

# COHESION POLICY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION: THE ATTITUDE OF POLISH PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** The quality of public organisations, which is highly dependent on the institutional quality, is one of the fundamental factors determining policy effectiveness and socio-economic growth trajectories in a long-term perspective. The article provides an insight into the topic of the informal institutions characterising Polish public organisations by paying special attention to informal institutions referring to the awareness of the need for sustainability and an attitude towards Cohesion Policy implementation in the field of environmental protection. Therefore, the main research goal was to verify the following hypothesis: “The staff of Polish public organisations are characterised by the awareness of the need for sustainability and a positive attitude towards Cohesion Policy implementation in the field of environmental protection”. To this end, a direct research technique (e-questionnaire) involving representatives of organisations responsible for Cohesion Policy implementation and for natural environment protection was applied. This made it possible to gather unique data and to elaborate the structure indicators describing the beliefs of staff employed in public organisations. Overall, their positive attitude towards the directions and assumptions of Cohesion Policy in the field of environmental protection was proved. The examined groups of organisations were characterised by a similar way of thinking about Cohesion Policy funds as an environmental protection factor, which seems to be an important institutional building block affecting Cohesion Policy effectiveness. Some of the respondents demonstrated critical thinking, and they developed their own ideas regarding the most important environmental protection factors including mainly both formal and informal institutional elements, such as legal regulations or ecological education.

**KEYWORDS:** Cohesion Policy, environmental protection, public organisations, institutions, sustainability need awareness, Poland

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## Introduction

Cohesion Policy is a key instrument of the European Union stimulating socio-economic changes in the regions of the member states. For over 25 years, its main and unchanged goal has been to reduce development differences and promote convergence among the European

Union (EU) countries and regions (Hooghe 1996; Churski 2008; Becker 2019). The importance of the Cohesion Policy objectives is also evidenced by the fact that it is one of the largest EU policies, which accounts for about one-third of the EU budget (Crescenzi, Giua 2020). Cohesion Policy funds are treated as financial instruments supporting activities related to natural environment

protection (Bartniczak 2010; Herodowicz 2016; Komornicki et al. 2018), which is one of the areas of intervention aiming at sustainable development.

Cohesion Policy funds are not administered independently, but they are embedded in a broader, multi-level governance system that involves many public entities and organisations (Hooghe, Marks 2001; Bachtler et al. 2014). The quality of public organisations and institutions is a fundamental factor determining policy effectiveness (Fratesi, Wishlade 2017; Bachtrögler et al. 2019) and socio-economic growth trajectories in a long-term perspective (Stachowiak, Stryjakiewicz 2008; Farole et al. 2011; Rodríguez-Pose, Garcilazo 2015; Fratesi, Wishlade 2017; Surubaru 2017). Public organisations perform in the sphere of public affairs regulated by the norms of public law that “allows to define mutual relations between civil society and public administration” (Niczyporuk 2009: 119). The specificity of public organisations is defined by the essence of their goals (other than commercial profit) and by the complex environment these organisations operate in (Boyne et al. 2005; Wytrążek 2011). Public organisations are established to meet new challenges and deal with permanent social issues, their task being to develop and implement effective solutions to complex problems that often change rapidly and take unexpected directions (Boin, Christensen 2008; Aykac, Metin 2012). Therefore, regional development and protection of the natural environment can be included in the catalogue of goals and challenges faced by public organisations that should seek to provide solutions to effective regional development management and natural environment protection (Conyers 1983; Hawrysz, Foltys 2016). In this respect, public organisations rely on their experience to develop appropriate practices that must be sanctioned by political and social partners constituting the immediate environment of public organisations (Boin, Christensen 2008; Iacovino et al. 2017; Romanelli 2017). Sanctioning the solutions proposed by public organisations is possible, thanks to their compliance with institutions understood as patterns of thinking and as actions considered in a given society as appropriate. Institutions are commonly divided into formal and informal ones (North 1990; Casson et al. 2010; Fiedor 2015; Gruszevska 2017). Formal

institutions are established and imposed on communities to comply with in the form of codified law or strategies creating a framework for state arrangements (Syssoeva 2010). Their application by public organisations ensures that the proposed development programmes and actions are mainly sanctioned by political partners. Informal institutions are created spontaneously as a result of continuous repetition of activities that become fixed in social awareness (Rodríguez-Pose 2013). It can be presumed that their application ensures that the solutions proposed by public organisations are sanctioned by social partners to a greater extent.

