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Thin and Thick Europeanization of Polish Regional and Local Policies

The nature of expected EU impact on regional and local level has been extensively discussed in the literature concerning the West European countries (see for ex. Goldsmith & Klausen 1997, Tofarides 2003, Leonardi 2005, Frank et al 2006, Hamendinger & Wolfhardt 2010).

Goldsmith & Klausen (1997) in their pioneering study of the impact of European integration on local governments indicate three levels of interaction. The first one – called “direct impact” is related to compulsory adaptation to the legal requirements produced by the European institutions, for example rules of public procurement, labour code or application procedures related to European structural funds available for local governments. The second level – “indirect impact” – local governments have to comply with requirements of European policies – related for example to environment protection (e.g. directives related to sewage and solid waste management), consumer protection etc. The third level (called by Goldsmith & Klausen – *third order impact*) is related to the general change of environment in which urban governments operate as a result of European integration and globalization.

Goldsmith & Klausen identified four types of local governments’ attitude towards the Europe. First one – *counteractive* (sceptical) – is relatively rare, a little bit more often in regions which are not direct beneficiaries of the European regional policy. The most frequent is *passive* attitude. However the most often referred to, although relatively un-numerous, is a group called by them *proactive* (innovative). Cities qualified within these group may be characterized by having own strategic vision of presence in Europe and being initiators of international networks of co-operation. Usually, they have special units dealing with the European issues, within their administrative structures. They often open their offices in Brussels and try to play an important lobbying role. There is also a numerous group of *reactive* (“followers”) – they are interested in urban issues, but they are far from being innovators. But they join the networks created by “innovators” willingly.

But there has been much less systematic observation to what extent the processes noted in New Member states recall earlier (and sometimes parallel) experience of the Western part of the continent. Existing analysis concentrate mostly on the impact on the state level (e.g. Grabbe 2003) or on the pre-accession period and its relationship with regional policies (e.g.

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Keating & Hughes 2003). There are very few cases studies, such as Budapest (Tosics 2010) and Ljubljana (Pichler-Milanović 2010), but in the English-language literature there is lack of a more comprehensive reflection².

The paper refers also to the extensive literature on the broader phenomenon of Europeanization, especially to the analysis of learning processes induced by EU (Radaelli 2003) and the level (depth) of the EU impact (Börzell & Risse 2003, Bache 2008).

In the Europeanization literature we may distinguish two streams of analysis (Bache 2008, Börzell & Panke 2010): (i) top-down – in which we focus on how European integration and EU policies influence the behaviour of national and sub-national institutions, and (ii) bottom-up – in which we analyse how national and sub-national institutions act on a European level, trying to influence European policies (e.g. Wolfard et al. 2005). In this paper we concentrate on the first understanding, so leaving aside for example regional governments’ activity in Brussels (e.g. Goldsmith 2003), European networking of large cities (such as Eurocities) etc. In this paper the term Europeanization will be understood as:

transformation in (regional and local) institutions, including change in formal organizational structures, change in the ways of operation, but also change in the formulation of policy priorities or change of system of values, which has been a result of the EU policies.

Referring to the Goldsmith & Klausen (1997) study (discussed earlier) we concentrate on the first two levels of the impact of the EU, referring to the “third order” impact only sporadically.

The paper does not pretend to be a comprehensive analysis of the processes in the whole region. Such an analysis would require an extensive international research project. The ambition of the paper is much more modest – it indicates characteristic examples of the Europeanization, showing the diverse characteristics of the multi-dimensional phenomenon. Although I have made an effort to incorporate examples from various countries of the region, the bulk of empirical evidence is based on Polish experience, which I have had an occasion to study in a direct way.

1 The impact on regional reforms

In Poland the impact of European Union on local governments has been discussed since mid of the last decade of 20th century, when on the one hand the perspective of EU accession has became real, and the process of European Integration has been accelerating on the other. But the dominant tune of this early debates was very much simplifying.

The reform implementing 16 regions (*województwo*) with their elected governments was implemented in Poland in 1998. The issue of future integration with the UE was often used by the proponents of the reform, who argued that only large regions could be economically

² Such a conceptual reflection in a Polish language has been published by Lackowska 2011.

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competitive on the future European market and could become stronger partners for West European counterparts, especially for the German *Lander*. Some of the proponents claimed that the regional reform was one of the conditions of access to UE structural funds, but this claim was not entirely justified. And, as Hughes et. al. (2003) notice, “*the final shape of the reform should be seen as inherently endogenous development.*”

The similar reforms were introduced a few years later (2000) in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, where the self-governing *kraj* level has supplemented the structure of sub-national governments (14 regions in the Czech Republic and 8 in Slovakia – Illner 2011, Čapková 2011). In Bulgaria the regional reform has never been implemented, in spite it has been envisaged in the constitution (Kandeva 2001). In Hungary and Romania their upper tier of sub-national government (*megye* and *judets* respectively) has not changed its spatial shape after 1990 turn-over, although at least in Hungary its role has been marginalized (Horváth 2000).

