

SME'S COMPETITIVENESS AS THE ERDF'S PRIORITY FOR THE SUPPORT OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT – EVALUATION OF THE POLISH EXPERIENCE

Jarosław POTERAŁSKI

University of Szczecin, Institute of Management; jaroslaw.poteralski@usz.edu.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-6205-3795

Purpose: The development and competitiveness of regions constitutes one of the most crucial areas of the intervention of the European Union's structural funds. Aid to SME's and increasing their competitiveness constitute one of the main priorities of supporting the development of individual regions. The aim of the article is to summarize and evaluate Polish experiences in the use of EU funds for the needs of increasing the competitiveness of the SME sector.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper features an analysis of literature concerning the structural funds with a particular focus on the European Regional Development Fund. Additionally, the author analysed the provisions of basic strategic documents, which contain the assumptions for the implementation of the cohesion policy in Polish regions in subsequent EU budget periods over the course of 2004-2020.

Findings: Poland as well as its regions have been the beneficiaries of the EU cohesion policy for nearly twenty years, preparing strategic documents and managing aid received from the structural funds during three subsequent periods: 2004-2006, 2007-2013 and 2014-2020. For almost two decades a system of support and the implementation of its major priorities was created at a national and regional level, stipulated in operational programmes and implemented by institutions equipped with suitable competences.

Originality/value: The paper is an attempt at summarising Polish experiences in using the ERDF's aid for the purpose of raising the competitiveness of the entities in the SME sector, which was to constitute one of the main priorities of improving the competitiveness and growth of Polish regions.

Keywords: Structural funds, development of regions, competitiveness of the regions, European Regional Development Fund, SME's competitiveness.

Category of the paper: research paper, viewpoint.

1. Introduction

The development and competitiveness of regions constitutes one of the major areas of interventions undertaken by the European Union structural funds. In turn, business entities of the SME sector are the most significant beneficiaries of such interventions, both at national and regional levels. Raising SME's competitiveness became one of the main priorities specified in strategic documents at the EU, national and regional levels. Support of the SME sector became one of the most consequential tools for the development and increase of the competitiveness of EU regions, while the European Regional Development Fund serves as a fundamental instrument of support for the sector, mostly in the area of investments and innovations.

Poland as well as its regions have been the beneficiaries of the EU cohesion policy for nearly twenty years, preparing strategic documents and managing aid received from the structural funds during three subsequent periods: 2004-2006, 2007-2013 and 2014-2020. For almost two decades a system of support and the implementation of its major priorities was created at a national and regional level, stipulated in operational programmes and implemented by institutions equipped with suitable competences.

The paper is an attempt at summarising Polish experiences in using the ERDF's aid for the purpose of raising the competitiveness of the entities in the SME sector, which was to constitute one of the main priorities of improving the competitiveness and growth of Polish regions. The paper features an analysis of literature concerning the structural funds with a particular focus on the European Regional Development Fund. Additionally, the author analysed the provisions of basic strategic documents, which contain the assumptions for the implementation of the cohesion policy in Polish regions in subsequent EU budget periods over the course of 2004-2020.

2. SME's competitiveness as a priority of support to the development of regions

Cohesion policy is one of the most essential EU policies. Its objective involves promoting a harmonious development of the entire territory of the European Union through actions leading to the reduction of disproportions in the level of development of its regions, and thereby to strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion of the European Community. Thanks to the suitable direction of the actions realized within the scope of cohesion policy, with the financial assistance of the structural funds and the Cohesion Fund, less developed regions have a chance of catching up on their growth and significantly accelerating the processes of achieving convergence with other regions and countries of the Community (Poteralski, 2011a, p. 346).

Social and economic cohesion of the European Union refers to all EU member countries, however, the essence of all the actions designed to ensure cohesion is that it is a region-oriented policy (Poteralski, 2011b, p. 97).

One of the most pivotal aims of integration is alleviation of economic disparities between old EU members and newly-accepted states or those aspiring to the Union membership. The process of reducing differences was to be achieved through the EU Cohesion Policy and Regional Policy, whose most essential tool was to be financial aid provided under structural funds (Świrski-Czałbowska, 2007, p. 92).

In the EU structural policy, in the context of raising EU regions' economic cohesion, their competitiveness is emphasised, both in terms of current diagnoses determining the directions in which the financial aid is applied, as well as in the perspective of expectations regarding its shape in the future. Competitiveness may be considered in national and regional dimensions as well as in terms of individual institutions or business entities, also entities belonging to the SME sector.

