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EUROPEAN, STATE, LOCAL LEVELS AND STRATEGIES OF POLISH REGIONS

Konrad GŁĘBOCKI

Czestochowa University of Technology, Czestochowa; konrad.glebocki@pcz.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0001-7241-7970

Purpose: The aims of the research were to answer the questions: 1) which of the European, state or local level is dominant in strategies of Polish regions? (2) Are there differences between the strategies of Polish regions in references to the European, State and local levels?
Design/methodology/approach: The objectives were achieved through qualitative literature review and quantitative method was used in empirical studies part. Theoretical scope was shaped around the regional strategic planning and European, State and local levels. In quantitative part all sixteen strategies of Polish regions were examined.
Findings: The answer for the first research question is: the local level is dominant in strategies of Polish regions. The answer for the second research question is that in general there are no differences, almost in case of every Polish region the ranking is as follows: 1) local, 2) European Union, 3) state level.
Research limitations/implications: Limitation was lack of interviews with planners and decision-makers. Suggestion for future research comprise conducting these interviews and conducting similar research in other countries of the UE.
Practical implications: The authorities of regional self-government and staff of regions offices in the EU could analyze the results in the context of their future works on strategies.
Originality/value: The approach to examine the substance of Polish regions strategies is new. The paper is addressed to the authorities of self-government regions in the EU, staff of regions offices and everyone interested in regional development.
Keywords: State, regions, local communities, EU, strategic regional planning.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Regions are discussed in a variety of contexts, including regional integration, understood as the process by which a group of states establishes a single organization. A prominent example of such a regional grouping is the European Union (Bonilla-Bolanos, 2021). Regions may also take different forms, including geographical, cultural, and administrative ones. The article focuses on administrative regions at the level directly below the state. In Poland, these

correspond to voivodeships (Polish regions); in Spain, to autonomous communities; in Germany, to federal states (Länder); in the United Kingdom, to regions established as a result of relatively recent processes of regionalization; and in France, to regions. Strategic planning at the regional level is a common practice among regional authorities and is undertaken in all European Union member states, as well as beyond.

Strategic planning is embedded within the broader framework of public management. In terms of the evolution of public administration, regional strategic planning emerged within the paradigm of New Public Management (NPM). A key dimension of NPM is the adoption of practices and theories derived from the private sector (Dawson, Dargie, 1999; Glor, 2001).

Regional strategic planning can also be understood within more contemporary frameworks of public administration, namely New Public Governance and Digital Era Governance. In the former, it has increasingly taken the form of a networked process, involving a wide range of actors rather than solely planners or political decision-makers (Krogh, Triantafillou, 2024). In the latter - Digital Era Governance (Margetts, Dunleavy, 2024) - regional strategic planning benefits from enhanced data foundations, enabling more informed and effective strategic decision-making. More recently, artificial intelligence has also become a significant factor in regional strategic planning.

Strategic regional planning has experienced alternating phases of greater and lesser prominence in both practice and academic theory. In recent years, the field has attracted renewed interest, as evidenced by the scholarly sources cited in this article. At the same time, with regard to its political and practical relevance, many scholars argue that regional planning is losing significance. However, extensive research conducted by Smas and Schmitt (2021) challenges the thesis of declining interest.

The contestation of planning occurs across several dimensions. These include an ideological dimension, reflecting the tension between market liberalism and social redistribution; a material dimension, relating to the spatial allocation of profits; and a cultural dimension, as planning operates across diverse communities. Of key importance is the relationship between the authority of planners and that of other professional groups (Gordon, Champion, 2021). Despite ongoing debates about the contemporary relevance of strategic regional planning and the contestation of its foundations, it continues to develop.

The second part of the article, following the introduction, is about literature review related to strategic regional planning. Next the research methodology employed is outlined. The fourth section presents quantitative results of the research which is followed by discussion, summary and references.

2. Literature review

Regional strategic planning has its core components, typically in the form of regional development strategies. Within this focus, a notable line of inquiry concerns regional identity and its role, particularly in relation to economic development (Borges, 2017). In the case of Swedish regions, there is no strong preference for statutory regional planning. Instead, planning is predominantly conducted within the framework of non-statutory forms of regional planning, an approach that tends to be ineffective unless regions adopt a multi-level perspective. The considerable degree of autonomy associated with non-statutory strategic planning in Swedish regions has been shown to generate conflicts, ambiguity, and uncertainty (Andersson, Schmitt, 2024). Comparative studies of formal regional planning across several European countries have sought to determine the extent and scope of regional planning within the examined states (Smas, Schmitt, 2021). In another line of research, scholars have attempted to understand the extent to which abstract regional planning strategies — conceptualizing spatial imaginaries, following Davoudi et al. (2018) — are capable of addressing constraints and supporting real spatial transformation (Bafarasat et al., 2021). This research focus also encompasses studies on territorial capital, understood as a component of endogenous development. In this context, a multidimensional assessment model has been proposed. In empirical analysis of specific regions, such a model enables the analysis of regional development within the framework of spatial strategic planning (Orsi et al., 2024). The current research is new approach to strategic regional planning.

