

# *The Unfinished Story of the Ugly Duckling: Polish Regions under the Realm of Europeanization*

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The article provides an analysis of the changing role of elected regional governments in regional policy making in Poland from their creation in 1998 until 2013. The analysed period shows the gradual empowerment of regional governments, initially established as politically, functionally and financially very weak institutions. The change is explained through the process of Europeanization, and in particular through their expanding role in the management of EU structural funds. The situation in Poland is characterised by a much weaker position of regional governments than is the case in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The article also raises the question of the role of regions following the end of the EU 2014–2020 financial

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perspective, calling for a reinvention of the role of regional institutions, and suggesting that the lack of long-term vision may result in a rapid decrease of the political profile of regions, to a level similar to that observed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Key words:* Europeanization, Poland, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), regionalisation, regions, regional policy, structural funds

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary history of Polish regional governments is relatively short. They were created in the 1998 reform as very weak entities – with highly limited functions and even more scarce financial resources. Yet their importance in domestic politics grew significantly in the following years. This article argues that the main drive for this growth might be attributed to their role in the implementation of European regional policies, and in particular to the decisions on the institutional shape of Regional Operating Programmes. However, it is not clear what the vision of Polish regions is after 2020, when their role as the »ministries of European gifts« for localities will most probably be over. The regions have to be reinvented and have to reinvent themselves.

The connection between the expanding role of Polish regions and EU accession, as well as the management of EU funds, directs our attention to the concept of Europeanization (more extensively discussed in Swianiewicz, 2013). The nature of the expected EU impact at the regional and local level has been extensively discussed in literature concerning Western European countries (Goldsmith, Klausen 1997; Tofarides, 2003; Leonardi, 2005; Frank et al., 2006; Hamendinger, Wolfhardt, 2010). But there has been much less systematic observation of the extent to which the processes noted in new member states recall the earlier (and sometimes parallel) experience of the western part of the continent. The existing analyses concentrate mostly on the impact at the state level (e.g. Grabbe, 2003) or on the pre-accession period and its relationship with regional policies (e.g. Keating, Hughes, 2003). There are a few case studies, such as Budapest (Tosics, 2010) and Ljubljana (Pichler-Milanović, 2010), or the interesting study of EU impact on regionalisation in Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (Bachtler, McMaster, 2008; Bache et al.,

2011), but English-language literature still contains very few analyses which would include a more comprehensive reflection.<sup>1</sup>

The paper addresses in particular the analysis of the learning processes prompted by the EU (Radaelli, 2003) and the extent of EU impact (Börzell, Risse, 2003; Bache, 2008). Radaelli (2003) made a very useful distinction between thin and thick learning processes. A similar distinction is made between absorption, accommodation and transformation (Börzell, Risse, 2003) as levels of Europeanization. This paper will refer to these distinctions.

The framework used in this paper refers to the concept of Börzell and Risse (2003) on the one hand, while at the same time it attempts to view the adaptation of regional governments through three perspectives: (1) change in the structure of public administration; (2) change in the hierarchy of goals and priorities in regional government policies; and (3) change in the style of policy preparation and policy implementation.

The empirical part draws upon the results of research projects conducted within the 2008–2012 period.<sup>2</sup>

The first section of the article provides an illustration of the »creeping regionalisation« of Poland, showing the gradual growth of the political significance of regions. The second section discusses their current role in the implementation of regional policies, demonstrating both similarities to other CEE countries and the unique position of Polish regions compared to those in neighbouring countries. Finally, the third section, by reference to the theoretical concepts of Europeanization, focuses our attention on the broader impact of EU cohesion policies on the organisational culture of Polish regions.

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<sup>1</sup> Such a conceptual reflection in the Polish language was published by Lackowska (2011).

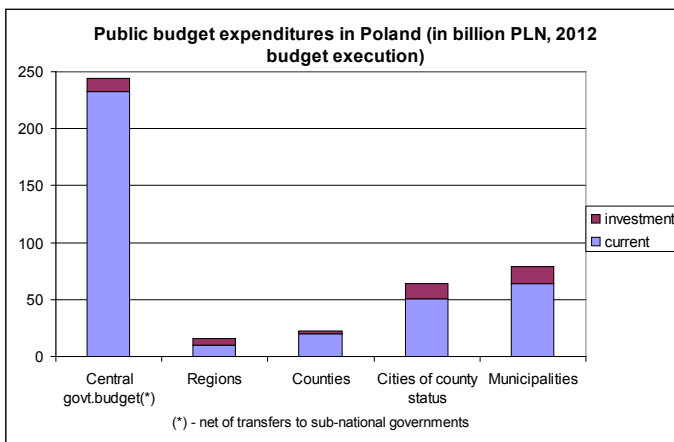
<sup>2</sup> Factors differentiating implementation of the Integrated Regional Operating Programme (grant from the Polish Ministry of Regional Development, research conducted in 2008-2010); Local government beneficiaries of Sectoral Operating Programmes (grant no. DKS/BDG-II/POPT/179/11 from the Polish Ministry of Regional Development, research conducted in 2011-2012).

