

LEGAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF THE FUNCTIONING OF POWIATS IN POLAND

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive legal and economic analysis of the functioning of powiats in Poland. It presents their historical background—from medieval starosties to their contemporary iteration shaped by the administrative reform of 1998—and highlights the importance of powiat as the second tier of local government, responsible for tasks beyond the scope of individual gminas in the social, economic and infrastructural spheres. The author discusses in detail the role of the starosta as the chair of the executive board and public administration body, their powers in the areas of management, issuing administrative decisions, supervising services, inspections and fire service, and representing the powiat externally. This paper also points to the links between the powiat council, the executive board and the central administration, emphasising the importance of the supervision of lawfulness exercised by the voivod and regional chambers of audit. An important element of the analysis is to consider powiats as local “economies” strongly linked to the labour market and the socio-economic environment. The considerations encompass the three dimensions of cohesion: social (based on social capital, integration and solidarity), economic (related to equal access to the labour market, entrepreneurship and the absorption of external funds) and territorial (encompassing infrastructure, communication and public services). The European Union’s cohesion policy and European funds, which strengthen local development, are of particular importance, and the studies on the powiats of Lubelskie Voivodship are a case in point. The conclusions indicate that the effectiveness of the powiat depends on institutional cooperation, strategic planning and the efficient use of resources and EU financial support.

Keywords: Powiat, Gmina, Cohesion

1. Introduction

As part of the three-tier territorial division of Poland, the powiat [usually translated into English as district or county] is a key level of local government administration in the country, performing public, economic and social functions. Its current institutional and legal form is the result of the administrative reform of 1998, but the origins of this unit date back to the Middle Ages, when the political and organisational foundations of powiats were established. Since their restoration in 1999, powiats have played a significant role in the implementation of tasks beyond the powers of gmina [municipality/commune], integrating public services, infrastructure and socio-economic development.

This study presents a legal and economic analysis of selected aspects of powiat functioning in Poland, considering their role in shaping social, economic and territorial cohesion. Specific objectives:

1. Analysis of the tasks and competences of the starosta [chair of the powiat executive board] and powiat authorities throughout history, with reference to the current legal status.
2. Discussion of the activities of the powiat and the starosta for the socio-economic and territorial development of the powiat.
3. An overview of the role of European funds in shaping the socio-economic cohesion of powiats,

with particular emphasis on mechanisms for harnessing European Union funds in development processes.

4. Analysis of the economic aspects of powiat functioning in the context of strengthening territorial cohesion, on the example of a selected voivodship [province/region], e.g. Lubelskie Voivodship.
5. Demonstrating the cohesion of powiats in Lubelskie Voivodship in the context of European Union funding (based on Statistics Poland surveys).

This paper presents both a historical perspective, highlighting the evolution of the structural position of the powiat and the starosta, and a contemporary perspective, where the implementation of the European Union's cohesion policy and the utilisation of European funds in local development are of key importance.

In the context of research on powiat administration, it is essential to demonstrate the connections between the legal framework and economic conditions that influence the effectiveness of public task implementation. Particular attention was paid to the analysis of the economic and territorial cohesion of powiats, their developmental diversity and the role of powiat institutions in mitigating spatial disparities. This approach allows for an assessment of the extent to which powiats function as "local economies" linked to the labour market and the local functional area.

The considerations presented later in this study cover both the normative foundations and practical aspects of the functioning of powiats, presenting them in the broader context of public policy, decentralised administration and regional development.

This study employs various methods: historical, analytical, synthetic, and statistical.

1. Do the development processes of the countries, in spatial terms, lead to a convergence of their development levels?
2. Has EU accession altered the trends in the magnitude of changes in the dynamics of socio-economic development?
3. Has the COVID-19 pandemic altered the trends in the magnitude of changes in the dynamics of socio-economic development?

2. Powiat—Definition

A powiat is a unit of territorial division in Poland that emerged in the 14th century. At that time, a new office of the starosta also emerged. In the 15th century, powiats took the place of the declining castellanies. The network of powiats formed at that time remained largely unchanged until the third partition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795. Powiats existed in the Duchy of Warsaw; at that time, they were headed by deputy prefects appointed by the duke (Ochendowski, 2010).

The powiat self-government constitutes the second level of local government in Poland, alongside the gmina self-government and voivodship self-government. It can shape its own internal organisation, including the election of powiat bodies (powiat council, powiat executive board), as well as enacting local laws through these bodies to perform specific public tasks stipulated by law (Dąbrowski and Śwital, 2016).

The powiat was established under the Powiat Self-Government Act of 5 June 1998 (consolidated text Journal of Laws of 1998, No. 91, item 578, as amended). The aforementioned Act also specified the procedure and rules for establishing, merging, dividing and abolishing powiats. In light of the Act, powiats are established, merged or abolished by the Council of

Ministers by way of a regulation after consultation with the interested gmina councils, powiat councils and voivodship assemblies. When establishing, merging, dividing, or abolishing powiats and defining their boundaries, efforts should be made to ensure that a powiat covers an area that is as homogeneous as possible in terms of settlement and spatial system, as well as social and economic ties, which facilitate the performance of public tasks. The Council of Ministers established powiats and determined their names, seats of authority and gminas within their territorial structure under the Regulation of 7 August 1998 on the establishment of powiats (Journal of Laws, No. 103, item 652, as amended; cf. Lang, 2009).

According to the statutory definition, a powiat is a local self-government community comprising the inhabitants of the powiat and the relevant territory. The law determines membership in this territory. The boundaries of a powiat are determined by identifying the gminas that comprise the powiat. Changes to its boundaries may be made in a manner that ensures that the powiat has a territory that is as homogeneous as possible in terms of settlement and spatial system, taking into account social, economic and cultural ties and ensuring the ability to perform public tasks. The powiat is a legal person under civil and public law. Its autonomy is legally protected. The structure of the powiat is set out in its statute (Kisala 2016).

