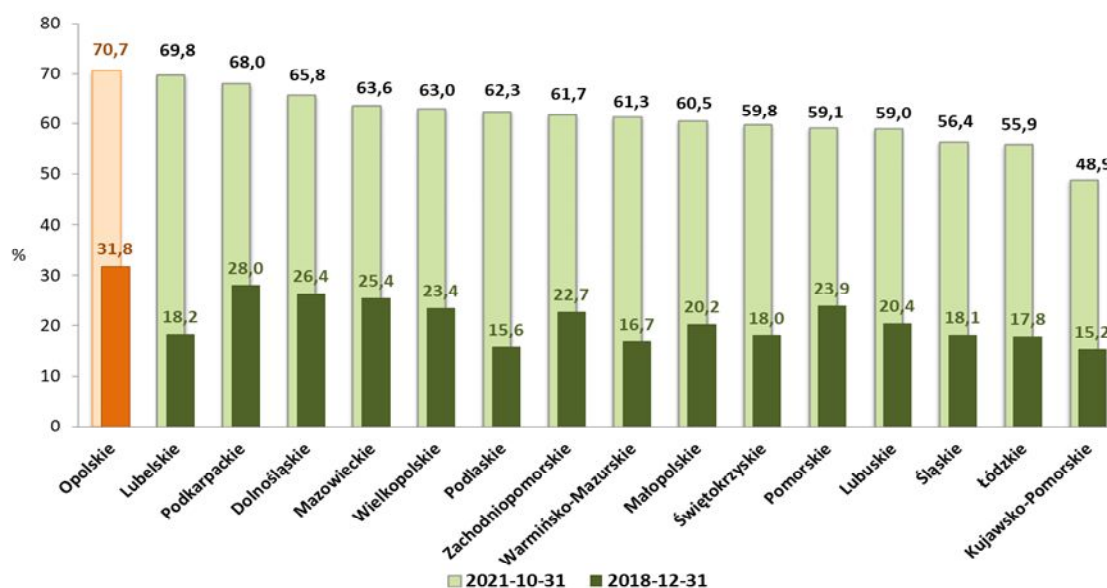
The promotion of European funds is also taking place online. The “European Opolskie” (*Opolskie Europejskie*) profile on both Facebook and Instagram is entirely devoted to the effects of European funds in Opolskie Voivodship. Every year, the region actively participates in European Fund Open Days. During this event, beneficiaries show off their projects to the general public. The Board of Opolskie Voivodship organises the final of the Open Days in the form of the European Funds Picnic, an open-air event that takes place in a selected location in the voivodship. This event is an opportunity for participants to learn about the effects of projects co-financed by the European Union. Every year, attractions for children and young people, competitions, and artistic performances related to the European Union make the Picnic a very popular event for residents of the voivodship, in particular families with children.

Beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries constitute a special target group for awareness-raising activities, since the level of Programme implementation depends on their knowledge and involvement. The Managing Authority and the Intermediate Bodies of the Regional Operational Programme for Opolskie Voivodship 2014-2020 regularly organise specialised training and information sessions for beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries. These forms of education are very popular and positively assessed by the participants.

2.3. Dynamics of European funds disbursement

Analysing the system for the disbursement of structural funds in the Polish regions, it should be clearly stated that, almost from the outset of the programming period 2014-2020, Opolskie Voivodship was at the top of the voivodship rankings in terms of the level of contracting and disbursement of structural funds under the regional operational programmes as a percentage of the allocation of programme funds [15], which then translates into the level of certification. This is due to the rapid launch of the regional operating programme. The implementation process took place immediately after the European Commission approved the Regional Operational Programme for Opolskie Voivodship 2014-2020 (ROP OV 2014-2020). The Opolskie region ranked very highly from the very beginning, as shown in Chart 2. In terms of contracting, it ranks 1-3 in the country, while in terms of payments, it has consistently taken 1st place.

Chart 2. Approved payment claims as % of allocation under specific regional operational programmes



Source: Own study of the Managing Authority of the Regional Operational Programme of Opolskie Voivodship 2014-2020 based on data from the reports of the Coordinating Authority of the Partnership Agreement.

Opolskie Voivodship's high ranking is a result of its strategic management policy. The efficient disbursement of funds in Opolskie Voivodship is the second pillar of Opole's model for the programming and implementation of EU funds. Expenditure of funds was based on a broad institutional partnership between the Board of Opolskie Voivodship and the Department of European Funds (at the Marshall's Office of Opolskie Voivodship), and the following Implementing Authorities: the Voivodship Labour Office, the Opolskie Centre for the Development of the Economy, and the Opole Agglomeration, as well as their cooperation with the final beneficiaries. Representatives from these two Management and Implementing Authorities, together with directors of Opolskie Voivodship Local Government units make up the Inter-Institutional Team for the Implementation of ROP OV 2014-2020. Their regular meetings have had a significant influence on the scale and pace of spending European funds in Opolskie Voivodship. The consistent long-term work by this Team has produced results. The value of partnership projects which frequently cover the whole voivodship constitutes approx. 30% of the whole ROP OV 2014-2020. Members of the Team periodically analyse the stages of implementation and the level of disbursement of funds under individual projects. Conclusions are formulated and then collaboratively formulated solutions are carried out.

The implementation of structural funds also requires good, beneficiary-friendly procedures, with competent and motivated staff to efficiently work and promote EU funds. All these elements are constantly consulted in Opolskie Voivodship and adjusted to consider the suggestions of partners at various stages of fund implementation.

