

## EVOLUTION OR STATUS QUO - REGIONAL OPERATIONAL PROGRAMMES IN THE EU FINANCIAL PERSPECTIVE 2014-2020

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**Purpose:** The publication presents the evolution of the European Union policy implemented in Poland, focusing primarily on the 2014-2020 perspective, which was characterized by its decentralization.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The method of statistical data analysis and source materials was used in the work.

**Findings:** As a result of the conducted research, it was indicated that the 2014-2020 perspective was characterized not only by the highest allocation of financial resources, but the solutions proposed therein led to a deeper decentralization of regional policy in Poland consisting in the construction of two-fund regional programs (ERDF and ESF), prepared, managed and implemented at the regional level, bringing the thereby increasing the effectiveness of this policy.

**Originality/value:** The literature research and statistical analysis carried out in the article served to show the evolution of the regional policy decentralization process on maximizing its effects. The research results are dedicated to a wide group of people and entities benefiting from the support of European Union funds.

**Keywords:** cohesion policy, region, operational programs, regional development, European funds.

### 1. Introduction

The issues of broadly understood regional development have become increasingly important in Poland. In the first instance, in the context of finding extensive legitimacy in the Constitution, the Act on provincial local government, as well as the signed and ratified European Charter of Local Self-Government, primarily through the process of the country's integration with the European Union and, in this context, its participation in the EU's cohesion policy. In the second place, the importance grew with the implementation of the successive multiannual financial frameworks of the European cohesion policy and the growing awareness

of the importance of development policy, more broadly, the construction and implementation of a development management system, as well as the discounting of previous experience, which was also associated with the evolution of legal provisions in the field in question. It should be mentioned, *inter alia*, the Act on the Principles of Development Policy, the Act on the Principles of Implementation of Tasks Financed from European Funds. At the same time, it should be noted that the notions of the region and regionalism, based on a solid theoretical foundation of certain paradigms, rules and trends of development, the evolution of the territorial unit, give the regional policy a strong bearing as a conscious way of creating development and solving many important problems of development not only of the region, but also of the national economy (Hunek, 2000).

The reform of the country's territorial organisation by introducing district and voivodeship self-government, thereby restoring the three-tier territorial division of the country, started a broad process of economic and administrative change. The voivodeship became an essential participant in shaping the spatial socio-economic order and was given the opportunity to formulate the country's development strategy (Act of 5 June 1998 on Voivodeship Self-Government, 1998). The region has become, on the one hand, a "framework" for the programming and implementation of certain spheres of action, while on the other hand, it defines the ways to solve problems, to realise the development path of the region. The current regional policy is integrally linked to the decentralisation of the centre and the transfer of competences, resources and responsibilities to the regional level, although since 2015, after Law and Justice Party took power, we can observe recentralisation tendencies.

With this fact in mind, it should be recalled that the strategic bearing of the region as a distinct territorial unit and regionalism as a form of goal realisation was intended to enable:

- a constructive response to the state centralism and omnipotence of the state,
- the maintenance of the region's identity in the face of economic globalisation and cultural standardization,
- to create conditions for the development of self-government, self-governance and the concretisation and institutionalisation of democracy,
- the creation of a special development medium, the regional development multiplier (Sługocki, 2004).

The implementation of the European Union's cohesion policy in Poland in the subsequent perspectives was possible thanks to the aforementioned political changes, introducing the region as a *de facto* subject of its implementation in the territorial dimension. At the same time, it should be emphasised that the architecture of operational programmes, the distribution of financial resources and competencies in this area has been evolving. The first perspective 2004-2006 was characterised by a relatively low amount of EUR 12.8 billion and a low degree of decentralisation of competences, including in particular the implementation of a single operational programme implemented in 16 Polish regions. The Integrated Regional Development Operational Programme was characterised by the fact that the structure of

