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Barriers to obtaining cohesion policy funds from the perspective of municipalities that received the least funding under the 2014–2020 budget period

https://doi.org/10.25312/2391-5129.38/2024_02mwa

Cohesion policy is one of the most important European Union's policy. The lack of cohesion between states and regions would not only result in less-than-optimum use of the endogenic potential of the EU, but it might also threaten the existence of the common market, and thus, the whole European integration. This problem has become particularly evident after the enlargement of the European Union by 10 new Member States in 2004. It is therefore justified to study the effectiveness of this policy and the barriers that accompany it. The aim of the study was a qualitative analysis of problems in obtaining funding by communes that received the least EU funds in the 2014–2020 financial framework. The study was conducted using the CAWI method. The text presents and discusses the results of the study, which allowed, among others, to confirm the still persistent problem with generating own contribution for most local government units.

Keywords: European Union, local government units, cohesion policy, co-financing

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Introduction

Poland is the largest beneficiary of cohesion policy in the 2014–2020 financial period receiving potentially EUR 82.5 billion under the scheme. According to the Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, in 2020, EU-funded investments accounted for 37.8% of total public investment in Poland (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2022). As indicated by the Association of Polish Cities, in the case of local government investments this share varies depending on the type of local government unit (LGU). In the years 2004–2020, the highest share of EU funds in relation to total investments was recorded by provincial local governments (62.1%), followed by cities with district rights (43.9%), rural municipalities (40.7%), urban-rural municipalities (36%) and urban municipalities (32.2%). On the other hand, the lowest share of EU funds in total investments was recorded for districts (19%) (Association of Polish Cities, 2021).

However, a closer look at the individual groups reveals that the inter-group differences are also significant. For example, in the group of rural municipalities, the highest EU funding in 2014–2021 per capita was received by the municipality of Puńsk (PLN 10,059.59, while the lowest was received by the municipality of Sześć (PLN 30.99) (Swianiewicz, Łukomska, 2022a). The above figures show that although the amounts of funding for all types of LGUs at the macro level are large, some LGUs received relatively little funding between 2014 and 2020. Given that the above amounts are not final (according to the N+3 rule, it is possible to apply for and spend funds until the end of 2023), it can nevertheless be concluded that a large proportion of LGUs will receive very modest funding from cohesion policy in the financial period under review. This calls for an examination of the reasons for this, particularly in municipalities, which are the most numerous of all types of LGUs in Poland.

In order to analyse the barriers to obtaining European funds, it is necessary to mention the concept of absorption capacity. This concept does not have a universal definition in the literature (Novosak et al., 2017b; Cace et al., 2009; Pawlicz, 2014; Jurevičiene, Pilckaitė, 2013). According to the most common definition, absorption capacity is the ability of a Member State to effectively spend European Union regional policy funds (Novosak et al., 2017b). However, a few clarifications need to be made at this point. Firstly, the concept should address both the acquisition and effective spending of European funds, with no need for major financial adjustments. The extension of the definition of absorptive capacity to include fundraising capacity is in line with the original meaning of the term, which derives from the theory of the firm (Caragliu, Nijkamp, 2008) and implies the effective acquisition and use of external knowledge within an enterprise. Secondly, the term ‘state’ should be understood as all types of administrative units involved in the process of absorbing European funds. Absorption capacity should therefore be understood as the ability of the state or the different types of LGUs operating within its structure to effectively attract and account for European funds, contributing to the achievement of the state’s or individual LGUs’ objectives

The analysis of barriers and problems in obtaining European funds was carried out on a group of 10% of all types of municipalities that received the least amount of cohesion policy funds as beneficiaries in the 2014–2020 financial period. For this purpose, data from the CSO Local Data Bank on the value of contracts and funding decisions signed under the Partnership Agreement 2014–2020 in the part corresponding to the EU contribution was used. The data was obtained for all types of municipalities out of the 2477 municipalities included in the database (signed contracts as at 31 December 2020 – the most recent available data at the time of preparing the survey). Based on this dataset, the 10% (247) of municipalities with the lowest absolute absorption of European funds were identified. Adopting the absolute value of co-financing for the analysis made it possible to identify the municipalities with the greatest problems in absorbing the funds. In this group, the maximum total funding did not exceed PLN 5.1 million and the minimum was PLN 257,000. The average value of received funding was PLN 3.2 million (Statistics Poland, 2022). Considering that this is the total Multiannual Financial Framework 2014–2020 funding received by the individual municipalities, it is a rather small amount.