The primary function of the powiat is to perform tasks that go beyond the scope of individual gminas. The powiat became a supplementary unit to the gmina as an organisational unit of local government. The powiat has greater economic, financial and social potential in relation to its residents, their education, employment and social influence on events taking place in the powiat. It is capable of independently performing tasks of a higher degree of complexity or specialisation than a gmina. The tasks of the powiat include, among others: 1) secondary social infrastructure, i.e. running hospitals, specialist clinics, social care homes and social welfare homes; 2) secondary technical infrastructure, i.e. roads, bridges, motorways and, in general, public roads beyond the gmina level; 3) public order and citizen safety beyond the gmina level, i.e. fire protection and, above all, construction supervision; 4) environmental protection in a broad sense and spatial planning beyond the gmina level, primarily in relation to real estate management; 5) organisational activities aimed at solving local problems, such as combating unemployment, supporting people with disabilities and protecting consumer rights (Wojnicki 2015). The powiat executive board consists of the starosta, their deputy and other members of the executive board, numbering between three and five persons. The secretary and treasurer participate in executive board meetings in an advisory capacity only. The powiat executive board is the executive body of the powiat. The council elects the executive board within three months of the competent electoral authority's announcement of the election results. The council first elects the starosta, and at the starosta's request, the other members of the executive board, including the deputy starosta, by secret ballot, respectively: by an absolute majority of the statutory composition of the council and by a simple majority of votes in the presence of at least half of the council members. Members of the executive board, including the starosta, may be elected from outside the council. An employment relationship is established with the thus-appointed members of the executive board (Wojnicki 2003). A city with powiat rights is a local self-government community and the corresponding territory. The residents of a city with powiat rights form a local self-government community by virtue of the law. Membership in the urban local self-government community is independent of any declaration of will, activity or passivity in that community. The autonomy of a city with powiat rights is protected by law. From the public law perspective, this mainly translates into the right to challenge supervisory decisions concerning the city, issued by the authorities supervising this local authority, before administrative courts.

Legal protection is closely linked to the right to autonomously, i.e. free from interference by other entities, perform public tasks falling within the competence of the city. From the civil law perspective, given its legal capacity, this is, in particular, the right to bring legal proceedings before any common court based on applicable laws that also bind other legal persons. A city with powiat rights performs public tasks specified by law on its own behalf and at its own responsibility (Wierzbica 2010). A city with powiat rights is competent in all public matters of local importance. The primary task of this local authority is to meet the collective needs of residents who, by virtue of law, form a local community. A city with powiat rights may establish subsidiary units. A city with powiat rights may establish organisational units and enter into agreements with other entities, including non-governmental organisations, to perform its tasks. The creation, liquidation, reorganisation and equipping of municipal organisational units with assets are the exclusive responsibility of the city council. Organisational units in a city with county rights include, for example, day nurseries, nursery schools, primary schools, secondary schools, vocational schools, technical colleges of various specialisations, psychological and pedagogical counselling centres, children's homes, municipal cultural centres, municipal libraries, city guard forces, independent public healthcare institutions and others (Wierzbica 2010).

3. Starosta in the Current Law

The current legal status of the starosta is based on the Powiat Self-Government Act; however, the starosta's legal status is not precisely defined, as the provisions concerning the starosta are scattered throughout the Act and thus unclear and inconsistent. Inconsistencies are apparent. The Powiat Self-Government Act does not refer to the starosta as a body of the powiat self-government. Without this designation, there may be doubts as to the starosta's legal status. The provisions on the powiat executive board stipulate that the starosta is the chair of the executive board and organises its work. Specific provisions stipulate that the starosta has particular powers, which indicate the role that the starosta plays in the functioning of the powiat and public administration. The office of the starosta is considered one of the primary organs of state administration. The aforementioned powers of the starosta come under three categories:

The first category includes the powers vested in the starosta as chair of the executive board. These include organising the work of the powiat executive board and the powiat office. This involves preparing the agenda for executive board meetings, determining the venue and time of the meeting, preparing materials for the meeting, convening meetings and chairing the proceedings. This category also covers the management of day-to-day affairs of the powiat, which are repetitive and do not require detailed examination or cause a significant financial burden on the powiat. Naturally, the starosta also represents the powiat externally, except in matters relating to property. The second category involves the powers exercised on behalf of the executive board, which is the executive body of the powiat. These concern urgent problems, threats to the public interest, direct threats to health or life or the risk of significant material losses. Legal acts issued under these powers require approval by the executive board at its next meeting. These powers do not include the authority to issue regulatory provisions, which may only be issued by the powiat council and the powiat executive board (Zimmermann 2010). The third category encompasses the starosta's own powers, the existence of which determines the starosta's status as a public administration body. These include the authority to issue administrative decisions in individual cases relating to public administration, unless specific provisions stipulate that decisions are to be issued by the powiat executive board. The power to

issue administrative decisions, specified only in the Powiat Self-Government Act, is elaborated upon in dozens of specific acts on substantive administrative law, which grant the starosta material competence. The starosta may authorise the deputy starosta, members of the powiat executive board, employees of the powiat office, powiat services, inspectorates, fire service, as well as heads of powiat organisational units to issue decisions on the starosta's behalf (Zimmermann 2010).

The starosta is the head of the powiat. The starosta organises all the work of the powiat executive board and powiat office, manages the day-to-day affairs of the powiat and represents it externally with regard to official matters. The rules of operation and the entire organisation of the powiat office are specified in the organisational regulations adopted by the powiat council at the proposal of the powiat executive board. The starosta is the head of the powiat office and the supervisor of the office staff and managers of the powiat's organisational units, as well as the supervisor of the powiat services, inspectorates and fire service (Powiat Self-Government Act Article 35(2)). The starosta acts on behalf of the powiat office as the employer in matters relating to labour law in respect to the office employees (Wierzbica 2012). By its very nature, the powiat office is a subsidiary body of the powiat as a local government unit, providing services to the powiat authorities. The powiat office is a labour structure whose primary purpose is to ensure the efficient performance of the powiat's tasks (Judgment of the Voivodship Administrative Court in Warsaw of 18 January 2007). Article 169(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1997 introduces two categories of local government bodies, namely legislative bodies and executive bodies (Act of 2 April 1997). In the powiat, the legislative body is the powiat council, while the executive body is the powiat executive board.

