

“LITTLE BIG CULTURAL CENTERS” – HOW SMALL TOWNS DELIVER BIG ON CULTURE

Piotr CZAKON

Instytut Rozwoju Miast i Regionów, Kraków; pczakon@irmir.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-9724-9176

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to evaluate cultural disparities among Poland's subregional cities and explore how selected small towns manage to thrive culturally despite structural limitations.

Design/methodology/approach: The study is based on a comparative analysis of 40 subregional cities using a Cultural Potential Index developed by the author. The index integrates both core and extended cultural infrastructure components, drawing on quantitative data from official statistics and supplementary internet-based research. The approach combines quantitative mapping with interpretive case studies of two high-performing towns to illustrate distinct models of cultural success.

Findings: The study identifies wide variation in cultural potential among subregional cities, unrelated to size or spending levels. It highlights two successful models—Zakopane's institutional-heritage model and Cieszyn's networked-festival model.

Research limitations/implications: The study is based primarily on quantitative indicators, which do not fully capture the qualitative dimensions of cultural life, such as community impact or artistic value. Future research should incorporate in-depth qualitative analysis to better understand cultural practices, local narratives, and the role of informal actors.

Practical implications: The study provides guidance for local authorities seeking to enhance cultural development through strategic specialization and community-driven initiatives.

Social implications: Strengthening cultural infrastructure in smaller cities can foster social cohesion, reinforce local identity, and promote inclusive participation in public life. The study underscores the role of culture as a catalyst for community engagement, cross-generational dialogue, and regional integration.

Originality/value: This article offers one of the first comparative assessments of cultural potential across Poland's subregional cities using a standardized index. By combining quantitative analysis with illustrative case studies, it provides a nuanced perspective on how smaller towns can successfully position themselves as cultural leaders beyond the metropolitan mainstream.

Keywords: Cultural potential, subregional cities, cultural infrastructure, small-town development.

Category of the paper: Research paper, viewpoint.

1. Introduction

There is no single, universally accepted definition of culture. Still, most scholarly perspectives converge on the idea that culture is a complex and evolving system of values, norms, symbols, and practices transmitted across generations. It encompasses both tangible expressions—such as tools and architecture—and intangible ones, including language, customs, and law (Szacka, 2003, pp. 75-81; Sztompka, 2004, pp. 251-253). What makes culture particularly vital is its ability to adapt to shifting social, economic, and environmental conditions, which in turn shapes identity, fosters social cohesion, and drives innovation.

In recent years, the debate around urban development has increasingly turned its attention to the issue of cultural peripherality. This concept goes beyond simple geography—it's not just about being located outside major metropolitan areas. It also encompasses symbolic, institutional, and infrastructural marginalization (Lewicki, 2018, pp. 27-32). Subregional towns, despite playing important administrative and service roles, often remain on the fringes of the cultural landscape. The idea of *cultural marginalization* (Harvey, 2016; Bianchini, Parkinson, 1995) highlights how such places are frequently excluded from dominant cultural policies and narratives.

Paradoxically, it is often in smaller towns that the most innovative models of cultural participation and production are emerging today. Scholars have described these places as “laboratories of social innovation” (Manzini, 2015, p. 45), where local identity, grassroots initiatives, and hybrid cultural forms help compensate for institutional shortcomings. Studies of cultural practices (Szlendak, Goszczyński, Krajewska, 2019; Kiszkiel, 2020) and the impact of infrastructure investments (Wojnar, Grochowski, 2011) show that well-designed cultural initiatives in small towns can drive social revitalization, strengthen social capital, and boost economic appeal.

This article follows the trail of 40 subregional towns highlighted in a recent study by the Institute of Urban and Regional Development's Urban and Regional Policy Observatory (Sobala-Gwosdz, Janas, Jarczewski, Czakon, 2024), offering a preliminary assessment of their cultural potential. At its core, the aim is to move beyond a metropolitan lens and shed light on the complex and diverse cultural landscape that exists across the country.

The decision to examine the cultural potential of subregional towns stems from three closely related premises. First, there is a noticeable gap in both urban and cultural studies literature: while metropolitan areas dominate academic discourse, the complex cultural dynamics unfolding in medium-sized and smaller towns are often overlooked. Addressing this gap offers a chance to better understand how culture develops beyond the urban core and to expand the theoretical framework of urban studies.

Second, this issue carries practical significance. Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the cultural sector in subregional towns can serve as a valuable resource for local governments seeking effective public policy models that bridge social goals—such as integration and social capital—with economic ones, like tourism and the creation of creative jobs. A deeper understanding of local contexts also enables better alignment of cultural initiatives with community needs, helping to strengthen residents’ sense of belonging and place-based identity.

Third, numerous examples—from the Zakopane art school to the cross-border film festival in Cieszyn—demonstrate the multiplier effect of culture: investment in a single, strategically chosen area (whether an institution, a festival, or an artistic network) can trigger a cascade of positive change. Such initiatives attract audiences from beyond the region, energize the creative sector, and enhance the city’s image. Understanding the mechanisms behind this phenomenon makes it possible to identify repeatable success factors that other towns can intentionally adopt and adapt.