## 2. The Impact on Regional Reforms – The Crawling Decentralisation of Polish Regional Reform

The whole set of decentralisation reforms implemented in Poland first in 1990/1991 and then in 1998/1999 granted a wide range of functions to municipal governments, while the lists of county and regional functions are much shorter. This is illustrated by Figure 1, showing the role of individual tiers in public budget spending. In the years just following the reform the share of regions in sub-national budget spending was just over 5 per cent; in subsequent years this increased considerably, but in 2012 it was still less than 9 per cent, while the share of large cities (cities of county status) was over 35 per cent and the share of remaining municipalities – over 43 per cent.

This is associated with the fact that the role of regional government in the direct delivery of services is very limited. The most important service functions include: maintenance and construction of regional roads, organisation of regional railway services, and organisation of the health service at the regional level (in this last case the role of regions is limited to maintenance of infrastructure and organisational/management decisions. The current costs of health care are covered by the contracts between hospitals and the national health insurance fund). However, the main function of regions is not related to service provision, but to strategic planning and regional development programmes.

Figure 1. Public budget expenditures in Poland in 2012 in billion PLN



Source: author's calculations based on data from [www.stat.gov.pl](http://www.stat.gov.pl)

The reform has not introduced a considerable regionalisation of the public finance system either. Unlike municipal governments – who enjoy a limited power of taxation and who to a considerable extent are financed by their own taxes – regions rely on transfers from the state and (increasingly) European budgets, as well as on shares in personal and corporate income taxes – they receive 1.6 per cent of PIT and 15.9 per cent of CIT revenues collected within their territory. Moreover, most of the grants feeding the regional budgets are specific rather than general purpose transfers. Thus the reform created a new regional actor who was very weak – both functionally and financially – and was initially also weak in terms of its political position against local and central-level political actors.

The current system of sub-national governments assumes the existence of the three tiers with no vertical subordination among these. However, the implementation of EU regional policies and absorption of structural funds produces clear inter-relations among the tiers, and – as is shown in the following sections – places regional governments in a position of privilege in internal power relations.

The issue of future integration with the EU was often used by the proponents of the 1998 reform, who argued that only large regions could be economically competitive in the future European market and could become stronger partners of Western European counterparts, especially the German *Länder*. Some proponents claimed that regional reform was one of the conditions of access to EU structural funds, but this claim was not entirely justified. Also, as Hughes et al. (2003) observe, »the final shape of the reform should be seen as an inherently endogenous development«.

Similar reforms were introduced a few years later (2000) in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, where the self-governing *kraj* level has supplemented the structure of sub-national governments (14 regions in the Czech Republic and 8 in Slovakia; Illner, 2011; Čapková, 2011). In Bulgaria regional reform has never been implemented, in spite of having been envisaged in the Constitution (Kandeva, 2001). In Hungary and Romania the upper tier of sub-national government (*megye* and *judets* respectively) has not changed its spatial shape since 1990, although at least in Hungary its role has been marginalised (Horváth, 2000).

However, the biggest difference between Polish and other countries' upper level of sub-national government is that Poland is the only country in the region in which an administrative region would become a European NUTS-2 level region. Since NUTS-2 is a basic unit of European regional

policy, this has had very serious consequences for the regionalisation of cohesion policy implementation in Poland.

In 1998 the new regional institutions were granted a very limited set of functions and even more limited financial resources, but the mere fact of their establishment created a new political dynamism. Regional governments became involved in lobbying to strengthen their position and proved themselves able to mobilise public opinion and fight for further decentralisation. Their designation as NUTS-2 regions was a result of their successful lobbying. In the 2004–2006 Integrated Regional Operating Programme (IROP) this role was moderated by the fact that the goals and structure of the IROP were identical across the country, and regional governments had an extremely weak impact on policy preparation. But regional governments played a dominant role in the selection of individual projects to be financed, although this process was still controlled by the regional governor appointed by the national government (Lackowska, Swianiewicz, 2013). Nevertheless, the implementation of the 2004–2006 cohesion policy was clearly more decentralised in Poland than in any of the other member states which joined the EU in 2004.

The further empowerment of regional governments was possible during the 2007–2013 period thanks to the effective mobilisation of public opinion in support of decentralisation. The IROP was divided into 16 regional operating programmes (ROP), elaborated on by the regions themselves. The new law transferred decisions on project selection to regional executive boards. But this relatively clear logic was violated by the Polish Parliament, which decided to grant the governor the power to veto the regional governments' selection of projects. This regulation was strongly criticised by several experts, as well as local and regional politicians (including the Association of Polish Regions), some of whom suggested that it might not comply with the Polish Constitution and/or EU regulations. After powerful lobbying, the veto clause was eventually removed from the Polish legislation a few months later.

The role of regional governments has grown gradually, strengthening their position both against the central and the local (municipal) tiers (the latter being increasingly dependent on the region's decisions on the allocation of EU funds to local projects). The process may be described as *creeping decentralisation* – a process in which individual changes were not very dramatic, but taken together they have transferred discretion over regional policy making from the central to the regional level.