In individual matters relating to public administration within the competence of the powiat, decisions are issued by the starosta, unless specific provisions provide for decisions to be issued by the powiat executive board. The powiat council enacts local laws of the powiat by way of a resolution, unless the act authorising the enactment of the law provides otherwise. In urgent cases, the powiat regulations may be issued by the executive board. These are subject to approval at the next powiat council meeting and lapse if not presented for approval or if approval is refused. The powiat council determines the date on which the regulation lapses. The starosta forwards the regulations to the executive authorities of the gminas, i.e. to the mayors, located in the powiat and to the starostas of neighbouring powiats on the day after their enactment. Local laws in the powiat are enacted by the powiat council by way of a resolution, based on authorisations contained in specific acts. The aforementioned local laws are enacted in particular in matters requiring regulation in the statute, special procedures for managing powiat property, and the rules and procedures for using powiat facilities and utilities (see Wiktorowska 2009). These are signed immediately after their adoption by the chair of the powiat council and forwarded for publication (Bielecki, Stelmasiak 2015). Gmina and powiat regulations are published in voivodship official journals. The rules and procedure for the promulgation of local laws and issuing the voivodship official journal are set out in the Promulgation of Normative Acts and Certain Other Legal Acts Act of 20 July 2000 (consolidated text Journal of Laws of 2007, No. 68, item 449, as amended; see Wiktorowska 2009). In the structure of the powiat, the starosta acts, on the one hand, as the chair of a collegial body, i.e. the powiat executive board, and, on the other hand, has autonomous powers (Bułajewski 2018). The Powiat Self-Government Act does not explicitly define the office of the starosta as a powiat body. The powiat council elects the starosta. The council elects the starosta by an absolute majority of votes of the statutory composition of the council, in a secret ballot (Judgment of the Voivodship

Administrative Court in Warsaw of 11 May 2011). Only upon the request of the starosta are the remaining members of the executive board elected. The dismissal or resignation of the starosta is tantamount to the resignation or dismissal of the entire executive board. The starosta organises the work of the powiat executive board and powiat office, and represents it externally. The starosta is the head of the powiat office and the supervisor of the office staff and managers of the powiat's organisational units, as well as the supervisor of the powiat services, inspectorates and fire service (cf. Wojnicki 2003). Accordingly, the starosta appoints and dismisses the heads of these units, approves their action plans in consultation with the voivod [regional governor], coordinates the joint activities of these units within the powiat, manages joint activities under exceptional circumstances, and orders inspections. All these powers are collectively referred to as supervising the powiat's combined administration. It comprises both local government entities (e.g. the powiat office) and government administration entities (e.g. the police) (Zimmerman 2014). The tasks of the starosta in organising the work of the executive board include:

1. Preparing a draft agenda for the executive board meeting;
2. Determining the time and place of the executive board meeting;
3. Preparing materials for the draft agenda;
4. Providing support for the executive board meeting;
5. Convening executive board meetings;
6. Chairing executive board meetings (Dąbrowski and Śwital 2016).

The starosta also develops an operational flood protection plan and declares and cancels flood alerts and warnings (Dolnicki 2012).

A specific organisational unit tasked with assisting the starosta in exercising authority over powiat services, inspectorates and fire service, as well as in performing tasks related to public order and citizen safety, is the powiat security and order commission, which is established specifically for this purpose (cf. Wojnicki 2015). The regulations governing the aforementioned commission regulate its structure, coordination and inspection tasks. The powers of the starosta are exercised by the mayor of a city with powiat rights, who combines the powers of two tiers of local government. The starosta is elected. Unlike in a gmina, these are not general elections, and the starosta is elected by the powiat council by an absolute majority of votes, in a secret ballot, together with the powiat executive board. The powiat council may dismiss the starosta on the grounds of failing to grant discharge to the executive board or for other reasons, but in this case only at the request of $\frac{1}{4}$ of the statutory composition of the council. The dismissal or resignation of the starosta is tantamount to the dismissal or resignation of the entire powiat executive board (Zimmermann 2010). The organisation and rules of operation of the powiat office are specified in the organisational regulations adopted by the powiat council at the request of the powiat executive board (Gajewska 2010). Under current legislation, the heads of powiat services, inspectorates and fire service are the Powiat Police Commander, the Powiat Fire Service Commander, the Powiat Construction Supervision Inspector and the Powiat Sanitary Inspector. With reference to Article 35(3) of the Powiat Self-Government Act, exercising authority over these managers, the starosta: 1) appoints and dismisses the managers of these units, in consultation with the voivod, and also performs activities with respect to them in matters relating to labour law, unless specific provisions provide otherwise; 2) approves their action programmes; 3) coordinates the joint activities of these units within the powiat; 4) under exceptional circumstances, manages the joint activities of these units; 5) orders inspections to be

carried out in justified cases (Wierzbica 2012).

4. The Powiat Council

The powiat executive board is an executive body that is indirectly elected. The powers of the executive board are regulated by Article 32 of the Powiat Self-Government Act. In light of this regulation, the powiat executive board implements the resolutions of the powiat council and performs the tasks specified by law for the powiat. The main tasks of this body include, in particular, preparing draft council resolutions, managing the powiat's property, implementing the powiat's budget, and hiring and dismissing managers of the powiat's organisational units. The powiat council sets the course of action for the powiat executive board (Dąbrowski 2016). It is a legislative and supervisory body. As a legislative body, it may adopt resolutions that are binding on their intended recipients, i.e. the residents of the powiat community. Resolutions may be general or specific. Resolutions may also be addressed to the powiat bodies or other entities located in the powiat (Dąbrowski 2016). The Powiat Self-Government Act does not impose a term of office on the powiat executive board. In light of Article 28 of the Powiat Self-Government Act, the powiat executive board remains in office until a new board is elected. This guarantees the continuity of the powiat executive body. This also ensures that the newly elected council will be able to elect its own executive body. The territorial division of the country should take into account social, economic and cultural ties and ensure that the entity is capable of performing public tasks (Dolnicki 2009).

