

## COMPETITIVE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE COHESION POLICY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A MEANS OF COUNTERACTING DEVELOPMENT DISPARITIES

Arkadiusz TUZIAK

University of Rzeszów, Institute of Social Sciences; atuziak@tlen.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-3984-4318

**Purpose:** The main objective of the article is to characterize and analyze the cohesion policy of the European Union in the context of competitive regional development and counteracting excessive development disparities. In implementing the formulated objective, it was assumed that cohesion policy should evolve towards: greater networking, realising the endogenous potential of the regions, a holistic approach to the continent's space and strengthening Europe's position in global competition. It should also be based on a long-term strategic vision.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The article uses a method of analysis of literature in the field of regional studies referring to the problems of competitiveness in regional development. The reference point of the analyses are the main assumptions of the EU cohesion policy setting out the framework for the functioning of regions in the conditions of European integration. The thematic scope of the article includes an analysis of the basic factors and determinants of competitiveness in regional development, presentation of the main causes and dimensions of interregional development divergence and characterization of EU cohesion policy with particular emphasis on its impact on competitiveness and reduction of development disparities in the regional dimension. In the summary of the article, an attempt was made to outline a new model of cohesion policy. The challenges for regional cohesion policy in the context of contemporary global trends and transformations are also presented.

**Social implications:** The impact of the characteristics and analyses contained in the article may be manifested in the scope of objectives, directions and practices implemented by public authorities within the framework of pro-development regional policy. It can contribute to raising the awareness and knowledge of the regional community in terms of targeted, sustainable *and* competitive development at regional level within the context of the implementation of the priorities and principles of EU cohesion policy.

**Originality/value:** The value of the article is based on a focused analysis of the issue of competitiveness of regional development and showing its determinants in the perspective of EU cohesion policy. The characteristics and analyses of the subject issues contained in the article are included in the current of regional studies dealing with the issue of reducing disparities between regions and counteracting their backwardness through the implementation of programs and policies strengthening economic and social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Competitiveness, inter-regional development disparities, EU cohesion policy.

**Category of the paper:** General review.

## Introduction

The models for action in the European Union's regional policy, individual countries and regions have two main options. The first (classic) is to compensate for development differences by supporting problem regions (lagging regions), so that they effectively reduce their development distance in relation to growth poles. The second is to maintain the economic diversity of development by supporting the strongest regions and increasing their development potential so that development impulses spread to peripheral and marginalized areas. This model, unlike the classic pattern, is an attempt to win, not even out the differences. It involves using diverse features, resources and predispositions of regional socio-economic structures and taking into account equally diverse conditions and threats of development in the processes of allocation of funds (Pyszkowski, 2000, p. 74).

The European Union's cohesion policy is the EU's main investment tool. It covers all regions and cities in the European Union. Its main objectives are to support job creation, stimulate the competitiveness of enterprises, economic growth and sustainable development and improve the quality of life of citizens. In order to achieve these objectives and meet the diverse development needs of all regions of the EU, more than EUR 350 billion was allocated to cohesion policy in the period 2014-2020, representing almost a third of the EU's overall budget. A fundamental principle of the EU is solidarity and regional policy (and within it cohesion policy) allows this to be put into practice, especially in less developed regions, regions with serious demographic problems or in geographically disadvantaged (peripheral) regions.

The pursuit of cohesion does not run counter to the pursuit of competitiveness. In practice, it is not possible to fully compensate for regional differences and disparities. The aim of cohesion policy is to achieve a state of development differences that are socially acceptable. There have always been significant territorial and demographic differences in the European Union, which have been an obstacle to the process of European integration and development. The first solidarity mechanisms were created under the Treaty of Rome in 1957 in the form of the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Agriculture Guidance and Guarantee Funds (EAGGF Guidance Section). Since the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) was set up in 1975, regional development has become a key part of its focus. In 1994, a pro-development mechanism was created to compensate for regional disparities in the form of the Cohesion Fund (CF). Since 2008 (signature of the Lisbon Treaty), the three dimensions of EU cohesion – economic, social and territorial cohesion – have been supported by cohesion policy and the structural funds.