The identified group was asked to complete a survey (CAWI), to which 171 municipalities of various types responded (69% of all contacted LGUs). The survey was conducted from 13 July 2022 to 31 July 2022 via an online form. Its aim was to answer three research questions:

Q1: What are the reasons for the poor absorption of European funds by the LGUs participating in the survey?

Q2: Has there been an ‘evolution’ of LGUs’ attitudes towards obtaining EU funds?

Q3: How is the attractiveness of EU funds perceived by LGUs least inclined to use this form of support in the context of availability of other sources of financing LGUs’ needs?

In addition to the presentation and discussion of the results obtained, the added value of this study is the presentation of the evolution of the attitudes of LGUs over the years, e.g. with regard to the evaluation of procedures or own contributions. The results helped to expand existing knowledge by answering questions on the new EU financial period and the importance of issues such as high inflation or potential competition between cohesion policy funding and national funds.

Literature review

Research in Estonia has shown that the most important problems limiting the ability of municipalities to absorb European funds are staff shortages and problems generating own contribution for the implementation of projects (Tatar, 2010). In contrast, a study conducted in the Netherlands shows that the size of a municipality is related to its proactivity, both in terms of applying for funds and shaping cohesion policy.

The latter study also suggests that the financial wellbeing of a municipality may have a negative impact on the propensity of local authorities to apply for European funds (de Rooij, 2002).

In Poland, such research was conducted by Dziemianowicz and Swianiewicz (2007), who verified the hypothesis that the passive attitude of local authorities is a consequence of a number of factors, including the personal characteristics of the leader, the characteristics of the local communities, and historical or economic conditions. Other studies have pointed to problems on the supply side (e.g. overly complicated procedures) and the demand side (poor financial, organisational and staffing situation of local authorities) in applying for EU funds (Pastuszka, 2007; 2012). Poor strategic management is also one of the factors identified in the studies conducted in Poland. This is manifested in applying for grants for previously unplanned projects that are not investment priorities, but are implemented merely due to the availability of funding (Pastuszka, 2012; Swianiewicz, 2013). In addition, in previous studies, applicants have pointed to insufficient transparency in the project selection process (Swianiewicz, 2013).

In order to examine the factors hindering the acquisition of funding by LGUs, it is necessary to refer to the concept of ‘absorption capacity’. As indicated in the introduction, absorption capacity can be understood at several levels. Firstly, it has to do with the demand and supply factors affecting the absorption of European funds (Novosak et al., 2017b; Jurevičienė and Pileckaitė, 2013; Popescu, 2015). Factors affecting the supply side of absorptive capacity include macroeconomic conditions, the ability to secure funding to implement projects and the administration’s ability to prepare all necessary documents in a timely manner in accordance with applicable regulations, such as those relating to multi-level partnerships. In addition, the latter factor also includes the effective and efficient implementation of operational programmes (Cace et al., 2009).

On the other hand, demand-side factors include insufficient knowledge and skills of applicants, problems in generating own contribution and finding partners and a weak lobbying position (Novosak et al., 2017b). Furthermore, research in Romania additionally points to problems in the application of public procurement rules (insufficient knowledge of project staff and lack of adequate guidelines for applicants), lengthy procedures in administrative courts, and a high turnover of professionals caused by political factors and financial issues (Zaman, Georgescu, 2011). Many studies also point to the key role of the institutions involved in implementation, including potential problems such as corruption or decentralisation (Mihailescu, 2012; Braşoveanu et al., 2011; Marković Hriernik et al., 2008). According to some studies, there is a positive correlation between the quality of governance and the absorption of structural funds (Rodrigues-Pose, Garcilazo, 2015; Charron, Lapuente, Rothstein, 2013; Hryniewicz, Smełkowski, Płosza, 2018). It is also worth mentioning that research by Hryniewicz (2019) suggests that the influx of European funds has helped to improve the bureaucratic efficiency of regional administrations in Central and Eastern Europe.