However, the big difference between Polish and other countries’ upper level of sub-national government is that Poland is the only country of the region in which it has been decided that the administrative region would become an European NUTS-2 level region. Since NUTS-2 is a basic unit for European regional policy, it has had a very serious consequences for the regionalization of the cohesion policy implementation in Poland.

In 1998 the new regional institutions were granted a very limited set of functions and even more limited financial resources. But the fact of their establishment created a new political dynamism. Regional governments have become involved in lobbying to strengthen their position and proved to be able to mobilize public opinion and fight for more decentralization. Their “nomination” as NUTS-2 regions was a result of their successful lobbying. It allowed for at least a moderate role (although controlled by the regional governor appointed by the national government) of regional government in implementing the Integrated Regional Operating Programme (IROP) 2004-2006. Regional governments played a decisive role in the selection of projects to be financed by IROP grants (Lackowska & Swianiewicz 2013). The further empowerment of regional governments was possible during the 2007-2013 period thanks to effective mobilization of public opinion in support of decentralization. The IROP has been divided into 16 Regional Operational Programmes (ROP), elaborated by the regions themselves. The new law transferred decisions on projects’ selection to Regional Executive Boards. But this relatively clear logic has been broken by the Polish Parliament which decided to grant to the Governor the power to veto the regional governments’ selection of projects. This regulation was strongly criticized by several experts, as well as local and regional politicians (including the Association of Polish Regions), some of them suggesting that it might not comply with the Polish Constitution and/or EU regulations. After powerful lobbying, the ‘veto clause’ was eventually removed from the Polish legislation a few months later.

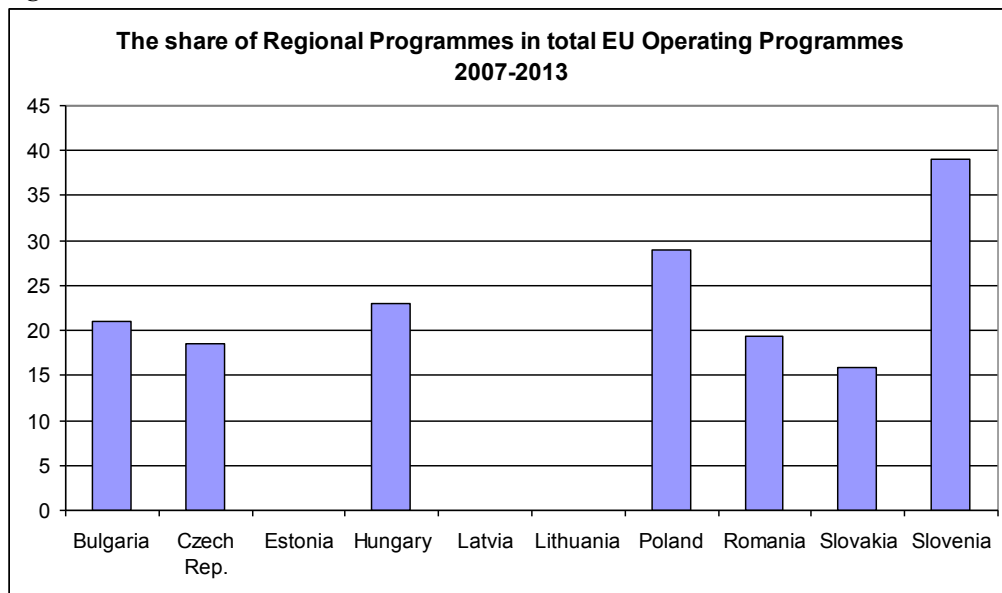
There has been gradually growing role of regional governments, strengthening their position both against the central and the local (municipal) tiers. (The latter being increasingly dependent on the region’s decisions on allocation of EU funds to local projects). The process may be described as ‘creeping decentralization’ – the process in which none of the individual

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changes were very dramatic, but taken together they have transferred discretion over regional policy making from the central to the regional level.

It is a clear contrast to other NMS, in none of which ROP was managed by the elected regional government. Moreover, in Poland the regional programmes constitute larger (than in other countries) share of the total volume of EU funds. As figure 1 demonstrates, Slovenia is the only exception to this rule, however the nature of the regional programme in the latter case is quite different, since it is the single programme managed on a central level. Except of Poland, the only countries with several regional programmes in 2007-2013 perspective have been Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, but in their case the programmes were managed by special purpose authorities including representatives of central and regional level governments. In Romania and Bulgaria there has been the Integrated Regional Operating Programme for the whole country, and the role of regional governments in Romania has been even much more limited that in Polish IROP 2004-2006.

Figure 1.



Source: own calculations based on EU Commission data

For the 2014-2020 perspective Poland plans to increase the share of ROP's to 39% of the total allocation, while some other countries of the region plan to go in the opposite direction – such as Hungary which announced its willingness to abolish ROPs at all.