## Competitiveness at the regional level

The term “competitiveness” is used in two ways: dynamic and static. In a dynamic sense, referring to a longer period, it concerns the analysis of factors determining long-term ability to compete. In a static sense, it refers to the assessment of this ability at a specific time point. Competitiveness in the regional dimension is the subject of numerous studies, research and analyses (Gorynia, Łaźniewska, 2012; Czyżewska, 2012). A competitive region is one that “enables the creation of ever new structural combinations, by using human and material resources, giving the advantage of commercializing its products” (Klamut, 2008, p. 50). In order to increase competitive capacity, developed technical and social infrastructure and a network system of relations in the region are necessary. Knowledge and information are considered as the basis for the competitiveness of regions. From this perspective, the factors of regional competitiveness in the form of human capital, social capital, economic entities, innovation and institutional infrastructure are analyzed (Przygodzki, 2007, pp. 103-147).

In the context of globalization, the most significant processes significantly impacting the situation of regions, particularly their competitiveness, are metropolitanization and the increasing role of transnational corporations (Markowska-Przybyła, 2005, p. 94). Metropolisation is a phenomenon typical of the last phase of urbanization, consisting in the transformation of urban spaces and the change of the relationship between the city constituting the center and its immediate surroundings and the discontinuous use of urbanized spaces (Jałowiecki, 1999, p. 29). The most visible manifestation of metropolisation in the dimension of regional links is the break-up of the economic ties of the central city with its regional hinterland and the emergence of contacts with other metropolises on a continental or global scale. The strength of network links between metropolises is growing and the importance of traditional links in the center-periphery system is decreasing.

The second process determining the dynamics and direction of transformations on a global scale is the growing role of transnational corporations and the value and pace of international capital flows. The growing importance of international corporations can have both positive and negative consequences for countries and regions (Markowska-Przybyła, 2005, p. 97). On the one hand, the inflow of foreign direct investment is a condition for the development of the economy and a source of structural changes (Markusen, Venables, 1999). In order to increase competitiveness, regions are seeking foreign investment, as it means the influx of new production technologies, methods of organization and management, as well as improving the quality of production and improving labor productivity and skills of workers. In addition, they create new jobs, increase competitiveness between national actors, and new development impulses flow to the regional economy. On the other hand, the possible negative effects of foreign direct investment may be due to the fact that international capital is guided by the criterion of its own merits. The most significant threat may arise from a multinational

corporation monopolizing the market and making the local economy dependent on a dominant entity, which in the event of an investment withdrawal could lead to severe difficulties and disruption of the local labor market. (Markowska-Przybyła, 2005, p. 97). In addition, corporations often practice transferring profits and thus limiting the further development of a given area. Attracting foreign investment within the framework of regional policy must therefore be accompanied by a reliable diagnosis in terms of identifying the benefits and possible risks associated with it.

The competition, which is intensifying under the conditions of globalization, involves both regional and central authorities to be active in increasing the international competitiveness of individual regions and the country as a whole by undertaking the following integrated actions: (a) development and modernisation of technical and economic infrastructure and creation of conditions for undertaking tasks in this scope by the regions themselves; (b) creation of conditions for development and modernisation of social infrastructure in the form of schools, cultural, educational institutions, etc.; (c) creation of conditions for the development and modernisation of institutional market infrastructure, support for entrepreneurship and business services; (d) building a national and European economic information base for entrepreneurs and modernisation of statistical services; (e) creation of an environment conducive to the emergence and diffusion of innovation and absorption of new technologies; (f) shaping modern scientific staff and stimulating the activity of researchers; (g) stimulating innovation and disseminating research results among entrepreneurs; (h) building a learning, information society by disseminating access to national, European and world information networks; (i) conducting effective international promotion of regions and the country (Jałowiecki, Szczepański, 2002, p. 254).