Characteristics of the examined municipalities

The analysis of the municipalities' fundraising process was based on a questionnaire (CAWI) conducted in July 2022. The questionnaire consisted of 43 questions (one open-ended and the rest closed-ended), with the number of questions depending on the answers provided (some questions were expanded depending on the answers). The questionnaire was addressed to 10% of municipalities of all types (247 in total), which, according to the Local Data Bank as at 31 December 2020, received the lowest amounts of funding under all programmes financed by the cohesion policy in the 2014–2020 financial period. 171 representatives of municipalities responded to the questionnaire. The structure of the respondents is shown in figures 1 and 2.

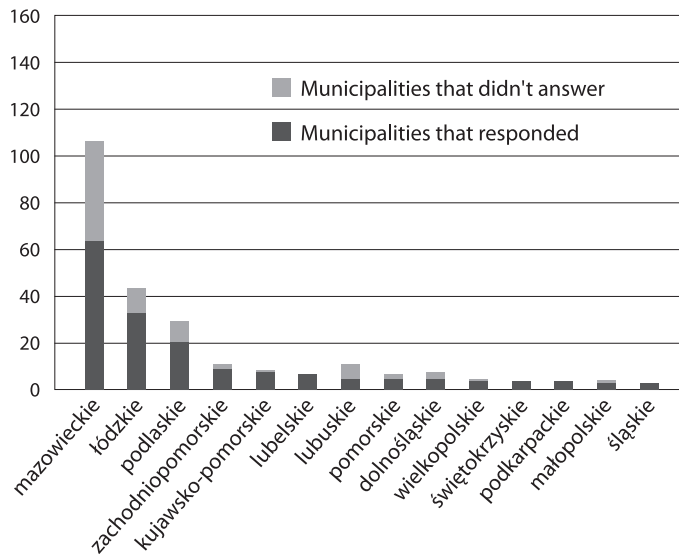


Fig. 1. Spatial distribution of municipalities targeted by the questionnaire

Source: own elaboration.

The vast majority of the municipalities surveyed came from the Mazowieckie Province (37%), followed by the Łódzkie Province (19%) and the Podlaskie Province (11%). Certainly, this distribution of municipalities is partly due to the different size of the provinces, but it is probably not the only determining factor. As can be seen in figure 1, the Lubuskie Province was the only one where the number of municipalities that refused to respond to the survey was greater than the number of those that responded.

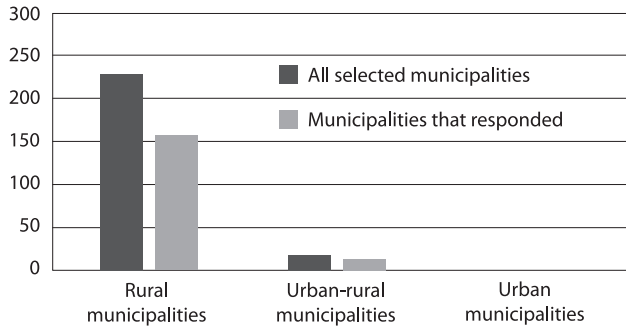


Fig. 2. Distribution of respondents by municipality type

Source: own elaboration.

As can be seen in figure 2, rural municipalities are the main group that responded to the questionnaire, which is obviously because they are also the predominant group targeted by the survey (93%). A request to take part in the survey was also made to one urban municipality, but it did not respond. Figure 3 presents the distribution of the population in the municipalities surveyed. The majority of the municipalities targeted by the survey are characterised by a relatively small population, with an average of around 4,400 residents.