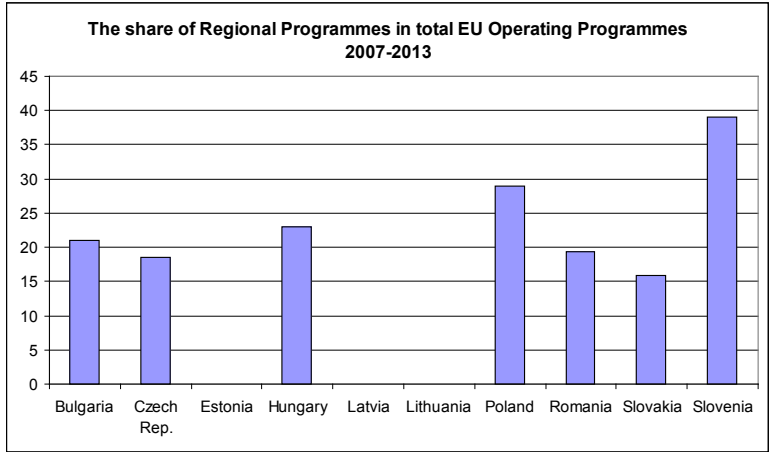
### 3. The Role of Regional Governments in the Absorption of EU Funds

Bache et al. (2011) argue that in the accession period of CEE countries the EU Commission initially sought to advance regionalisation and the role of regions in the absorption of structural funds. However, »... the position of regions is diversified among the NMSs, depending on the developments and traditions in domestic politics« (Bachtler, McMaster, 2008: 127). In the study by Bache et al. (2011: 135–136), for all the analysed cases (Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia) the authors conclude that »we find a resilient central state that adapts to the changing policy environment to retain a pivotal role in key decision areas«. The situation in Poland seems to be very distinct – it is the only NMS in which the ROP is managed by the elected regional government. Moreover, in Poland the regional programmes constitute a larger share of the total volume of EU funds compared to other countries. As Figure 2 demonstrates, Slovenia is the only exception to this rule; however the nature of the regional programme in this case is quite different, since it is a single programme managed on a central level. Besides Poland, the only countries with several regional programmes in the 2007–2013 perspective were the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, but in their case the programmes were managed by special purpose authorities including representatives of central and regional level governments. Romania and Bulgaria had an integrated regional operating programme for the whole country, and the role of regional governments in Romania was much more limited than even in the Polish IROP 2004–2006. Bachtler and McMaster (2008) distinguish between four potential roles of regions in structural funds programmes: planning, management, implementation and final beneficiary. In the 2004–2006 period the Polish regional governments contributed significantly through the last two roles only, which as Bachtler and McMaster (2008: 412–13) show was still more prominent a role than in other CEE countries. However, in the 2007–2013 period they played a crucial role in all four dimensions.

For the 2014–2020 perspective, Poland plans to increase the share of ROPs to 39 per cent of the total allocation, while some other countries of the region plan to head in the opposite direction – for instance, Hungary, which has announced an intention to abolish ROPs altogether.

A summary of the variety of regional programmes, their management and relative importance in the absorption of EU funds is also provided in Table 1.

Figure 2. The share of regional programmes in total EU operating programmes 2007–2013



Source: author's calculations based on EU Commission data

Table 1. Regional Operating Programmes in New Member States

CROATIAN AND COMPARATIVE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

		Institutional structure for implementation				
		Elected regional government responsible for implementation on NUTS-2 level	ROPs implemented on NUTS-2 level by special purpose institutions	One integrated ROP, implementation in NUTS-2 regions	One regional programme managed and implemented at the central level	No regional programmes
The share of ROPs in total allocation of EU funds 2007–2013	>25%	Poland			Slovenia	
	15–25%		Czech Republic Hungary Slovakia	Bulgaria Romania		
	0%					Estonia Latvia Lithuania

Source: Swianiewicz et al., 2008

During the past decade the dominant perspective of the Europeanization discourse in Polish academic literature has been limited to access to EU funds. Somewhat infrequently it also referred to the necessity to comply

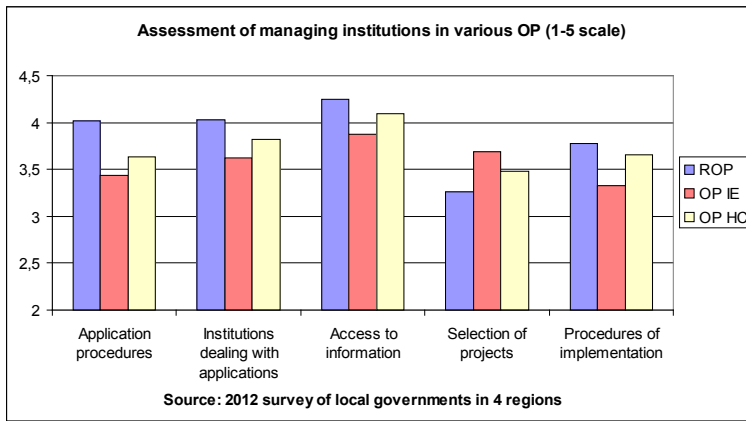


with EU standards and norms with regard to functions for which local governments are responsible. The new issue of regional policy was the fear of low absorption capacity – to what extent would available funds really be absorbed by local administrative structures? The ‘fetish of absorption’ may still be noticed in the discourse of urban politics, in which politicians concentrate on how much funds they were able to procure for their cities, while the effects of the undertaken projects are less frequently discussed and attract less public attention.