5. Cooperation with the Central Government

Many authors claim that such cooperation is carried out without much reservation. However, some situations test the top-down power structure at the powiat level. Still, in general, it can be said that this cooperation takes place without any significant difficulties. As a local government unit, a powiat, like a gmina and a voivodship, is subject to state supervision. Supervision can be described as the authority to inspect the activities of a supervised entity, combined with the authority to intervene in the activities of the supervised entity in cases strictly defined by law. Currently, there is an increasing emphasis on the role of supervision as an institution for defining the relationships between entities performing public administration tasks in a decentralised system. This concerns relations between central government bodies and local government units. The basic functions of supervision over the powiat self-government include: 1) upholding the law; 2) protection and support. In performing the functions of upholding the law, the supervisory bodies ensure that the powiat self-government bodies comply with the provisions of generally applicable law. In turn, the protective function is performed through expert assistance provided to the powiat self-government bodies to enable them to draw on the experience gathered by supra-local authorities (Sikora 2010). Under current legislation, the state legislator allows supervisory bodies to assess the powiat activities solely in respect of compliance with generally applicable law, with regard to their lawfulness, and thus the sole purpose of the supervisory bodies is to uphold the law. It can be said that the oversight of the powiat self-government primarily involves upholding generally applicable law and providing professional assistance to the supervisory bodies. The voivod is a supervisory authority with general competence. The voivod's material competence encompasses all matters not reserved for other supervisory authorities, i.e. the prime minister and the regional chambers of audit. The scope of financial affairs subject to the supervisory authority of the regional chambers of audit is set out in Article 11 of the Regional Chambers of Audit Act (Sikora 2010).

6. Powiats and Cohesion Policy

Over the past decades, the starosta and the powiat have performed specific functions on behalf of the residents of the administered territory. By doing so, they have become direct creators of specific activities for the benefit of recipients.

The powiats, like other local government units, are distinctive due to their individual development conditions. These differences stem from, among other things, geographical location, climatic conditions, cultural factors, access to resources, historical circumstances and the socio-economic environment in which development strategies are implemented. The economic aspect is particularly important, as it determines established methods of financial management in a given area and influences the selection and implementation of specific economic projects (cf. Ciołek 2017, Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019).

The issue of territorial cohesion applies to all levels of Poland's administrative division. In this context, cohesion at the powiat level can also be considered, which in functional terms can be viewed as "local economies" strongly linked to the local labour market and the area in which they operate. Table 1 summarises the structure and principles of cohesion policy.

Table 1. The basic principles of the European Union Cohesion Policy

Principle	Meaning
Concentration	It regards the concentration of resources, efforts (directing investments at activities supporting economic growth) and expenses. It means the necessity for treating the areas of the convergence objective as a priority, which, in practice, is connected with the need for spending most of the cohesion policy resources on the poorest countries and regions.
Programming	It means the necessity for financing multi-annual comprehensive programmes corresponding with the objectives and priorities of the European Union and not with the individual projects.
Partnership	It means the necessity for holding consultations with social partners at every level of programming, i.e. from the project, through management and execution, to monitoring and assessment.
Additionally	It means the necessity for domestic co-financing; it is assumed that the EU resources cannot replace the resources coming from the member states.
Subsidiarity	It means the necessity for the implementation of the activities ensuring higher efficiency and effectiveness than in the case of attributing them to the member states.

Source: Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019, pp. 22–23.

In light of the analyses conducted to date, powiats undertake a wide range of activities, including tasks related to shaping social, economic and territorial cohesion.

Social cohesion is a key element of territorial development, referring to the ability of local communities to maintain relationships based on trust, cooperation and a sense of belonging. In the case of powiats, as intermediate-level local government units, social cohesion is both the result and a prerequisite for effective local development policy. Its level affects the quality of life of residents, the effectiveness of public policy implementation and the region's ability to adapt to economic and demographic changes. Social cohesion comprises three elements: social capital, social integration and mutual solidarity. In the activities of the powiat, these elements are reflected in the activities of non-governmental organisations, religious communities, the degree of integration of national and ethnic minorities and the availability of public services. Structural

factors (e.g. population density, level of urbanisation), economic factors (unemployment rate, residents' income) and cultural factors (local traditions, regional identity) also have an impact on the social cohesion of powiats. Local government policy has a special role here as investment in social infrastructure, the development of public transport and integration programmes increase opportunities for contact between residents and improve their sense of belonging. The higher the level of social cohesion a powiat achieves, the more attractive it becomes for investment, local innovation, social stability and effective mobilisation in a crisis (cf. Nowak and Wieteska 2019).

Economic cohesion means striving to even out the level of economic development between territorial units and ensuring equal opportunities for participation in economic processes. In the context of local government units at the powiat level, economic cohesion can be defined as the extent to which economic processes in a given powiat are balanced and its ability to generate stable and long-term economic growth while reducing development disparities between individual gminas and areas comprising that unit (cf. *Powiat Self-Government Act of 5 June 1998*, Journal of Laws of 2024, item 107, as amended).

The economic cohesion of a powiat includes sustainable development of the local economy, equal access to the labour market, income equalisation, delivery of adequate economic infrastructure and the capacity to absorb external funds. The degree of economic cohesion among powiats is determined by endogenous factors such as local entrepreneurial potential, labour resources, demographic structure and social capital. Exogenous factors are also important, including the location in relation to metropolitan centres, accessibility of national infrastructure, and macroeconomic conditions that determine demand for local goods and services. Instruments supporting the economic cohesion of powiats include local development strategies, investment plans, special economic zones, as well as financial mechanisms of the EU cohesion policy, including programmes targeting the development of entrepreneurship, innovation and economic infrastructure. However, the effectiveness of these instruments depends on the powiats' capacity for strategic planning, cooperation among the gminas and effective use of available resources (cf. Dijkstra 2014).