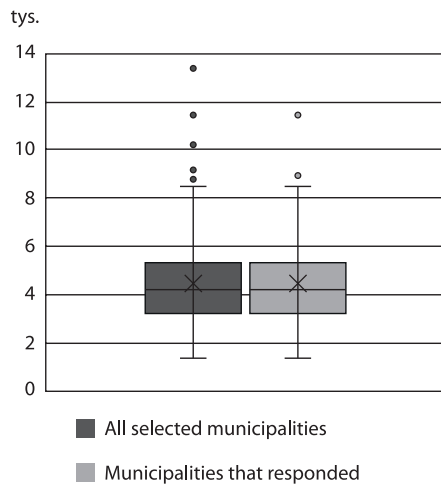


Fig. 3. Population of the surveyed municipalities

Source: own elaboration based on data of the Local Data Bank, Statistics Poland.

In order to provide a complete picture of the surveyed entities, figure 4 shows the distribution of the average investment expenditure of the surveyed municipalities between 2014 and 2020. This approach has been proposed by Swianiewicz and Lukomska (2022), which makes it possible to eliminate the distortions arising from

the high fluctuation accompanying investment expenditure. Based on the analysis of the distribution, both in the municipalities that responded to the questionnaire and in general in all the municipalities surveyed, the average value of the total investment expenditure between 2014 and 2020 was approximately PLN 2.6 million.

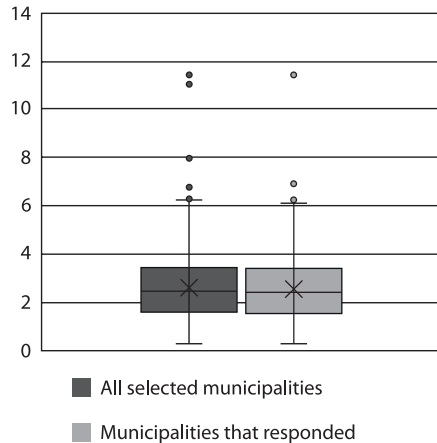


Fig. 4. Average asset-related expenditure of municipalities over the period 2014–2020 (million PLN)

Source: own elaboration based on data of the Local Data Bank, Statistics Poland.

On the basis of the above, it can be generalised that the typical municipality participating in the study was a small rural municipality with low investment expenditure, which benefits little from EU cohesion policy. This is due to the characteristics of rural municipalities that affect the absorption of European funds. As Swianiewicz (2007) pointed out, this may be partly the result of a lack of economies of scale in these entities. This was confirmed by the 10% of municipalities selected for the survey that are characterised by the weakest absorption of European funds.

The survey was addressed to 247 municipalities, which received a total of 800 million PLN in subsidies (Local Data Bank, Statistics Poland), which gives approximately 723 PLN in subsidies per capita. This is considerably less than the amounts obtained by LGUs that are at the top of nationwide rankings (see Swianiewicz, Łukomska, 2022). Thus, looking at the relative and absolute values, it is clear that there are still municipalities in Poland that benefit little from cohesion policy. This has also been confirmed by previous studies (see Churski, 2014; Wyszowska, Wyszowski, 2021).

Survey results

The results were analysed in terms of five groups of questions. The first group of questions, on the attractiveness of European funds, provides an understanding of the extent to which European funds are still an attractive source of funding for the municipalities that took part in the survey. Another area examined relates to financial issues and looks at factors that significantly affect the ability of municipalities to implement projects. Another group of questions relates to administrative capacity and administrative burden, which can also limit the ability to implement EU projects. Another area is the evaluation of cohesion policy, which provides an understanding of its perception by the municipalities surveyed, which was one of the objectives of this study. The final area comprised questions that could not be classified in any other area, but which were of significant cognitive value to the study.

Attractiveness of European funds for LGUs

Firstly, it was necessary to establish whether European funds are still an attractive form of funding for municipalities. The results of the survey in this area are presented in table 1.

Tab. 1. Attractiveness of European funds for LGUs

Question	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Do you think your municipality/city needs EU funding to develop?	78%	16%	3%	1%	2%
In your case, was the reason for not applying for EU funding because you received support from other sources?	1%	10%	17%	51%	21%
Do you think EU funds are an attractive source of investment funding for local authorities these days?	31%	47%	18%	2%	1%
Do the needs of your municipality/city and the areas of support under EU funds overlap?	3%	45%	32%	18%	2%

Source: own elaboration.