Regional strategic planning concerns as well peripheral regions. Within this context, a study conducted in Austria and Sweden primarily addresses regional cohesion in these affluent European countries. Notably, regions are treated as functional entities rather than strictly administrative entities (Gruber, Rauhut, Humer, 2019). Similarly, a study concerning North Wales extends beyond the established regional framework in the United Kingdom, as this area is formally situated within the West Midlands region. The North Wales Growth Deal can be considered part of the strategic planning of this region, which is peripheral in nature and where the city-region concept is difficult to apply, given the absence of a dominant agglomeration or even a major urban center (Beel, Jones, Plows, 2020). Issues related to peripheral regions are also addressed in an article on the Northern Ireland Protocol, which may be viewed as a strategic framework encompassing this region—relatively underdeveloped compared to the rest of the United Kingdom (Brownlow, Budd, 2024). In Poland there are some peripheral regions like e.g.: Podlaskie region, Lubelskie region and Podkarpackie region.

Specific research focus concerns the relationship between regions and the state as a whole. In Norway, research has examined regional strategic planning within the framework of the Norwegian Planning and Building Act. These studies focus on the understanding and implementation of regional planning strategies in Norway, as well as their evolution over time

(Hagen, Higdem, 2024). Another line of research examines partnerships between the state and regions in the field of strategic planning (Thom, Steinfeld, 2025). Additional examples of the region-state relationship relevant to regional strategic planning include the following. In Mexico, studies have examined regional disparities in the context of economic development. The primary objective was to assess whether economic growth or degrowth is associated with greater or lesser regional disparities within the country (Nieto, 2021). A distinct line of research examines Wales's participation in the Wellbeing Economy Government, a network of national and regional governments which aims to replace GDP growth as the primary objective of national economies with alternative well-being indicators (Holmstrand, 2025). To date, GDP has been a key indicator, including state and regional level. The introduction of well-being indicators at the regional level would therefore constitute a significant shift. However, such indicators would need to be measurable to enable meaningful comparisons of well-being across regions. And it should be implemented as well on the state level at the same time.

A particularly important research focus for European regions concerns European Union policy in the context of regional planning. For example, studies of regions in Portugal examine the impact of the European Union on regional planning (Marques et al., 2018). Research on local engagement in current European Union regional policy remains limited. One example is research on the theoretical foundations of local involvement in EU regional planning, which may enhance the effectiveness of sustainable regional transformation (Grillitsch et al., 2025). Research on European Union regions, although not strictly focused on regional development strategies, has nonetheless generated important insights relevant to such strategies. This is evident, for instance, in studies on regional vulnerability to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The findings highlight a strong need for differentiated, region-specific strategies across the European Union in order to address differences in exposure and capacity to adapt to 4IR. Such strategies must strike a balance between leveraging the transformative potential of 4IR and mitigating its risks, thereby ensuring a more inclusive and equitable transition to a 4IR-based economy within the European Union (Panori, 2025).

Another research focus concerns the interaction between regional strategic planning and local communities. This includes strategic planning in the city-region context. The increasingly prominent city-region research agenda spans urban and regional theory, empirical analysis, and planning practice, as well as public policy. The growing inseparability of the concepts of "city" and "region" is reflected in the emergence of the city-region concept (Soja, 2015). Discursively constructed city-region programs often overlap with existing institutions of regional and local governance, as well as statutory land-use planning systems (Granqvist et al., 2021). Theoretical frameworks have also been proposed to apply of scenario-based planning approaches in strategic land-use and transportation planning, with particular emphasis on the city-region scale (Mäntysalo et al., 2023). Research at the intersection of local communities and regions may examine the impact of regional development strategies on the strategic planning

of local communities across specific policy domains (Bonnett, Birchall, 2023). A case study in a German region examined the conflict between infill development and the preservation of green spaces, demonstrating that regional planning can function as a coordinating mechanism in resolving such conflicts in medium-sized, growing cities (Dörder, 2025). Another example of the interface between regions and local communities is research on mutual learning processes among local and regional actors, aimed at maximizing the benefits of regional investments while managing local expectations. This entails incorporating local knowledge into regional planning processes, as well as institutionalizing local–regional integration and co-designing Transit-Oriented Development initiatives (Björling, Patrao, 2024). Local and regional traditions are also examined in their potential contribution to the quality of development projects. There is a clear need to incorporate local and regional traditions in both urban and regional planning (Skjerven, Martins, 2019).