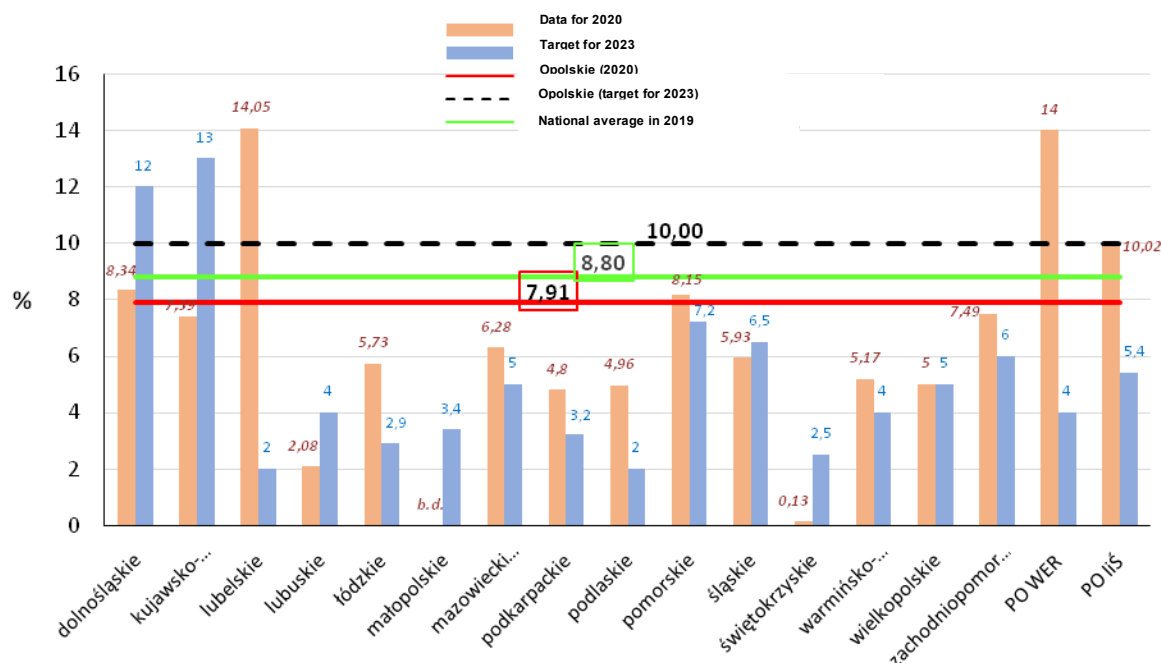
2.4. Staff stability

The effective management of institutions involved in implementing the Regional Operational Programme of Opolskie Voivodship for 2014-2020 has required the creation of an appropriate and adequate organisational structure, capable of the efficient implementation of structural funds [16, p. 19].

Creating an appropriate organisational structure and estimating the human resources necessary to implement the programme was based on the assumption that there would be continuity in the institutional memory of the Marshall's Office of Opolskie Voivodship and other units implementing operational programmes in the periods 2004-2006, 2007-2013 i.e. the potential of staff with wide ranges of experience and competence in implementing funds would be utilised.

The efficient implementation of EU funds depends to a very large extent on the ability to hold on to highly motivated staff with the right competences which, over each multi-annual financial perspective, is a huge challenge for all institutions implementing EU funds in Poland. With burnout and wage competition in the labour market major issues, it is becoming increasingly difficult to retain valued staff. The scale of this problem has been one of the reasons for its inclusion in the 2014-2020 common list of key factors in the output indicator "annual rate of staff turnover in the institutions involved in the Cohesion Policy" [16, p. 15] [17, pp. 15–16]. Monitoring this indicator provides an initial assessment of the organisation's stability. Its baseline value in the Opolskie Regional Operational Programme for 2014-2020 was set for 2013 at 14.71%, while the target value for 2023 is 10% [18, p. 241]. Within the institutions responsible for the management and implementation of the Regional Operational Programme of Opolskie Voivodship, a lower turnover rate than that assumed for 2023 has now been achieved. It is assumed that it will be maintained at this level (Chart 3).

Chart 3. Comparison of the rate of staff turnover in the institutions involved in Cohesion Policy in 2020 in the regional operational programmes Operational Programme: Knowledge, Education, Development and Operational Programme: Infrastructure and Environment



Source: Own study based on information on the implementation of technical assistance components in 2020, Department of Assistance Programmes, Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, Warsaw 2021, pp. 11–13.

The ministry responsible for funds and regional policy estimated in 2019 that the average rate of turnover in institutions implementing structural funds is 8.8% [18, p. 39]. From the chart data we can conclude that the staffing situation in Opolskie Voivodship is relatively stable, as the indicator for the staff turnover rate in 2020 was 7.91%.

In order to achieve success in the implementation of European funds, it is necessary to have a consistent systemic human resources management policy, using not only salary instruments, but also non-wage instruments, such as the possibility to gain further qualifications [16, p. 24]. In this case the operational programme’s technical assistance funds are indispensable to finance expenses related to various forms of staff motivation [18, p. 265].

Research into employment trends in the institutions involved in implementing EU funds nationwide shows that even where staff turnover is low, the problem is that of the most experienced and highly qualified staff leaving [19, p. 40]. Counteracting excessive staff rotation should be one of the priorities of human capital management strategies in each institution responsible for the implementation of European funds.