Competitiveness is recognized as a concept from the field of economics, although one should rather conclude that it is equally close to the areas of interest of management sciences. Competitiveness may be discussed in micro-, meso- and macroeconomic scopes. In a micro perspective it chiefly concerns enterprises, whereas at a macro level it concerns a state. Between these two levels one can also differentiate a meso level, where the competitiveness of industries, sectors and regions is featured. Such a broad application of the term of competitiveness has implications regarding both the understanding of the term as well as the factors that shape it (Grodzka, 2017, pp. 170-171).

One of the factors of competition between regions entails the strive to ensure proper technological, social and infrastructural conditions for the development of entrepreneurship. It is at the regional scale that many factors are shaped which may affect the operation of enterprises, such as social capital, business environment institutions, public services (Grodzka, 2017, p. 171).

Regional policy is a substantial component of the socio-economic policy conducted by Poland. The objective of the regional policy involves creating competitiveness of regions and counteracting the marginalization of certain areas in such a way so as to facilitate long-term economic growth of the country, its economic, social and territorial cohesion as well as integration with the European Union. Regional policy is a domain of public intervention that has been gaining increasingly more importance, while aid for SME's forms its part. The SME sector constitutes one of the major factors of regions' competitiveness and the pace of their economic growth. It is important that in planning the steps of a regional policy it is taken into account among development priorities. (Stachowiak, Pyciński, 2001, p. 7).

It needs to be emphasised that assistance to an enterprise provided within the framework of the EU may assume different forms, such as for instance specialist advisory services, support of business environment institutions, subsidies to start up business activity, however the actions

that evoke greatest emotions involve the ones undertaken under operational programmes, which are based on direct support of investments in the SME sector (Poteralski, 2011c, p. 154).

A region's competitiveness is stimulated through suitable actions aimed at improving the quality of life in a given area, and in particular the actions in areas such as environment protection, education, public health and safety, as well as through measures stimulating business activity, SME's growth, or the creation of a suitable investment climate. Support to small and medium enterprises is deemed to be one of the best methods of activating poorly developed regions (Stachowiak, Pyciński, 2001, pp. 11-13).

There are several forms of supporting entrepreneurs. Financial aid is a fundamental form available. Its aim is to pay for trainings, consultancy services, research and development work. Another type of aid entails simplifying legal and administrative procedures. It concerns in particular registering new business entities, applying simpler forms of taxation or enterprise auditing. Yet another kind of assistance involves supporting business environment institutions, such as information and consultancy networks for SME's, cooperation links between companies and business partners (Świrska-Czałbowska, 2007, p. 91).

The process of regional development is the result of three premises: internal ones (endogenous), external ones (exogenous) as well as reactions to external changes. Creation of development forces public authorities to exert impact on a suitable combination of factors of exogenous and endogenous nature. It entails the need for developing the right models of intervention policy. In the economic practice the effect of a chosen model typically involves the emergence of various fields of operation of small and medium enterprises (Stachowiak, Pyciński, 2001, pp. 23-24).

3. Competitiveness of Polish regions in the ERDF perspective in the years of 2004-2020

The use of aid within the framework of the EU structural funds in subsequent budgetary perspectives required that a series of strategic and programme-related documents had to be devised and agreed upon with the European Commission, both at the level of the Community, as well as at national and regional levels. However, it may be assumed that in the Polish situation the most important strategic documents at the national level included, respectively:

- in the years of 2004-2006: National Development Plan for 2004-2006,
- in the years of 2007-2013: National Strategic Reference Framework (National Cohesion Policy),
- in the years of 2014-2020: Partnership Agreement.

Those documents constituted, *inter alia*, a synthetic perspective of problem areas, they defined priorities and areas of support, they indicated the operational programmes, tools and institutions that were responsible for the planning, implementation and management of the programmes. In each of those documents one main objective was formulated along with several specific objectives, supporting the achievement of the aid assumptions within cohesion policy on the forecasted budgetary period. Those assumptions constituted a resultant of other strategic documents, determining the direction and priorities of growth in subsequent years, both at the level of the Community, as well as at national and regional levels. They were also a subject of negotiation between Polish authorities and the European Commission.

Table 1 contains a synthetic presentation of the assumptions of subsequent strategic documents, specifying the support to problem areas from the structural funds in the period of 2004-2020.

Analysing the provisions of fundamental strategic documents determining the use of aid from the structural funds in Poland in the subsequent budgetary perspectives, one can observe that the goals in the area of the main objectives have not changed significantly in the examined period. In all three periods "increasing the competitiveness of the economy" was listed in the first order. Furthermore, "improvement of social and territorial cohesion" was featured as well.

However, in the case of formulating specific objectives it can be observed that in the first of the analysed periods they were of fairly general nature and they largely referred to macro-economic and national dimension.