This perspective is more understandable upon considering the structure of sub-national investment spending. In Poland, while the share of EU funds in sub-national current expenditures did not exceed 4 per cent in social protection (and even less in other spending sectors) in 2010, in case of investment spending it was close to 40 per cent in communal infrastructure and 25 per cent in capital spending on transport infrastructure.

The management of ROPs by regional governments in Poland is often seen as very successful. This is not only because they have proved efficient in terms of the absorption and disbursement rate, but also because they are perceived as efficient managers by the final beneficiaries of EU-funded projects. The perception of their performance in this respect is often better than in the case of programmes which are managed at the central level (Figure 3). This does not concern, however, all dimensions of management – the perception of project selection at the regional level is often seen as less transparent and more politicised than in centrally-managed operating programmes. The competition for ROP projects is usually much fiercer than in the case of centrally-managed OPs. Therefore, selecting from a vast range of similar projects makes transparent decision-making more difficult than in the case of the relatively limited range of applications for big projects in other OPs.

Figure 3. Assessment of managing institutions in various OPs (1–5 scale)

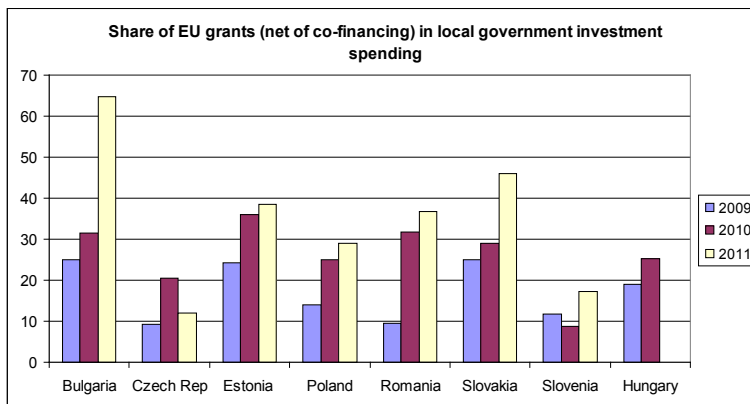


Source: Swianiewicz et al., 2013

Figure 4 shows the rate of dependency of sub-national investments on EU grants in various new member states. In most countries this grew from 2009 to 2011, reaching the highest figures in Bulgaria (over 60 per cent in 2011), Slovakia, Estonia and Romania. The lowest figures are found in Slovenia and the Czech Republic, but even in those cases EU grants provide close to 20 per cent of the total sub-national investment spending.

There is no doubt that the absorption of EU funds has dominated domestic regional policies in most NMSs. At the beginning of century the Polish government tried to develop its own regional policy tool through a system of regional contracts signed with regional governments (Swianiewicz, 2004), but later the concept of contracts was overshadowed by structural funds, and the main effort of Polish public funds was directed towards securing the matching input necessary for the absorption of resources available in the EU operating programmes. This is not in agreement with the theoretical assumptions of the EU cohesion policy, which assumes that it »... represents an addition to existing national regional policies rather than a substitute for national policies« (Leonardi, 2005: 18). In Poland the role of national policies is important in the sense that the allocation of funds among regions and among particular projects is to a huge extent a domestic decision. But as Grosse (2006: 151) notes, »... the system of Polish regional policy is focused on the absorption of EU funds«.

Figure 4. Share of EU grants in local government investment spending



Note: no data available for Hungary for 2011

Source: author's calculations on the basis of data gathered in interviews with Dobrinka Krsteva (BG), Tomas Kostecky (CR), Miryam Vahtra (EST), Gabor Peteri (HU), Sorin Ionita (RO), Jan Bucek (SK), Krunoslav Karlovec (SI)

This situation observed in several NMSs is not unique in the history of the cohesion policy. As Leonardi (2005: 22–23) describes, »In 1992 the Amato government in Italy was forced to abolish the national regional policy for the South and used the available national funds to co-finance (with difficulty) the 50% level necessary for the cohesion policy's national and regional operating programmes. In the four 'cohesion' countries – Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain – the level of co-financing from the EU reached 75% of total expenditures, but even in these cases the national governments were hard pressed to come up with their additional 25%. Spending on regional development in the four less developed countries did increase dramatically – reaching over 5% of GDP in some cases – but this was largely due to the money transferred to national coffers from Brussels.«

But the data presented above do not tell us all about the depth of the changes induced by the implementation of the European cohesion policy at the regional and local level.

## 4. Thin and Thick Learning in Regional Governments

### 4.1. Administrative Structures for Regional Policies

The accession period and functioning within the structure of the EU led to several organisational changes in all tiers of public administration. In 2005 a new Ministry of Regional Development was created, with the main goal of directing the proper absorption of EU structural and cohesion funds. At the regional level, separate units dealing with EU funds were established in all regional government offices and they are usually among the most powerful departments in the regional administration.

However, there is limited evidence that these changes resulted in a more profound change in the organisational culture of the institutions involved. Following the Börzell and Rise definition, this change is something more than absorption; its permanent character suggests the use of the term *accommodation*.

### 4.2. Goals (Priorities) of Regional Policies

The impact of Europeanization on formulating goals or regional policies is primarily influenced by the weakness of strategic planning, which is broadly discussed in the next section of this paper. Strategic goals are usually formulated in a very broad fashion, giving an opportunity to justify the grant application, whilst not providing a basis for the selection of individual projects. Considering this weakness, the strategies did not provide an adequate basis for the preparation of ROPs for the 2007–2013 perspective.