Territorial cohesion is important for regional and local development policy in the European Union, as confirmed by EU strategic documents such as the Treaty of Lisbon (cf. Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, OJ C 306, 17 December 2007), which recognises territorial cohesion alongside economic and social cohesion as a fundamental objective of European integration. Its essence boils down to ensuring balanced development conditions throughout the space of a country or region and minimising disparities between different territorial units. The territorial cohesion of powiats can be defined as the degree of internal spatial and functional integration, including economic, social, transport and institutional links within a given area and its surroundings. This means that the powiat, as a local government unit, should strive to ensure equal access for residents to technical and social infrastructure, public services and opportunities to participate in economic and social life (*Powiat Self-Government Act of 5 June 1998*, Journal of Laws of 1998, No. 91, item 578, as amended). Factors influencing the degree of territorial cohesion in a powiat include the local economy, geographical and transport conditions, social capital, financial instruments, and social and technical infrastructure. The social, economic and territorial cohesion of powiats is linked to their capacity to pursue an integrated development policy that takes into account cooperation among gminas and links with surrounding administrative units. For cohesion policy, funding mechanisms are important, which enable the implementation of infrastructure investments, social programmes and economic initiatives contributing to the

levelling out of development disparities, which include EU Funds (cf. Ryszkiewicz 2018, pp. 103–147; Salamacha 2018; Szuper 2019; Dijkstra 2014; Instytut Rozwoju 2019).

7. EU Funds and Cohesion Policy

EU funds are implemented through instruments within the following socio-economic policies of the European Communities: Cohesion Policy (for which the strategic document in Poland is the National Strategic Reference Framework, NSRF), Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). A Partnership Agreement is a document that defines the strategy for the intervention of European funds within the framework of three EU policies: Cohesion Policy, Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) in Poland from 2014 to 2020. The instruments for implementing the Partnership Agreement are national operational programmes and regional operational programmes. The European Union's financial perspective for 2021–2027 is governed by the Partnership Agreement for the Implementation of the Cohesion Policy 2021–2027 in Poland (PA). This is a strategy agreed with the European Commission for the use of European funds over the next decade. The PA covers eight national programmes and 16 regional programmes (Statistics Poland 2025). The amount of funding obtained from the EU is presented in Figures 1 and 2, Table 1 and Map 1. An increase in funds acquired on a national level has been observed. Among the voivodships, Mazowieckie receives the most funding, while Lubuskie gets the least. The voivodships of Zachodniopomorskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie receive the most funding per capita.

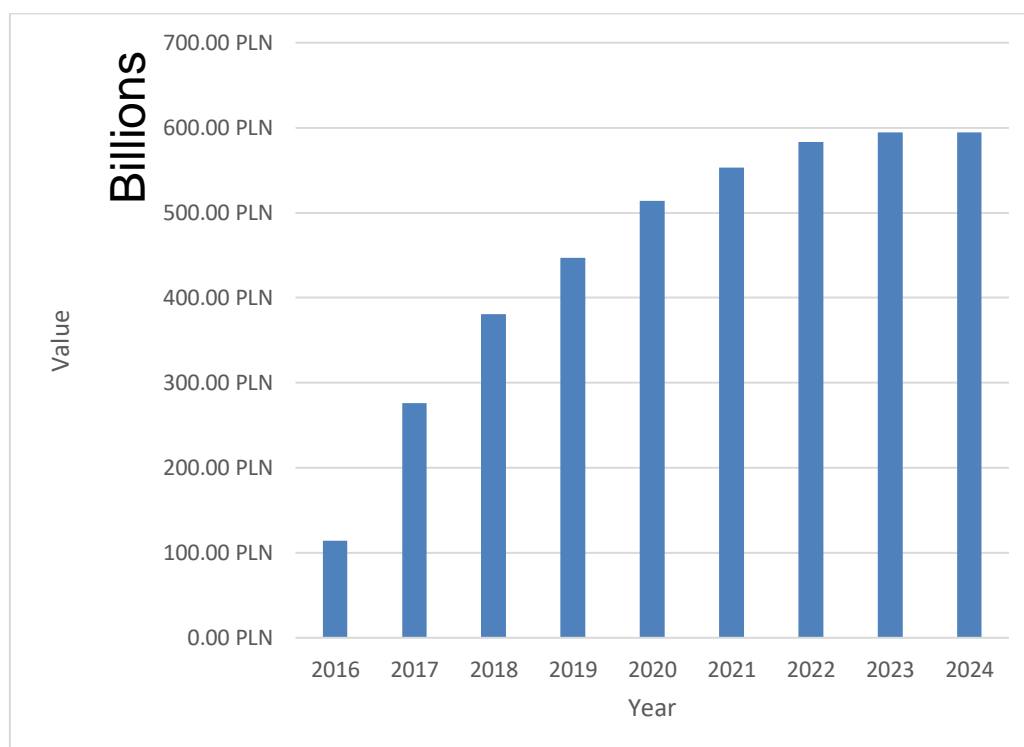


Figure 1. Total value of contracts/decisions on EU funding in Poland

Source: Own study based on 2025 data from Statistics Poland

Table 2. Total value of contracts/decisions on EU funding in PLN billion in voivodships