The first period of 2004-2006 was extremely important in building Polish experiences of using aid from the structural funds. On the eve of Poland's accession to the EU it was pointed out that the country lacked wide-ranging training and systematic education in the sphere of regional development. The effect of that was very poor knowledge of the subject both among civil servants as well as political decision-makers at all levels of territorial government, and in governmental institutions. The deficit was highly significant, considering the need for efficient and effective absorption of extensive financial aid that Poland would receive as transfers within the framework of the European Union structural funds (Józefowicz, 2001, p. 47).

Table 1.

Objectives of the strategic documents in the years of 2004-2020

2004-2006	2007-2013	2014-2020
National Development Plan	National Cohesion Policy	Partnership Agreement
Main objective/Main objectives		
Developing a competitive economy based on knowledge and entrepreneurship, capable of long-term, harmonious growth, ensuring an increase of employment and improvement of social, economic and spatial cohesion with the European Union at regional and national levels.	Creating conditions for an increase of competitiveness of an economy based on knowledge and entrepreneurship, ensuring an increase of employment and improvement of social, economic and spatial cohesion.	Increasing the competitiveness of the economy, improving social and territorial cohesion, improving the effectiveness of public administration (raising the efficiency and effectiveness of the state).

Cont. table 1.

Specific objectives		
<p>Supporting the achievement and maintenance of high GDP growth in the long-term.</p> <p>Increasing levels of employment and education.</p> <p>Including Poland into the European network of transport and information infrastructure.</p> <p>Intensifying the process of increasing the share of high added value sectors in the structure of the economy, developing information society technologies.</p> <p>Supporting the participation in developmental and modernization processes of all the regions and social groups in Poland.</p>	<p>Improving the quality of functioning of public institutions and expanding partnership mechanisms.</p> <p>Improving the quality of human capital and increasing social cohesion.</p> <p>Building and modernizing technical and social infrastructure of fundamental importance to the economy.</p> <p>Increasing enterprises' competitiveness and innovativeness, including in particular high added value manufacturing sector and developing the services sector.</p> <p>Improving the competitiveness of Polish regions and counteracting their social, economic and spatial marginalization.</p> <p>Evening out developmental opportunities and supporting structural changes in rural areas.</p>	<p>Improving the quality and internationalization of research as well as increasing the application of its results in the economy.</p> <p>Improving the competitiveness of enterprises.</p> <p>Increasing the use of ICTs in the economy and society</p> <p>Improving the competences of personnel in the economy.</p> <p>Using the resources more effectively on the labour market.</p> <p>Reducing the emissions generated by the economy.</p> <p>Improving the ability to adapt to climate change and developing risk management systems.</p> <p>Improving the effectiveness of the use of natural and cultural resources and their conservation.</p> <p>Improving the quality and functioning of the offer of the transport system and increasing transport accessibility of the country within the European network.</p> <p>Increasing the stability of electrical power and natural gas supplies.</p> <p>Improving chances for the employment of individuals affected by or being at risk of poverty and social exclusion.</p> <p>Reducing the risk of social exclusion caused by disproportions in access to services.</p> <p>Inclusion of communities residing in peripheral and degraded areas.</p> <p>Improving the quality and functioning of the offer of the transport system and increasing transport accessibility of the country within the national network.</p> <p>Improving administrative and legal conditions for economy growth.</p> <p>Increasing the use of ICTs in the economy and society.</p>

Source: own elaboration on the basis of: Poland. National Development Plan 2004-2006, Council of Ministers, Warszawa 2003, pp. 63-64; National Strategic Reference Framework (National Cohesion Strategy), Ministry of Regional Development, Warszawa 2007, pp. 40- 42; Programming of the financial perspective for 2014-2020. Partnership Agreement, Ministry of Development, Warszawa 2015, pp. 14-17.

In the National Development Plan for 2004-2006, 5 intermediate objectives were formulated and it was pointed out in the first years following Poland's accession to the European Union that the focus of the economic policy was chiefly on maintaining macroeconomic balance and financial stability (...), on limiting administrative and legal barriers to the development of entrepreneurship and conducting business activity. In the following objectives the need was stressed for, inter alia, the implementation of mechanisms that were to reduce labour costs, reduction of administrative and institutional barriers, simplification of the rules for conducting infrastructural investments, continuation of

restructuring processes and support for the most effective employment and prevention of any further deepening of spatial and social disparities (Council of Ministers, 2003, pp. 64-65).