An important task of regional policy is to support the competitiveness of regions, which is one of the ways to compensate for disparities in regional development (Winiarski 2000; Korenik, 2003; Wyszowska, 2005; Gorynia, Łaźniewska, 2012; Murzyn, 2016). The analysis of the literature shows that the competitiveness of the region is understood differently and studied using various methods (Bronisz, 2013). The authors of analyses in the field of regional development point to two levels of competitiveness of regions in the contemporary global economy. One is determined by the competitiveness of companies located in a given territorial system (region). The second level is the competitiveness of the territorial systems themselves, which seek new income-generating capital, create jobs for highly qualified employees, able to create innovations and use modern, advanced technologies and to manage large corporations (Gorzela, Jałowiecki 2000:8). Both aspects of competitiveness are closely linked. On the one hand, the conditions that regions create for doing business significantly affect the competitiveness of companies. Unfavourable conditions can lead to the collapse of companies or their relocation to places where they are better. In such a situation, the region is experiencing negative economic and social consequences. On the other hand, companies, especially

technologically advanced ones, are willing to locate themselves in places that offer the most favourable conditions for conducting business.

Regional competitiveness is sometimes understood as a permanent advantage of one region over another, resulting from its characteristics: attractiveness of the service offer addressed to current and potential users of the region; the most important strengths of the region; productivity and export strength (Klasik, 2002, pp. 99-100). Competitiveness is defined as direct and indirect (subjective) competition. Indirect competition consists in creating conditions of the regional environment for companies operating in the region in areas not controlled by their activities. Direct competition of regions is the competition of empowered territorial units in pursuit of various benefits (Markowski, 1997, pp. 39-40). An important source of creating competitive advantages may be the regional innovation system, which is a set of companies and institutions connected in a separate territory, oriented toward innovative action or conducive to innovation processes and innovation progress in the economy (Markowski, 2008).

Regional competitiveness is influenced by many factors, both external and internal ones, which can be classified into several groups (Łaźniewska, Czyżewska, 2011, pp. 28-29). The first is created by microeconomic factors, which include the availability of capital, access to codified and silent knowledge, and the quality of education. The second group includes macroeconomic factors in the form of territorial accessibility, research infrastructure and the industrial structure of the region. The third group of regional competitiveness factors consists of institutional and cultural elements: institutional infrastructure, mechanisms and models of governance in the region, the size of the local market, entrepreneurship supporting territorial development and cluster formation, local culture, creative environment for local development. The fourth group consists of spatial factors in the form of *spill-over* and benefits of agglomeration. The last group of factors determining regional competitiveness is defined as relational factors, the most important of which are networking cooperation and trust, which are the basis for joint learning of partners at regional level.

Equalization of regional disparities should consist in equalizing not the effects but the development opportunities. Competitiveness cannot mean supporting only strong regions, as this would lead to greater inter- and intra-regional disparities. Regional policy should not refer only to efficiency criteria. However, this does not mean accepting the second extreme model of supporting only weak regions. The optimal solution seems to be to increase the competitiveness of all regions, taking into account the existing conditions in them, and above all their own resources and development potentials, without excluding, if justified, redistribution of funds (Markowska-Przybyła, 2005).

## **Interregional disparities in development (in the light of theoretical analyses)**

In the literature of the field of regional studies, two groups of theories of development of backward (peripheral) regions can be distinguished. The first refers to exogenous development and the second to endogenous development (Grosse, 2007, pp. 48-52; Zajdel, 2011; Tuziak, 2019, pp. 134-138). The basic assumption of the concept of exogenous development is that it is impossible to initiate the development of backward (marginalized) areas based only on their own resources, because they are often insufficient. This group of concepts assumes the natural process of spilling experience, technological innovation and capital from highly developed (central) regions to peripheral regions. Regions lagging behind should seek external investment capital to ensure technology transfer.

The concepts of exogenous development assume division into countries and regions creating advanced, innovative technologies and others, in which the role only boils down to the implementation of innovative solutions in the field of production and organization. In the exogenous paradigm, the low absorptive capacity of underdeveloped, peripheral regions, expressed, *inter alia*, in low efficiency in attracting external investors and in the use of development support funds, is considered to be a serious problem of the underdeveloped, peripheral regions (Isaksen, Tripppl, 2017; Sadowski, 2020). On the basis of the concept of exogenous development, a uniform, linear model of development is assumed, in which regions form a hierarchical structure. At the top there are megacities, and at the bottom peripheral areas with poor socio-economic condition, which are developing thanks to the spread of development processes from highly developed regions.