By considering the aforementioned findings, the following assumptions were made:

1. Key factors for the development of appropriate practices and solutions by public organisations in the field of regional development and environmental protection are related to
  - a. formal institutions (legal norms and rules determined by strategies and programmes linked to Cohesion Policy intervention), and
  - b. informal institutions (employee values and beliefs, e.g. awareness of the legitimacy of EU development intervention, environmental awareness and sustainability need awareness).
2. The beliefs of staff in public organisations determine their involvement in solving problems related to the Cohesion Policy intervention in the field of natural environment protection and then – indirectly – the effectiveness of the implemented solutions.

The article pays special attention to informal institutions related to awareness of the need for sustainability. It can be defined as a derivative of the following informal institutions: culture, an axiological system, commonly accepted behaviour patterns and mental models in terms or aspects related to sustainable development (Fiedor 2015). One of the key aspects of sustainable development is the environmental one, so the belief in the legitimacy and importance of actions aimed at natural environment protection can be treated as a manifestation of sustainability need awareness.

The main research goal was to verify the following hypothesis: “The staff of Polish public organisations are characterised by the awareness of

the need for sustainability and a positive attitude towards Cohesion Policy implementation in the field of environmental protection". Such a goal was specified by three research questions formulated as follows:

1. Have the representatives of Polish public organisations noticed an improvement in the natural environment since Poland's accession to the EU?
2. To what extent do the representatives of public organisations responsible for regional policy implementation and for environmental protection differ in the perception of Cohesion Policy treated as the environmental protection factor?
3. How do the representatives of public organisations assess the significance of Cohesion Policy intervention in comparison to other factors determining the state of the natural environment?

## Study area

The research scope covered two groups of Polish public organisations operating at regional level in 16 voivodeships. The first group consists of organisations responsible for the Cohesion Policy implementation and includes Marshal Offices, especially departments entrusted with the function of the managing authority of regional operational programmes. This group also includes Regional Funds for Environmental Protection and Water Management, which are intermediaries in the implementation of operational programmes for the development of the technical infrastructure and environmental protection co-financed by the Cohesion Fund. The second group of organisations is directly related to natural environment protection and includes Regional Directorates

for Environmental Protection and Voivodeship Inspectorates for Environmental Protection. These organisations are mainly treated as beneficiaries implementing projects supported by Cohesion Policy for sustainable development in the field of environmental protection.

## Materials and methods

The research procedure consisted of three main stages (Fig. 1). In the first stage, the definition of the theoretical framework concerning the importance of informal institutions for public organisation performance was provided based on the source literature and was incorporated in the introductory section of this article. In addition, assumptions were formulated regarding the awareness of the need for sustainability as a derivative of informal institutions that affects the performance of public organisations. As a result, the aim of the research was formulated. Its achievement was primarily based on direct research using an e-questionnaire due to the lack of secondary data describing informal institutions in the performance of public organisations.

The e-questionnaire was an important element in the second stage of the research. The survey was conducted in 2019 among the representatives of Polish public organisations responsible for regional policy implementation and environmental protection. The use of purposive sampling (Babbie 2004) was justified by the fact that the representatives of the indicated organisations were directly involved in the development and implementation of solutions in the field of sustainable regional development and environmental protection, and awareness of the need for sustainable development should be of particular importance in their performance. Moreover, in

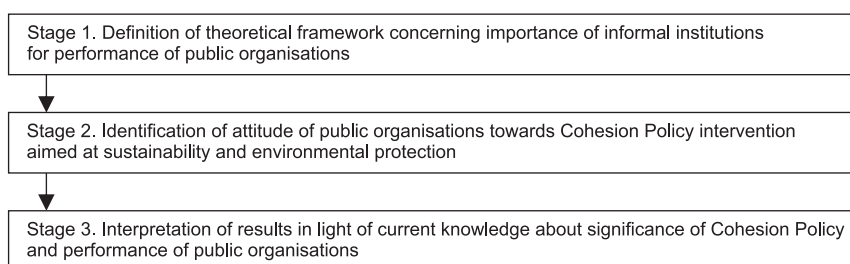


Fig. 1. Research algorithm.  
Source: own elaboration.

the author's opinion, they possibly had the most complete practical knowledge of the Cohesion Policy funds implementation for natural environment protection. The e-questionnaire was correctly completed by 69 respondents (Table 1), which could be recognised as a satisfactory result considering the limited number of public organisations (four for each voivodeship) that constituted the target group of this research.