The summary of the variation of regional programmes, their management and relative importance in the absorption of EU funds is also provided in the table 1.

Table 1. Regional Operating Programmes in New Member States

	Institutional structure for implementation				
	Elected regional government responsible for implementation on NUTS-2 level	ROP's implemented on NUTS-2 level by special purpose	One integrated ROP, implementation is NUTS-2 regions	One regional programme managed and implemented on a central	No regional programmes

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			institutions		level	
The share of ROP in total allocation of EU funds 2007-2013	>25%	Poland			Slovenia	
	15-25%		Czech Republic Hungary Slovakia	Bulgaria Romania		
	0%					Estonia Latvia Lithuania

2. Sub-national governments and EU funds’ absorption

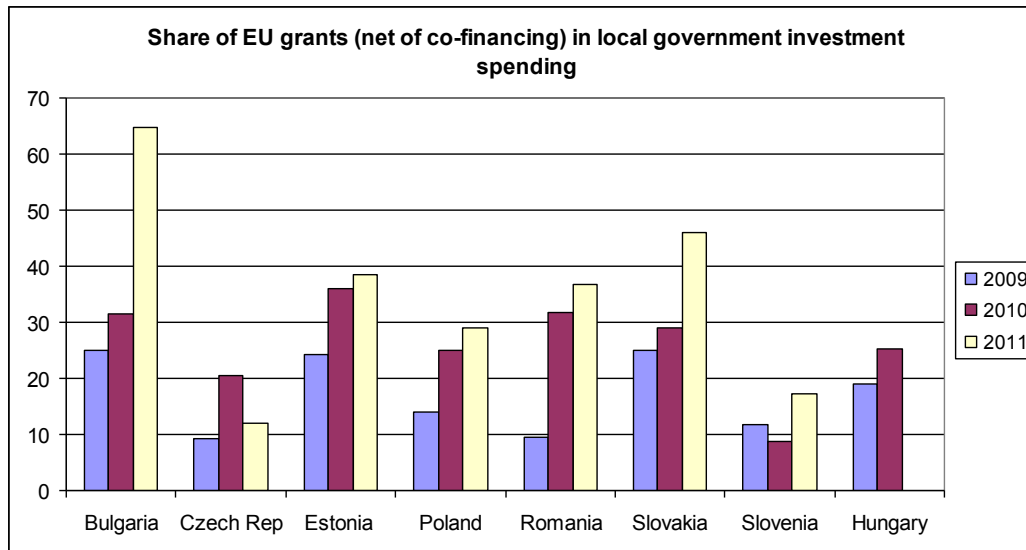
During the last decade the dominant perspective of the Europeanization discourse has been limited to the access to EU funds. Somewhat more seldom it also referred to the necessity to comply with the EU standards and norms in relation to functions local governments are responsible for. The new issue of regional policy has been the fear about the “absorption capacity” – to what extent available funds would be really absorbed by the local administrative structures? The “fetish of absorption” may be still noticed in discourse of urban politics, in which politicians concentrate on how much funds they were able to get for their cities, while the effects of the undertaken projects are less discussed and attract less public attention.

This perspective is more understandable if notice the structure of sub-national investment spending. to some extent justified. In Poland, while the share of EU funds in sub-national current expenditures did not exceed 4% in social protection (and even less in other spending sectors) in 2010, in case of investment spending it was close to 40% in communal infrastructure and 25% in capital spending on transport infrastructure.

Figure 2 shows the rate of dependency of sub-national investments on EU grants in various New Member States. We may notice that in most of the countries it was growing from 2009 to 2011, reaching the highest figures in Bulgaria (over 60% in 2011), Slovakia, Estonia and Romania. The lowest figures we find for Slovenia and Czech Republic, but even in those cases EU grants provide close to 20% of the total sub-national investment spending.

Figure 2.

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Note: no 2011 data available for Hungary.

There is no doubt that EU funds absorption has dominated the domestic regional policies in most of New Member States. It is not in agreement with theoretical assumptions of EU cohesion policy, which assumes that it *represents an **addition** to existing national regional policies rather than a **substitute** for national policies* (Leonardi 2005; 18). In Poland the role of national policies is important in that sense that the allocation of funds among regions and among particular projects is to a huge extent a domestic decision. But as Grosse (2006: 151) notes *the system of Polish regional policy is focused on absorption of EU funds.*

This situation observed in several New Member States is not unique in the history of the cohesion policy. As Leonardi (2005: 22-23) describes:

In 1992 the Amato government in Italy was forced to abolish the national regional policy for the South and used the available national funds to cofinance (with difficulty) the 50% level necessary for the cohesion policy's national and regional operational programmes. In the four "cohesion" countries – Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain – the level of co-financing from the EU reached 75% of total expenditures, but even in these cases the national governments were hard pressed to come up with their additional 25%. Spending on regional development in the four less developed countries did increase dramatically – in some cases it reached over 5% of GDP – but this was largely due to the money transferred to national coffers from Brussels.