The possibility of the regions developing programmes by themselves provides more opportunities for local projects to reflect a clearly formulated vision for the future development of the region. Yet, comparing the ROP documents, it is clear that the regions made only limited use of the freedom to create programmes by responding to the individual needs of a specific region. The ROPs are quite similar in their goals and formulated priorities, which indicates an unchanged attitude towards strategic documents.

The ROPs are not identical either. Even the sector which attracts the largest allocation of ROP funds is not the same in all 16 regions (Kru-

kowska, 2013). In 13 regions this is transport infrastructure, whilst in the remaining 3 it is research and development. However, the differences are not very significant. Analysing the nine major areas of intervention, it is apparent that all are reflected in each of the ROPs. The only exception to this rule is the elimination of the urban regeneration axis from the Podlasie Operating Programme. The average deviation of allocation from the national average – as calculated by Krukowska – differs from 0.6 to almost 3 per cent.

There is no doubt that the discretion in shaping the ROPs is strongly limited by the guidance from Brussels and the Ministry of Regional Development, but it seems that the weakness of the selective strategies contributes to their relative similarity.

### 4.3. Styles of Policy Making and Policy Implementation

The implementation of EU-funded projects often requires an adaptation to the EU model of policy making and policy implementation. The source of these rules may be found in the horizontal policies of the EU and/or in various documents adopted by the Commission. For example, with regard to urban policies one may indicate the methodological assumptions of the URBAN initiative and several EU-level documents, such as the 2000 Lille Agenda. Some dimensions of the promoted model are:

- Integrated strategic planning: the necessity to demonstrate a relationship between a planned activity and wider strategic goals, which requires earlier preparation of strategic documents. In the case of urban regeneration projects a specific kind of such a strategic approach concentrates on integrated neighbourhood projects, promoted since the URBAN initiative. Such an integrated approach includes complex interventions covering economic, social, environmental and physical infrastructure aspects of neighbourhood regeneration;
- Style of policy preparation including wide social consultations and various forms of community involvement;
- Partnership in project implementation. In particular, this involves partnership of public institutions (which includes cooperation among government tiers, going along with the concept of *multi-level governance*) and non-public actors (both local businesses and societal organisations).

It would be unjust to suggest that these ideas have appeared in Polish local and regional governments exclusively because of their involvement in the implementation of the EU cohesion policy. But there is no doubt that the appearance of EU funds has contributed to the wider popularity of the promoted model, and sometimes the mere application process was the main engine of their implementation. Examples of similar changes may be found in other countries of the region. Sootla and Kattai (2011: 591) describe how access to EU funds facilitated the partnership style of policy making and professionalisation of the local government administration in Estonia. Similarly, in Bulgaria EU integration has promoted the idea of inclusive policy making (Nikolova, 2011).

The depth of the changes was diversified. One may ask to what extent these ideas influence the consciousness of local staff and politicians, and how durable the changes in local government operating styles may be? As suggested by the cases discussed in following paragraphs of this paper, the *thin learning process* (a term suggested by Radaelli, 2003) has been dominant so far. Or, referring to the Börzell and Risse (2003) concept, the most typical is the *absorption level*, in which local governments try to access EU funds, but without a more substantial change in the modes of operation and goals of institutions which implement the projects. There are also exceptions to this rule, demonstrating deeper transformations in policy making and implementation.

The study of the implementation of the 2004-2006 IROP provides an excellent example of the issue discussed above. The obligation to prepare regional development strategies was introduced to the Polish legal system long before the take-off of the IROP, and was only very indirectly related to EU integration. However, access to EU structural funds has strongly dominated the way of thinking about strategic management. It was documented earlier (Swianiewicz et al., 2008, 2010) that the most frequent model of regional strategic planning differed very significantly from the theoretical assumptions rooted in New Public Management (NPM).

Many strategies try to define goals very broadly. Sometimes they cover the entire or almost the entire spectrum of functions delivered by the government that develops and adopts the programme. In this situation it is difficult to expect that the strategy would provide guidance for the implemented policies. Rather, it is a dead document, having little bearing on the daily activities of the administration and on key decisions. It should be emphasised that this form of document is sometimes adopted not because of a lack of skills or knowledge, but intentionally. The assumed role

of a strategy is often the key to obtaining as many grants as possible. Thus a 'hunting' document is created (for the purpose of grant hunting). Very broadly defined goals provide justification for almost every application for external funds under the strategy (and an indication of linkage with the strategy is often required by donors). Why indicate priorities, if we do not know in advance for what type of projects we will be able to get external support? By such reasoning, goal formulation (which seems to be wrong from the standpoint of an orthodox understanding of strategic management adopted by those who developed this concept) appears reasonable, and even desirable. If the priority in the development programme is 'almost everything', then we are free to apply for any measures that appear on the horizon.