Key in this respect are the recommendations [19, pp. 97–117] for human resource management in public administration, included in the draft of the Partnership Agreement for the implementation of Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 in Poland [20]. These objectives include

providing staff with stable, competitive pay and access to various forms of professional qualifications, as well as introducing packages for experienced employees, while allowing development and career advancement for employees with less experience. Equally important is to increase the effectiveness of human resource management processes by, for example, improving the employer's image (*employer branding*), monitoring employee satisfaction and holding interviews with staff who are leaving (*exit interview*), supporting the modernisation and digitalisation of human resource management processes, or running induction programmes for new staff (*onboarding*). Another element is bringing in flexible and attractive forms of work, including remote work and non-wage benefits, enabling the exchange of employees between institutions [20, p. 125].

Recommendations are gradually being brought in at institutions implementing the Programme in Opolskie Voivodship, including a flexible approach to working time, team-building exercises, support for internal mobility and the flexible division of responsibilities, and continuous work on improving processes related to fund management.

Maintaining a stable and experienced team is one of the most important factors for the smooth implementation of funds, because employees who have built close relationships, have profound competencies and at the same time are managed in an open way have the greatest learning potential. This allows them to successfully face all challenges [21, p. 250].

THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIP IN COHESION POLICY

3.1. Partnership projects in numbers

Partnership projects are projects carried out by entities which have established partnerships specifically for this purpose, thereby pooling human, organisational, technical or financial resources [22]. While they have operated since Poland's accession to the EU, there has been a clear increase in their role between 2014 and 2020 [213]. In terms of investment, partnership projects strengthen coherent social and economic development throughout the region and very often go beyond one *gmina* or *powiat*. In terms of projects aimed directly at people, they also integrate social environments and organisations or public entities.

Partnership is the driving force behind many projects, including those co-financed by EU funds, and is one of the foundations in building sustainable development [24, pp. 131–151]. Partners bring into projects a wide range of experience, as well as personal, financial and organisational capacity. This makes partnerships between actors of different status, operating in the social, private and public sectors, so valuable. Partnership projects require both excellent collaborative and organisational skills. Complex socio-economic problems can often only be solved when organisations with complementary competencies actively work together, developing synergies, sharing ideas, goals, risks, opportunities, commitments and tasks, as well as competencies and resources. Despite the efforts made to popularise the idea of partnerships, the potential for cooperation between partners representing various public institutions, private entities or social organisations still needs to be strengthened.

It is characteristic that Opolskie Voivodship is one of the pioneers of partnership projects co-financed by the European Union, dating back to the years 2007-2013. It was at that time that partnership projects were created for tourism, road infrastructure, information society or vocational education, among other areas. Partnership projects currently cover a very wide range of subjects, and are implemented under the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund in different areas, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Areas of the ROP OV 2014-2020 in which partnership projects are implemented

Thematic objective	Area	ERDF	ESF
TO 1, 3	Entrepreneurship	+	
TO 2	Public e-services	+	
TO 4	Low-carbon strategies	+	
TO 4	Energy efficiency	+	
TO 6	Biodiversity	+	
TO 6	Culture	+	
TO 9	Health and social services		+
TO 9	Social inclusion		+
TO 9	Revitalisation	+	
TO 10	Education		+

Source: Own study based on SL2014 data and LSI SYZYF RPO WO 2014-2020, as of 24.09.2021.

Of the 1,650 projects in total, 258 are partnership projects, with a total value of PLN 1.1 billion, which constitutes almost 26% of the Programme allocation.

The largest number of partnership projects have been implemented under the European Social Fund, in health and social services, social inclusion, and education, and under the European Regional Development Fund, in biodiversity, and revitalisation and culture (Table 6). Social and health services were first included in 2014-2020 [23]. They are targeted at the elderly and dependent people. In the area of social services, the coordinating role was assumed by the Regional Social Welfare Centre, a unit of Opolskie Voivodship Local Government. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in all hospitals and other health care units being invited to implement joint projects for health services, with Opolskie Voivodship being the coordinating entity.

Table 6. Partnership projects within the ROP OV 2014-2020 according to support areas

Thematic objective	Area	Number of partnership projects	Value of partnership projects [PLN]	EU co-financing [PLN]	Average number of partners	Max. number of partners
TO 1, 3	Entrepreneurship	3	12,177,943.65	8,837,526.30	1	1
TO 2	E-services	4	21,474,191.15	16,943,307.43	6	15
TO 4	Low-carbon strategies	8	247,836,799.11	164,698,074.06	5	9
TO 4	Energy efficiency	4	74,458,059.86	44,219,845.82	10	14
TO 6	Biodiversity	41	99,238,397.02	78,710,837.16	2	4
TO 6	Culture	25	93,791,264.39	59,404,233.32	3	11
TO 9	Health and social services	90	244,121,690.28	207,433,590.75	3	25
TO 9	Social inclusion	20	31,953,001.39	27,148,524.82	1	2
TO 9	Revitalisation	22	232,523,316.51	94,996,594.89	3	5
TO 10	Education	41	66,876,908.24	56,844,803.08	2	7
OVERALL TOTAL		258	1,124,451,571.60	759,237,337.63	3	25

Source: Own study based on SL2014 data and LSI SYZYF RPO WO 2014-2020, as of 24.09.2021 (each time the number of partners should also include the project leader)

Local government units are the most active in implementing partnership projects (Table 7). This is a natural consequence of the role these entities play, which is to co-create resident-friendly living conditions. Partnership projects frequently include non-governmental

organisations, which follow a similar mission to local government units. It is the voivodship government or administrative units at the level of *gminas* and *poviats* that invite NGOs to build partnerships in various social projects addressing the needs of residents at every stage of life.