Most respondents (94% in total: 78% “Strongly agree” and 16% “Somewhat agree”), believe that EU funds are necessary for their municipality. Two conclusions can be drawn from the responses. First of all, EU funds are still seen as an important means of development even in municipalities that have benefited relatively least from EU support. Secondly, it shows that the available national funds

under the government support programmes for LGUs (such as the government's Polish Order Fund: Strategic Investment Program or the Government Fund for Local Investments) do not have a significant negative impact on the attractiveness of European funds among LGUs, despite the fact that support from national sources is a significant source of funding for LGU investments. The value of national subsidies (excluding funds for co-financing EU investments and excluding subsidies between LGUs) as a percentage of total investment expenditure in municipalities in 2021 was over 45% (Swianiewicz, Łukomska, 2022b). Approximately 38% of municipalities received more support from national funding programmes than from EU funds (based on the value of funding contracts), while for areas at risk of permanent marginalisation the percentage was as high as 56% (Wolański et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the vast majority of respondents, despite receiving the least support from the European Union to date, believe that co-financing investments in their municipality under cohesion policy is a necessary measure. This is also confirmed by the answer to the question whether the reason for not applying for EU funds was due to having received support from other sources. The vast majority of respondents (only 11%: 1% "Strongly agree" and 10% "Somewhat agree") found this statement to be untrue. The results indicate that funding investment needs from the central budget through government initiatives, although raising serious concerns about the risk of clientelism (Flis, Swianiewicz, 2021; Czepil, 2022), does not lead to European funds being perceived as less attractive.

Interesting conclusions also emerge from the analysis of the last two responses. Almost 80% of the respondents find that EU funds are an attractive source of funding for LGU investments. However, when asked if they were aligned with LGUs' needs, less than 50% confirmed (3% "Strongly agree" and 45% "Somewhat agree"). This demonstrates the large investment needs in the municipalities, which are only partly covered by European funds. On the other hand, it may also be indicative of different priorities of local and EU policies.

In conclusion, the low absorption of European funds by some municipalities is not related to a perceived lack of attractiveness of these funds. Although EU funds do not cover a large part of the investment needs of municipalities, they are still considered a necessary measure for development. The availability of other national funds also does not reduce the attractiveness of EU funds. So the reasons for the low absorption of European funds must lie elsewhere.

Financial issues

Another important issue affecting absorption is the financing of investments. The results of the questionnaires received regarding financial issues are shown in table 2. For the majority of respondents, the need to provide an own contribution was an obstacle to applying for EU funds. Similar results were obtained by other researchers

for earlier financial perspectives (Zajac, Wojewódzka, Stawicki, 2009; Pastuszka, 2012) and other countries (Novosak et al., 2017a).

The answers to the question on the impact of inflation on the implementation of EU projects are interesting. Rising prices were seen as an obstacle by 43% of respondents (12% “Strongly agree” and 31% “Somewhat agree”). In contrast, 31% of respondents (3% “Strongly disagree” and 28% “Somewhat disagree”) found that inflation is not an obstacle to applying for EU funds. This was despite the fact that inflation (CPI) in July 2022 in Poland reached 15.6% (y/y). It can therefore be concluded that high inflation was not a significant reason limiting the availability of EU funds, although its negative impact on the absorption of funds is clearly noticeable. This is probably due to the fact that above-target inflation has been observed continuously since April 2021, when most of the funds from the 2014–2020 financial period have already been distributed. The rise in prices therefore affected beneficiaries at the end of the financial perspective. Nevertheless, this is an important aspect that cannot be underestimated.