The survey was based on the original questionnaire covering, *inter alia*, four questions used for the purposes of this study:

1. In your opinion, has the quality of the natural environment in the region improved since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004?
2. Please assess to what extent the funds obtained under Cohesion Policy contributed to changes in natural environment protection in your region.
3. In your opinion, are the other mentioned factors influencing the improvement in environmental protection more important than the Cohesion Policy funds for shaping the quality of the natural environment?
4. In your opinion, are there any additional significant factors influencing environmental protection? Please list them out.

The answers to closed-ended questions (1-3) were coded in a way that allowed constructing the indicators of structure (Czyż 2016) describing the attitude towards Cohesion Policy intervention aimed at sustainability and environmental protection in particular. Owing to the relatively small number of respondents, any additional statistical data modifications would result in additional distortion of results. To be more specific, the graphs in the Results section (Figs 2-4) are supplemented with labels on the number of responses to demonstrate the differences between the analysed groups in terms of their amount. The constructed indicators constituted the quantitative dimension of the research, while the qualitative dimension was related to the respondents' answers to open-ended question no. 4 concerning other significant factors determining the environmental protection level. This type of approach meets the requirements of the parallel type of mixed-method, which assume concurrent

Table 1. Structure and characteristics of respondents by groups of Polish public organisations operating at regional level.

Public organisation			Main characteristics and competencies	No. of respondents (pers.)	Share (%)
Group 1	Organisations responsible for regional policy implementation	Marshal Offices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regional government</li> <li>- Regional development policy planning and implementing</li> <li>- Regional programmes financed by Cohesion Policy funds implementation</li> </ul>	27	39.1
		Regional Funds for Environmental Protection and Water Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regional public finance institution involved in regional development policy</li> <li>- Co-financing activities and investments for environmental protection</li> </ul>	10	14.5
Group 2	Organisations responsible for environmental protection	Regional Directorates for Environmental Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Implementation of environmental protection policy in the field of nature conservation management</li> <li>- Assessment of investment projects impact on environment</li> </ul>	12	17.4
		Voivodeship Inspectorates for Environmental Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- State of natural environment inspection and monitoring</li> <li>- Controlling of entities using environment</li> </ul>	20	29.0

Source: own elaboration.

analysis of qualitative and quantitative data (Chaumba 2013; Shorten, Smith 2017). Based on the obtained data, the differences and similarities between analysed groups of public organisations in terms of the importance attributed to a Cohesion Policy treated as a factor strengthening natural environment protection was identified. The last stage of the research procedure included the interpretation of the results in the light of the current knowledge about the significance of Cohesion Policy, performance of public organisations, and institutions.

## Results

The obtained results have confirmed that a vast majority (about 90%) of the representatives of the surveyed public organisations associate the moment of Poland's accession to the EU with the improvement of the state of the natural environment in their region (Fig. 2).

While comparing the answers of the two surveyed groups of public organisations, one can observe that the representatives of the organisations responsible for regional policy implementation are characterised by a slightly higher share of people perceiving a positive relationship between Poland's accession to the EU and the state of the natural environment than the representatives of the organisations responsible for environmental protection. However, these differences are very small and amount to a few percentage points.



Fig. 2. Improvement in the regional natural environment since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 as observed by respondents.

Source: own elaboration.

To achieve more detailed results, the respondents were asked to what extent the funds obtained under Cohesion Policy contributed to positive changes in natural environment protection. In general, the representatives of public organisations narrowly indicated responses of 'no impact' (Fig. 3).