Endogenous development concepts assume that sustainable development should be based mainly on intra-regional factors (Stimson, Stough, Nijkamp, 2011; Tuziak, 2013; Olejniczak, 2016). The use of endogenous factors and the accumulation of capital and knowledge in the region offer an opportunity for the region to avoid development dependent on national centers and external investors. The efficient use of own resources and capacities also allows for mitigating the unfavorable dependency pattern typical of the dual economy, characterized by a clear differentiation between development instruments for central and peripheral areas (Grosse, 2007, pp. 51-52; Hryniewicz, 2010, pp. 5-27). On the basis of the concept of endogenous development, the principle of the free spilling of development from the centers to the periphery is questioned. It is stressed that free market processes promote the accumulation of capital, human resources, knowledge and entrepreneurship in the central regions, while peripheral areas are becoming increasingly marginalized. In this way, they become only a source of resources for dynamically developing centers.

Regions lagging behind in development have problems with activating the factors that allow the process of self-propagation of development within the regional cooperation network. It is difficult to initiate processes of capital accumulation, knowledge and innovation, as well

as social and institutional capital. The endogenous approach assumes that each region has its own unique set of features that create its development potential. At the same time, the importance of exogenous factors and the benefits of transferring the experience of external institutions (e.g. the European Union) is not denied, provided that they are adapted to regional specificities and development needs.

Spatial disparities in the development of regions resulting in the peripheral and marginalization of certain areas are the subject of analyses on the basis of the theory of growth poles (Perroux, 1955). According to this concept, economic development is not uniform but rather point-like, concentrated in the most developed enterprises, sectors, and branches of industrial production, forming so-called growth poles that drive the entire economy. These competitive, innovative and most advanced entities have a well-developed network of cooperative links (Ejsmont, 2019). They effectively gain a monopoly position, subjugating and making other entities dependent on each other. The emergence of the poles of growth is an economic and political process, a natural, inevitable result, and at the same time an indispensable condition for growth (Grosse, 2002, p. 28).

On the assumption that the imbalance of socio-economic development is the result of uneven growth of economic sectors and spatial disparities in economic development, the concept of geographical growth centers is based (Hirshmann, 1958). Thanks to the dynamism and expansiveness of the growth centers and the enterprises, clusters and economic sectors located in them, development is spread to neighboring regions (Korenik, Zakrzewska-Półtorak, 2011; Dyjach, 2013; Tuziak, 2019, p. 136). Geographical growth centers are therefore the main stimulator of development processes. Innovation is the basis for the polarization of development, and the accumulation of its effects in development areas gives these territorial units a dominant position in relation to less developed regions. Broadly understood, innovation is today the main endogenous resource for development at the regional level (Tuziak, 2013). It is the capacity to innovate that gives centers a dominant position and a competitive advantage in the economic sphere.

Analyses of spatially differentiated economic development lead to the conclusion that regional disparities and inequalities are the result of a long historical process in which economic, social and cultural factors accumulate and interact (Myrdal, 1957). Mutual strengthening and coincident of economic, political and cultural causes increase in the diversity of the level of development in space. The reasons for the widening of the development gap between central (highly developed) regions and peripheral (lagging) regions are explained by the mechanism of cumulative and circular causality, which is in fact a self-perpetuating vicious circle that deepens the development gap between central regions and the periphery. Increasing regional disparities mean that the growth poles, which are the places of concentration of new locations of various industrial activities, are developing faster and faster, and areas of economic stagnation are becoming increasingly subordinated to economic, political and cultural poles of growth. While there is a positive spillover effect of development from economic centers, it is

simultaneously accompanied by a 'brain drain' effect, which involves the draining of developmental resources from peripheral areas and their increasing dependence on highly developed regions (Zimoch, 2013; Proniewski, 2012). The regions (especially Central European regions) are characterized by variability in the level of development and thus in the degree of peripherality (Strojny, Niewiadomski, 2023).