priorities and measures was unified and did not take into account the specificity of individual regions (National Development Plan 2004-2006, 2003). The management also took place at central level, while the regions participated in the implementation of the programme. The next programming period of 2007-2013 was characterised both by a higher value of EUR 63.7 billion and the transfer of further competences to the regions, which, on the basis of regional development strategies, prepared sixteen regional operational programmes in which the structure of priorities and measures corresponded, on the one hand, to the objectives of strategic and planning documents at European and national level, and, on the other hand, most importantly, to the potentials and challenges of individual regions (National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013, 2007). At the same time, the level of management was also transferred to the voivodeship government. It should be noted that these programmes were single-funded, financed by the European Regional Development Fund, while the remaining so-called national programmes were managed with the involvement of central institutions. In this context, the author's aim in this article is to present the process of implementation of the European Union's cohesion policy implemented at the regional level in Poland in the years 2014-2020, juxtaposing it at the same time with the experiences to date, focusing his attention both on the issues of the value of the financial resources allocated to the implementation of individual national and regional programmes, the criteria for the distribution of these resources, the substantive and thematic scope of the programmes prepared and the competences of the institutions involved in their implementation. The final conclusions indicate the differences and the evolution of the process of supporting the development of regions within the framework of the European cohesion policy. In order to achieve this research objective, it was necessary to answer the question: has the process of regional policy decentralisation in Poland progressed and to what extent?

Such a research question determined the substantive scope and structure of the article, in which the considerations begin with the issues related to the delineation of cohesion policy implemented in 2014-2020 at the national level in Poland, with a particular focus on the architecture of operational programmes along with the characteristics of national programmes. The next part addresses the process of increasing decentralisation and a description of the algorithm for the distribution of funds and the global characteristics of regional operational programmes. The whole article is closed with the final considerations contained in the conclusion.

## **2. Cohesion policy implemented in Poland in the period of 2014-2020**

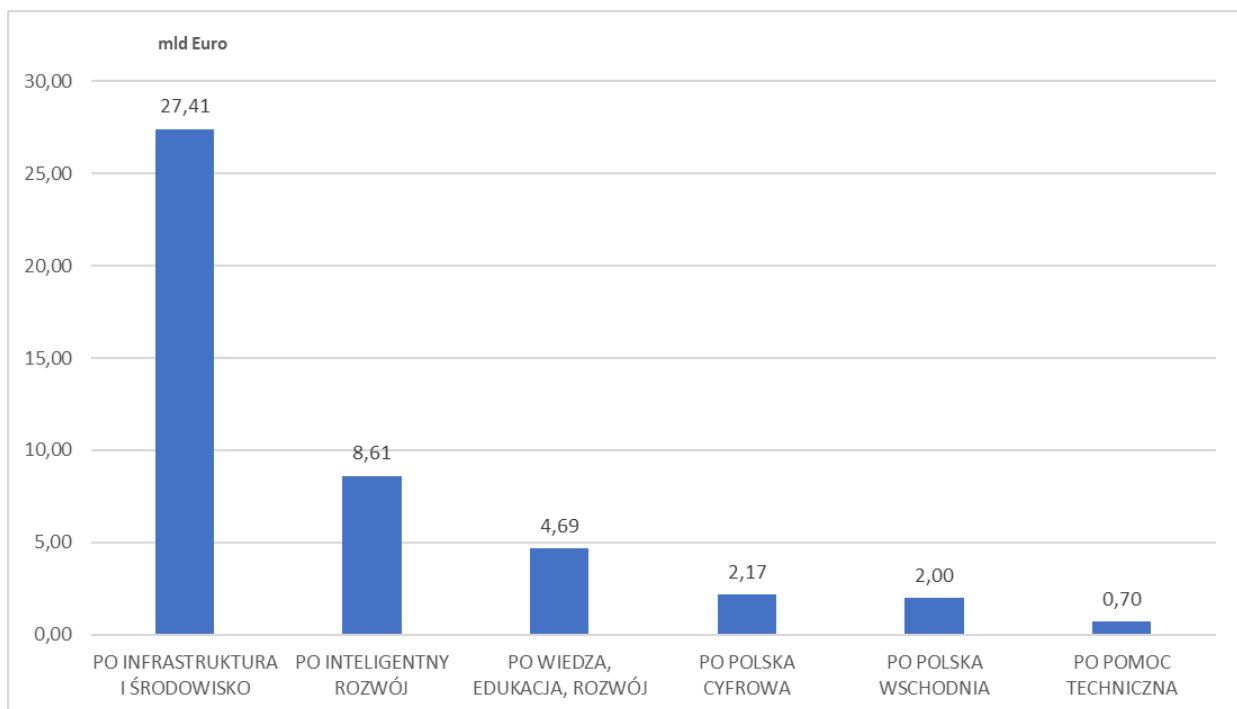
In accordance with the provisions of the Partnership Agreement (2014), a document defining the strategy for the intervention of European funds under the three policies of the