However, in the group of organisations responsible for environmental protection, the share of sceptics was clearly higher (almost 10%) than that among the organisations responsible for regional policy implementation (<3%).

The second category of responses was an unsatisfactory impact, which indicated a positive, but less-than-desirable, impact. It was chosen relatively more often by the representatives of the organisations responsible for environmental protection. On the other hand, among the representatives of the organisations responsible for regional policy implementation, the largest group (>60%) assessed the impact of Cohesion Policy as satisfactory, which indicated that in their opinion, Cohesion Policy was a factor that clearly improved the level of environmental protection.

Another identified issue was the importance attributed to the Cohesion Policy funds by the respondents in relation to other significant factors shaping the natural environment, which included (1) other national and foreign funds aimed at environmental protection, (2) an increased ecological awareness followed by a change in social behaviour patterns, and (3) general socio-economic changes (e.g. demographic trends and welfare increase). The results indicate that the Cohesion

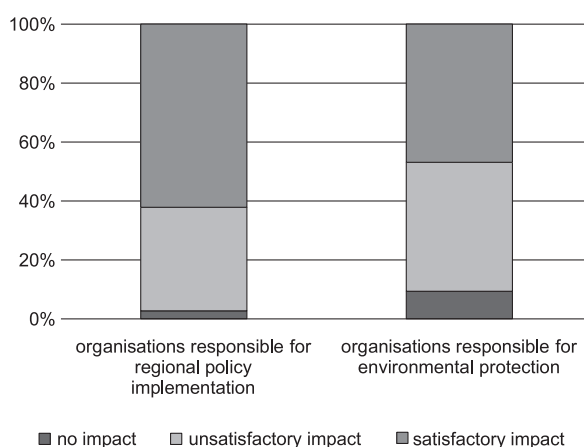


Fig. 3. Respondents' opinion on the impact of Cohesion Policy on positive changes regarding regional environmental protection.

Source: own elaboration.



Policy funds were not treated as the most important factor in shaping natural environment protection. According to the respondents, their significance was only higher than that of other funds aimed at environmental protection, especially in the opinion of the representatives of the organisations responsible for regional policy implementation (Fig. 4).

Interestingly, 80% of the respondents in both surveyed groups fully agreed that the increased environmental awareness of the inhabitants had a much greater impact on environmental protection. For the last factor – general socio-economic changes, the representatives of the organisations responsible for regional policy implementation far more recognised its advantage over Cohesion Policy funds than the respondents from the organisations responsible for environmental protection.

The research results made it possible to also indicate other factors that had an impact on natural environment protection. The respondents from both groups of public organisations mainly pointed to changes that had taken place in the sphere of legal regulations (Fig. 5). One of them stated that “the law in this area has changed a lot – even in a revolutionary manner. If we are talking about a positive impact on the environment in the context of Poland’s accession to the EU, the financial means should not be put in the first place but the legal regulations Poland had to introduce in this respect”.

In the respondents’ statements, ecological education of society was also a recurring theme, in particular the education of “pupils and students who should be familiarised with the problems of environmental protection”. Another important factor that, by contrast, has a negative impact on natural environment protection is formal procedures and the related excessive bureaucracy. It was ironically described by one of the respondents as “Poland’s contribution to the EU bureaucracy goes beyond the formal framework established by the EU”. The other indicated factors are mostly of an economic nature and are related, e.g., to the fluctuations of gas prices, the development of a technical infrastructure or the use of new technologies. Finally, it is worth quoting one of the representatives of the organisation responsible for regional policy implementation, who pointed to the shortcomings in the functioning of other public organisations as a factor negatively affecting the state of the natural environment: “The greatest, negative impact on the natural environment is exerted by offices which are supposed to uphold compliance with the law related to environmental protection, but in fact do little. It would be enough to enforce the existing regulations to achieve considerable improvement. That would involve technical inspection of vehicles, curbing illegal discharge of sewage into the ground or waters, or stealing, uncontrolled abstraction of groundwater”.