Tab. 2. Financial aspects related to project preparation and implementation

Question	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Was the need to provide an own contribution to the project an obstacle for you in applying for EU funding?	15%	41%	15%	25%	5%
Was inflation a factor that prevented you from applying for EU funding?	12%	31%	26%	28%	3%
Was the risk of having to repay funds in the event of project irregularities been a deterring factor for you when it comes to applying for EU funds?	4%	19%	20%	42%	15%
Were the costs of maintaining the investment over its lifetime (5 years after completion) an obstacle for you in applying for EU funding?	0%	7%	13%	63%	17%
Was the risk of failure to award a tender an obstacle for you in applying for EU funding?	4%	14%	25%	51%	6%
Was the lack of adequate pre-financing an obstacle for you in applying for EU funding?	6%	25%	23%	45%	1%

Source: own elaboration.

It should also be noted that the risk of having to reimburse funds in the event of project irregularities, the costs of maintaining the investment for five years after its completion, the risk of not awarding the tender, and the lack of adequate pre-financing were not significant obstacles to applying for EU funds.

It can therefore be concluded that securing own contribution and high inflation are perceived as the main problems of the surveyed LGUs. Undoubtedly, these factors negatively affect the absorption capacity of the municipalities surveyed, but do not prevent it completely.

Administrative capacity and procedures

Responses to the question on administrative capacity and procedures are presented in table 3. They show that the lack of suitably qualified staff is not a barrier to applying for EU funds for the vast majority of municipalities surveyed (18% “Strongly disagree” and 47% “Somewhat disagree”). One in five respondents pointed to such a problem (4% “Strongly agree” and 17% “Somewhat agree”). Similarly, for the majority of respondents, the cost of preparing the documentation was not an obstacle to applying for funds (only one in four respondents identified it as a problem).

As the results show, most respondents believe that the application and settlement procedures do not limit access to funding. This is all the more interesting as in previous years it was this factor that was cited as the main factor limiting LGUs’ access to European funds. In 2007, as many as 85% of LGUs in the Świętokrzyskie Province indicated procedures as a significant obstacle to obtaining funds (Pastuszka, 2007, 2012). However, by the end of the 2007–2013 financial perspective, a change in attitudes and the ability of LGUs to navigate regulations and procedures could already be observed (Swianiewicz, 2013). The results obtained therefore confirm the evolution of the attitudes of LGUs and the fact that currently procedures are not a significant obstacle in applying for EU funds.

The answer to the question on the selection criteria for operations is interesting in this respect. It is worth noting at this point that surveys conducted in earlier years among LGUs indicated a sense of insufficient transparency in the selection of operations (Swianiewicz, 2013). Although the majority of respondents in this survey (2% “Strongly disagree” and 39% “Somewhat disagree”) believe that this is not a barrier to applying for funding, one in five (2% “Strongly agree” and 21% “Somewhat agree”) identified this as a problem. As many as 37% of respondents had no opinion on this issue.

This is related to the question of whether LGUs have the necessary knowledge to apply for European funds. More than 60% of the respondents (6% “Strongly agree” and 55% “Somewhat agree”) are of the opinion that their employees have the knowledge necessary to apply for EU funds. It can therefore be concluded that navigating the procedures for applying for and accounting for funds is not currently a barrier to accessing European funds, according to the respondents.

Although the procedures are transparent to the majority of respondents, for one in four respondents (4% “Strongly agree” and 23% “Somewhat agree”) the wording of the programme was not. On this issue, as many as 39% of respondents had no

opinion. Regarding the question on the feeling of influence on the content of operational programmes, the majority of respondents (10% “Strongly disagree” and 41% “Somewhat disagree”) felt that they had no influence in this respect. This result demonstrates the serious shortcomings of cohesion policy and the lack of compatibility between one of the European Union’s largest programmes and the Polish municipalities participating in the survey, despite the fact that almost 20 years have passed since Poland’s accession to the European Union. This result should prompt reflection on the part of the European Commission, state authorities, but also regional and local authorities.