Table 7. Types of partners in partnership projects in the ROP OV 2014-2020

Thematic objective	Area	LGU	NGOs	Government administration	Private entities
TO 1, 3	Entrepreneurship	+			+
TO 2	Public e-services	+			
TO 4	Low-carbon strategies	+			
TO 4	Energy efficiency	+			
TO 6	Biodiversity	+	+	+	
TO 6	Culture	+	+	+	
TO 9	Health and social services	+	+	+	+
TO 9	Social inclusion	+	+		+
TO 9	Revitalisation	+	+		
TO 10	Education	+	+		+

Source: Own study based on SL2014 data and LSI SYZYF RPO WO 2014-2020, as of 24.09.2021.

3.2. Leading examples of partnerships in Opolskie Voivodship

The regional authorities of Opolskie Voivodship have focused on building partnership-based, comprehensive projects covering the entire region, run by the voivodship’s local government units. A very good example is the Regional Social Policy Centre in Opole, which involves social partners and local government units in projects devoted to the devolution of social services, in particular support for the elderly and disabled, as well as family and foster care activities. Partnerships with NGOs are built gradually; first they receive single tasks which are commissioned as part of open tenders. This has been made possible with the Act on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work [25]. It is only at later stages that NGOs are involved as partners in the project. This approach strengthens their potential and is often more effective than artificially imposing partnership at the level of project selection criteria. Organisations over time become partners who can meet the procedural requirements for a project.

Two projects of the Regional Social Policy Centre deserve special attention. Project “Not Independent, Not Alone” deals with the development of social services and support for dependent people. The three editions involved 24 partners, including 17 local government units and 7 NGOs. The project “Closer to the Family and Child”, which supports families experiencing care and child-raising issues and also promotes foster care, was implemented in three editions by 43 partners, including 38 *poviats* and *gminas*, as well as 5 non-governmental organisations. This approach worked well in a crisis situation.

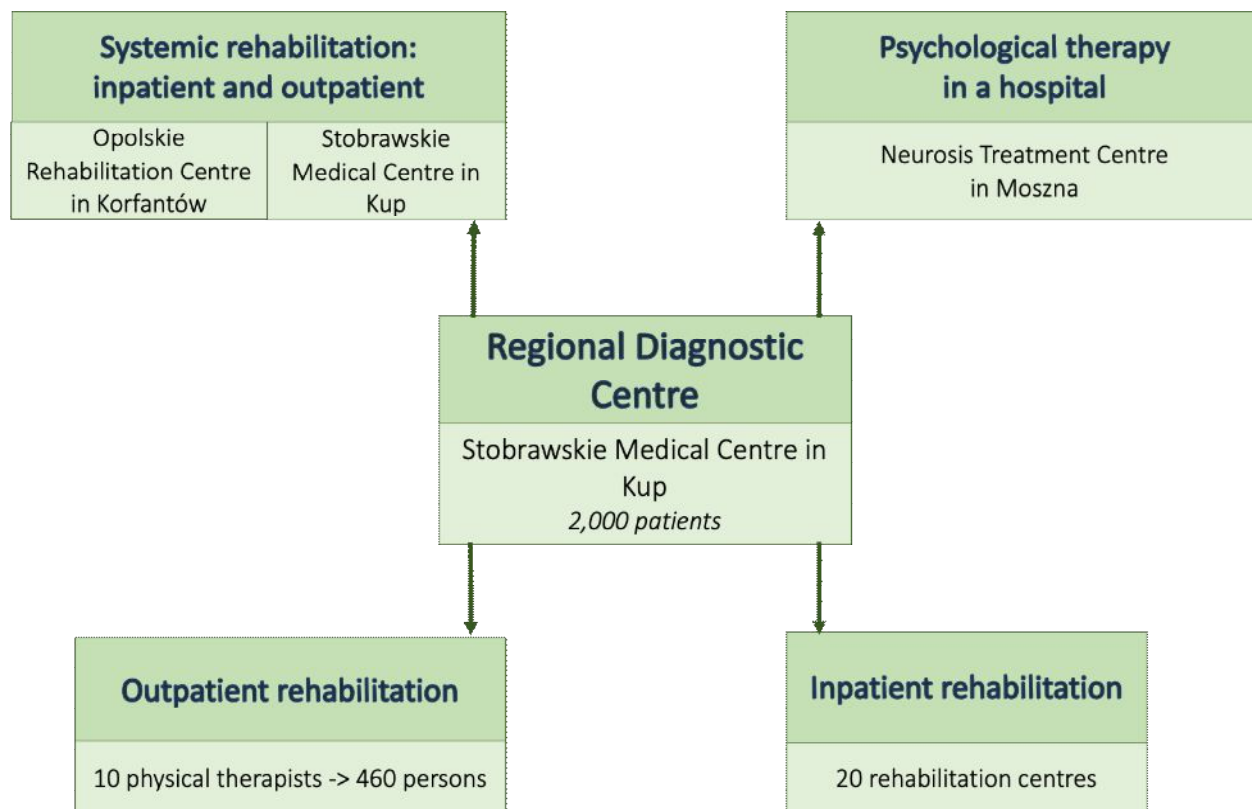
During the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to the partnerships already in place, a much-needed measure – the Marshall’s Community Courier – was quickly introduced, which involved people in local communities helping the elderly, by taking them medication and meals.

The Board of Opolskie Voivodship has also adopted an innovative measure within the European Participatory Budget framework. In the project, only NGOs chosen via the Act on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work will implement projects for lifelong learning for local communities. The entire process involved residents who voted for NGOs whose projects, in their opinion, were the most likely to improve skills and competencies. Public participation in voting is a prerequisite for the entire process of evaluating the tasks proposed by an NGO and is part of the substantive evaluation of submitted projects.