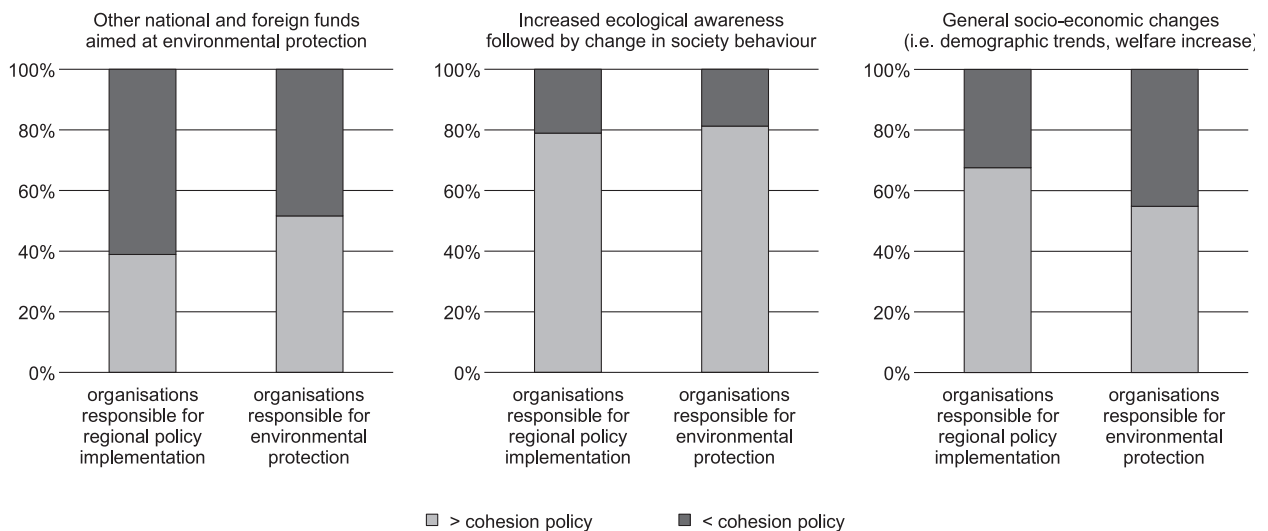


Fig. 4. Impact of the remaining factors affecting environmental protection compared with an impact of Cohesion Policy – the respondents’ opinion. Source: own elaboration.

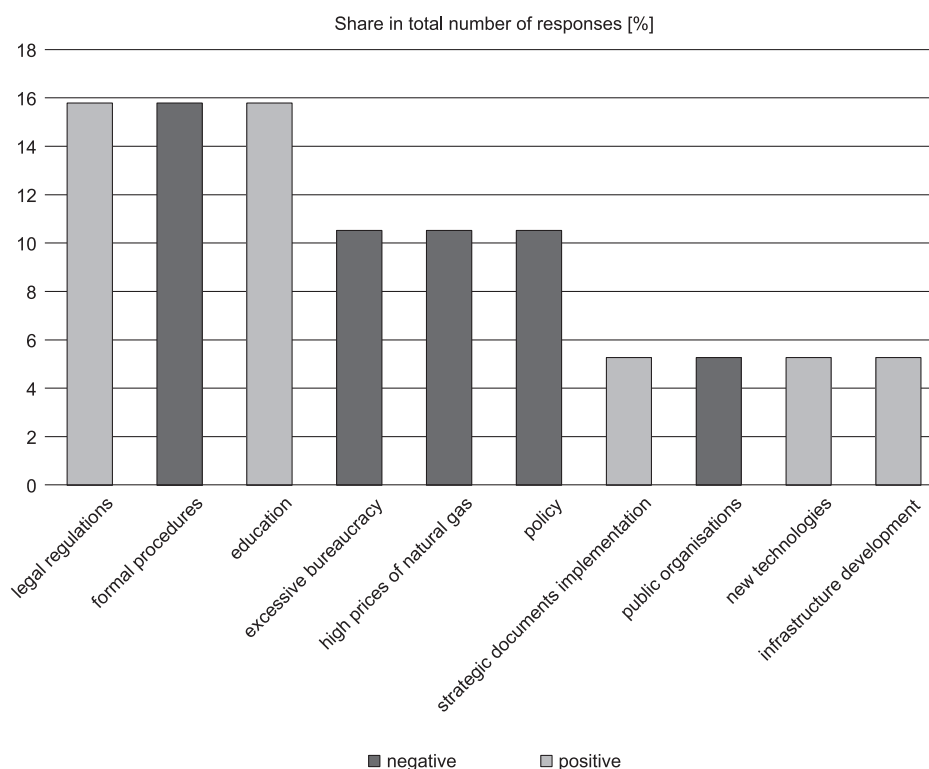


Fig. 5. Remaining factors affecting environmental protection indicated by the respondents.  
Source: own elaboration.