The ability to implement an own strategy for the region by means of the IROP was obviously limited, if only because it was a uniform program, implemented under an identical scheme throughout the country. Key objectives were defined at the national level and regional authorities had relatively limited flexibility in adjusting the allocation of resources to the development visions. In comparison to the funds transferred to the regions in the 2007-2013 perspective, these resources were also scarce. All of this does not mean that the selection of specific projects for implementation could not be linked with the priorities arising from the regional strategy. The idea was to link this vision with the IROP through ongoing discussions within the regional steering committees, as well as final decisions taken by regional boards. We can also imagine the submission of project applications was consistent with the vision of regional development and inspired by regional governments' offices.

In practice, however, as documented by empirical studies and in the opinions of the main actors of regional policy making, the strategy was treated in a rather bureaucratic way – it served as a 'support document', and not one that directs regional development. In that sense the strategy was important as it supported applications for structural funds, but it was not difficult, since strategic goals were defined in a very broad way, enabling the justification of almost any project.

So what does success in IROP implementation, so often invoked by interviewees, mean? It comes down to two things: (1) spending all or almost all of the granted resources and (2) avoiding 'mishaps' of a formal nature. Implementing projects that would have a significant impact on regional development in the most desirable direction was not foremost in the minds of regional and local politicians and officials when asked to de-

scribe success. This is shown, for example, in a fragment of conversation with a member of the board of one of the surveyed regions: »I wanted to ask about your overall assessment of IROP implementation in the region. What was the greatest success, and what do you see as a failure? Although it was the first programme on such a large scale, we managed together with the beneficiaries to pull it off pretty well. There were no major appeals or complaints about the decisions of individual bodies.«

Given such an attitude we should maintain moderate criticism. To a large extent it is understandable. IROP was the first programme on such a scale to be implemented by the regional governments, thus they lacked experience and had to learn many things 'on the fly'. The central authorities set out very complicated procedures and specific requirements for regions that go far beyond the formal rigour imposed by the EU.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the regional media were interested in uncovering and publicising striking cases of unused or poorly used funds. In the final stage of the programme funds were sometimes awarded to projects from a 'round-up' (so long as applications did not contain formal errors). This was done in an attempt to avoid a low level of absorption at all costs. Therefore, all these drawbacks have rational explanations and justifications, but this does not change the fact that the observed practices differed significantly from the ideal strategic management of regional development. Thus the adoption of the strategic model of management remains the *absorption* rather than the *transformation* level of Europeanization.

The situation described above had an impact on the logic of the process of selecting projects for implementation under the IROP. The lack of strategic thinking meant the absence of guidance on the selection of projects resulting from the thought-out policies. When the politicians in power at the regional level were faced with the problem of using funds from the IROP, the tools at their disposal – in the form of previously developed strategies for regional development – could not help them, because they had been created for a completely different purpose. They were not treated as documents for the actual selection of investment priorities, but as 'supporting documents'. In making decisions on allocating resources from the IROP, the decision makers did not have any policy documents that would facilitate their job. The logic leading to the final selection of projects can be traced through the successive stages of the process.

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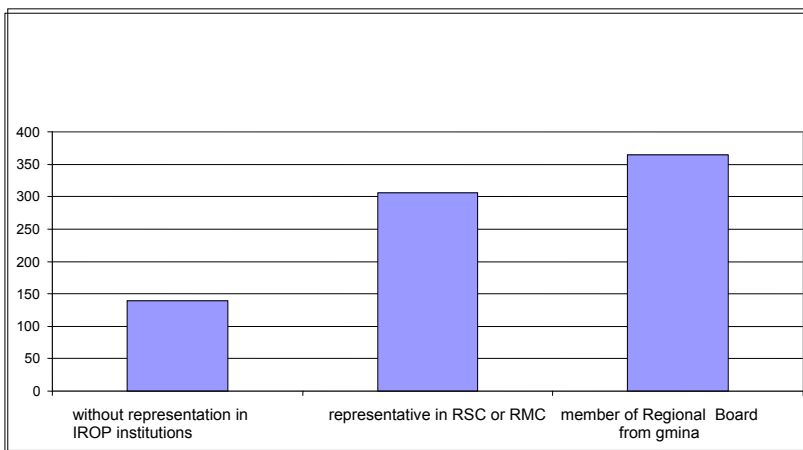
<sup>3</sup> Many authors have written about this excessive bureaucratisation and complexity of the process. Cf. Kozak, 2006; Grosse, 2004; Klimczak et al., 2006; Swianiewicz et al., 2008.



In the absence of priorities organising the process of generation and selection of priorities, there is nothing surprising in the fact that the selection was decided by other criteria. An important role among these was played by the applicant's position in the network of social actors in regional policy. In other words, the access to key decision makers was important. This issue has been described in detail in earlier studies (Swianiewicz et al., 2010; Bielecka, 2006; Bukowski, 2008). Figure 5 illustrates that those municipalities which were represented in formal IROP management institutions as well as municipalities where members of regional executive board came from were able to obtain larger grants than other local government units. Figure 6 also confirms that the issue of the position in the network of policy actors is not limited to the first years of the absorption of EU funds – the same phenomenon is visible in the ROP 2007-2013 data.

