

# Abstract

**Studies on Problem Areas in Poland.** The presented study is the result of a project carried out jointly by the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IGiPZ PAN) and the Centre for European Regional and Local Studies of the University of Warsaw (Euroreg) in 2018 on behalf of the Ministry of Investment and Development. This project was a continuation of previous scientific and expert work for the Ministry of Development on a similar subject, the results of which were published in *Prace Geograficzne (Geographic Works)* of IGiPZ PAN [Śleszyński *et al.* 2017a] and in several scientific articles [Bański *et al.* 2018; Komornicki *et al.* 2018], including the extension of some threads, *i.e.*, the regionalization of problem areas [Śleszyński *et al.* 2017b]. The results of the project together with the study on medium-sized cities [Śleszyński 2017] became, *i.a.*, the basis for the designation of problem areas in the *Strategy for Responsible Development (SOR)* of 2016. The results of the analyses, including the developed methodology, found application in subsequent studies, both expert [Dębkowska *et al.* 2019; Śleszyński *et al.* 2019] and typically scientific [Dolińska *et al.* 2020].

The main cognitive and application goals are as follows:

- verification of the number and boundaries of areas at risk of permanent marginalization on the basis of updating the values of indicators used in the SOR diagnosis [Śleszyński *et al.* 2017a];
- in-depth identification of development problems in the designated sub-areas;
- in-depth identification of local resources and development potentials in the designated sub-areas;
- development of typology of sub-areas, taking into account their similarity in terms of existing problems and possibilities of counteracting marginalization;
- elaboration of individual portraits of sub-areas, taking into account the complexity of their natural and socio-economic characteristics, as well as occurring phenomena and processes concerning problems and possibilities of activation of potentials, mainly endogenous.

The delimitation update (Chapter 2) was made with the same assumptions as in the earlier study, made for the Ministry of Development [Śleszyński *et al.* 2017a]. Attempts were made to use the latest source data, which was not possible for all

indicators due to the lack of continuous, *e.g.* annual, recording of events (*e.g.* percentage of population with higher education). The deductive proposal for the regionalization of the 46 problem sub-areas designated as "urbanization delays", "transformational shock" and "inner periphery" is innovative (and others that cannot be clearly classified).

An in-depth diagnosis of the problems (Chapter 3) was first based on their classification. The following issues were singled out: migration outflow, depopulation and aging, economic and social deprivation, labor market defects, poor economic structure, unfavorable settlement structure, natural obstacles and threats.

The most extensive part is the diagnosis of potentials, of which 10 (Chapter 4) were distinguished. In a sense, for some indicators it may also be a diagnosis of problems. Some of the issues are repeated in relation to Chapter 3 (*e.g.*, settlement, infrastructure and agricultural issues), but they are left for each part to be complementary. The entire first part of the monograph ends with a synthetic summary (Chapter 5).

In the summary of the first part it is stated that the update of the delimitation of problem areas allowed to capture some more general regularities related to the dynamics of the formation of territorial structures. It showed that spatial systems with problematic characteristics (both economic and social) are mostly permanent. This applies primarily to vast problem areas historically conditioned in broadly understood Eastern Poland (urbanization delay) and Northern Poland (transformational shock). At the same time, dense problem areas (threatened with marginalization) in the rest of Poland are less stable. They have different genetic conditions (including the so-called inner peripheries).

The new delimitation made it possible to analyze phenomena in a system of 46 sub-areas. This made it possible to identify development potentials in a functional, rather than administrative system. This confirmed that these systems are often not identical. The general increase in the mobility of the society and the development of the infrastructure makes the mismatch between the two systems growing.

The dynamic analysis of the selected variables revealed that some of the features that speak for the marginalization of the sub-areas are undergoing rapid changes, both favourable (improvement of accessibility, decrease in the number of social welfare recipients, decrease in unemployment) and negative (depopulation and aging of society). Others seem to be much more stable (level of education, tourist base), despite their theoretical vulnerability to intervention. This may lead to a cautious conclusion that the changes (often positive) in the sub-areas at risk of marginalization are rather the result of general macroeconomic and demographic changes (good economic situation, drop in unemployment) and the result of actions taken by central authorities (construction of large infrastructure, social programs).

The conducted research (an in-depth diagnosis and a diagnosis of resources and potentials) showed that there are deep differences between the delimited areas in terms of both the dynamics of unfavorable phenomena and the potential to overcome them. The results themselves are a very strong premise for the territorialization of development policy. They prove that Poland with its strongly differentiated (and even mosaic) spatial structures is a model field for applying the place-based approach [Barca 2009].