Polarization and inequality in regional development is also indicated by the model of the core and periphery (Friedmann, 1969). The core are highly developed areas (mainly metropolitan centers), where the economic activities of the most competitive, innovative industries and enterprises are located. Core regions dominate the periphery not only in the economic, but also in the political and cultural spheres. They gain the advantage, among other things, by creating a network of territorial systems characterized by a high level of capacity for innovative change. Economic centers contribute to initiating and stimulating the development process in backward and peripheral regions, but it is subordinated to the objectives and needs of central areas (Hryniewicz, 2010). The core-periphery model is a spatial scheme of the regional system structure, which is based on the assumption of uneven development. The concept of the core region is close to the concept of the polarized region (Boudeville, 1972), which – belonging to the category of the node region – constitutes a heterogeneous, hierarchical and integrated system comprising the pole and its spheres of influence. The pole is a metropolis constituting a spatial concentration of economic activity. It is characterized by great opportunities in terms of creating and absorbing innovations and economic growth, it also has a strong impact on its facilities (Czyż, 2002, p. 5; Tuziak, 2013, p. 154).

Theoretical concepts based on the assumption of spatial unevenness of development include the theory of the global network of economic relations (Castells, 2007). Research and analysis of global development trends show that economic growth is generated by the world's largest metropolises and technopoles, as well as by other territorial arrangements, such as industrial regions. These areas dominate the rest of the world in economic, political and cultural terms. Metropolises and technopoles concentrate the highest economic, technological, financial and innovative potential, making them the main centers of economic growth and the creation of new knowledge on a global scale. The modern, IT-based, and decision-making world economy is networked. It surrounds the globe with a system of structural, complex, numerous and multidirectional connections and communication channels through which information, scientific knowledge, technologies, goods and financial resources flow. Within the network structure, global transfers of capital, products and innovations are possible between all actors active in the global economy.

Summing up a brief overview of the most important theoretical concepts concerning the issues of interregional disparities and developmental disparities, it should be noted that there is no single theory that comprehensively explains the conditions and mechanisms of the emergence of differences in the level and dynamics of development processes at the regional level. In the literature, it is emphasized that no theory covers the scope of its characteristics and



analyses explaining all the factors determining spatial developmental imbalance (Dyjak, 2013). The complexity and multi-faceted character of regional development conditions is reflected in the wide range and substantive diversity of the scientific achievements of the theory of regional development in the economic and social sphere.

## **Cohesion Policy of the European Union in the context of regional development**

The European Union has consistently strengthened its economic, social and territorial cohesion to ensure universal and sustainable development for the countries that make up the European community. In particular, the EU aims to reduce disparities in the development of European regions. Cohesion Policy provides the essential institutional framework and the legal and organizational basis for the EU's investment policy. It benefits many regions and cities in the EU and stimulates economic growth, job creation, business competitiveness, harmonious development and environmental protection.

The Cohesion Policy for 2021-2027 comprises four main funds:

1. The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF),
2. The Cohesion Fund (CF),
3. The European Social Fund (ESF),
4. Just Transition Fund (JTF).

The European Regional Development Fund supports actions to restore regional balance (to compensate for regional disparities) in the European Union. The ERDF shall contribute to supporting less developed regions and transforming declining industrial regions.

The Cohesion Fund grants financial support to environmental projects and trans-European networks in the area of transport infrastructure in those Member States where the gross national income per capita is less than 90% of the Union average.

European Social Fund (since 2021) ESF+) is the Union's main instrument supporting actions to prevent and combat unemployment, to develop human resources and to promote social inclusion in the labor market. The ESF+ supports initiatives promoting high levels of employment, equal opportunities for men and women, sustainable development and economic and social cohesion.