A special example of partnership projects are two undertakings implemented by Opolskie Voivodship, “Opolskie Against COVID-19” and “Opolskie Supports Hospitals in the Fight against COVID-19”. The source of financing for health services is the European Social Fund. Both projects have involved over 20 healthcare units, including public and private hospitals, but also other healthcare facilities. The comprehensive approach has made it possible to strengthen the organisational, technical, and personnel capacity of these units in carrying out the mission of saving lives and then ensuring patient recovery during the challenging period of COVID-19.

The pandemic is still present and is taking its toll. The Voivodship Board, in consultation with the Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Tariff System, adopted a Programme for Post-Covid Rehabilitation for residents of the region, which includes innovative solutions in devolved network health services for the treatment of the effects of COVID-19. This led to a project of consolidated rehabilitation services for two thousand people. They include high quality health services based on a diversified system of healthcare units. More than a dozen primary care providers, 20 rehabilitation facilities and hospitals were involved. In-patient and out-patient rehabilitation services were offered, with 24-hour-a-day rehabilitation in a hospital (Figure 2). Stobrowskie Medical Centre in Kup (Opole *poviat*) has become a regional diagnostic centre that refers patients to a specific form of support following the analysis of questionnaires received, including from primary health care providers or individually sent on-line by potential rehabilitation service recipients [26].

Figure 2. Model for the implementation of consolidated post-Covid rehabilitation network in Opolskie Voivodship (European Social Fund)

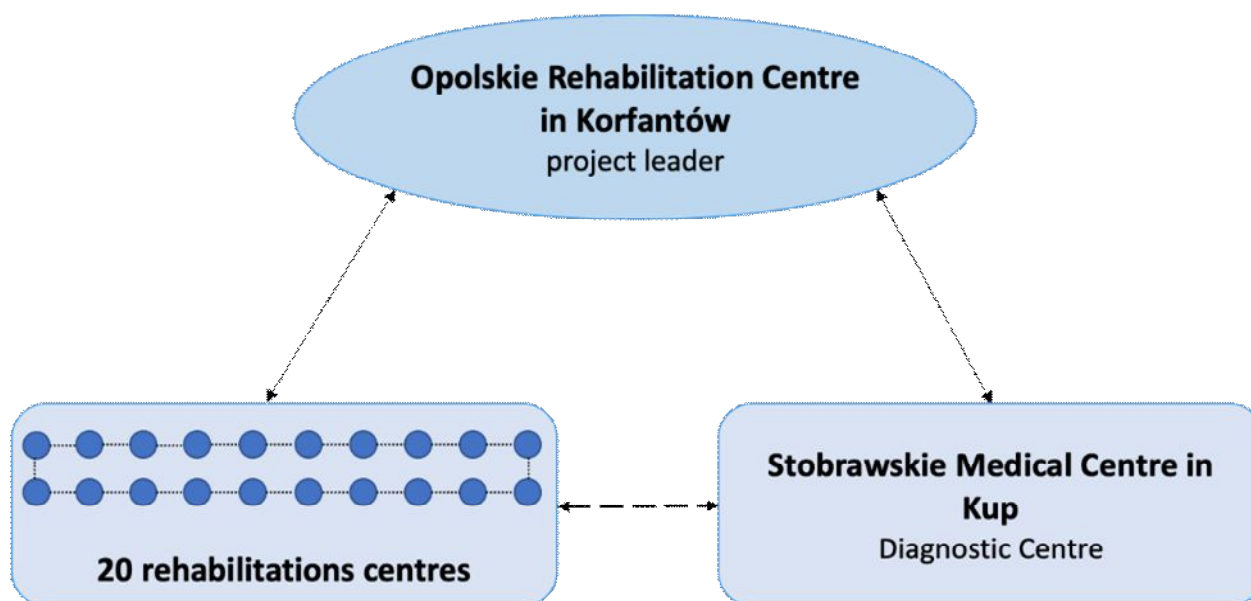


Source: Own study based on the Health Policy Programme for the rehabilitation of people in Opolskie Voivodship with health problems caused by COVID-19, adopted by the Board of Opolskie Voivodship by Resolution No. 6027/2021 of 2 December 2021.

At the same time, this project, co-financed by the European Social Fund, has been linked to an investment co-financed by REACT-EU funds², as shown in Figure 3. The European Regional Development Fund will finance the creation of the Network Centre for Coordinated Post-Covid Rehabilitation Services in Opolskie Voivodship. Thus, the resources of one facility are being combined with another financial facility, while involving a broad partnership of primary care providers, rehabilitation facilities, and hospitals. From the Managing Authority's point of view, the leader in the investment project (Figure 3) is Opolskie Rehabilitation Centre in Korfantów. This institution has extensive experience implementing partnership projects co-financed by EU funds. Such projects are difficult because of their exceptional organisational, logistical and financial challenges. However, only such innovative solutions offer the opportunity to create projects with a large development potential.

² REACT – one of the European Commission's tools to support the EU's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3. Model for the implementation of consolidated post-Covid rehabilitation network in Opolskie Voivodship (European Regional Development Fund, REACT-EU)



Source: Own analysis of premises for investment project Opolskie Rehabilitation Centre in Korfantów.