But the data presented above do not tell us all about the depth of changes induced by the implementation of European cohesion policy on a regional and local level. In this paper we will try to look also at these other dimensions. Next section presents a brief conceptual framework for empirical analysis which are presented in following parts of the article.

3. Europeanization of local politics – conceptual framework for the analysis

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On a theoretical level the analysis will refer to the concepts of Europeanization discussed briefly in the introductory section of this paper. In particular we refer to the distinction between thin and thick learning processes (Radaelli 2003) as well as the distinction between absorption, accommodation and transformation (Börzell & Risse 2003) as levels of Europeanization. We concentrate on the top-down Europeanization.

One of the dimensions of Europeanization which has been so far extensively discussed in the academic literature concerns the promotion of partnership in European funded projects (eg. Geddes & Bennington 2001, Geddes & Le Galès 2001, Tofarides 2003, Marshall 2005). As it is clear from observations made by various authors, creation of partnerships supporting local policies, may be related to various levels of adaptation, as defined by Börzell and Risse. In this article we are going to look at policies of Polish local governments from that perspective. We are interested not only in how much funds they absorb but also in how deep is the impact of EU funded projects on the ways local politicians formulate their policies and to what extent they change the way policies are implemented. Some of earlier research suggest that changes in local governments of Eastern Europe have been often limited to the level of absorption. Bernt (2009: 755-756) in his study of East German cities notices partnerships formed as *grant coalitions rather than growth coalitions*. Nikolova (2011: 681) made similar observations on building partnerships in Bulgaria. Marinov & Malhasian (2006) generalizes the observation on most of New Member States countries saying that: *In new member states partnerships are essentially formalistic, an arrangement that emerged as a reaction to external requirements*. Tosics (2010: 138) in his analysis of changes in Budapest concludes:

The main driver of the changes is the aim to absorb as much project money as possible; less the modernization of the functioning of the administration. The adaptational pressure coming from the EU institutions is not strong enough to modify significantly the institutional structures and power relationships... The spread of new governance practices is very slow.

Tosics indicates *thin* institutional changes, for example creation of new organizational units dealing with EU funds, which do not lead to the more substantial evolution in the operation of local governments. Referring to classification of Börzell & Risse we may talk about *accommodation*, but not *transformation*.

The framework used in this paper on the one hand refers to the concept of Börzell & Risse and at the same time tries to look on adaptation of local governments through three perspectives:

- Change in the structure of public administration (first of all on the local and regional tiers, but also on a national level, if this change has an significant impact on local governments);
- Change in hierarchy of goals and priorities in local government policies;
- Change in the style of policy preparation and policy implementation.

Using both perspectives, we come to the framework which is presented on the figure 3.

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The empirical part draws upon the results of a few research projects conducted within 2008-2012 period³. The projects have been selected in that way that their results help to understand the evolution of various types of sub-national governments: regional and municipal – being both big cities and small, rural governments.

Fig. 3 Europeanization of local and regional governments – analytical framework

	Structure of administration	Goals (priorities) of local policies	Styles of policy preparation and policy implementation
thin	Absorption		
	Acommo- dation		
thick learning	Transfor- mation		

Source: own development of the author based on Börzell & Risse (2003) and Radaelli (2003)

4. Europeanization and the structure of administration

The accession period and functioning within the structure of the European Union have led to several organizational changes in public administration of all tiers. In 2005 the new Ministry of Regional Development was created, with its main goal to steer the proper absorption of EU structural and cohesion funds. On a regional level, the separate units dealing with EU funds have been created in all regional government offices. The same applies to the most of mid-size and big cities. The only exceptions are town halls in the smallest municipalities, which

³ The following research projects are referred to:

- „Factors differentiating implementation of the Integrated Regional Operating Programme” (grant from the Polish Ministry of Regional Development, research conducted in 2008-2010);
- „Distressed neighbourhoods in policies of big cities” (grant No. N306053137 from the Polish Ministry for Academic Research and Higher Education, research conducted in 2009-2010);
- „Pre-school education in local government policies” (within the framework of the research programme “Improvement of strategic management of education on local and regional level, the study of pre-school education was conducted in 2011).
- “Local government beneficiaries of Sectoral Operating Programmes” (grant No. DKS/BDG-II/POPT/179/11 from the Polish Ministry of Regional Development, research conducted in 2011-2012).

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often employ only dozen or less than a dozen of administrative staff. In such small organizations there is no space for a separate units focusing on EU funds, in cases of small municipalities there is usually only one person who is responsible for preparing relevant applications and who has also some other duties in his (her) job description.

Following the definition used by Börzell & Rise we may say that this change is something more than an absorption, its permanent character suggests to use the term *accommodation*. But it may also happen that the change in administration reminds the level of *transformation*. Implementation of the – financed by the EU structural funds – urban regeneration programme in Gdańsk provides a good example of such a situation.