As analyzed above various relations in the context of strategic regional planning were studied in the literature up to date e.g. between EU and regional level, between state and regions, between regions and local level. However the research gap is that there is a lack of studies which compare the frequency of occurrence in regional strategic planning of all these levels and consequently the research gap is on which level is most important and which levels are less important for regions at least in strategic planning phase.

3. Methods

The article addresses two following research questions: 1) which of the European, state or local level is dominant in strategies of Polish regions? (2) Are there differences between the strategies of Polish regions in references to the European, State and local levels?

Articles for the literature review were identified by searching for the phrase "regional strategic planning" in selected academic databases, namely Taylor & Francis, EBSCO, Wiley, Web of Science and Google Scholar. The aim was to identify articles published in recent years, with a focus on European, state and local level.

The selected articles were subsequently analyzed using a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) approach. Similar approaches have been applied in studies analyzing journal content at the intersection of European regional policy and regional planning (Marques et al., 2018).

The PDF search function was used as a tool, to find out how many references to the determined levels are there in the sixteen strategies of the Polish regions (study sample). In course of PDF searching singular, plural and all cases of the searched words were examined. Next there was "hand" confirmation if the words are consistent with the research. Method of data analysis was putting the absolute numbers and changing them into percentages which was facilitated by using the tool of the excel program.

The number of occurrences of specific words constitutes an appropriate indicator of the significance of a given level because it seems obvious that the more words concerning given level used in the text the bigger significance attached to the level by the planners and decision-makers of a given region. What is less important for planners is mentioned less often. The author do not engage into psycholinguistics as it is too far from research discipline and it seems that using words in development strategies is not about emotions but rather about objective view of the world and the needs of a region.

The research procedure can be summarized as follows: identification of recent articles; analysis of the selected publications; analysis of strategies of Polish regions; presenting the results and discussion of the results.

4. Results

In the table 1 sixteen regions are ranked alphabetically from Dolnośląskie region to Zachodniopomorskie region as rows in the table. References in their strategies to European Union, state and local are presented in the columns. The results are presented not only in absolute numbers but also in percentages. This is important because the absolute numbers are not comparable due to different length of strategies of regions. Only percentages can be compared.

Table 1.
References to EU, state and local levels in strategies of Polish Regions

Levels / Regions	EU	%	State	%	Local	%	Total	%
Dolnośląskie	29	48%	6	10%	26	43%	61	100%
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	38	10%	56	14%	298	76%	392	100%
Lubelskie	46	17%	50	19%	173	64%	269	100%
Lubuskie	50	32%	31	20%	76	48%	157	100%
Łódzkie	34	22%	22	14%	98	64%	154	100%
Małopolskie	105	39%	21	8%	142	53%	268	100%
Mazowieckie	47	41%	6	5%	61	54%	114	100%
Opolskie	82	37%	52	23%	89	40%	223	100%
Podkarpackie	119	42%	45	16%	118	42%	282	100%
Podlaskie	58	37%	22	14%	76	49%	156	100%
Pomorskie	42	42%	7	7%	50	51%	99	100%
Śląskie	81	35%	34	15%	115	50%	230	100%
Świętokrzyskie	39	29%	17	13%	78	58%	134	100%
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	32	32%	7	7%	61	61%	100	100%
Wielkopolskie	46	28%	14	8%	107	64%	167	100%
Zachodniopomorskie	28	21%	16	12%	91	67%	135	100%
Total	876	30%	406	14%	1659	56%	2941	100%

The results in the table 1 are presented on the basis of percentages, so proportionately. Only in case of Dolnośląskie region there are proportionately more references to the European Union than to local. In case of Podkarpackie region percentages of the references to the European Union and to local are exactly the same. In cases of other regions percentages of the references (further on "references" will mean "percentages of the references") to local are higher than to European Union. In these cases the rank is the same: 1) local; 2) European Union; 3) state. State in case of every region takes the last place in the rank.

The most of references to local are in the following regions: Kujawsko-Pomorskie (74%), Zachodnio-Pomorskie (67%), Wielkopolskie (64%), Łódzkie (64%). The least references among regions to local are in the following four regions: Opolskie (40%), Podkarpackie (42%), Dolnośląskie (43%), lubuskie (48%).

The most references to European Union are observed in the four regions: Dolnośląskie (48%), Podkarpackie (42%), Pomorskie (42%), Mazowieckie (41%). The least references to the European Union are observed in the following four Polish regions: Kujawsko-Pomorskie (10%), Lubelskie (17%), Zachodnio-Pomorskie (21%) and Łódzkie (22%).