The study also indicates that it is advisable to conduct further research in a system of separate sub-areas. They allow for a unique combination of socio-economic variables with functional areas. It seems that ultimately the sub-areas should be compared with "problem-free" functional systems (e.g. FUA's of large and medium centers). This would give the possibility of real comparative studies on the level of territorial development in the actual (rather than administrative) systems of links. Such a classification would also be helpful in assessing the phenomenon of socio-economic polarization.

Part II includes the results of case studies aimed at sketching the indicative action plans for selected marginalized areas in Poland. Six areas were selected for detailed quantitative and qualitative research: Ełcki, Hrubieszowsko-Tomaszowski, Jasielski, Północno-Białostocki, Świdwińsko-Kołobrzegi and Włocławsko-Kłodawski. The goal was to develop the indicative action plans for exemplary areas that differ in terms of origins of their development problems.

Field research and work on indicative action plans were carried out by expert teams consisting of employees of the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization of the Polish Academy of Sciences and EUROREG, University of Warsaw. However, a key role was played by stakeholders in the areas under study. Much emphasis was put on ensuring the participation of local leaders and residents.

A total number of 24 development barriers were identified and 41 actions were proposed that may contribute to the elimination of these barriers. For some actions, more specific instruments have also been identified that can be used complementarily or as alternatives. Such a large number of described activities and instruments results from the willingness to fully take into account the most promising ideas that emerged in the course of the work. Nevertheless, the implementation of the plans will certainly require further selection of activities – not only due to the nature of the support programs that will ultimately be offered to areas at risk of permanent marginalization, but also taking into account the organizational capabilities of local stakeholders.

Indicative action plans take into account local development potential as much as possible. The identification of potentials is partly based on previous statistical analyzes (see Part I), but it also follows the subjective opinions of stakeholders. It should be remembered that the study concerns the areas at risk of permanent marginalization, in which the development potentials are very limited and are of a rather relative nature.

In the course of research and consultations with stakeholders, it turned out that they express interest in material, advisory and organizational support. It was pointed out that although many municipalities have strong leaders (including village heads, mayors), finding one leader who would represent the interests of many units will not be an easy matter. It seems that advisory support should cover, *inter alia*, forms of cooperation and effective leadership in the implementation of activities with a cross-municipal range. This is especially important in areas where there is no 'dominant' administrative unit (e.g. by far the largest, and at the same time centrally located).

The study also revealed the need to support local units in contacts and possible cooperation with large entities having an indirect impact on their development. Currently, the position of municipalities in such relationships is often very weak. One

example is the cooperation with PKP PLK and other companies of the PKP Group. This kind of support may also refer to establishing cooperation on the basis of PPP (*e.g.* with bus carriers).

Another important issue is dissemination of good practices that already exist in the area, but remain unknown or not applied in some parts of it. This requires reflection on the methods of stimulating advisory cooperation between municipalities. Currently municipalities tend to compete for resources rather than sharing know-how.

The study resulted also with an afterthought on delimitation of the areas threatened by permanent marginalization. Initial delimitation was based on the analysis of statistical data, and more specifically on quantitative indicators reflecting various aspects of the socio-economic situation at the local level. It could not take into account "soft" factors related to the actual cooperation between neighboring municipalities, relations between their authorities and elites, as well as specific features of local communities, observable only during field research. Although the field observations in general confirmed the correctness of the adopted delimitation methodology, there were also many examples and arguments for flexible treatment of the once identified boundaries.

Some of the proposed solutions require action at the regional or central level of governance. A common postulate appearing in several areas was to guarantee separate funds for them in government or EU funded programs. This applies especially to programs supporting larger infrastructure investments. One solution is offer the areas threatened with permanent marginalization special packages (or priority axes) within Regional Operational Programs.

Some of the proposed activities aimed at breaking the barriers are related to investments located outside the studied areas (*e.g.* construction of a new junction on the currently existing motorway). Such situations should be taken into account when designing support programs, which should not be too rigid in terms of the territorial range. This is in line with the aforementioned postulate of delimitation flexibility.

The scale and nature of the development problems were also reflected by the willingness of local stakeholders to participate in the study (readiness to fill out questionnaires, participate in meetings, *etc.*). In this context, the most challenging research was the one conducted in włocławsko-kłodawski area, the area representing the 'inner periphery' type of marginalization. Low social capital and cumulative causation process make it particularly difficult for inner peripheries to break through their development barriers, and for this reason areas of this kind require dedicated assistance.

**Keywords:** delimitation, development policy, development potential, local development, problem areas, regional policy.