Local authorities in Gdańsk realized that their administrative structures are not fitting well with the management of integrated area-based initiatives (see discussion in Swianiewicz et al. 2011, p. 143-144, 217). The system of information collection had been traditionally organized along sector logic (roads, water-sewage, education etc.), but it had been very difficult to collect complex information on various sectors, which would be related to the selected fragments of the city. This difficulty resulted in an idea to appoint local coordinators responsible for individual parts (neighbourhoods) of the city. The decision by the Mayor of Gdańsk, introducing apparently small organizational innovation, was made to respond to the required by the EU programme integrated approach to policies towards distressed neighbourhoods. This approach has its roots in URBAN initiative implemented by the EU in 1994-2006 (see Frank et al. 2006). The ideas of integrated programmes addressed towards particular parts of the city were present in Polish local governments also before the EU accession. But only access to structural funds which could be used to implement those programmes allowed to materialize the general idea and at the same time it shown necessity to re-think organizational structure of the administration. This process might be described as *transformation*, according to definitions used in this article.

Changes in the structure of administration, influenced by the access to EU funds, is very common in Poland and the most often it may be interpreted as *accommodation*, but in some cases one may identify also elements of the *thick learning* or *transformation*.

5. Goals (priorities) of local policies

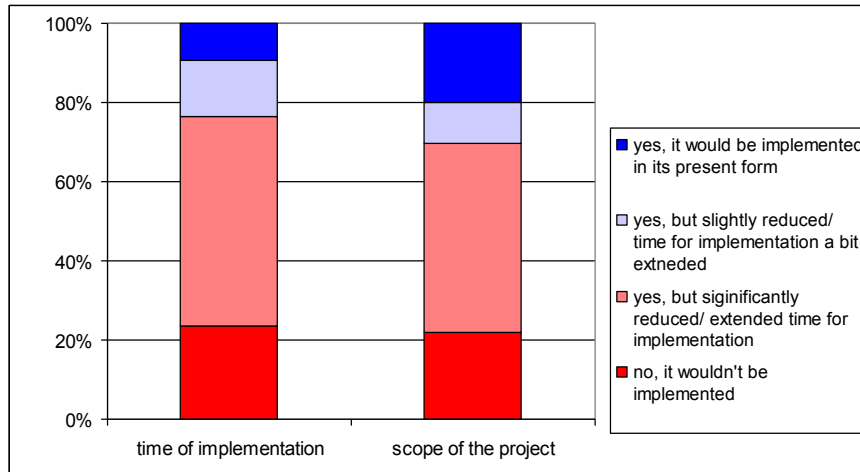
In this case observed changes are related to various policies. They are discussed on two cases: policies of urban regeneration and pre-school education.

5.1. Projects which are seen as “the most important” by the city mayors

In section 2 of this paper we analysed what has been the level of dependency of local government investments on grants provided from EU funds. In case of Poland this “dependency ratio” has been growing and in 2011 close to 30% of capital spending originated from EU structural or cohesion funds. But the dependency is much higher if we take into account those projects which are perceived as the most significant by the local mayors themselves. In 2011 and 2012, 46 Polish mayors were asked to indicate projects which have been the most important for development of their cities (Swianiewicz et al 2013). 89% of named projects were implemented with the support of grants from EU operational programmes (Regional Operating Programmes were mentioned the most often). Mayors were also asked what would happen if not EU co-financing were available. Would be projects implemented in a smaller scale of in a longer time-span? Or would they be totally abandoned? The answers are summarized on the figure 4.

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Fig. 4. Expected changes in the priority project in case of lack of EU co-financing (N=132, answers of 46 Polish mayors)



Source: Swianiewicz et al. 2013

The material gathered through the survey of mayors and in-depth interview allows to formulate following conclusions.

The availability of EU funds for the concrete priority lines formulated in the operational programmes, changes to some extent the perception of what are priorities of local governments. That explains why over 20% of projects which are seen as the most significant for the cities at the moment, would not be implemented at all, in case of the lack of the support EU funds. Reducing the scale or slower pace of implementation of the priority projects might be explained by the limited financial resources of local governments. But so frequent declaration of the possible total resignation from the projects declared as the most significant, suggests that the demand for them had been partially generated by the availability of EU funds allocation.

From interviews we know that the sector structure of the priority projects has also been influenced by the availability of funds. In particular, some mayors declared that they would not decide to implement some of the “soft projects” related to culture or education, if not availability of funds in a relevant lines of operational programmes. Such an adaptation sounds like a very *thin* Europeanization (*absorption* level), but the fact that some of these projects are later perceived as very significant for the cities, suggest a cases of gradual change from *thin* to *thick* learning processes. It reminds the classis process described in the theories of top-down Europeanization: at the beginning the modest adaptations are stimulated by the willingness to avoid penalty or to access the prize (EU funds). But after some time these adaptations become internalized by the way of thinking (consciousness) of beneficiaries. The process described above is well reflected in the following quotation from interview with an employee of one of the institutions responsible for the management of one of the operational programmes:

- *My dream related to submitted projects? Less money, but better quality of the projects.*
- ***But that depends on the potential beneficiaries and their applications...***
- *Yes, to a large extent. But surprisingly, we may have a big impact on what they submit (...) through the formal criteria (...) Through change of criteria we can often influence their priorities.*

5.2. Policies of urban regeneration

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The first example of the impact of EU on priorities of local policies is provided by urban regenerations programmes. Although Muzioł-Węclawowicz (2010: 17) notices that *it does not seem appropriate to claim that urban regenerations has started in Poland only after EU accession*, but there is no doubt that structural funds – especially allocated to the 2004-2006 Integrated Regional Operating Programme (IROP) and later to 2007-2013 Regional Operating Programmes (ROPs) – have significantly contributed to making this programmes more popular, and especially to passing from preparation of programmes to their actual implementation. Most of big cities prepared their Local Revitalization Programmes (LRP) following criteria formulated in IROP and ROPs and fitting with their time horizon. The authors of the programmes often admit that chances of their implementation are to a huge extent dependent on the EU funding. And a few cities which decided not to prepare LRP (for example Gdynia) argued that they did not develop the programme due to the low amount of expected funding which could be obtained. This is a very powerful illustration how thinking about urban rehabilitation has become dominated by the logic of application for EU funding. Some of the developed programmes consist of the list and description of projects which have a form of applications almost ready to submit for external funding, and they openly admit that the programme will not be implemented in case of the failure of application. At the same time, these urban rehabilitation programmes are usually the only interventions which are aimed at support for distressed neighbourhoods. Therefore we may say, that bringing this topic into local political agenda has been related to the existence of the European funds.

This may be well illustrated by the results of the research in Gdańsk and Bydgoszcz cities. Urban rehabilitation programmes have been prepared exactly to apply for European funds, and their time horizon has been fitting with the EU financial perspectives. The interventions planned within the programmes have been reflecting criteria written down in the IROP and RPO. It concerns also delimitation of neighbourhoods which would be the subjects of policy intervention. Possibility to absorb the structural funds may be seen as the crucial motive for developing and implementing of the programme. It is especially clear in case Bydgoszcz, where the council resolution changing the Local Urban Rehabilitation Programme⁴ directly admits that: the programme has been prepared to apply for funds available in Priority Axis 7 „Support for changes in cities and areas requiring rehabilitation” [...] within the Regional Operating Programme for 2007-2013. Also in Gdańsk the urban rehabilitation programme has been prepared under the influence of RPO and its practical implementation has been dependent on successful applications for EU funds. It is very telling what we could hear in one of the interviews:

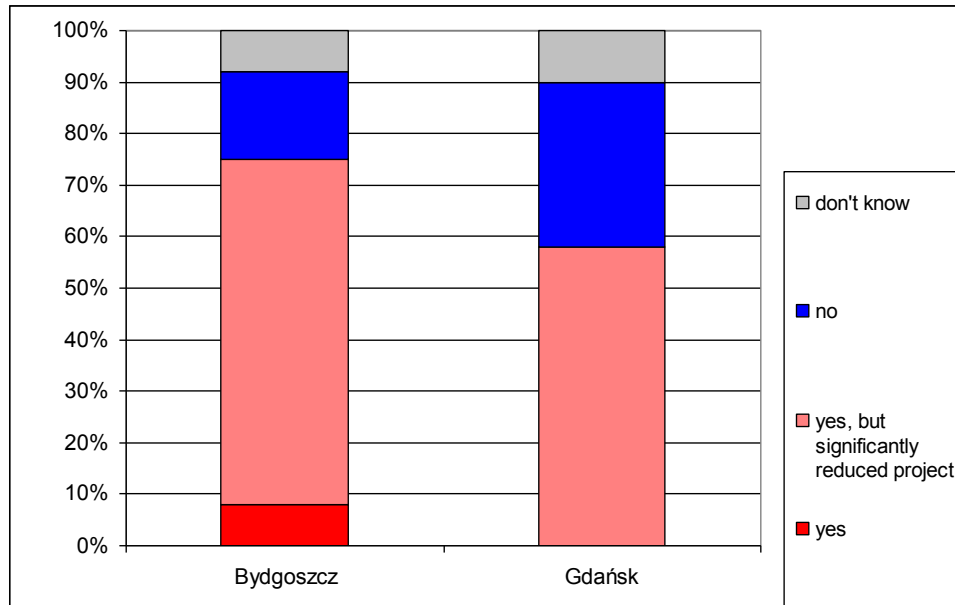
Let's be sincere. As in other Polish cities, only after EU funds have been released, something concrete has started to happen
(employee of the local government administration, Gdańsk).

This observation is also confirmed by the results of the questionnaire conducted with local politicians, administration and other people involved in development and implementation of urban rehabilitation programmes. Most of them admits that in case of no EU funds available, the programme would not be implemented, or it would be seriously reduces (see fig 5.).