The most references to state are confirmed in the following regions: Opolskie (23%), Lubuskie (20%), Lubelskie (19%) and Podkarpackie (16%). The least references to state are observed in the five regions: Mazowieckie (5%), Warmińsko-Mazurskie (7%), Pomorskie (7%), Wielkopolskie (8%) and Małopolskie (8%).

5. Discussion

The first research question was: which of the European, state or local level are dominant in strategies of Polish regions? The answer is that the local level is dominant in strategies of Polish regions. Only in case of Dolnośląskie region there are more references to the European Union than to local. This is interesting because Dolnośląskie in the ranking of affluency is on the one of the highest position among regions in Poland (Słomski, 2026). One could assume that the richest regions in Poland rather pay less attention to the European level. They are more independent from the European Union funds because they have more own resources. This research in case of Dolnośląskie region proved that *vice versa*. In case of Podkarpackie region the references to the European Union and to local are exactly the same. This region is one of the poorest in Poland (Słomski 2026). So in this case it could be confirmed that the poorest regions pay more attention to the European Union. So in general one could not assume that the richer region the less attention to the EU. Four regions with the most references to the European Union Dolnośląskie (48%), Podkarpackie (42%), Pomorskie (42%), Mazowieckie (41%) is additional confirmation of that.

Local communities cooperate with regions in Poland (Necel, Nosal, 2016). It is interesting that the local in the vast majority was dominant in the strategies of Polish regions. The reason of the focus on local could be that local self-government in Poland is relatively strong. Proportionally in case of financial resources it is much stronger that the regional self-government. The other reason of this focus could be that local community and aspects of its functioning influence greatly what region is and how it is functioning. This relationship is very strong and the results of this research confirm it clearly.

Next important aspect is the weakest position of state in this set of the research. So weak position is despite the fact that state is supporting Polish regions through special contracts (Chaba 2022). Anyway state generally looses its position in the reality of today. The Polish national parliament e.g. is in the vast proportion only transposing the European law. European Union continually increases its competences. In this research this trend is confirmed, state is in case of every region on the last place between examined levels taking into account references in Polish regions strategies. One could draw a conclusion that European Union and local levels are far more important for the Polish regions than the state. The research observed an interesting dependence: poor regions are more dependent of the state like Opolskie (23%), Lubuskie (20%), Lubelskie (19%) and Podkarpackie (16%). The richer regions are less dependent of the state: Mazowieckie (5%), Pomorskie (7%), Wielkopolskie (8%) and Małopolskie (8%).

The second research question was: Are there differences between the strategies of Polish regions in references to the European, State and local levels? The answer is that in general there are no differences: almost in case of every region the ranking of the levels is: on the first place is local level, on the second place is the level of European Union and on the last place is the state. Influence of the EU on strategies of Polish regions in individual cases was commented in various studies (Kawałko 2009). Inside this ranking are bigger and lesser differences. For example in case of local level the differences are as follow. Between the regions with the most references to local: Kujawsko-Pomorskie (74%), Zachodnio-Pomorskie (67%), Wielkopolskie (64%), Łódzkie (64%) and the regions with the least references: Opolskie (40%), Podkarpackie (42%), Dolnośląskie (43%), lubuskie (48%) the difference is substantial.

6. Summary

In course of the research strategies of all sixteen regions were examined. The table 1 shows that in detail. The positive side of the research was examination of all strategies in the group of Polish regions. However additional light could be shed through interviews of planners and decision-makers. It is the limitation of the research. The weakness was lack of comparison with at least strategies of regions of one another country. This limitation and weakness indicate the future possible areas of research. In particular repeating of the same research after some years could show if in the meantime some changes emerge.

The new knowledge is emerging from the answers to research questions. The first research question was: which of the European, state or local levels are dominant in strategies of Polish regions? The answer is that the local level is dominant in strategies of Polish regions.

The second research question was: Are there differences between the strategies of Polish regions in references to the European, State and local levels? The answer is that in general there are no differences: almost in case of every region the ranking of the levels is: on the first place is local level, on the second place is the level of European Union and on the last place is the state. The exemptions were: only in case of Dolnośląskie region there are proportionately more references to the European Union than to local. In case of Podkarpackie region percentages of the references to the European Union and to local are exactly the same.

Giving the answers for the above questions is important for the field of regional management. The local level being most important in strategies of almost all Polish regions could confirm individual regions in putting local first. The role of the state should be strengthened as it is closer level to regions than the EU. That is vital because when Polish regions being more affluent will lose in the future financing of the EU they should have state to lean on. Anyway because of legislation role of the EU it will keep its strong position.

The lessons are: the role of the state in strategic planning of regions should not be so weak. The roles of all three levels should be more balanced.

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