This article is guided by two central research questions:

1. What are the key differences in cultural potential among Poland’s subregional towns?
2. What factors enable some smaller towns to overcome demographic and financial constraints and build a strong cultural presence?

2. Measuring Cultural Potential in Subregional Cities: Challenges and Methodological Approaches

The academic literature emphasizes the importance of using indicators that capture both the tangible and intangible dimensions of cultural activity. Quantitative measures typically include the number of cultural institutions (such as museums, theatres, and libraries), the frequency of artistic events, and overall participation levels. However, such indicators offer only a partial view of cultural potential, as they fail to account for the qualitative value of events or their impact on local identity and social cohesion.

Particular value lies in the use of methodological triangulation, which enables a more comprehensive assessment of cultural potential. Combining quantitative and qualitative data allows researchers to capture the interplay between cultural participation, accessibility, and the broader impact of culture on local communities. As noted by K. Wojnar and M. Grochowski (2011, p. 83), investments in cultural infrastructure not only enhance access to cultural goods but also contribute to urban revitalization and improved quality of life. Similarly, T. Szlendak et al. (2019, pp. 64-67) argue that any robust methodological framework must take into account the evolving needs of diverse social groups and their changing patterns of cultural engagement.

Equally important is the examination of how cultural initiatives influence social integration, the formation of local identity, and the stimulation of creativity and entrepreneurship. These dimensions represent a vital added value of cultural potential, particularly in the context of subregional urban development. Effectively leveraging such data can provide a foundation for local cultural development strategies that foster greater social cohesion and enhance the attractiveness of cities as places to live and work.

In assessing the cultural potential of subregional cities, this study adopts an approach that begins with a predominantly quantitative analysis. This is conceived as a preliminary step—an entry point into a more complex research process that will be expanded and deepened in subsequent stages. The author acknowledges the limitations of this initial focus, treating it as a foundation for future, more nuanced investigation.

Another major challenge in assessing the cultural potential of cities is the limited availability and timeliness of data. Statistics provided by Poland's Central Statistical Office (GUS) are often delayed by two to three years and tend to omit certain institutions—particularly private museums, galleries, and grassroots initiatives—which also contribute significantly to the cultural fabric of cities. These less formal entities are playing an increasingly prominent role in shaping the cultural landscape, especially in subregional areas. To address these data gaps, an additional internet-based query was conducted in October 2024. In reconstructing the current number of cultural institutions, the author relied on official city websites. When data on commercial venues (such as private art galleries) were missing—or for verification purposes—information was cross-checked using the OpenStreetMap database.

Table 1.
Component Criteria of the Cultural Potential Index and Their Scoring

Category	Included Types	Scoring
Cinemas	Multiplexes, arthouse cinemas, single-screen commercial cinemas	1 point for each venue of each type present in the city
Libraries	Main municipal library, branches, media libraries, newly constructed main building	1 point for every five library branches in the city + 1 point for a new main building + 1 for a media library
Museums	Public and private (distinct locations)	1 point for every five museum venues in the city
Cultural Centers	Public, cooperative, youth centers, including those with branches	1 point for every two centers in the city
Art Galleries	Independent public, private, and academic galleries	1 point for each gallery in the city
Theatres	Permanent theatre institutions with an acting ensemble	1 point for each venue in the city
Philharmonics	Philharmonic institutions with their own orchestra	1 point for each venue in the city
Zoos	Permanent full-scale zoological gardens	1 point for each separate facility in the city
Festivals and Awards	Recurring events with at least 10 editions or with a supra-local reach	1 point for each festival or cultural event held in the city

Source: Own study.

The outcome of the research process is a matrix (Table 1) encompassing both the core infrastructure—cinemas, libraries, museums, and cultural centers—and a range of less common but highly differentiating elements, such as art galleries, theatres, philharmonic halls, zoos, festivals, and cultural awards. Most categories are weighted to reflect both the availability and significance of a given institution. For instance, cinemas are divided into multiplexes, arthouse cinemas, and small single-screen venues to better capture the diversity of the local film market. Cinemas, libraries, museums, and cultural centers are present in every subregional city, forming the foundational layer of cultural infrastructure. All other institutions and forms of cultural participation are more selectively distributed and thus constitute the extended cultural offering.

In collecting data on cultural offerings, suburban areas were deliberately excluded from the analysis. The core network of cultural institutions is consistently located within the central city itself, and extending the scope to surrounding municipalities would primarily result in the inclusion of additional libraries, cultural centers, and occasionally museums or open-air heritage parks. Since these facilities are situated outside the urban core and require travel, they are generally less relevant to local residents in terms of everyday cultural participation. Moreover, museums located in peripheral areas tend to cater more to tourists than to the local population.