⁴ Uchwała nr LXVI/1018/10 Rady Miasta Bydgoszczy z dnia 26 maja 2010 r. zmieniająca uchwałę w sprawie Lokalnego Programu Rewitalizacji dla Miasta Bydgoszczy na lata 2007-2015

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Figure 5. Would city decide to finance similar regeneration programme without support from the EU structural funds? (% of answers)



Source: Swianiewicz et al. 2011: 188.

Comparing regeneration programmes implemented with the support of IROP and later ROP funds with our theoretical framework, we notice that in many cases opportunity to obtain grants was a primary motive of the programme. It means *absorption* level of the Europeanization process. But it was also quite often that applying for EU funds was a beginning of process in which the role of issues related to urban regeneration was gaining its political importance, which marks the gradual shift from the *absorption* to *transformation* level.

5.3. Policies related to pre-school education

The third example is related to pre-school education in rural areas. The starting point of the observation may be described in a following way:

- (a) access to pre-school education was very poor. In 2009 still only 1/3 of children in Polish rural areas attended any kindergarten (Swianiewicz et al. 2012);
- (b) parents interest in pre-school education was very low, but it has been growing. Media information indicating positive correlation between attending kindergartens and development of children was among the factors of that social change;
- (c) the place of pre-school education in the ranking of political priorities of rural governments was very low. The issues of local roads' network, water provision, primary schools were seen as much more important. This claim is confirmed by results of the survey conducted in 2011 (see table 2).

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Table 2. Intensity of discussions on various issues in the local councils – opinions of mayors and councillors

	Mean score of the „temperature” of discussions (1-4 scale)	% answers „discussions are very intense”
Local Road – construction and maintenance	3,80	81
Charge for communal services	3,04	37
Decisions related to land-use planning	2,81	27
Changes in primary schools’ network	2,45	33
Operation of kindergartens	2,73	22
Operation of local culture institutions	2,58	13

Source: Swianiewicz et al. 2012

(N=100, sample of local governments from 5 Polish regions).

Access to EU funds available for opening new kindergartens should be seen on the background described above. 800 projects related to development of kindergartens was financed from the Operating Programme Human Capital (OPHC) till the end of 2011. The total value of the EU grants was close to 500 million Polish zloty (ca. 125 million euro). Over 80% of these projects were implemented in rural areas (see also table 3). The pressure related to the willingness to use available funds, as well as the pressure of parents who learn that similar funds have been obtained in neighbouring municipalities, led to the increasing number of applications from rural governments. The applications were often prepared in the partnership with societal organizations (foundations, local associations), so the programme stimulated also the change in the style of local policy making (this issue will be further discussed in the following chapter). But existence of the new kindergartens often implies the change in parents’ attitudes. Even 10-15 years ago it happened that rural kindergartens were liquidated because of the low interest of parents in pre-school education. In the recent years the situation has changed dramatically, and even parents staying at home (for example unemployed) are interested in having their children in the kindergarten. One of the mayors of small, mountain rural government described that change in the following way:

The main reason to liquidate the kindergarten was that there were only 10-12 children attending, 3, 4 and 5-years old together... Nowadays in the same village there is a few times more parents who are interested in having their children enrolled. This confirms the change in parents’ consciousness.

Table 3. Projects related to new kindergartens (financed from OPHC, April 2011)

	volume of grants (million zloty)	number of projects
Total	488.97	805
Cities of county status	50.01	47
Rother cities	43.09	74
Mixed, Urban-rural municipalities	92.11	189
Rural local governments	299.63	495

1 euro = ca. 4.1 Polish zloty

Source: own calculations based on the data base of EU funded projects, available at www.mrr.gov.pl

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The change of parents’ attitude has led also to the change in the hierarchy of local government priorities. Even if grants from OPHC allow to finance the operation of kindergarten in relatively short period (usually two years) the liquidation of the new opened institution is hard to imagine. Considerable share of local governments declares that future maintenance of the institutions may be a problem (see table 4). Nevertheless, most of them is determined to continue the functioning of new kindergartens. It means that the EU grants in irreversible way has changed the priorities of local policies. One of the mayors (from the region with one of the lowest kindergartens’ attendance rate) describes the process in the following way:

Looking from today’s perspective and demands, I cannot imagine not having kindergarten in our municipality. We will conduct relevant analysis after the vacation period. Most probably we cannot afford the kindergarten in every village. But we need to maintain at least one. The question is, and we need to discuss it with the council: which one?

Table 4. In some local governments kindergartens are financed by grants from EU funds and there might be difficulties with further financing after the end of the EU funded Project. Does this problem concern your municipality? (answers from rural local governments).