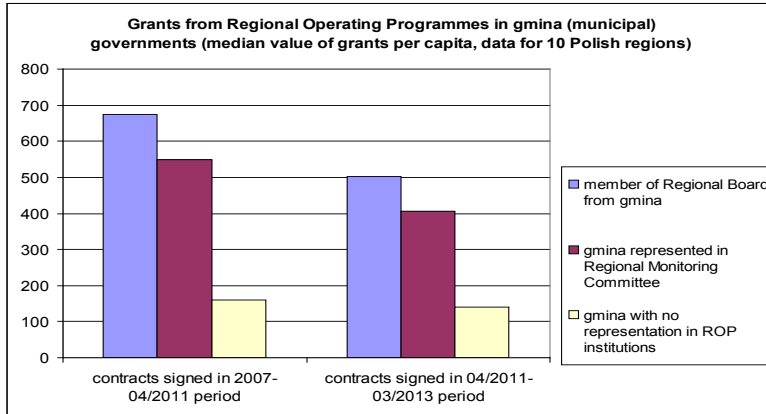
In this sense, in the process of IROP implementation, a superficial process of Europeanization can be observed. The sub-national actors have adapted to the formal requirements of EU programmes, but this adaptation was often superficial. This can be formulated even more harshly: EU policy has not changed the strategy and policy objectives of regions, because there was nothing to change – these goals and strategies existed only on paper.

Figure 5. Structural funds per capita in different types of municipalities (2004-2007, the average for 5 regions)



Source: Swianiewicz et al., 2008

Figure 6. Grants from regional operating programmes in gmina governments



Source: author's calculation based on data from [www.mrr.gov.pl](http://www.mrr.gov.pl) and websites of the regional operating programmes

Such an instrumental attitude towards strategic planning does not concern only IROP implementation at the regional tier. One can also provide examples of cities in which capital investment programmes are treated more as preparation of a formal 'support document' for EU funding applications, rather than real management instruments increasing the efficiency of policy making and implementation (see e.g. Purzyński, 2011).

The IROP procedures assumed the establishment of regional steering committees (RSCs), which would be an element of the partnership model of regional policy making. The idea of RSCs (and regional monitoring committees) was to set up a place to discuss visions for regional development and to carry out a proper selection of projects, in line with those visions. In practice, however, most RSC members did not have adequate competences for such an assessment, were not interested in this kind of discussion and perceived their role differently.

The dominant role in the work of RSCs from most regions was played by the representatives of potential project beneficiaries – municipal and county governments. Representatives of professional bodies, employer associations and academic circles, co-opted to RSCs, mostly remained as extras in the game, which was, de facto, between local governments joined in territorial alliances (unless they fought for projects for their institutions).

The process of co-optation of RSC members from societal organisations had several weaknesses related both to the weakness of civic society (a small number of organisations, which would not only defend particular narrow interests, but would be ready to undertake responsibility for the co-production of regional policy; Bukowski et al., 2008) and to the low level of trust between regional governments and societal organisations (and cases of manipulation identified in the appointment of NGO representatives to RSCs).

The only repeated trend in the quasi programme debates at RSCs was to strive for a relatively even distribution of resources among the different parts of a region. This resulted in a special understanding of the concept of sustainable development<sup>4</sup> (very widely adopted by politicians at the regional and local level) usually understood as the ‘even’ allocation of financial resources, in accordance with an adopted criterion, most often linked to the population.<sup>5</sup> This approach had nothing to do with sustainable development; it is an anecdotal example of the superficial adoption of concepts relating to theories underlying the regional policy, and at the same time the use of certain words, which matched well the justification of the dispersal of resources to beneficiaries in different parts of the region.

RSCs were a highly imperfect attempt to implement the partnership principle of management. Their establishment may be interpreted as a structural change having the character of *accommodation*. But in spite of the fact that in some regions RSCs had a significant impact on the selection of projects to be financed from the IROP, it is hard to describe this as a *transformation* of the regional policy making style.

## 5. Conclusion

The data provided in the paper prove that the change in regional policies as a result of EU integration and access to EU funds is tremendous. Sub-national investments have become heavily dependent upon grants from structural funds, and this process concerns not only Poland but most

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<sup>4</sup> The root of this misunderstanding comes from the terms in the Polish language. The Polish term for ‘sustainable development’ is almost the same as for ‘even development’.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Capitation’ was the term often used by interviewees demonstrating the popularity of this criterion, understood as the use of indicators and the distribution of grants in terms of their height per capita.

NMSs. The vast majority of new projects which are seen as highly significant by mayors would not have started in their current form if it had not been for access to EU funds.

Regional governments play an increasingly important role in the implementation of EU cohesion policies in Poland. There are no signs of moving towards a federal system; Poland remains and will remain a unitary state in the foreseeable future. However, it is an increasingly regional state, and using the terminology suggested by Loughlin (2001), it is becoming more accurate to call it a 'regionalised unitary state'. Due to these processes there are elements of political decentralisation at the regional level. The other dimensions of decentralisation which are typically discussed in the literature – functional and fiscal – are much weaker in the regions and more visible at the municipal tier.

The examples presented in this paper suggest that the most typical form of the Europeanization of regional policy making in Poland takes on the form of absorption (Börzell, Risse, 2008) or the thin learning process (Radaelli, 2003), although the creation of institutions necessary for the implementation of ROPs may itself be seen as the accommodation process. The observation of thin learning concerns, for example, integrated strategic planning, which has most often been subordinate to the absorption of EU funds as the main (if not the only) objective of undertaking the preparation of the strategy. But it is also visible in the frequently adopted model of partnership or community involvement, which is undertaken primarily to comply with the formal requirements of the operating programmes. It does not mean that one could not identify examples of deeper learning (transformation), but the level of absorption is a dominant element of the picture.