European Union, namely cohesion policy, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) in Poland in the years 2014-2020. The Partnership Agreement was implemented through National Operational Programmes (NOPs) and Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs). These programmes together with the Partnership Agreement form a coherent system of documents of strategic and programming nature. The Partnership Agreement sets out both the strategic context in thematic and territorial terms, as well as indicating the expected results and the applicable financial and implementation framework. At the same time, it provides a reference point for defining the detailed content of Operational Programmes, which specify specific areas of support and implementation instruments (Partnership Agreement, 2014). It should be added that the Partnership Agreement and operational programmes negotiated with the European Commission formed the basis for the implementation of the described financial perspective. In this context, the European funds 2014-2020 were treated in the country as the main, although not the only, source of financing for investments ensuring dynamic, sustainable and balanced development. The idea behind the programming is to link European expectations to focus on the objectives of the "Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth - Europe 2020" (2010) with the national objectives identified and enshrined in the "National Development Strategy 2020 - Active Society, Competitive Economy, Efficient State" (2012). The European Funds pursued, albeit to different degrees and extents, all three objectives, contributing to increased competitiveness, social and territorial cohesion and improved administrative efficiency. It should be noted, therefore, that the objectives of the Partnership Agreement are identical to those of the SRK 2020, while maintaining synergy with the Europe 2020 Strategy. The document emphasises the need to tailor interventions to the potentials and needs of specific territories, as the document includes the "National Strategy for Regional Development 2010-2020: Regions-Cities-Rural Areas" the areas of strategic state intervention where integrated investments will be made within the framework of relevant policies and funds. The territorial dimension is emphasised in both national and regional operational programmes (National Strategy for Regional Development 2010-2020, 2010). The Partnership Agreement also assumes an increase in funds for the implementation of regional operational programmes, which means greater responsibility than so far for the implementation of the objectives set out in the document (Programming of the financial perspective 2014-2020. Partnership Agreement, 2015).

In the years 2014-2020, the amount of EUR 82.5 billion was allocated to Poland as part of the cohesion policy, which was by EUR 18.8 billion higher than the funds allocated for the implementation of the 2007-2013 perspective. In this perspective, the money will be invested in the areas that will contribute most to Poland's development, among which are: increasing the competitiveness of the economy, improving the social and territorial cohesion of the country and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the state. The largest funds will be allocated to the implementation of investments in the field of transport infrastructure such as roads and railways, while the largest increase in expenditure was for investments in the field of innovation

and support for economic entities. There are also repayable financial instruments - loans, loan sureties, which also support the projects implemented by small and medium-sized enterprises. Money will continue to be invested in the environmental protection and the energy sector, as well as in cultural, employment, education and social exclusion projects. Six national programmes will be implemented under the agreement, including a cross-regional "Operational Programme for Eastern Poland" (see Figure 1), as well as sixteen regional operational programmes (Błasiak-Nowak and Rajczewska, 2015).

The architecture of the national operational programmes is formed by the Operational Programme "Infrastructure and Environment", the objective of which was to support a resource-efficient and environmentally friendly economy, as well as one that favours territorial and social cohesion. This objective stems from one of the three priorities of the "Europe 2020 Strategy", which is sustainable growth understood as fostering a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy, in which environmental objectives are complemented by actions for economic, social and territorial cohesion. This priority is based on a balance and complementarity of actions in three areas: clean and efficient energy, climate change adaptation and resource efficiency, competitiveness, including making a significant contribution to the EU's continued global leadership in environmentally friendly technologies. An amount of EUR 27.41 billion has been allocated to the operational programme (Operational Programme Infrastructure and Environment 2014-2020, 2014).



**Figure 1.** Allocation of national operational programmes in 2014-2020.

Source: own elaboration based on: Błasiak-Nowak and Rajczewska, 2015.

Another of the programmes was the "Intelligent Development" Operational Programme. The investments undertaken under the programme served to stimulate innovation and competitiveness of the Polish economy. The activities undertaken under the IDOP focused on supporting the entire process of innovation creation from the stage of an idea formation, through the stage of R&D works, including the preparation of a prototype, to the commercialisation of the results of R&D works. Taking into account the different level of risk of project realisation at different stages of implementation, it was foreseen to use grants and repayable instruments. It should be noted that the smart growth is also one of the three priorities outlined in the Europe 2020 strategy. It concerns an increase in R&D investment. In individual Member States it has been adapted to the implementation possibilities. In the case of Poland, it is associated with the allocation of 1.7% of GDP to this area in 2020. The funds allocated for the implementation of the programme amounted to EUR 8.61 billion (Intelligent Development Operational Programme 2014-2020, 2014).