3. Ranking of Subregional Cities by Cultural Potential Index

All of the thematic components described above have been combined into a single index measuring the cultural offering of subregional cities (Table 2). The index ranges from five to twenty-one points, depending on the diversity and accessibility of cultural institutions within a given locality. To facilitate comparison, all cities were grouped into four categories based on their scores (Figure 1). The lowest category—the so-called *low tier*—includes cities scoring up to five points, indicating a limited cultural offering. The next group, the *lower-middle tier*, consists of cities with scores ranging from six to ten points. The *upper-middle tier* includes cities scoring between eleven and fifteen points, reflecting a more developed cultural landscape, typically marked by a greater number of institutions and events. At the top of the classification is the *high tier*, encompassing cities that received more than sixteen points. These localities stand out for their particularly rich cultural offerings and often function as regional cultural hubs.

In the low tier—comprising cities with the least developed cultural offerings—only two urban centers are represented: Świdnica and Skierniewice. Świdnica is characterized by the presence of a single multiplex cinema, a municipal library network consisting of a main branch and four satellites, as well as two museums and two cultural centers. The city also hosts one recurring cultural festival. Skierniewice, while offering a similar range of institutions, differs

in several respects. Instead of a multiplex, it features a single arthouse cinema. The city lacks notable festivals or cultural awards but does include one art gallery in its cultural portfolio. Despite these distinctions, both cities fall within the lowest category of the index, reflecting limitations in the accessibility and diversity of their cultural infrastructure.

The lower-middle tier includes twenty-three subregional cities—over half of all cities of this type—reflecting their varied levels of cultural provision. First among them are cities that only slightly exceed the threshold of five points. These include Siedlce, Inowrocław, Grudziądz, Elk, Ciechanów, Ostrołęka, and Włocławek. What distinguishes them from the low-tier cities is the presence of a more developed component in at least one area—cinemas, libraries, or art galleries. This single strength allows them to accumulate a total score of six points, placing them within the lower-middle category.

Secondly, this category also includes cities with a higher number of cultural institutions—up to ten public libraries with branches, two cinemas, or two art galleries. In some cases, these cities also host local festivals or grant cultural awards, further enriching their cultural landscape. Although they do not reach the level of the top-performing subregional cities, they demonstrate meaningful development in terms of access to a diverse range of cultural institutions.

Twelve cities fall into the middle range of this tier, with scores between seven and nine points. Cities such as Gniezno, Nowy Targ, Sieradz, Suwałki, Lubin, Puławy, Ostrów Wielkopolski, Piotrków Trybunalski, Leszno, Piła, and Biała Podlaska exhibit more developed cultural infrastructure compared to those barely surpassing the six-point threshold. These cities typically feature extensive networks of cultural centers, two or three art galleries, and unique assets such as dedicated theatre stages in Gniezno and Nowy Targ, or a zoological garden in Lubin. These elements contribute to a more robust and diversified cultural offering.

It is worth noting that within this group, some cities achieve relatively high scores due to exceptional development in a single category of cultural provision. For instance, Puławy earns as many as four points in the library category—thanks to its modern main library building and the presence of a media library. Similarly, Piła stands out among subregional cities by hosting three art galleries, a feature that significantly elevates its overall cultural score.

Chełm, Elbląg, Krosno, and Mielec each score ten points, placing them at the top of the lower-middle tier. Each of these cities has achieved this standing through distinct cultural strengths. Chełm owes its strong position to a highly developed art gallery scene, comprising five separate venues—making it one of the leading cities in this category. Elbląg, on the other hand, distinguishes itself with a particularly diverse cinema offering, including two multiplexes, an arthouse cinema, and a small commercial venue, providing residents with a broad range of film options. Additionally, the presence of a theatre further enhances Elbląg's standing in the sphere of cultural entertainment.

Mielec ranks highly in the library category due to its modern main library building and the inclusion of a media library, which significantly boosts its overall score. In contrast to other cities in this tier, Krosno stands out for its evenly developed cultural infrastructure across all categories, resulting in a stable and balanced score. However, the absence of a theatre and a zoo limits its potential to rise even higher in the ranking. Despite this, the well-rounded nature of its cultural offering places Krosno among the strongest cities within the lower-middle tier.

Upon surpassing the eleven-point threshold, subregional cities enter the upper-middle tier, represented by eleven centers with diverse cultural offerings. At the entry level of this group are Oświęcim, Legnica, and Kołobrzeg, each scoring exactly eleven points. Their position in this category is largely the result of a well-developed foundational infrastructure, complemented by the presence of recurring festivals.

The next subgroup includes five cities—Nowy Sącz, Jelenia Góra, Konin, Przemyśl, and Wałbrzych—that exceed the twelve-point mark and are firmly positioned within this tier. From this level onward, the presence of permanent theatres, extensive networks of libraries, cinemas, and cultural centers becomes the norm. Philharmonic halls also begin to appear as part of the cultural landscape in some of these cities.