The next budgetary perspective of 2007-2013 was the first full budgetary period comprising subsequent 7 years, and secondly it was a perspective that enabled Poland to use the experience already gained in the previous period. It was extremely important for the country and the regions, which in 2004 were only launching the entire system of planning and implementation of instruments of support within the scope of the cohesion policy. In the National Cohesion Strategy there was a distinct reference already at the level of formulating specific objectives to basic cohesion policy objectives, such as e.g. improving the quality of functioning of public institutions, improving the quality of human capital and increasing social cohesion, improving enterprise competitiveness and innovativeness. Furthermore, building and modernization of infrastructure was mentioned, including social infrastructure as well as increase of the competitiveness of regions, evening out growth opportunities and supporting structural changes in the countryside.

In the Partnership Agreement for 2014-2020 the precision with which the objectives were formulated was far greater. The document pointed out to the links between the Partnership Agreement main objectives and the Europe 2020 strategy, priority areas for support were listed, moreover, the main objectives and specific objectives were defined. Priority areas of support, defining the specific objectives presented in the document, included: environment favourable to entrepreneurship and innovations, modern network infrastructure, social cohesion and professional activity, the environment and effective management of resources, network infrastructure for employment growth (Ministry of Development, 2015, pp. 14-16).

4. Support to SME's as an objective of the cohesion policy in the years of 2004-2020

As previously mentioned, one of the areas of support provided by the structural funds involves the competitiveness of the economy, which to a large extent depends on the competitiveness of Polish enterprises. Over the course of the three European Union budgetary outlooks the priorities listed in the overriding strategic documents were realized within the scope of the so-called operational programmes. In the years of 2004-2006 the competitiveness of Polish enterprises was aided through such operational programmes as the Sectoral Operational Programme – Growth of the Competitiveness of Companies (SOP GCC) as well as measure 3.4 Microenterprises within the scope of the Integrated Operational Programme of Regional Development. In the next budgetary period of 2007-2013, the competitiveness of Polish enterprises was increased from the aid provided by the ERDF chiefly through the Operational Programme – Innovative Economy (OP - IE). At a regional level the

competitiveness of enterprises, particularly in the sector of small and medium enterprises, was supported through 16 regional operational programmes implemented and managed at the level of voivodeships (Poteralski, 2012, p. 208).

In the years of 2014-2020 the approach was continued, in line with which the cohesion policy at a regional level was supported by 16 Regional Operational Programmes, while the national programme, mostly oriented towards improving the competitiveness of Polish enterprises, involved Operational Programme Smart Growth. Table 2 contains the most important priorities and directions of the actions supporting SME's growth along with operational programmes, which provided the support with the participation of the ERDF. However, it needs to be added that apart from the programmes listed above, since 2007 the ERDF aid was also realized within the scope of separate programmes, addressed to the regions located in Eastern Poland. In the period of 2007-2013 it was the Operational Programme Development of Eastern Poland, while in 2014-2020 it was the Operational Programme Eastern Poland. They served as instruments of aid for those regions complementary to the Regional Programmes.

Table 2.

Selected priorities and operational programmes supporting SME's in the years of 2004-2020

2004-2006	Priorities/directions of actions supporting SME's development
	Supporting the competitiveness of enterprises Strengthening the growth potential of regions and counteracting the marginalization of certain areas
	Involvement of the ERDF in operational programmes Sectoral Operational Programme Growth of Economic Competitiveness (eventually the name adopted was: SOP Growth of the Competitiveness of Companies) (SOP GCC) Integrated Operational Programme of Regional Development (IOPRD: Measure 3.4.)
2007-2013	Priorities/directions of actions supporting SME's development
	Strengthening growth drivers, i.e. innovative enterprises through the creation of institutional conditions for their development, including the development of information society Supporting regional innovativeness (investment components), basic services, including tourism Growth of entrepreneurship Improvement of access to financing Supporting the growth of human resources for innovative economy
	Involvement of the ERDF in operational programmes 16 Regional Operational Programmes (ROP) Operational Programme Innovative Economy (OPIE) Operational Programme Development of Eastern Poland (OPDEP)
2014-2020	Priorities/directions of actions supporting SME's development
	Promoting entrepreneurship, in particular by facilitating economic applications for new ideas and facilitating the establishment of new enterprises, including also through business incubators Developing and implementing new business models for SME's, in particular in order to increase internationalization Supporting the creation and expansion of advanced capabilities of product and service development Promoting enterprise investments into R&D (research & development), developing links and synergies between enterprises, R&D centres and higher education sector, supporting technological and applied research, pilot lines, activities related to early validation of products and advances production capabilities and first production in key technologies.
	Involvement of the ERDF in operational programmes 16 Regional Operational Programmes (ROP) Operational Programme Smart Growth (OPSG) Operational Programme Eastern Poland (OPEP)

Source: own elaboration on the basis of: Poland. National Development Plan 2004-2006, Council of Ministers, Warszawa 2003, pp. 67-75; National Strategic Reference Framework (National Cohesion Policy), Ministry of Regional Development, Warszawa 2007, pp. 90-96; Programming of the Financial Perspective 2014- 2020. Partnership Agreement, Ministry of Development, Warszawa 2015, pp. 79-85.