Education is one of the areas in which partnership projects are often implemented. An exceptional example are two projects from the Regional Education Facilities Support Team, a unit of Opolskie Voivodship Local Government: “Opolskie Vocational Education for the Labour Market” and “Opolskie Vocational Education for the Labour Market 2” (the follow up to the first project). The projects include support for all vocational schools, i.e. nearly 80 vocational education establishments grouped within 56 complexes of vocational schools in the Opolskie region. There is a wide range of educational options on offer for students, teachers and employers, adapted to the requirements of the labour market. These three groups have worked together over the whole region to create a system of internships, student placements in enterprises with tutors, and the development of dual education. Although the vocational schools in these projects were not formal partners, it was possible to consolidate their participation in project activities related to an important regional development goal.

In the financial perspective 2021-2027, Opolskie Voivodship will implement partnership even more extensively, both under the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund Plus. The European Social Fund Plus allows support to be directed to the people of the region. Thus, the involvement of social and public sector actors will be particularly evident in relation to disadvantaged groups, such as the homeless and Roma, and, as a continuation of the 2014-2020 policy, to the elderly and people with disabilities, as well as families experiencing caregiving problems, and children deprived of parental care. In the context of supporting the process of devolvement, the idea of local partnership will be promoted, the strength of which is direct reference to the problems of the local community, and the ability to find the relatively best ways to counteract and solve these problems.

The Board of Opolskie Voivodship assumes that with the implementation of new undertakings, such as the Marshall's Village and Urban Initiative, the partnership will also tackle problems in local communities. Needs identified by residents will be translated into projects to be carried out by NGOs and local government units. Such projects will contribute, on the one hand, to improvements in citizens' lives and, on the other, will increase the participation and involvement of local communities. In this regard, the regional authorities plan to use the potential of Local Action Groups as rural area leaders.

Another dimension of partnership involves increasing the role of business entities. Companies will be involved both in vocational training or flexible forms of employment and in public-private partnerships. This form of partnership assumes that public tasks will be fulfilled via an agreement between a local government unit and businesses. The measure of success in this case is the ability to optimise the spending of budget funds through the involvement of private capital in the realisation of public investments, as well as the use of the knowledge and experience of businesses.

An interesting form of multilevel partnership is the whole system of revolving financial instruments co-financed from structural funds. In Poland, its scale is illustrated by the financial perspective 2014-2020, which demonstrates visible progress compared to the years 2007-2013. There is currently EUR 3.267 billion in funding, representing 4.2% of European Structural and Investment Funds, while in the 2007-2013 perspective, EUR 874 million were allocated to revolving financial instruments in Poland [27] [28]. In Opolskie Voivodship, more than PLN 227 million, i.e. 5.4% of the funds for the Regional Operational Programme for 2014-2020, were allocated to repayable financial instruments, while in the years 2007-2013 this totalled PLN 92 million³. They revolved around the regional economy at least twice, which confirms that the implementation of such projects should continue in 2021-2027 [29]. Obviously, it is worth indicating the areas of support in a well-thought-out way, since the Opolskie experience clearly shows that not all types of interventions in the form of revolving instruments are accepted by the regional actors of socio-economic life. There are many reasons for that – one of the main ones is the financial capacity of financial intermediaries and the beneficiaries' absorption capacity. This multilevel partnership includes a Managing Authority in the region, an Intermediate Body in the region, the Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego and a selected financial intermediary which is an institution providing support to local governments and businesses. The necessity to secure the voivodship's own contribution, in the amount of 15%, was finally transferred to the financial intermediary and the final beneficiary.

It is noticeable that Opolskie Voivodship features its own individual way of building partnerships. The projects above demonstrate that they are very often inspired by employees in the voivodship's local-government units, acting on behalf of the region's authorities. In many cases, partnerships involve entities from the entire voivodship. Quite frequently, these entities come from different spheres of socio-economic life, e.g. local governments, NGOs, hospitals whose founding bodies are local or regional authorities,

³ Data of the Managing Authority for the ROP OV 2014-2020 as of the end of 2021.

ministries, primary health care entities, rehabilitation facilities, etc. Thus, the beginning of the chain is a partnership in one project of various entities based on human, organisational, technical and financial resources. The next advanced stage is the integration of projects from different sources, their mutual complementarity, and thus building coordinated projects with a high development potential. It should be emphasised that the projects are carried out in a specific space, so they have their impact on building internal cohesion at the regional, sub-regional and local level. While analysing the experience of Opolskie Voivodship, it becomes clear that these projects would never have been implemented on such a scale without the support of European Cohesion Policy.

3.3. Integration of public intervention

The integration of the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund measures and resources from other EU funds with other streams of available financial resources is a component of the Opolskie participatory model for the programming and implementation of EU funds. Integrating projects is certainly a basis for building intra-regional and external competitiveness using all levels of strategic management in European Cohesion Policy. This approach leads to economic, social and territorial cohesion in the region and also illustrates its cultural and environmental dimensions.

In Opolskie Voivodship, the support from the European Regional Development Fund for investments in hospital gynaecological and obstetric wards are a good example of fund integration. These investments are complemented by projects financed under the European Social Fund and result from the “Mother and Child” Health Programme for Opolskie Voivodship. At the preparation stage, the Opolskie Voivodship Health Programme was divided into three areas: northern, central and southern. Within calls for tenders no more than 2 projects per area were chosen to support women with the same services in different parts of the voivodship. Assistance received by pregnant women and mothers is provided mainly through mobile antenatal classes, prenatal checkups, the rehabilitation of children under two, midwifery support during the first months of life, and psychological counselling for parents [30]. At the same time, beneficiaries and partners of investment projects very often implement projects undertaken under the European Social Fund.