There is no major debate about the changes in the central-regional or regional-local relations at the moment. The current power of Polish regions originates to a large extent from their role in the implementation of the European cohesion policy. However, indigenous regional functional, financial and political position is still very limited. It is also much less clear what their position would be if the stream of EU funds to be managed by regions were to shrink considerably. Currently, their role seems to be secure until the 2014–2020 EU financial perspective is over. There are plans that the role of the regions in the absorption of EU funds will be even larger than in the 2007–2013 period. The role of regional operating programmes is going to be enlarged, and regional governments will play a role in the implementation of certain other programmes as well. However,

the amount of EU funds at the disposal of Polish regions will most probably shrink dramatically very soon after 2020. Before this happens, Polish regions have to reinvent themselves and find other roles and sources of political power. One may say that using the opportunities provided by EU structural funds, the Polish regions have grown (as political actors) from ugly ducklings to very strong and powerful swans. Without reinventing their role for the future they may easily shrink to ugly and unwanted ducklings again.

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THE UNFINISHED STORY OF THE UGLY DUCKLING:  
POLISH REGIONS UNDER THE REALM  
OF EUROPEANIZATION

Summary

*The article provides an analysis of the changing role of elected regional governments in regional policy making in Poland from their creation in 1998 until 2013. The analysed period shows the gradual empowerment of regional governments. Initially they were established as politically, functionally and financially very weak institutions. Their political importance increased due to following major milestone decisions: (1) establishing NUTS-2 units identical with the territory of elected regional governments, (2) gaining a limited role in the implementation of the Integrated Regional Operating Programme for 2004–2006 (including decisions on the selection of individual projects), and (3) considerable regional autonomy in the preparation and implementation of regional operating programmes for 2006–2013 and 2014–2020, involving about a quarter of all structural funds available for Poland. Therefore, the change, labelled as the process of ‘creeping regionalisation’, is explained through the Europeanization of regional policy making. The situation in Poland is characterised by a much weaker position of regional governments than is the case in other CEE countries. No other new member states have NUTS-2 regions which are identical with self-governing regions, and in one of those countries ROPs are prepared or managed by elected regional governments. However, in policy-making practice, Europeanization at the regional level often has a character of thin learning or the absorption level (as opposed to the deeper transformation level). The article also raises the question of the role of regions following the end of EU 2014–2020 financial perspective, calling for a reinvention of the role of regional institutions, and suggesting that the lack of long-term vision may result in a rapid decrease of the political profile of regions, to a level similar to the situation observed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

Key words: Europeanization, Poland, Central and Eastern Europe, regionalisation, regions, regional policy, structural funds

## NEDOVRŠENA PRIČA RUŽNOG PAČETA: POLJSKE REGIJE U POSTUPKU EUROPEIZACIJE

### Sažetak

*Analiziraju se promjene u ulozi koju jedinice regionalne samouprave u Poljskoj imaju u osmišljavanju regionalne politike u razdoblju od 1998. kada je regionalna samouprava uspostavljena do 2013. Tijekom tog razdoblja dolazi do postupnog jačanja regionalne samouprave, u početku slabe kako s političkog, tako i s financijskog i funkcionalnog aspekta. Na političkoj je važnosti dobila zbog tri važne odluke: (1) uspostave NUTS-2 jedinica, koje se prostorno poklapaju s jedinicama regionalne samouprave, (2) zadobivanja ograničene uloge u provođenju integriranog Regionalnog Operativnog Programa za razdoblje 2004.-2006. (uključujući i odlučivanje o odabiru pojedinih projekata) te (3) znatne neovisnosti na regionalnoj razini u pripremi i provedbi regionalnih operativnih programa za periode 2006.-2013. i 2014.-2020. na koje otpada otprilike četvrtina strukturnih fondova koji su na raspolaganju Poljskoj. Ta se promjena, nazvana polaganom regionalizacijom, objašnjava europeizacijom oblikovanja regionalne politike. Situaciju u Poljskoj obilježava daleko slabiji položaj regionalne samouprave nego što je to slučaj u ostalim zemljama srednje i istočne Europe. Ostale nove države članice nemaju NUTS-2 jedinice prostorno identične samoupravnim regijama, s tim da u jednoj od njih regionalne operativne programe pripremaju ili njima upravljaju izabrane regionalne vlasti. Ipak, kada se radi o kreiranju politike u praksi, europeizacija na regionalnoj razini često se odvija na površnoj razini, tj. razini apsorpcije, umjesto na dubljoj razini transformacije. Također se postavlja pitanje što će biti s ulogom regija po završetku financijske perspektive EU 2014.–2020. Regionalne institucije trebale bi pronaći nove uloge jer u protivnom bi manjak dugoročnog planiranja mogao rezultirati naglim opadanjem političke važnosti regija do razine slične onoj s kraja 20. stoljeća.*

*Ključne riječi: europeizacija, Poljska, srednja i istočna Europa, regionalizacija, regije, regionalna politika, strukturni fondovi*