Płock scored fifteen points in the study, placing it at the upper limit of the upper-middle tier. Notably, it is the first city to surpass the eleven-point threshold solely on the basis of core cultural infrastructure—cinemas, libraries, museums, and cultural centers—without relying on less common or highly specialized offerings.

At the top of the cultural offering index for subregional cities are four centers: Cieszyn, Kalisz, Tarnów, and Zakopane. This group includes two smaller cities (with populations under 40,000) and two larger ones (around 100,000 inhabitants). The specific cases of the smaller cities will be discussed in more detail later; for now, attention is focused on the two larger urban centers that achieved the highest cultural potential scores.

Tarnów stands out as one of the few cities with a well-balanced cultural infrastructure, exhibiting no major deficits in any of the core categories. Although it lacks a philharmonic hall and a zoological garden, this is offset by a broad and coherent cultural offering across all key areas—cinemas, libraries, museums, cultural centers, art galleries, a theatre, and special events.

Kalisz presents a similarly balanced cultural profile, with the added advantage of hosting its own philharmonic and offering a wider range of festivals and cultural awards. It not only performs consistently well across all evaluated categories but also does so without needing to compensate for gaps through the development of niche sectors.

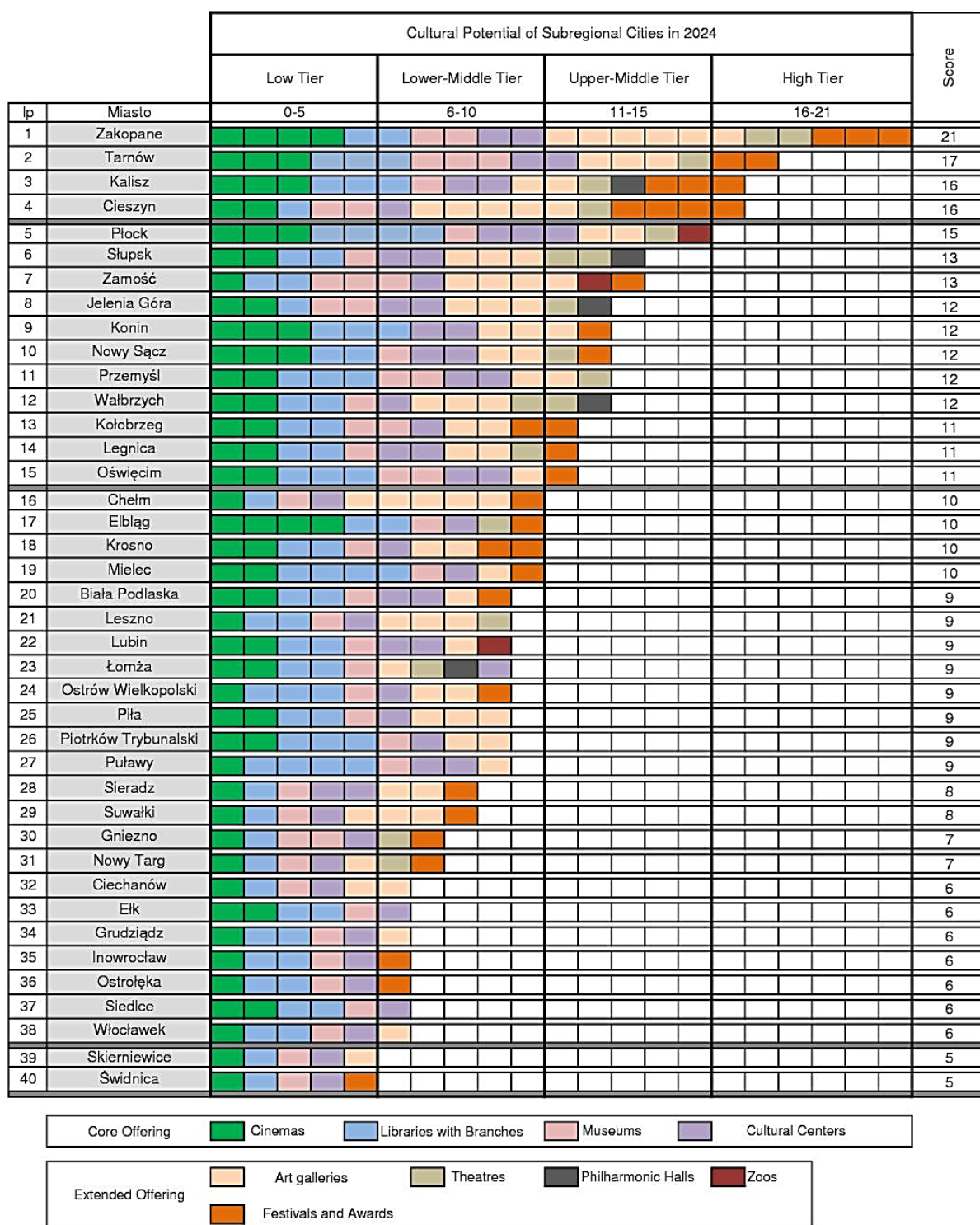


Figure 1. Cultural Potential of Subregional Cities in Poland in 2024.