The Just Transition Fund is the main tool to support the areas most affected by the effects of the transition in order to achieve climate neutrality and to prevent the deepening of regional disparities. To achieve this goal, JTF supports initiatives in the areas of digital connectivity, clean energy technologies, emission reduction, industrial regeneration, retraining of workers, technical assistance.

The analysis of the amount and structure of transfers from the European Union budget indicates that the share of cohesion policy funds in total expenditure on development policy in Poland is about 55%. Poland's use of funds available under the cohesion policy creates opportunities for undertaking promotional and modernization activities as part of the current and future implementation of the Polish regional policy (Churski, 2023).

The scope of action taken within the framework of the European Union's cohesion policy is wide. It focuses on the implementation of several thematic objectives:

1. support for R&D and innovation,
2. improving the availability and use of information and communication technologies,
3. improving the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises,
4. supporting the transition to a low-carbon economy,
5. promoting adaptation to climate change and risk prevention,
6. protecting the environment and promoting the sustainable use of natural resources,
7. promoting sustainable transformation and addressing bottlenecks in the core infrastructure network,
8. promoting employment and promoting labor market mobility,
9. promoting social inclusion and combating poverty,
10. investing in education, competences and lifelong learning,
11. strengthening institutional and administrative capacity.

All thematic objectives of the intervention measures within the cohesion policy have been appropriately specified and developed at the regional level. They serve to increase competitiveness at the regional level, among others by supporting the research and development sector and broadly understood innovation. At the same time, they promote sustainable development and the elimination of inequalities and asymmetry in various spheres of social and economic life.

Network links within the framework of cooperation of economic entities and the activity of clusters significantly determine the competitiveness of individual regions. The analysis of the impact of cohesion policy on the scale and scope of cooperation relations in the economy shows that at the regional level there were relatively rare intervention instruments supporting the formation and development of cooperation links, as well as those concerning the support of clusters (Szczucki, Gajewski, Kubajek, Witkowska, Sochaczewska, Kornacki, 2022). Therefore, a set of recommendations (algorithm of necessary actions) were formulated to improve the situation in this area:

1. within the framework of the Cohesion Policy for 2021-2027, specify more precisely which types of cluster projects can be supported from the national and regional level,
2. resumption of work of the body monitoring the implementation of cluster policy with the participation of representatives of central administration, regional governments, representatives of clusters, business environment institutions and business organizations,

3. continuing support for clusters in the period 2021-2027, considering a simplified mode of change for the companies participating in the cluster and decentralizing the implementation of the project,
4. promoting within the framework of the Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 the idea of cooperation between entities both in the economic area and in the sphere of building trust in mutual relations,
5. promotion of solutions providing support for projects implemented in moderate partnerships,
6. undertaking analytical work and dissemination of good models in terms of supporting companies concentrated in clusters,
7. encourage clusters to undertake activities promoting their industry and encouraging education in a given field and cooperation with schools (Szczucki, Gajewski, Kubajek, Witkowska, Sochaczewska, Kornacki 2022).

Due to the limited framework of the article, it is not possible to comprehensively present the issue of competitiveness and regional disparities in the context of cohesion policy. However, it is worth paying attention – as was done in the above paragraph of the article – to even one important “cooperative-cluster” aspect of regional competitiveness, which in the end serves sustainable development and thus increases regional cohesion.

## Summary

The characteristics and analyses presented in the article suggest that it is worth considering the possibility of modifying the current concept of the European Union's cohesion policy toward a vision corresponding to a new, globally motivated model of regional policy. The new vision of cohesion policy formulated in the literature of the subject (Kukliński, 2003; Dziembala, 2016; Kwaśny, Mroczek, Ulbrych, 2018) opens up the possibilities of modern development corresponding to global challenges. It has a network, organic, holistic, extroverted and long-term character. The first element of the new cohesion model is networking, which should be understood as a system of movement of people, goods, information and innovation, directly conditioning the cohesion of the European space. It is a complex and comprehensive way of seeing cohesion as the process of merging the European continent into one organic whole with a clear identity on a global scale. The second element is the organic vision of cohesion, in which the unity of Europe is built on the conscious and creative use of its wealth in the form of the diversity of the European economy and culture. The organic vision of cohesion policy emphasizes the need to unleash endogenous efforts to overcome their weaknesses by developmentally backward regions and thus to increase their chances of becoming better placed on a European and global scale. Holism is the third element of cohesion policy; it entails