In the period when the National Development Plan for 2004-2006 was in effect, the so-called Development Axes were formulated for the purpose of constructing individual Operational Programmes. Table No 2 features two of them, the first of which defined areas of support for the Sectoral Operational Programme Growth of Economic Competitiveness (later to be changed to: SOP Growth of the Competitiveness of Companies), while the second one referred to the needs of regions and was used to formulate areas of support for the Integrated Operational Programme of Regional Development (Council of Ministers, 2003, p. 68).

The latter programme was based on two funds and it supported intervention areas from both the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). One of the objectives of the Integrated Operational Programme of Regional Development within the area of the ERDF's competences involved building the competitiveness of regional economies through the support to the most effective and pro-development undertakings (Council of Ministers, 2003, p. 113).

The National Cohesion Strategy for 2007-2013 defined the so-called horizontal objectives, of which objective 4 "Increasing the competitiveness and innovativeness of companies, and in particular of the high added value manufacturing industry and development of the service sector" referred directly to the areas of competitiveness of enterprises, including from the SEM sector and it was reflected in relevant Operational Programmes (Ministry of Regional Development, 2007, p. 90). In the last programming period covered by this paper, the so-called thematic objectives were defined. The support of the competitiveness of the economy and its entities was provided for under Thematic Objective 1: "Strengthening of scientific research, technological development and innovations" as well as Objective 3: "Strengthening the competitiveness of SME's, the agricultural sector, fisheries and aquaculture sector". Within those objectives the programme specified areas for aid and priorities, listed in Table 2 (Ministry of Development, 2015, pp. 79-85).

The Partnership Agreement first of all specified Poland's crucial developmental challenges formulated on the grounds of an analysis of developmental needs and territorial potentials. The document assumed a significant importance of the funds that were to be managed by voivodships. It meant a greater than previously responsibility for the implementation of the Partnership Agreement objectives and it made it necessary to devise mechanisms ensuring the proper coordination of interventions. The Partnership Agreement featured an outline of the system of coordination as well as general assumptions for the division of interventions between a national and regional level, based chiefly on the subsidiary principle. Coordination between the cohesion policy funds at a regional level was ensured by the introduction of programmes based on two funds (the ESF and the ERDF), which was to be realized for the first time in the programming period of 2014-2020 by voivodeship local governments (Ministry of Development, 2015, pp. 7-8).

5. Conclusion

The European Structural Fund constitutes an uniquely important instrument of the EU cohesion policy. The main areas of the ERDF's interventions include an infrastructural dimension, competitiveness and innovativeness of business entities, including the ones from the SME sector. Improving the competitiveness of business entities constitutes a key factor in increasing the competitiveness and socio-economic cohesion of regions.

Summarising the first, nearly 20-year long experience of Poland and its regions in programming and using aid from the structural funds, including the ERDF, it needs to be emphasised that it was a period of intense efforts focused on the creation and launching of an entire system devised to support the process of absorbing the aid provided under the structural funds. It was particularly evident in the first period of 2004-2006.

Decentralization was a crucial factor determining the efficiency of absorption of the aid for the regions, both in terms of programming as well as managing aid. Observing the process of strategic documents formulation and the competences of individual institutions responsible for the management and implementation of operational programmes, one could conclude that in the analysed period a significant progress became notable in that area. Both in the aspect of recognizing needs (programming), as well as managing signs of such decentralization, the introduction of the financial perspective of 2007-2013 was a breakthrough moment with its 16 regional operational programmes, clearly responding to regional needs, the programmes supporting regions in Easter Poland. This trend was maintained also in the period of 2014-2020. It meant that the involvement of funds managed by voivodships was on the rise.

In the following budgetary periods it became evident that an evolution started in the programming of support for SME's. On the one hand, the ties between growth and competitiveness of micro, small and medium enterprises and the main areas of the ERDF's interventions, including objectives at regional and national levels, were adequately formulated. In the first period of 2004-2006 the aid was largely concentrated on stopping unfavourable phenomena at macro- and meso-economic levels, furthermore, the objectives were in a way directly reflected in operational programmes with a limited consideration of their complementarity, but also demarcation. It was decidedly more clearly defined in the periods when regional operational programmes were in effect.

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