Source: Own study.

4. “Little Big” Cultural Centers: Why Zakopane and Cieszyn Succeed in the Cultural Sphere

The chart reveals several noteworthy patterns concerning the relationship between the population size of subregional cities and the scope of their cultural offerings (Figure 2). While one might intuitively expect larger cities to possess more developed cultural infrastructure, the data suggest that this correlation is far from straightforward. Among cities with populations under 80,000, those with lower cultural index scores clearly predominate, indicating that smaller cities generally tend to have more limited cultural facilities.

However, the cases of Oświęcim, Cieszyn, and Zakopane challenge this trend. Despite their relatively small populations, these cities perform exceptionally well in the cultural index. Their success appears to stem from specific locational, touristic, or historical advantages, suggesting that factors other than population size can significantly shape a city’s cultural profile.

Conversely, larger urban centers such as Elbląg, Włocławek, and Grudziądz record relatively low scores. All three fall below the 10-point threshold, placing them within the lower-middle tier in terms of cultural provision—despite their substantial populations. This further confirms that city size alone is not a decisive factor in the development of cultural infrastructure.

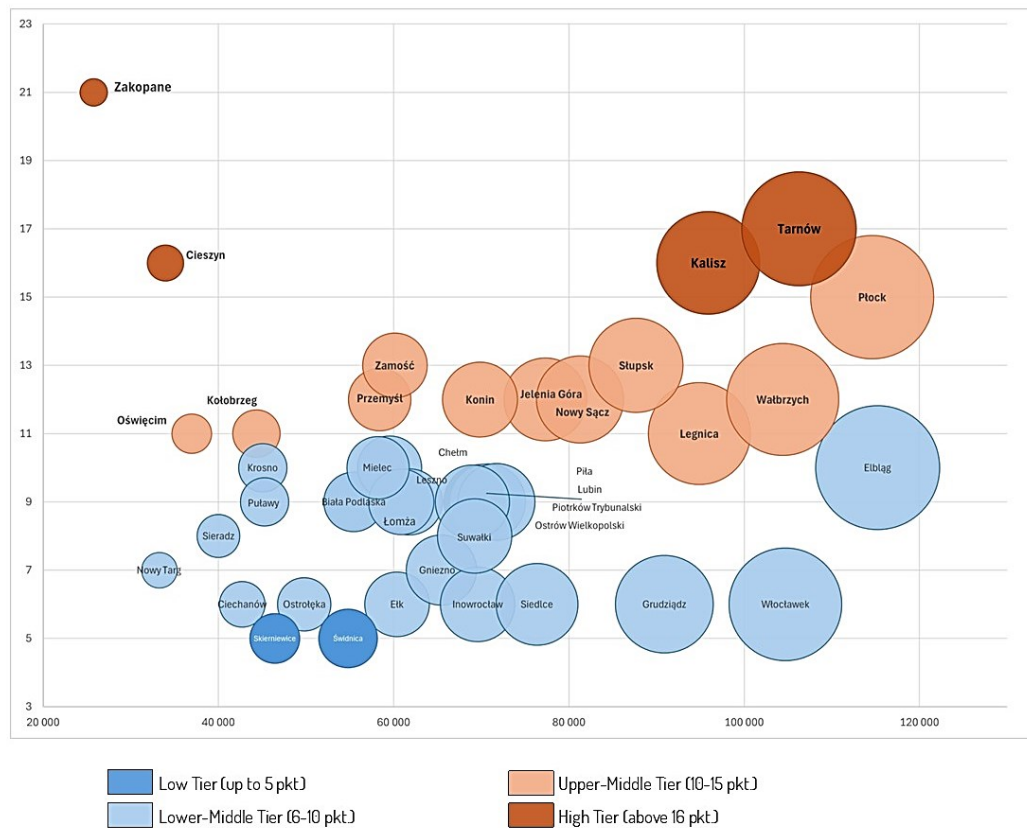


Figure 2. Relationship between city population size and the Cultural Potential Index (CPI) score. Larger populations are generally associated with higher CPI values, though several smaller cities achieve above-average scores.

Source: Own study.

An analysis of current per capita cultural expenditures in relation to the cultural offering index of subregional cities reveals no strong correlation between these variables (Figure 3). Most cities, regardless of their ranking in the index, spend up to 400 PLN per resident on cultural activities. Notable exceptions include Lubin, Puławy, and Zamość, which allocate significantly higher amounts—exceeding 500 PLN per capita. However, among them, only Zamość achieves a correspondingly high score in the cultural index, while Lubin and Puławy remain relatively low in the ranking.