## Discussion

The analysis presented refers to a broad trend in research on the significance of Cohesion Policy for regional development (Farole et al. 2011; Churski, Perdał 2016; Fratesi, Wishlade 2017; Komornicki et al. 2018). This study provides an input into the discussion on the concrete issue, i.e. the importance of Cohesion Policy for regional environmental protection understood as one of the components of sustainable regional development (Medeiros 2014, 2017; Herodowicz 2020). The interviewed representatives of Polish regional public organisations clearly stated that Cohesion Policy played an important role in shaping environmental protection, although it is worth emphasising that this impact was quite often assessed as not fully satisfactory. At the same time, the respondents pointed out that more important factors were linked to general socio-economic changes, and particularly to ecological awareness among society, which is a kind of informal institution (Fiedor 2015) treated as one of the key advantages of the proposed future scenarios of Cohesion Policy intervention (Faludi, Peyrony 2011).

Researchers' interest has shifted away from attempts to assess the general impact of Cohesion Policy towards an emphasis on the factors determining policy effectiveness (Fratesi, Wishlade 2017). Among these factors, the institutions and quality of public organisations are mentioned as fundamental to successful management, to the implementation of the EU funds, and to the trajectories of socio-economic growth in a long-term perspective (Farole et al. 2011; Rodríguez-Pose, Garcilazo 2015; Fratesi, Wishlade 2017; Surubaru 2017). This makes it possible to assume that environmental protection as the component of Cohesion Policy intervention (Komornicki et al. 2018) is also determined by institutions and the quality of public organisations. Relationships between institutions, the quality of public organisations and policy effectiveness are issues that are very complex and hard to be determined, which results from the lack of comparable data (Rodríguez-Pose, Garcilazo 2015). The existing data sets on the quality of public organisations<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For example, data provided by the Quality of Government Institute (2010) decomposing the idea of quality of government into four components: (1) rule of

do not embrace the institutions referring to ecological awareness or sustainability need awareness (Fiedor 2015), which seems to be more and more important in the age of ecological crisis caused by climate change and should be well recognised. This article gives a primary insight into this matter, showing the attitude of Polish public organisations responsible for regional policy implementation and for environmental protection towards Cohesion Policy intervention. The goals of the latter are strictly linked to sustainable development assumptions (Herodowicz 2020), which may be interpreted as the manifestation of sustainability need awareness. The results obtained showed that the majority of the respondents were characterised by the awareness of the need for sustainability and a positive attitude to Cohesion Policy intervention in the field of environmental protection. A group of officials working for organisations responsible for regional policy implementation was a little more enthusiastic. It may result from the fact they work in units which perform the managing functions of regional operational programmes co-financed by structural funds. On the one hand, they are well trained in the EU policy issues and are responsible, e.g., for reporting on the implementation of operational programmes, which enables them to take a general insight into the Cohesion Policy results. Moreover, they may, to some extent, be less objective as employees who assessed their own work. Organisations responsible for environmental protection were represented by employees who demonstrated a positive attitude towards Cohesion Policy as well, but their opinions were slightly less enthusiastic. Their organisations play a role of beneficiaries of structural funds, and they can only see a part of Cohesion Policy intervention; experiencing bureaucratic problems and complicated procedures may limit its positive assessment.

This leads to another thread related to the discussion on factors that have an impact on the way Cohesion Policy is implemented and how it is perceived by citizens, which plays an important role in the process of EU identity-building (Capello, Perucca 2018; Aiello et al., 2019; Dąbrowski et al.