The third most valuable national programme implemented in 2014-2020 was the Operational Programme "Knowledge Education Development" its value amounted to EUR 4.69 billion. The programme responds to challenges and at the same time is an instrument for the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy, just like the previously presented programmes. The programme is aimed at supporting the quality, efficiency and openness of higher education as a knowledge-based economy. It takes into account the long-term challenges facing the European Union related to globalisation, economic development, the quality of public policies, demographic phenomena or investment in human capital (Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development Education Development 2014-2020, 2014).

The objective of the Operational Programme "Digital Poland" is to strengthen the digital foundations for the development of the country, with broad access to fast Internet, efficient and user-friendly public e-services and the constantly increasing level of digital competence of the society as the foundations. In addition, the programme is in line with the first objective of the Europe 2020 Strategy, i.e. smart growth - based on knowledge and innovation. Innovation in this respect, as highlighted in the programme, also translates into cost-saving solutions, reducing energy, fuel and paper consumption. Furthermore, the Internet increases the reach of the services provided, reduces their costs and improves their transparency. It makes them de facto more accessible both in the sense of being able to use the service remotely and in the sense of adapting the way the service is provided to the perceptive capacity of the recipient. The digitalisation creates particular opportunities for improving the quality of life of people with disabilities and those at risk of social exclusion. The programme was worth EUR 2.17 billion (Digital Poland Operational Programme 2014-2020, 2014).

Due to the fact that voivodships of Eastern Poland are among the least developed in terms of GDP per capita in the EU-27 and the least competitive regions in the European Union. Taking this into account, the main objective of intervention under the programme was assumed as growth of competitiveness and innovativeness of the macroregion of Eastern Poland.

The document indicates that it will be achieved by focusing the measures on supporting: SMEs in terms of innovative activities; creating conditions favourable for the emergence of innovativeness of SMEs in Eastern Poland; creating new business models for the internationalisation of SME activities; improving the efficiency of transport systems and sustainable transport of voivodeship cities and their functional areas; increasing the accessibility of the macro-region in terms of transport infrastructure. EUR 2.0 billion has been earmarked for the implementation of the programme (Operational Programme Eastern Poland 2014-2020, 2014).

The last of the national programmes implemented in the 2014-2020 perspective was the Operational Programme "Technical Assistance". It is a tool for strengthening the administration and supporting the implementation of cohesion policy. The main tasks of the programme were to: maintain and develop the potential of institutions implementing the cohesion policy in Poland in the years 2014-2020; prepare beneficiaries for the implementation of projects; support the urban dimension in the cohesion policy; provide an information and promotion system for European funds. The implementation of the programme took place with the support of EUR 0.7 billion (Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020, 2014).

The 2014-2020 perspective also saw the implementation of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes with a total value of EUR 0.7 billion, which differ from regional and national programmes in their international character and the need for Polish beneficiaries to cooperate with foreign partners. As part of the ETC, projects in the field of cultural heritage and the environment, the development of infrastructure, entrepreneurship and education can be implemented. In addition, this perspective saw the inauguration of the Connecting Europe Fund, a financial instrument that supports the development of three areas - transport, energy and telecommunications networks. The European Union has a separate financial envelope in its budget for this purpose (<https://www.gov.pl/web/fundusze-regiony/dowiedz-sie-wiecej-o-funduszach-europejskich>, 24.01.2023).

### **3. Regional Operational Programmes - deeper decentralisation**

The deeper decentralisation of the cohesion policy was one of the key changes in the previous system of managing European funds. Local governments had almost 40% of the total pool of funds allocated to Poland in the years 2014-2020. Compared to the previous perspective, there was a definite increase, as in the previous seven-year period it was at the level of 25% of the then allocation. In the absolute amounts, a total of more than EUR 31 billion was allocated to support the regional operational programmes (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
*Regional Operational Programmes in 2014-2020*