Culture also sees the integration of European funds and the voivodship budget. Many comprehensive investments, including those of a local nature, have been financed by the European Regional Development Fund. Through the voivodship budget financed “Eduko” initiative, the Board of Opolskie Voivodship supports the cultural activities of individuals who can submit projects of up to PLN 5,000. This approach follows the idea that educational and cultural initiatives must always have a specific place in the voivodship space. So, funds are integrated and venues important to the culture of the voivodship are made more attractive.

Another form of integration is the use of cross-financing from the European Social Fund. This approach results in soft activities being complemented by investments in a given project. Examples include supported housing for seniors and young people leaving foster

care as part of comprehensive social service projects. Another example is pre-school education financed by the European Social Fund, whereby additional classes are organised in a project which covers all kindergartens in the given *gmina*. The range of the project allows for co-financing the purchase of equipment for kindergartens, the renovation of classrooms in educational institutions or the conversion of an entrance to a building to make it accessible to the disabled.

These examples of integrating projects in Opolskie Voivodship from different sources of public intervention demonstrate that regional solutions have been found that are worth following. There are mechanisms leading to integrated projects which, although difficult, have great potential for development. This approach is based on the two funds being mutually complementary. These are not always only European funds for investment and soft projects, i.e. targeted directly at people (post-Covid rehabilitation). An example of such a project is “Eduko” which is financed from the state and voivodship government budget. Investments in culture have been financed by regional, national and EU funds. In this approach, it is important to combine different types of interventions and thus seek to achieve wider developmental effects.

CONCLUSIONS

Experience in implementing European Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 has provided much inspiration for modelling public intervention in Opolskie Voivodship, as well as other Polish and European Union regions. On this basis, these are the most important expectations for the next perspective for 2021-2027.

- 1. Maintaining a very positive trend in quality of governance, which is the key to success.** The leading yardstick for assessing the effectiveness of structural fund implementation at the regional level is quality of governance. For the European Commission, it is extremely important how average citizens perceive corruption or the quality of public services in their place of residence. Comparing the development of this indicator for Opolskie Voivodship with other voivodships shows that in just one decade it is possible to go from last to first place within Poland. This position should be maintained, and the importance of quality of governance for the design of public policy is recognised by the local government of Opolskie Voivodship.
- 2. Fostering economic development, as reflected in narrowing the gap with richer regions of the European Union in terms of GDP per capita.** Poland's accession to the EU resulted in a leap forward rarely seen in such a short space of time. Thanks to European Cohesion Policy, both the country and individual regions have significantly increased the scale and focus of public investment, resulting in a rise in the GDP per capita by purchasing power standard. For Poland this is an improvement of 20.8 percentage points, while for Opolskie Voivodship it is an improvement of 15.4 percentage points between 2006 and 2019, which puts the region in the middle of the voivodship rankings. There is a general decrease in the deviation of the value of this indicator from the EU average. Opolskie Voivodship should continue looking for economic and social measures and increasing institutional capacity, using, among other things, European Cohesion Policy instruments, to bridge the gap from other regions and the EU average.
- 3. Shaping the outlook of the region's population and advancing a participatory model of development.** An important parameter for the strategic management process is its multilevel governance process, which results from the participation of key stakeholders. In Opolskie Voivodship this takes place when key strategic documents are created as well as when programmes and partnership projects are planned and carried out. This is demonstrated by the initiatives financed from the budgets of local government units, as well as from European funds. Some examples are the unanimous adoption of Voivodship Strategy to 2030 by all the political fractions in the Regional Assembly, the creation of sub-regions, the Marshall's Village Initiative, the Marshall's and European Participatory Budget, and projects for vocational education or social services. Devolution also involves residents and NGOs in project partnerships. The next financial perspective aims to further strengthen cooperation at each stage of the management of EU funds and to use the concept of multi-level

public management. Finally, it is by mobilising the potential of small local communities and NGOs, including local action groups, that projects can be built for the benefit of the voivodship's population. New partnerships should be created through the grant system, as well as a mixed model based on financial instruments and non-repayable grants, which is an additional use of the European Social Fund Plus. This fund is ideal for building partnerships and solving problems on a regional scale in such problem areas as supporting the elderly, strengthening the role of foster families and family-type children's homes, lifelong learning, the comprehensive development of vocational and general education, and supporting the activities of local communities.

4. **Catalysing positive trends in cohesion in the voivodship in its most important dimensions (social, economic, territorial, environmental, cultural, etc.).** The decentralised model for implementing Cohesion Policy structural funds has made it possible to implement a fine tuned approach in the disbursement of European resources in Opolskie Voivodship. An integrated and fine tuned approach to disbursement under the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund has been taken. The establishment of sub-regions made it possible to include them as partners in the process. The partnership-based approach to revitalisation, i.e. proposing quotas for individual cities based on specific indicators, created equal opportunities for entities from sub-regional centres and other towns. Recognition of border counties i.e. those with structural problems, has given a signal to local authorities that cohesion in the voivodship is given priority. Such actions ultimately result in a reduction in internal disparities throughout the region. Finally, it enables co-management of European funds with local authorities and citizens.

5. **Development-oriented allocation of successive tranches of structural funds for the benefit of Opolskie Voivodship.** Over the last decade or so, European Cohesion Policy has enabled Poland and its regions to significantly increase the scale and targeting of public investment. This has led to a leap forward in Poland rarely seen anywhere within such a short timeframe. This favourable trajectory should continue over the coming years, as the funds available via European Cohesion Policy are not used for short-term, but medium and long-term needs. EU funds in Opolskie Voivodship must therefore continue to be allocated to and targeted at climate protection with the use of green energy, digitisation, innovation and strengthening human resources, including the health of the local population. And by making sure that local and regional interests are balanced, and cooperation and dialogue promoted instead of competition, dreams can turn into reality. These dreams, despite occasional challenges, are partnership-based and integrated projects. Thus, projects with high development potential are of most help to the region, sub-region and local government.