a comprehensive approach to the entire European Union, with a deeper focus on the EU's internal space and a broader, more preliminary approach to the entire continent. The main task of the policy understood in this way is to overcome the development gap separating the European center from the periphery. The fourth, extroverted component of the vision of cohesion policy is that it is trying to find an answer to the question of what needs to be done on a European scale in order to strengthen the position of this continent in the face of global competition. The last and fifth element is the long-term and strategic nature of the new concept, which is expressed in the need to go beyond the existing medium-term thinking horizons and develop a long-term vision.

And analysis of long-term development trends shows that Europe is converging both at the level of Member States and regions, measured by the scale of relative differences in GDP *per capita* (European Union, 2007). Despite the progressive convergence, large inequalities, measured in absolute terms, remain between European regions. These inequalities are in part the result of the enlargement of the EU to include new Member States. However, they also stem from the fact that economic growth tends to be concentrated in the most dynamically developing areas (regions) in individual countries.

The data contained in the European Commission reports indicate that economic prosperity in the EU is, however, becoming more evenly distributed geographically. The share of Europe's traditional economic core (the area between London, Paris, Milan, Munich and Hamburg) in the overall GDP of the European Union is declining, although the demographic potential of the area is relatively stable (Ahner, 2007, p. 27). The main reason for this change is the emergence of new growth centers in Europe (Madrid, Helsinki, Stockholm, as well as Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava, Budapest). It should be noted, however, that within individual Member States economic activity is generally concentrated in the region of capital cities, which means that the share of capital regions in the GDP of individual countries increases.

The European Commission documents also reveal more general problems and challenges that most EU regions are already facing or will face in the near future. The most important of these are: globalization, rising energy prices, climate change, demographic change (Ahner, 2007, pp. 26-30). It should be emphasized that the global changes that have been taking place in recent years are a serious challenge to cohesion policy. These include, above all, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Kotkowski, 2020; Dziembala, Kłos, 2021; Krzemiński, 2021; Krzykowski, 2022).

Globalisation and its inherent tightening of competition will certainly continue to be one of the main challenges for the development of European regions. There are many indications that the competitive pressure felt by regions may increase in the future. This pressure will force further adaptation changes and lead to the restructuring of regional economies across the European Union.

High energy prices could become a very serious problem for European regions. Higher energy prices will increase the scale and pace of changes leading to the implementation of less energy-intensive generation processes. They will also force far-reaching and costly changes in transport. Rising energy prices will also require intensive investment in innovation to increase the efficiency of existing renewable energy sources. The development of infrastructure and technology for the generation and use of renewable energy will also require considerable investment.

Climate change is another challenge that is highlighted in the context of the development of European regions and the implementation of cohesion policy. Many regions of Europe will increasingly experience the asymmetric impact of climate change. One result will be a high increase in energy demand and the need to develop technologies and procedures for more efficient use of energy.

Demographic trends specific to Europe are also a major challenge. A negative consequence of these trends is a decrease in the rate of population growth in Europe. Currently, one third of the total number of regions in the European Union are facing a decline in population due to negative birth rates. At the same time, Europe will have to face rapid aging of its population. Currently, for every person aged 65 years or older, there are four people of working age. In the next three decades, this proportion will change dramatically - for each person aged 65 years or older, there will be on average only two people of working age. In addition, many problems and social tensions will be generated by migration processes and an increasing number of visitors to Europe from other continents.

Most of the challenges mentioned above represent not only threats to European regions but also new development opportunities that need to be exploited. One of the most important tasks of cohesion policy in this context is to strengthen the capacity to anticipate change and to increase the capacity to respond to it consciously and adequately (Ahner, 2007, p. 30). Most of these problems and challenges have in common that they will affect all regions in varying degrees and in different ways, but they will probably not be avoided.

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