<b>VOIVODSHIP</b>	<b>Total funds granted from European funds for the regional programmes (in EUR)</b>
DOLNOŚLĄSKIE	2 252 546 589
KUJAWSKO-POMORSKIE	1 903 540 287
LUBELSKIE	2 230 958 174
LUBUSKIE	906 929 693
ŁÓDZKIE	2 256 049 115
MAŁOPOLSKIE	2 878 215 972
OPOLSKIE	944 967 792
PODKARPACKIE	2 114 243 760
PODLASKIE	1 213 595 877
POMORSKIE	1 864 811 698
ŚLĄSKIE	3 476 937 134
ŚWIĘTOKRZYSKIE	1 364 543 593
WARMIŃSKO-MAZURSKIE	1 728 272 095
WIELKOPOLSKIE	2 450 206 417
ZACHODNIPOMORSKIE	1 601 239 216
<b>TOTAL (15)</b>	<b>29 187 057 412</b>
MAZOWIECKIE	2 089 840 138
<b>TOTAL (16)</b>	<b>31 276 897 550</b>

Source: European Funds in Poland, 2014.

Similarly to the 2007-2013 perspective, the regional operational programmes are co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. For the implementation of these programmes, more than 55% of this fund was allocated to Poland during the period in question. An unprecedented solution is the regionalisation of the European Social Fund and the allocation to regional programmes of 70% of the money flowing into the country from this fund. In this way, the provincial governments took over a huge responsibility for supporting interventions in the field of counselling, training, education, vocational training, retraining of employees, equipping them with new competences, or support for entrepreneurship (European Funds in Poland, 2014).

This solution has resulted in regions implementing two-fund programmes supported by ERDF and ESF, which consequently gives regional governments the possibility of comprehensive financing of development goals. Undoubtedly, it also contributes to a closer link between infrastructural projects and the so-called soft projects, which translates into an increase in their effectiveness. This solution also affects the closer linkage and coordination of activities undertaken in the regions by institutions involved in the implementation of the programmes. Among the sixteen operational programmes, one of them, the Mazowieckie Voivodeship programme, is characterised by the fact that the Mazowieckie Voivodeship does not meet the criteria for Objective 1 of the Cohesion Policy, meaning that GDP per capita in this region is higher than 75% of the average GDP per capita. For this reason, new rules for the investment of European funds applied in Mazovia. In this unitary case, the regional programme will account for 60% of the allocation, with the remaining 40% of the allocation earmarked for the region located in national programmes (European Funds in Poland, 2014).



**Table 2.**

*Regional Operational Programmes in 2014-2020 - percentage share of voivodships (PSV) in the allocation*

<b>VOIVODSHIP</b>	<b>Share in %</b>
DOLNOŚLĄSKIE	7,72
KUJAWSKO-POMORSKIE	5,68
LUBELSKIE	7,30
LUBUSKIE	2,79
ŁÓDZKIE	5,69
MAŁOPOLSKIE	6,67
OPOLSKIE	2,71
PODKARPACKIE	7,04
PODLASKIE	3,99
POMORSKIE	5,84
ŚLĄSKIE	10,19
ŚWIĘTOKRZYSKIE	4,62
WARMIŃSKO-MAZURSKIE	6,49
WIELKOPOLSKIE	7,05
ZACHODNIPOMORSKIE	4,96
<b>TOTAL (15)</b>	<b>88,74</b>
MAZOWIECKIE	11,26
<b>TOTAL (16)</b>	<b>100,00</b>

Source: Gostomczyk, 2017.

The money allocated for the implementation of the regional operational programmes was divided by the Ministry of Regional Development in a close cooperation with the regions in accordance with the information presented in the conclusions of the European Council on 7 and 8 February 2013, which used as a basis for their calculation:

- determination of the population for each region,
- the determination of the GDP per capita in PPS (eng. Purchasing Power Standards) for each region,
- determining the so-called prosperity gap - the difference between GDP per capita in PPS for a given region and the average GDP per capita in PPS for the entire EU,
- determination of the absolute amount (in EUR) obtained by multiplying the population for the region concerned by the so-called prosperity gap, i.e. the difference between the GDP per capita in PPS for the region concerned and the average GDP per capita in PPS for the EU,
- multiplying the amounts obtained for each region in the previous point by the so-called weighting factor, the percentage of which varies and reflects the relative prosperity measured in purchasing power parities of the Member State in which the region is located relative to the EU average. In the case of regions whose level of GNI (gross national income) per capita is less than 82% of the EU average - all less developed regions in Poland - this factor is 3.15%,

- determination of the number of the unemployed in each region and the theoretical number of unemployed in each region calculated using the average unemployment rate of all less developed regions in the EU. Calculation of the difference between the actual and theoretical number of unemployed in each region. Adding to the amount obtained in the previous point the amount resulting from the allocation of a premium of EUR 1,300 per unemployed person per year for the number of unemployed people in each region exceeding the number who would be unemployed using the average unemployment rate of all less developed regions in the EU - based on Eurostat data (Maciejczak, 2013).