Tab. 3. Administrative capacity and procedures

Question	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Was the lack of qualified staff in your office an obstacle to applying for EU funds?	4%	17%	13%	47%	18%
Were the costs of preparing project documentation an obstacle for you in applying for EU funding?	3%	24%	17%	50%	6%
Were the procedures for applying for EU funds an obstacle for you (e.g. having to prepare an application, participating in a competition, etc.)?	2%	14%	22%	54%	9%
Were the procedures for settling EU funds an obstacle for you in applying for support?	1%	14%	14%	61%	11%
Did the project selection criteria make it difficult for you to apply for EU funding (e.g. criteria unclear or unfair in your opinion)?	2%	21%	37%	39%	2%
Did you know in advance about the planned calls so that you had enough time to prepare adequately for those that were of interest to you?	4%	59%	19%	16%	1%
Do you think that your office has sufficient knowledge to apply for EU funds?	6%	55%	28%	10%	1%
Do you feel that the provisions of the operational programme for which you have applied or wanted to apply are too difficult and therefore hinder access to funds?	4%	23%	39%	33%	1%
Do you feel you have an influence on the areas supported by EU-funded operational programmes?	1%	10%	39%	41%	10%

Source: own elaboration.

To summarise, the surveyed municipalities have a surprisingly good assessment of their administrative potential necessary for the correct application and settlement of EU funds. However, the assessment of the programme for the financial period

2021–2027, provides a deeper insight into the problem and verifies this knowledge in practice.

Financial perspective 2021–2027

The question of LGUs' understanding of programme documents from the previous section was further explored and the results on the preparation of operational programmes for the 2021–2027 perspective are presented in table 4. According to the results obtained, half of the respondents were not aware of the ongoing consultation on the Partnership Agreement (PA). Only 5% of respondents had sent comments to the PA and 11% had sent comments to the regional programme. One in four respondents (26%) were not aware of the ongoing consultation on the regional programme. Almost 70% of respondents did not take part in public consultations of any programme, although almost all of them (98%) intend to apply for funds in the 2021–2027 perspective. These results unfortunately coincide with other studies on previous perspectives, which indicate that LGUs lack a strategic approach to cohesion policy funds and only implement those investments for which funding is available (Pastuszka, 2012; Swianiewicz, 2013).

Tab. 4. Preparation of the financial perspective 2021–2027

Question	Yes	No
Were you aware of the ongoing consultation on the Partnership Agreement 2021–2027?	52%	48%
Did you send comments on the Partnership Agreement 2021–2027 during the ongoing public consultation?	5%	95%
Were you aware of the ongoing consultations on the 2021–2027 regional programme in your province?	74%	26%
Did you send comments on the 2021–2027 regional programme during the ongoing public consultation?	11%	89%
Did you participate in the public consultation of any operational programme for the 2021–2027 perspective?	31%	69%
Do you plan to apply for European funds in the 2021–2027 perspective?	98%	2%

Source: own elaboration.

The above results show that the municipalities surveyed are generally not involved in the preparation of documents defining the subsequent scope of EU programmes. This can be explained by 'rational ignorance'. A small municipality would have to commit disproportionately large resources (financial and organisational) to actively participate in the programme preparation process. However, the related benefits would be limited. This phenomenon has also been observed in other countries (Tatar, 2010). Therefore, in order to increase the participation of LGUs in the

programme preparation process, the costs involved should be reduced, for example by simplifying programme documents or providing training.

Other issues

Table 5 presents other issues that may affect the absorption of structural funds by municipalities. When it comes to residents' interest in implementing projects funded by European sources, 81% of the responses were affirmative (32% "Strongly agree" and 49% "Somewhat agree"). This result testifies to the residents' unwavering interest in obtaining European funding. This is also confirmed by nationwide surveys, where EU funds are still regarded as the main benefit associated with EU membership (CBOS, 2019). European funds are therefore seen in a positive light by the residents of the municipalities surveyed, putting pressure on local authorities in this regard.

Tab. 5. Other factors affecting the absorption of structural funds by LGUs

Question	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
In your opinion, are the residents interested in the implementation by the municipality/city office of projects financed from European funds?	32%	49%	16%	3%	0%
Were worldview issues an obstacle to applying for EU funding in your municipality/city?	0%	1%	16%	47%	37%
In your municipality/town, have you encountered any reluctance from residents to implement EU-funded projects so far?	0%	5%	8%	52%	35%

Source: own elaboration.