2021). “The linkage between the institutions and EU identity-building is based on the assumption that better institutional quality guarantees a better effectiveness of policy actions, and therefore a greater collective benefit, leading to a more favourable perception of such policy actions” (Capello, Perucca 2018: 1452–1453). The research results obtained provide a basic insight into the quality of public organisations and increase awareness of the need for sustainability understood as a kind of informal institution. It can be stated that the examined public organisations are of good quality in the context of environmental protection issues. Since Poland’s accession to the EU, their activity has been one of the factors positively affecting the regional natural environment, which was observed by almost every respondent. They perceived Cohesion Policy as an important instrument shaping environmental protection, and this positive attitude was in line with the general attitude of Poles towards the EU’s policy (Cichocki 2011; Maciejewska-Mieszkowska 2017). It is worth adding at this point that respondents have noticed the financial support within Cohesion Policy is not the most important factor for the improvement of environmental protection. They also indicate other factors, mainly institutional ones, which refer to both informal institutions like ecological awareness and education, and formal institutions linked with legal conditions adjusted to EU requirements. It was also confirmed by Komornicki et al. (2018) who stated that many of infrastructural, pro-environmental investments were successfully completed in accordance with the EU policies following enactment of special regulations.

The results obtained within this study make it possible to state that officials working in Polish public organisations responsible for environmental protection and regional development are characterised by a high level of informal institutions (awareness of the need for sustainability and a positive attitude to Cohesion Policy intervention) in the field of environmental protection. Those features should help to build a positive image of public organisations among their external partners, especially NGOs and society, and limit the lack of organisational charisma indicated by Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012).

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law; (2) corruption; (3) quality of the bureaucracy or bureaucratic effectiveness and (4) democracy and the strength of electoral institutions.



## Conclusion

The article makes an attempt to identify the way of thinking about Cohesion Policy intervention in the field of environmental protection among the representatives of the Polish public organisations, which is a relevant input to the current discussion on soft factors determining Cohesion Policy effectiveness (Farole et al. 2011; Rodríguez-Pose, Garcilazo 2015; Fratesi, Wishlade 2017; Surubaru 2017) regarding informal institutions and the quality of local authorities. The issue was difficult to examine due to the lack of relevant data, hence the use of the primary data acquired directly from the employees of public organisations. Although it was valuable, qualitative material, it was also limited due to a relatively small group of respondents. The presented results should be treated as a pilot constituting the need for more comprehensive surveys involving other types of public organisations operating in other countries, which would allow making comparative studies.

Despite those limitations, the research goal, which was to verify the hypothesis: "The staff of Polish public organisations are characterised by awareness of the need for sustainability and a positive attitude towards Cohesion Policy implementation in the field of environmental protection", was achieved. It included three research questions. The first one (Have the representatives of Polish public organisations noticed an improvement in the natural environment since Poland's accession to the EU?) received a definitely positive answer, and both analysed groups of organisations were almost unanimous. It proved the positive attitude towards directions and assumptions of Cohesion Policy that were in line with the sustainable development concept. The second question was about the differences between the analysed organisations in the perception of Cohesion Policy as the environmental protection factor. Generally, the impact of Cohesion Policy was confirmed by the majority of respondents from both types of the analysed organisations, and there were no significant differences between the representatives of organisations responsible for regional policy implementation and organisations responsible for environmental protection. The similar way of thinking in that matter between Cohesion Policy

fund-managing bodies and beneficiaries seems to be an important element for building the institutional conditions affecting Cohesion Policy effectiveness. The last question concerned the comparison of Cohesion Policy financial support to other factors determining the state of the natural environment. The responses confirmed the correct understanding of sustainable development assumptions. The financial factors (including Cohesion Policy funds) were not considered the most important. It was the soft factors like ecological awareness and factors linked to general socio-economic changes (i.e. demographic and technological change) that were perceived as more significant for natural environment protection. It should be highlighted that some of the respondents demonstrated critical thinking and found their own answers regarding the most important factors. The answers mainly included the institutional elements like legal regulations or ecological education.

To conclude, the main hypothesis was confirmed, and Polish public organisations operating at regional level are characterised by awareness of the need for sustainability and a positive attitude towards Cohesion Policy implementation in the field of environmental protection, which may be treated as a factor that will help to rise the effectiveness of the EU's financial intervention in coming years.

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