As a consequence of adopting the methodology described above, a theoretical amount of allocation for less developed regions was adopted - all Polish regions excluding Mazovia. It was used to determine the structure of the percentage distribution of funds for individual voivodeships, which is presented in detail in Table 2 above.

The further decentralisation means that the regions prepared their development goals autonomously on the basis of smart specialisations, i.e. areas with the greatest potential, the development of which may lead to more effective regional competition on the national and international markets. This idea envisages that the region, or country, will achieve the highest level of socio-economic growth based on previously diagnosed strengths, i.e. the specific potential inherent in a given area. Within this framework, each of the voivodeships identified their smart specialisations in cooperation with various actors in the game of development, including local entrepreneurs, scientists, experts in the economy or environmental protection. When analysing individual regional operational programmes, it should be noted that the most frequently defined smart specialisations include: information and communication technologies, bioeconomy, energy and traditional industry branches, such as machinery, metal and wood processing. In addition to smart specialisations, the programmes will focus on support for the development of entrepreneurship - mainly small and medium-sized enterprises. In this respect, the funds will support the increase in innovation and competitiveness of enterprises by financing research and development activities and links between business and science. Transport investments continue to be supported, above all the expansion of road and rail connections to provide smaller towns with links to national and European transport networks. This includes modernisation of railway lines, renovation of railway stations as well as the purchase of modern rolling stock. An important priority emerging from the regional programmes is the development of a low carbon emission economy, involving support for a wide variety of projects such as the energy modernisation of buildings, support for clean public transport, energy production from renewable sources (RES), modernisation of transmission networks, reduction of road traffic in city centres, construction of cycle paths.

## 4. Conclusions

The development of the regional policy in Poland progressed together with the process of European integration. In fact, the process of Poland's integration with the European Union determined the process of shaping the regional policy, which enables the implementation of the European cohesion policy on national grounds, for which Poland, with successive multiannual financial perspectives, received more funding. It should be noted that the reforms undertaken in the nineties of the last century: of the territorial organisation of the country, of public finances, of the institutional arrangement contributed to the construction of solutions fully enabling the creation and implementation of the regional policy in Poland, both in the interregional and intraregional dimensions (Sługocki, 2019). The regional dimension has progressed primarily in view of the solidification of voivodeship self-governments by successively transferring more and more management competences to them, as well as the decentralisation of financial resources flowing to Poland with the implementation of successive financial perspectives under which cohesion policy was implemented. In fact, the 2014-2020 perspective, which is the subject of this article, turned out to be a breakthrough, with full decentralisation, i.e. transfer of competencies both in the process of preparing regional operational programmes and their implementation. It should be noted that local governments were for the first time given the opportunity to build regional operational programmes which included intervention under both the European Regional Development Fund, which, incidentally, was implemented in a fully regionalised manner for the first time in the 2007-2013 perspective, and the European Social Fund, which was regionalised in the 2014-2020 perspective. The changes introduced at that time made it possible to prepare regional operational programmes, under which it was possible to make investments across the full spectrum of socio-economic life, thus enabling the real impact of EU funds by voivodeship governments to undertake such actions that minimise deficits and support the strengths of the regions. On the other hand, the possibility of autonomous preparation of regional operational programmes preceded, as pointed out in the text of the article, by the process of preparing a diagnosis and a development strategy for the region, allows for better adjustment of interventions, thus increasing the effectiveness of the impact of EU funds. After nineteen years of experience in Poland's implementation of regional policy supported by the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund, the European Union's cohesion policy has produced a number of concrete effects, not only in the process of shaping this policy, but above all its positive impact on reducing the development gap between Polish regions and the best-developing regions of the European Union Member States. It has also contributed to building up the institutional arrangement at different levels of regional policy implementation and to developing competent human teams that manage the development of Poland with success at central, regional and local level.

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