This suggests that non-financial factors—such as historical heritage, tourism, or the engagement of local communities—may play a more decisive role in shaping a city's cultural potential. Moreover, current expenditure on culture may not fully capture a city's actual investment in cultural development. Some cultural spending may be embedded in other budgetary categories, such as city promotion, which complicates a straightforward interpretation of the data. These observations prompt a broader reflection on how to more accurately measure municipal commitment to culture, and how various non-financial factors contribute to the richness and diversity of the local cultural offering.

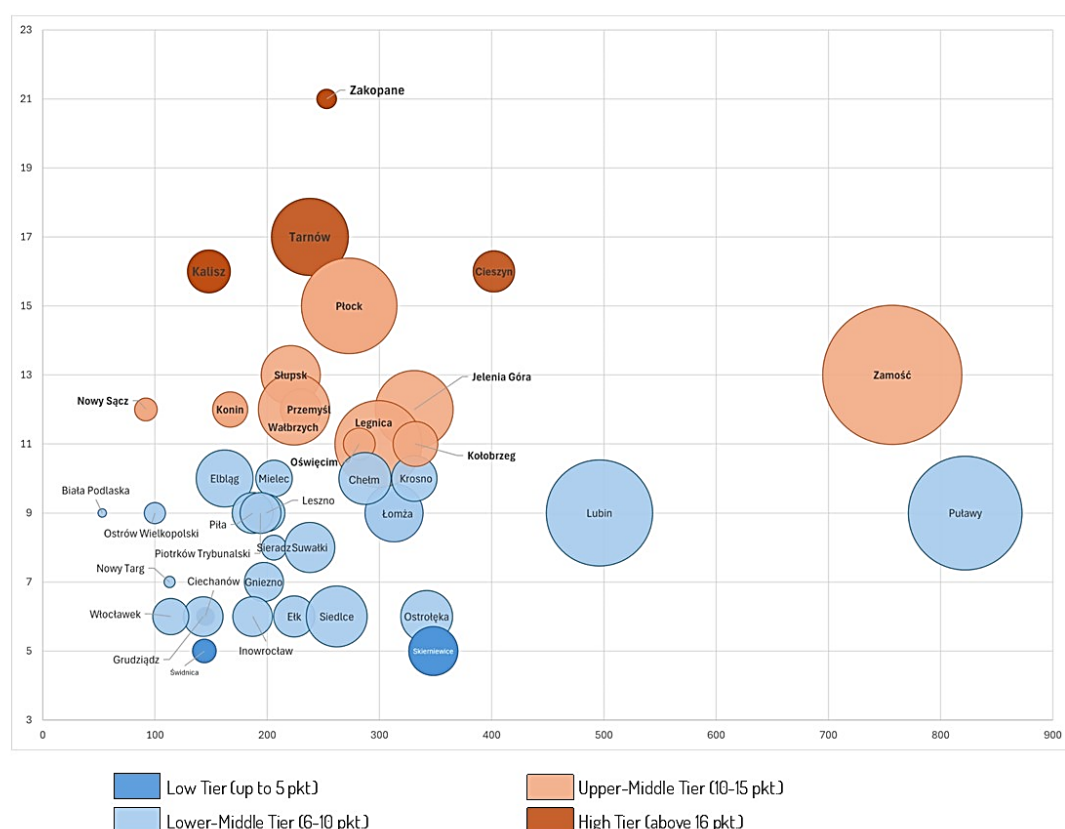


Figure 2. Relationship between per capita cultural expenditure (PLN/person) and Cultural Potential Index (CPI) score. Higher levels of cultural spending are not associated with higher CPI values.

Source: Own study.

Zakopane and Cieszyn represent two particularly compelling examples of subregional cities that, despite their relatively small populations, successfully function as significant cultural centers. Both cities ranked within the highest tier of the cultural offering index, placing them on par with Kalisz and Tarnów—cities that are considerably larger in demographic terms and hold a higher functional and administrative status (Sobala-Gwosdz, Janas, Jarczewski, Czakon 2024).

Cieszyn stands out primarily due to its borderland location, which not only shapes the city’s unique atmosphere but also serves as a foundation for cross-border cooperation and joint cultural initiatives with Český Těšín. Although Cieszyn lacks a philharmonic hall and a major theatre stage, this is offset by a remarkably strong presence of art galleries—placing the city among the leaders in this category within the study. Moreover, Cieszyn hosts well-recognized festivals such as *Kino na Granicy* ("Cinema at the Border"), which draw supra-local audiences and contribute significantly to the city's cultural brand.

This illustrates the so-called niche concentration effect: in the absence of large institutions, the city invests in specialized segments of culture that generate strong social and media resonance. Cieszyn also benefits from the visible engagement of NGOs and creative communities, which enrich the cultural programme and enhance the city’s cultural capital.

Zakopane, by contrast, draws upon a different kind of potential—its artistic heritage and the synergy it maintains with a well-developed tourism sector. The city’s cultural legacy, tied to figures such as Witkiewicz, Hasior, and Przerwa-Tetmajer, continues to resonate strongly within the local narrative and attracts new generations of artists. Zakopane boasts a remarkably robust cultural infrastructure for a city of its size, including museums, libraries, and two permanent theatres—an almost unique feature among cities in this population category.