Voivodship	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
DOLNOŚLĄSKIE	9.11	19.02	28.01	31.09	34.98	37.29	38.44	38.78	38.53
KUJAWSKO-POMORSKIE	2.03	11.27	16.46	20.00	24.33	27.20	27.67	27.73	27.78
LUBELSKIE	6.95	15.65	20.10	26.56	30.48	32.26	33.78	34.03	33.67
LUBUSKIE	3.49	7.23	9.14	10.07	11.88	12.67	12.85	13.16	13.17
ŁÓDZKIE	4.77	14.21	20.59	23.82	28.56	33.07	35.03	35.37	35.80
MAŁOPOLSKIE	6.15	20.11	27.13	33.42	38.71	41.20	45.42	46.88	46.85
MAZOWIECKIE	17.99	41.77	54.28	60.34	64.36	66.38	70.96	73.24	73.15
OPOLSKIE	2.89	6.43	8.17	9.36	11.57	11.87	13.05	13.32	13.31
PODKARPACKIE	5.31	13.87	18.49	23.49	26.80	29.31	31.13	31.28	31.09
PODLASKIE	3.19	8.04	10.82	14.57	16.70	18.05	18.21	18.60	18.60
POMORSKIE	7.25	15.53	24.22	27.07	29.59	31.05	31.83	32.79	33.52
ŚLĄSKIE	9.03	23.17	34.44	39.86	49.70	53.02	54.93	55.84	55.97
ŚWIĘTOKRZYSKIE	2.90	7.61	11.41	13.43	15.34	16.36	17.52	17.99	17.91
WARMIŃSKO-MAZURSKIE	8.39	13.40	17.90	22.06	25.20	27.13	27.79	28.07	28.04
WIELKOPOLSKIE	7.17	19.60	24.74	29.21	32.58	35.43	36.31	37.02	37.18
ZACHODNIOPOMORSKIE	1.86	12.58	17.58	21.57	26.24	28.80	30.84	30.71	30.15

Source: Own study based on 2025 data from Statistics Poland

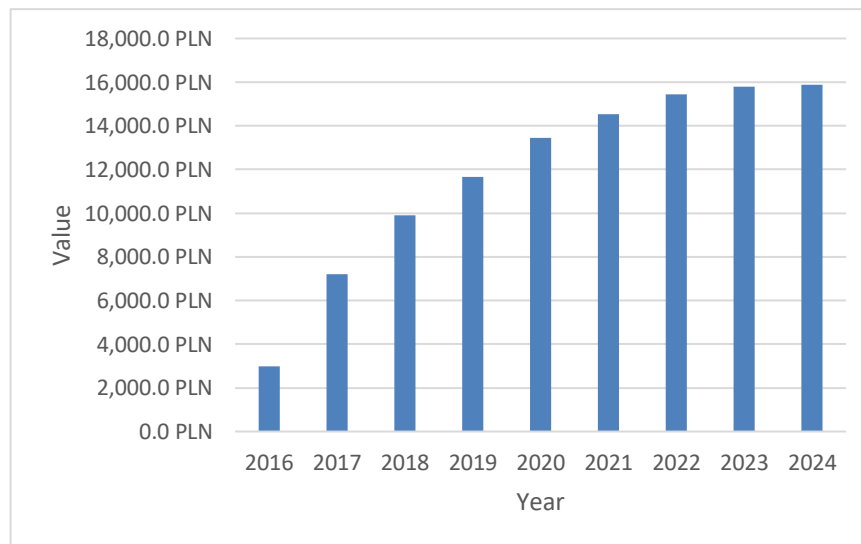
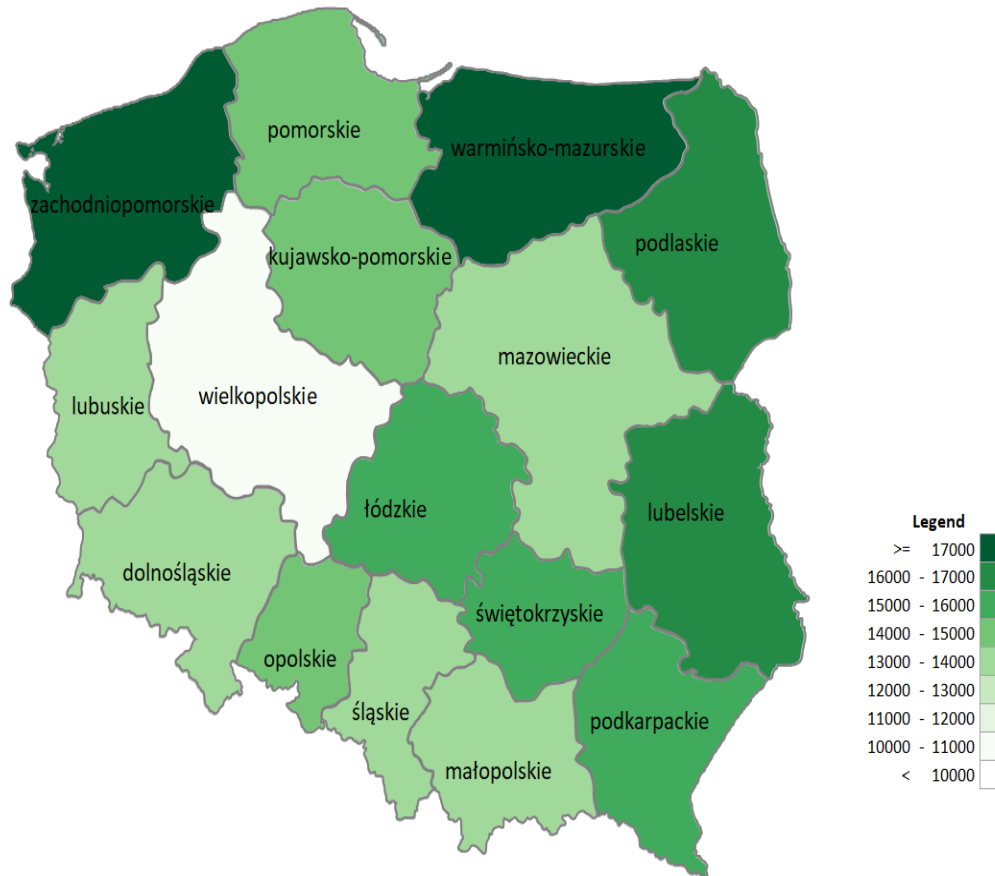


Figure 2. Value of contracts/decisions on EU funding per capita in Poland

Source: Own study based on 2025 data from Statistics Poland

Map 1. Value of contracts/decisions on EU funding per capita in voivodships in 2024 in PLN.