6. **Creativity in addressing new challenges arising from global megatrends and black swans.** The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that no national or regional economy was prepared for a crisis of this magnitude. It is now clear that many areas of economic and social life need to be remodelled. European Cohesion Policy should therefore create modern solutions that arise from changing realities. There is certainly a multiplier effect from combining the activities of the European Regional Development Fund with the European Social Fund Plus. Another aspect is building and implementing pilot projects. This trend can be illustrated by, among other things, the comprehensive, and innovative, project for post-Covid rehabilitation in Opolskie Voivodship or support for the purchase of not only laptops for all primary school teachers, but also a complete upgrade of the online learning environment, with the simultaneous appointment of educators who are leaders. Another important project in terms of public participation is the European Participatory Budget. Within that budget, all residents will have the right to vote for their preferred type of intervention. Citizen participation is part of the content assessment of the entire project selection process. This trend should be maintained, and more new ideas should be introduced. These can include the European Urban and Rural Initiative or the involvement of Local Action Groups in climate protection.

7. **Smart identification of the directions of European Cohesion Policy trends.** Over the past several years the approach to EU fund distribution has evolved. Currently, European Cohesion Policy is focused on economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among the member states of the Community, and thus on regions or local entities. Directions for change are presently seen many areas. The first is the climate: the quality of life for present and future generations depends to a great extent on today's actions to protect the environment. The second is education: young people have a unique role to play in the future of the Community and they should receive the kind of education that will enable them to enter the market economy. Furthermore, adult education is important in terms of the flexible functioning of human resources in the labour market. Another area for a new approach is health and social services, which should be aimed at building a society of equal opportunities. And as immigration continues to be vital in the economy, supporting non-EU citizens in their socio-cultural integration and entry into the labour market provides opportunities to develop the human resources needed for the labour market while ensuring their integration with local communities. Each of these real-life areas must have an online presence; the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that. But it's not only our own personal and professional lives; it extends to the application of revolving financial instruments, the integration of the measures financed by the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund and other sources for the purpose of pursuing undertakings with a large development potential.

8. **Investing in the capacity of the human resources in charge of the voivodship's social and economic development policies.** Management of EU funds requires a stable, well-trained workforce which works on the basis of institutional partnership. The strength of any institution is its most experienced and highly qualified people. Preventing excessive staff rotation is crucial for any institution involved in the process of managing funds, not only at the national but also at regional or local level. Equally crucial is consistency in ensuring that the institutional development potential of entities in Opolskie Voivodship can be achieved in a balanced manner. The quality of human resources, both at the Managing Authority and at implementing institutions, as well as those implementing projects, is a key determinant of the effectiveness of the entire system of regional management of EU funds, including the high quality of individual projects.

9. **Inclusion of relevant development policy issues at the voivodship, sub-regional and local levels in research priorities.** While the Polish academic literature has numerous analyses of the impact of Cohesion Policy on various aspects of socio-economic development, very rarely is the impact of Cohesion Policy analysed from the perspective of institutional change, including the quality of national or regional governance. This approach provides a basis for building models for sustainable regional growth in the next programming periods. Another issue is the demonstration of the benefits and the system for the effective implementation of European Cohesion Policy at the regional level, treating the voivodship as a laboratory of good practices in terms of management and the way it forms agreements around development issues. Yet another area of research is the integration of projects based on various sources, ensuring the coordination of regional and national instruments, and the assessment of their impact on regional cohesion. Therefore, it is necessary to look for such solutions, which are the most important in shaping the positive effects of the decentralised implementation of European Cohesion Policy in Polish voivodships.

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REVIEWERS' COMMENTS

Prof. Krystian Heffner, Ph.D. *Head of the Department of Spatial and Environmental Management, University of Economics in Katowice*

"...the example of Opolskie Voivodship, given in the reviewed *Reflection Paper*, fully confirms the appropriate use of European funds for accelerating the development of regions in Poland, as adopted by the regional self-government structures." ... "The concept and logic of the argument is also clear, in which – by presenting the general conditions, then justifying the quantitative characteristics and detailing examples of the implementation of regional development policy through the use of European support – important clues and inspirations for modelling sustainable regional growth in subsequent programming periods have been formulated." ...

Prof. Janusz Zaleski, Ph.D.

"A highly valuable part of the text is those issues related to the use of the European Social Fund in the implementation of the voivodship's development policy. The study ends with final conclusions, which are, on the one hand, a summary of the lessons learned from the implementation of Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 and, at the same time, lessons for the future in programming and implementing the Cohesion Policy at the voivodship level in the next EU budget for 2021-2027. These conclusions, although related to Opolskie Voivodship, have a more general dimension and should be used by all local voivodship governments in relation to the implementation of Cohesion Policy 2021-2027."

Piotr Żuber, Ph.D. *Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies, University of Warsaw*

"The reviewed text is an attempt to show the role of European Cohesion Policy in socio-economic development and the institutional modernisation induced by it in Opolskie Voivodship. The text has a more universal character and can be read more broadly – as showing the benefits and the system of effective implementation of European Cohesion Policy at the regional level, treating the case of Opolskie Voivodship as a laboratory of good practices in terms of management and the method for forming agreements around development issues." ... "Similar collective studies are very much needed – in the Polish literature there are many analyses of the impact of Cohesion Policy on various aspects of socio-economic development, but very rarely is the impact of that Policy analysed from the point of view of institutional changes, including quality of governance." ...