A strong presence of art galleries, along with recurring festivals celebrating both high and folk culture, further strengthens Zakopane’s role as a cultural hub capable of engaging both tourists and local audiences. The city skilfully leverages visitor traffic to finance ambitious cultural initiatives, while its rich year-round offering helps extend the tourist season—effectively linking cultural vitality with economic sustainability.

Despite following different developmental paths, both cities share several key success factors. Most notably, each possesses a strong cultural brand: in Cieszyn’s case, rooted in its borderland identity and intercultural dialogue; in Zakopane’s, in the historical myth of a place marked by artistic ferment. Both cities have also, whether consciously or not, chosen a clear cultural specialization—Cieszyn focusing on galleries and festivals, Zakopane on theatre and the visual arts.

In both cases, it is not the scale of core or extended cultural infrastructure that determines success, but rather the interplay between that infrastructure and other elements: locational advantages, a strong sense of local identity, and the active involvement of creative communities and civil society organizations.

The experiences of Cieszyn and Zakopane demonstrate that even small cities can develop into recognizable cultural hubs—“*little big*” *cultural centers*. What appears to be crucial is the strategic concentration of resources around one or two cultural segments, the effective presentation of local heritage, and an openness to cooperation—both within the local community and beyond.

These cases also suggest that investment in cultural infrastructure must be accompanied by a coherent programme and long-term vision; only then can such infrastructure truly foster cultural development, rather than serving a merely symbolic or representative role. The lessons drawn from Cieszyn and Zakopane may serve as a valuable source of inspiration for other small cities aiming to elevate culture to a central pillar of their development strategies.

At the same time, the differences between the two models are substantial. Zakopane operates on the basis of a highly developed cultural infrastructure: in addition to numerous galleries and museums, it boasts two permanent theatre stages—an exceptional feature for a city of its size. Cieszyn, while more modest in terms of institutional resources, stands out for its dense network of art galleries and the quality of its festival programming.

Another key distinction lies in the relationship between culture and tourism. In Zakopane, culture complements an already rich tourism offering; in Cieszyn, by contrast, it often serves as a substitute—attracting visitors specifically through its cultural events.

Table 2.

Zakopane and Cieszyn: Two Variants of the “Little Big” Cultural Center Model

Dimension	Zakopane	Cieszyn
Infrastructure Resources	Extensive and nearly complete infrastructure: cinemas, museums, libraries, theatres, galleries	More minimalist: lacks a theatre, philharmonic, and zoo; compensates with a rich network of galleries
Type of Heritage	Artistic heritage—post-Romantic, modernist, strongly embedded in the national myth	Multicultural heritage—borderland, hybrid, open to diversity
Relationship with Tourism	Culture as a complement and extension of the tourism offer—strong synergy	Culture as a substitute for tourism—a primary driver of visitor traffic
Scale of Impact	National—Zakopane is a widely recognized cultural “brand” across Poland	Regional and cross-border—strong presence within the Cieszyn Silesia Euroregion
Type of Festivals/Events	Strong focus on tradition (folklore, highlander culture) and high culture (theatre, visual arts)	Predominantly auteur and contemporary festivals, often exploring borderland themes
Promotional Model	Largely automated through tourism branding and association with the Tatra Mountains	Based on active identity-building—“ <i>Cieszyn, the city of encounters</i> ”

Source: Own study.

The scale of influence also differs between the two cities. Zakopane operates on a national level—its cultural brand is widely recognized across Poland, which in itself enhances the visibility and promotion of its cultural activities. Cieszyn, by contrast, is building its position primarily within the context of the Cieszyn Silesia Euroregion and through cross-border cooperation. This too represents a valuable and contemporary approach to cultural policy, rooted in regional integration and transnational collaboration.

In summary, Zakopane represents an institutional-heritage model—grounded in extensive cultural infrastructure and a strong, historically rooted identity. Cieszyn, by contrast, has developed a networked-festival model—dynamic, flexible, and built on collaboration and local initiatives. Both models demonstrate that there is no single path to becoming a “*little big*” *cultural center*; what matters most is a coherent strategy based on local assets and a consciously chosen area of specialization.

The lessons drawn from these two cities offer valuable inspiration for other subregional centers seeking to define their own cultural development trajectories.

5. Conclusions

The diagnosis of the “non-metropolitan gap” in cultural research reveals that the forty subregional cities identified by the Observatory of Urban and Regional Policy at IRMiR can be viewed as laboratories of social innovation—challenging the dominant paradigm of metropolitan centrality.

Their potential is assessed using the cultural offering index proposed by the author, which includes nine types of institutions and events: cinemas, libraries, museums, cultural centers, art galleries, theatres, philharmonic halls, zoological gardens, and festivals or cultural awards. The 5-21 point scale enabled the classification of cities into four tiers of cultural development.