A positive picture also emerges from the answers to the last two questions. It can be concluded that worldview issues are not an obstacle to the implementation of EU projects. Nor is there the problem of residents' reluctance to EU-funded projects. Therefore, in the examined LGUs, the above issues do not constitute an obstacle to applying for EU funds.

Conclusions and recommendations

It is worth noting that the municipalities surveyed, while having obtained the least amount of funding, still intend to apply for European funds in the 2021–2027 per-

spective that is about to commence. The support available from the government in recent years has not diminished local government interest in this area. The EU and national funds available to local authorities do not seem to conflict with each other, although there are some problems associated with the latter, as mentioned earlier. It should be emphasised, however, that despite the availability of national funds, European funds are still perceived as an important and necessary source of financing for Polish municipalities, and an important development capital for Polish LGUs.

An analysis of financial issues has shown that, since Poland's accession to the EU, the provision of an own contribution has been an obstacle for many local authorities in applying for EU funds. The need to provide an own contribution, but also to bear the costs of preparing the documentation, are expenses which, for small municipalities, may limit access to EU funds. Furthermore, high inflation has proven to be a new and relatively significant challenge in the 2014–2020 perspective. Although the level of inflation was perceived as problematic by less than half of the respondents, it should be noted that the persistence of high inflation in the future (and the risk of supply shocks) may generate risks for beneficiaries in terms of having to provide additional funds (due to a reduction in the level of funding through an increase in ineligible costs).

Although the lack of suitably qualified staff was seen as a barrier to obtaining funding by only one in five respondents, it is important to note the total lack of involvement of the municipalities surveyed in the preparation stage of the financial perspective programme. After the end of the two financial perspectives, the surveyed LGUs did not actively participate in the consultations on the Partnership Agreement and the programmes (and did not make any comments on them). On the other hand, it should be noted that the number of municipalities for which procedures are a barrier to fundraising has fallen. This shows, on the one hand, that the LGUs have acquired the skills to navigate EU procedures, but on the other hand, still lack understanding of the basic, horizontal principles of cohesion policy. This phenomenon has been described as 'shallow learning' (Swianiewicz, 2013) and is undoubtedly a failure of cohesion policy. Unfortunately, research in Estonia has shown that hiring specialists to raise European funds may not be an option for small municipalities due to the costs involved (Tatar, 2010). It is therefore necessary to find other solutions to enable the active participation of municipalities in the preparation of programmes, monitoring or evaluation of cohesion policy.

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Streszczenie

Bariery w pozyskiwaniu środków z polityki spójności z perspektywy gmin, które otrzymały najmniejsze dofinansowanie w ramach okresu budżetowego 2014–2020

Polityka spójności Unii Europejskiej jest jedną z ważniejszych polityk wspólnotowych. Ma ona na celu wyrównywanie dysproporcji pomiędzy państwami członkowskimi. Uzasadnione jest więc badanie skuteczności tej polityki oraz barier, jakie jej towarzyszą. Celem badania była analiza problemów w pozyskiwaniu dofinansowania przez gminy, które otrzymały w perspektywie 2014–2020 najmniej środków. Badanie przeprowadzono za pomocą metody CAWI. W tekście zostały zaprezentowane i omówione wyniki badania, które pozwoliły między innymi na potwierdzenie ciągle utrzymującego się w większości gmin problemu z wygenerowaniem wkładu własnego. Przeprowadzona analiza pozwoliła na wyciągnięcie wniosków i przygotowanie rekomendacji dla polityki rozwoju, które zostały zaprezentowane w ostatnim rozdziale.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, jednostki samorządu terytorialnego, polityka spójności, dofinansowanie

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Marcin Wajda – adiunkt w Kolegium Ekonomiczno-Społecznym Szkoły Głównej Handlowej w Warszawie. Zainteresowania naukowe koncentruje na zagadnieniach finansów publicznych, w szczególności koordynacji polityk fiskalnych w Unii Europejskiej, rozwoju regionalnego oraz polityki spójności Unii Europejskiej.

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