Source: Own study based on 2025 data from Statistics Poland

Powiat authorities implement measures to promote development and cohesion. The powiats of Lubelskie Voivodship are a case in point. A survey conducted by Statistics Poland, published in 2019 under the title The use of European Union funds and cohesion of powiats of Lubelskie Voivodship, presented the level of social, economic and territorial cohesion of powiats in Lubelskie Voivodship. This objective was achieved by using a set of information based on public statistics (Table 3). The empirical study employed statistical analysis methods. Cluster analysis was used as one of the multidimensional exploratory techniques to identify homogeneous groups of powiats in terms of the social, economic and territorial cohesion indicators examined. The idea behind this method was to group objects by internal similarity and external differentiation (Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019).

Table 3. Cohesion Indicators

Cohesion	Field	Indicator
Social	Human capital	Net migration per 1,000 population
		Demographic dependency ratio
	Labour market	Registered unemployment rate
		Employed persons per 1,000 population
		Average monthly gross wages and salaries
	Living conditions	Percentage of children attending day nurseries
		Children attending pre-school establishments per 1,000 children aged 3–5
		Places in stationary social assistance facilities per 1,000 residents
Economic	Financial independence	Powiat's own revenue per capita
	Economic activity	Commercial companies per 1,000 residents
		Commercial companies with foreign capital per 10,000 inhabitants
	Investment activity	Investment outlays in enterprises per capita
		Gross value of fixed assets in enterprises per capita
Territorial	Settlement structure	Population per 1 km ²
		Urbanisation rate
	Spatial planning	Share of the area covered by a local spatial plan
		Dwellings per 1,000 population
	Technical and transport infrastructure	Water supply network in km per 100 km ² of the area
		Sewage system in km per 100 km ² of the area
		Population with access to the sewage system as % of the total population
		Hard surface gmina and powiat roads per 100 km ²

Source: Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019, cf. Swianiewicz 1989; Ziółkowski 1997; Pocięcha, Podolec and Sokołowski 1998; Ratajczak 2000; Wiatrak 2000; Kosiedowski 2001; Rakowski and Pakulska 2001; Madras-Kobus 2001; Ponikowski 2002; Roeske-Słomka 2003; Lira and Wysocki 2004; Wysoki and Łuczak 2004; Ponikowski 2004; Kapusta 2004; Bról 2004; Wysocki 2004; Malina and Malina 2005; Młodak 2005; Roszkowska 2005; Tokarski 2006; Rosner 2007; Rosner and Stany 2007a; Rosner and Stany 2007b; Rosner and Stany 2007c; Czornik 2008; Ziemiańczyk 2010; Głuszczyk 2011; Kocura-Bera 2011; Szubska-Włodarczyk 2014; Kołodziejczyk 2014; Kiniorska 2014; Ludwiczak 2014;

Adamowicz and Janulewicz 2016; Chądyńska 2016; Krawczyk 2017; Konecka-Szydłowska and Maćkowiak 2016; Parysek 2018; Malina 2020; Kozubek, Konecka-Szydłowska 2022; Krawczyk 2023, 2024; Krawczyk and Marzec 2024, 2025.

Table 4. Clusters of Powiats according to Social Cohesion Indicators

Cluster	Number of elements	Powiats
I	13	Bialski, Chełmski, Hrubieszowski, Janowski, Krasnostawski, Kraśnicki, Lubartowski
II	5	Biłgorajski, Lubelski, Łęczyński, Łukowski, Radzyński
III	6	Puławski, Świdnicki, Biała Podlaska, Chełm, Lublin, Zamość.

Source: Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019

It can be concluded that the clustering was mainly determined by the following diagnostic variables: demographic dependency ratio, divorces per 1,000 population, registered unemployment rate, employed persons per 1,000 population, average monthly gross wages and salaries, percentage of children attending day nurseries and children attending pre-school establishments per 1,000 children aged 3–5. Powiats in clusters 1 and 2 had similar, relatively low divorce rates and children attending day nurseries. In turn, powiats from clusters 2 and 3 showed similar net migration, wages and salaries, and social assistance. Cluster 1 covered 13 powiats. These units present the least favourable situation in terms of most diagnostic variables, i.e. migration, employment, unemployment, wages and salaries, and children attending pre-school establishments and day nurseries. The only indicator reaching a relatively high level was the one on the availability of social assistance, which is logically related to the low values of the other indicators. This cluster can be described as having a relatively low overall level of social cohesion indicators. Cluster 2 comprised five powiats. These units have the lowest demographic dependency ratio and unemployment rate, and a relatively favourable situation in terms of divorce rates, wages and salaries, and employment. This cluster shows a relatively high level of development in two areas of social cohesion, i.e. human capital and the labour market. Cluster 3 included 6 powiats. These units demonstrate the most favourable situation in terms of wages and salaries, employment, pre-school and day nursery care, while at the same time having the highest demographic dependency ratio and divorce rate. This cluster is characterised by relatively high levels of labour market development and living conditions (Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019).

As in the case of social cohesion, the powiats were grouped and classified according to their economic cohesion. The results are presented in Table 4 (Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019).

Table 5. Clusters of powiats according to economic cohesion indicators

Cluster	Number of elements	Powiats
I	4	Lublin, Zamość, Chełm, Biała Podlaska
II	18	Bialski, Biłgorajski, Chełmski, Hrubieszowski, Janowski, Krasnostawski, Kraśnicki, Lubartowski, Lubelski, Łukowski, Opolski, Parczewski, Radzyński, Rycki, Świdnicki, Tomaszowski, Włodawski, Zamojski
III	2	Łęczyński, Puławski

Source: Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019.