The range of results is substantial: Świdnica and Skierniewice score just 5 points, while Cieszyn, Kalisz, Tarnów, and Zakopane reach the maximum of 21. These outcomes challenge two common assumptions. First, population size does not guarantee a richer cultural infrastructure—larger cities such as Elbląg, Wrocław, and Grudziądz perform worse than significantly smaller cities like Zakopane or Cieszyn. Second, high financial expenditure does not always translate into a higher cultural index: most cities spend ≤ 400 PLN per capita, and Zamość remains the only clear example of combining substantial spending with a strong cultural performance.

Differences in cultural potential emerge across four key dimensions: the scale of infrastructure (ranging from basic offerings to a full spectrum of institutions), the development profile (including “broad”, “narrow”, and “narrow-compensatory” cities), geographical conditions (with a band of lower-middle scores stretching along the Lubin–Suwałki axis), and the asymmetry between financial expenditures and cultural outcomes.

Two distinct models of success emerge as effective responses to demographic and financial constraints. Zakopane exemplifies the institutional-heritage model: a nearly complete cultural infrastructure, including two permanent theatre stages, combined with strong synergy between culture and tourism, underpinning its nationally recognized brand. Cieszyn, by contrast, follows a networked-festival model, building its visibility on a dense network of art galleries, cross-

border festivals, and the active engagement of NGOs—effectively compensating for the absence of major institutions.

In both cases, the key drivers of success include a strong cultural brand, strategic specialization in selected cultural segments, active involvement of local communities, and multi-level cooperation beyond the local scale.

An analysis of these experiences yields four key recommendations:

1. Diversity over monoculture – Even a single theatre or gallery can elevate a city into a higher tier of the cultural index.
2. Modern media libraries and landmark libraries – These facilities help engage younger generations and fill critical gaps in cultural infrastructure.
3. Strategic specialization – Focusing on a distinct cultural niche (e.g. a film festival or contemporary art) can trigger a multiplier effect in participation and visibility.
4. Consistent support for NGOs and cross-border partnerships – Such support sustains a “compensatory culture” that offsets the absence of large institutional anchors.

With a clear focus in these areas, smaller cities have a real opportunity to turn their local assets into lasting developmental advantages—and to emerge as true “*little big*” cultural centers.

References

1. Bianchini, F., Parkinson, M. (Eds.) (1995). *Cultural policy and urban regeneration: The West European experience*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
2. Gdula, M., Sadura, P. (2012). *Style życia i porządek klasowy w Polsce*. Warszawa: Scholar.
3. Harvey, D. (2016). *Przestrzenie globalnego kapitalizmu. W stronę teorii rozwoju nierównego geograficznie*. Warszawa: Książka i Prasa.
4. Kiszkiel, Ł. (2020). Partycypacja mieszkańców województwa podlaskiego w zinstytucjonalizowanej kulturze w ujęciu subregionalnym. In: E. Dąbrowska-Prokopowska, P. Goryń, M.F. Zaniewska (Eds.), *Kultura w Polsce w XXI wieku. Konteksty społeczne, kulturowe i medialne* (pp. 443-459). Warszawa.
5. Lewicki, M. (2018). Przepuszczalność granic – natura, zmiana i reprodukcja symbolicznych oraz społecznych granic peryferii. In: M. Jacyno, T. Kukołowicz, M. Lewicki (Eds.), *Kultura na peryferiach* (pp. 27-48). Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury.
6. Manzini, E. (2015). *Design, when everybody designs. An introduction to design for social innovation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
7. Sobala-Gwosdz, A., Janas, K., Jarczewski, W., Czakon, P. (2024). *Hierarchia funkcjonalna miast w Polsce i jej przemiany w latach 1990-2020* (Badania Obserwatorium Polityki Miejskiej). Warszawa/Kraków: Instytut Rozwoju Miast i Regionów. Retrieved from:

- <https://obserwatorium.miasta.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Hierarchia-funkcjonalna-miast-w-Polsce-i-jej-przemiany-w-latach-1990%E2%80%932020.pdf>, 24.03.2025.
8. Szacka, B. (2003). *Wprowadzenie do socjologii*. Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa.
 9. Szlendak, T., Goszczyński, W., Krajewska, M. (2019). Praktyki pozametropolitalne: uczestnictwo w kulturze w małym i średnim mieście. *Studia Socjologiczne*, Vol. 2, Iss. 233, pp. 61-98.
 10. Sztompka, P. (2004). *Socjologia. Analiza społeczeństwa*. Kraków: Znak.
 11. Wojnar, K., Grochowski, M. (2011). *Infrastruktura kultury. Polityka spójności, atrakcyjność miast*. Obserwatorium Kultury Narodowego Centrum Kultury. Retrieved from: <https://nck.pl/badania/raporty/infrastruktura-kultury-polityka-spojnosci-a-atrakcyjnosc-miast>, 24.03.2025.