Based on the analysis of variance, it can be concluded that the clustering was mainly determined by the following diagnostic variables: the powiat's own revenue per capita, commercial companies per 1,000 residents, commercial companies with foreign capital per 10,000 residents, investment outlays in enterprises per capita and gross value of fixed assets in enterprises per capita. The powiats in clusters 2 and 3 had very similar levels of own income per capita and commercial companies with foreign capital. However, the cluster 1 profile is markedly different. Cluster 1 included 4 cities with powiat rights. These units are notable for having the highest concentration of commercial companies, including those with foreign capital, and the highest level of own income per capita. These also have other favourable indicators. This cluster can be described as having relatively high development of financial and economic cohesion indicators. Cluster 2 comprised 18 powiats without cities with powiat rights. These units are characterised by the least favourable indicators of economic cohesion. Cluster 3 consisted of two powiats, which stood out from the rest due to their very high level of both investment outlays in enterprises and gross value of fixed assets. This suggests relatively high investment indicators of economic cohesion (Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019).

As in the case of social and economic cohesion, the powiats were also grouped according to their territorial cohesion. The results are presented in Table 5 (Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019).

Table 6. Clusters of Powiats according to Territorial Cohesion Indicators

Cluster	Number of elements	Powiats
I	4	Lublin, Zamość, Chełm, Biała Podlaska
II	11	Biłgorajski, Chełmski, Kraśnicki, Lubelski, Łęczyński, Opolski, Parczewski, Puławski, Radzyński, Rycki, Świdnicki
III	9	Bialski, Hrubieszowski, Janowski, Krasnostawski, Lubartowski, Łukowski, Tomaszowski, Włodawski, Zamojski

Source: Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019.

Powiats in clusters 2 and 3 had a similar profile in terms of population density, roads, water supply networks, and the percentage of the population with access to the sewage system. The factors that clearly differentiated the cities were two metrics: dwellings per 1,000 population and

the share of area covered by the local spatial plan. Clusters 1 and 2 showed similarities only in terms of the percentage of area covered by the local spatial plan, while the profile of cluster 1 was completely different from that of cluster 3. Cluster 1 included 4 cities with powiat rights. These units are characterised by the highest values of all analysed indicators, and thus the most favourable situation in terms of territorial cohesion. Cluster 2 comprised 11 powiats, which are units positioned between clusters 1 and 3. The units characterised by the least favourable parameters of territorial cohesion were classified in cluster 3, comprising nine powiats, most of which are located near the eastern border of the voivodship. Successive EU expansions have changed the nature of the challenges facing cohesion policy and increased the difficulty of addressing new challenges. With the Treaty of Lisbon recognising territorial cohesion as an explicit objective of cohesion policy, greater emphasis began to be placed on the importance of access to services, functional geography, territorial analysis and sustainable development. This change is reflected in an increased focus on sustainable economic growth and a move beyond GDP when assessing territorial development. The analysis revealed an increase in social, economic and territorial cohesion (Bronisz and Hrytsuk 2019).

Conclusion

This study analyses the legal and economic aspects of the functioning of powiats in Poland, taking into account their historical background, contemporary institutional structure and role in the implementation of public policies, particularly as regards social, economic and territorial cohesion. The reviewed operation of powiats—from the medieval starosty to its iteration introduced by the 1998 reform—highlights their enduring position in the Polish administrative system and their importance in ensuring the efficiency of local government.

An emphasis was placed on the key role played by powiat authorities, in particular the starosta, the powiat executive board, and the powiat council, and how this administrative structure is responsible for the implementation of public tasks, both procedural and strategic. The starosta and the powiat executive board, acting under and based on the provisions contained in legislation (including the Powiat Self-Government Act), play a vital role as executive and representative institutions, and their activities in issuing administrative acts, supervising services and implementing tasks beyond the scope of the gmina determine the quality and effectiveness of local administration.

Economic analysis has shown that powiats perceived as local economies should strive to maximise synergies between the three dimensions of social, economic and territorial cohesion. Social cohesion builds on social capital, integration and solidarity, influencing quality of life, community participation and sociopolitical stability. Economic cohesion, achieved through an appropriate economic structure, labour market balance, income distribution, and the absorption of external funds, determines local development and reduces disparities across the powiat. On the other hand, territorial cohesion, achieved by coordinated access to infrastructure, public services and an effective system of spatial connections, makes the powiat a functionally integrated territory.

European Union funds used by powiats within the voivodships are conducive to their development and cohesion, as exemplified by the powiats of Lubelskie Voivodship. As local government units, powiats play a strategic role in regional development. Their legal and economic standing, instruments and institutional capital determine their ability to effectively implement local policies. Achieving lasting social, economic and territorial cohesion requires sustainable cooperation mechanisms, predictable financial support and institutions capable of

responding to the changing needs of local communities.

Legal Acts:

Notice of the Marshal of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of 28 March 2007 on the promulgation of normative acts and certain other acts (Journal of Laws of 2007, No. 68, item 449, as amended).

Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 7 August 1998 on the establishment of powiats (Journal of Laws of 1998, No. 103, item 652, as amended).

Act of 2 April 1997—Constitution of the Republic of Poland, Journal of Laws No. 78, item 483, as amended.

Powiat Self-Government Act of 5 June 1998, consolidated text of Journal of Laws of 2024, item 107, as amended.

Powiat Self-Government Act of 5 June 1998, Journal of Laws 1998 No. 91, item 578, as amended).

Judgment of the Voivodship Administrative Court in Warsaw of 11 May 2011, II SA/WA1573/10, LEX No. 795703

Judgment of the Voivodship Administrative Court in Warsaw of 18 January 2007, II SA/Wa 1823/06, LEX No. 294989.

Judgment of the Voivodship Administrative Court of 29 June 2007, (IV SA/Wa 714/07, Legalis).

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