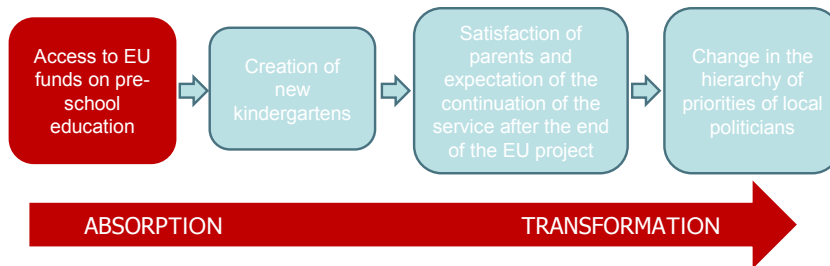
Yes, it may be a serious problem	14%
Yes, but this is a minor problem	22%
No, I do not think it might be a problem	64%

Source: Survey of local government politicians and staff (N=194). Swianiewicz et al. 2012.

The change initiated by the structural funds seems to be irreversible, although the attitudes of local governments towards the future pre-school education policies are diversified. They vary from “we hope that there will be the next EU programme which will provide further financial support” through “we do not know what is going to happen next” to “we have to find resources in our own budget”. To be precise, we should mention that there is one more attitude which has been noted during the field research: we do not apply for EU grants for kindergartens, because parents would get used to the new service and we would have problems with its maintenance in the more distant future. In some regions the available funds have not been disbursed exactly for that reason.

Figure 6.

Europeanization of policies on pre-school education in rural areas



Similarly as it was in the case of urban regeneration projects, at the beginning we can see the *absorption* level of Europeanization (the funds are available, so we apply for them). But the long-term effect of the projects is the durable change of priorities of local governments, which may be interpreted as *transformation* of the policy. The process of change may be summarized as on the figure 6.

6. Styles of local government policy making and policy implementation

Implementation of EU funded projects requires often adaptation to promoted by the EU model of policy making and policy implementation. The source of these rules may be found in horizontal policies of the EU and/or in various documents adopted by the EU Commission. For example, in relation to urban policies one may indicate methodological assumptions of the URBAN initiative and several EU level documents, such as 2000 Lille Agenda. In this paper we will refer to some of dimensions of that promoted model:

- Integrated strategic planning – necessity to demonstrate relationship between planned activity and wider strategic goals, which requires earlier preparation of the strategic documents. In case of urban regeneration projects the specific kind of such a strategic approach is concentration on the integrated neighbourhood projects, promoted since URBAN initiative. Such integrated approach includes complex interventions covering economic, social, environment and physical infrastructure aspects of neighbourhood regeneration;
- Style of policy preparation including wide social consultations and various forms of community involvement;
- Partnership in projects implementation. In particular, it involves partnership of public institutions (which includes cooperation among tiers of governments, going along with the concept of *multi-level governance*) and non-public actors (both local businesses and societal organizations).

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It would be unjust to suggest that these ideas have appeared in Polish local and regional governments exclusively because of their involvement in implementation of EU cohesion policy. But there is no doubt that appearance of EU funds have contributed to wider popularity of the promoted model, and sometimes even the application process was the main engine of their implementation. Examples of similar changes may be found in other countries of the region. Sootla & Kattai (2011: 591) describe how the access to EU funds facilitated partnership style of policy making and professionalization of local government administration in Estonia. Similarly, in Bulgaria the EU integration have promoted the idea of inclusive policy-making (Nikolova 2011).

But the depth of the changes was diversified. One may ask the question to what extent these ideas influence the consciousness of local staff and politicians and how durable may be changes in the styles of local governments operation? As it is suggested by the cases discussed in following paragraphs of this paper, the *thin learning process* (to use the term suggested by Radaelli 2003) has been so far dominant. Or referring to Börzell & Risse (2003) concept – the most typical is *absorption level*, in which local governments try to access EU funds, but without a deeper change in modes of operation and goals of institutions which implement the projects. However, there are also exceptions to this rule, demonstrating a deeper transformations in policy making and implementation.

6.1. Implementation of the Integrated Regional Operating Programme (IROP) 2004-2006)

The obligation to prepare regional development strategies was introduced to the Polish legal system long before the take-off of IROP, and was only very indirectly related with EU integration. But access to EU structural funds has strongly dominated the way of thinking on strategic management. As it was documented in earlier reports (Swianiewicz et al 2008, 2010) the most frequent model of regional strategic planning very significantly differed from theoretical assumptions rooted in *New Public Management*.

Many strategies try to define the goals very broadly. Sometimes they cover the entire or almost the entire spectrum of functions delivered by the government that develop and adopt the programme. In this situation it is difficult to expect that the strategy would provide guidance for the implemented policies. It is rather a dead document, having little bearing on daily activities of the administration and on key decisions. It should be emphasized that this form of a document is sometimes adopted not because of the lack of skills or knowledge, but purposefully. The assumed role of a strategy is often the possibility to obtain as many grants as possible. Thus a “hunting” document is created (for hunting for grants). Very broadly defined goals provide enable justification for of almost every application for external funds under the strategy (and an indication of linkage with the strategy is often required by donors). Why indicate priorities, if we do not know in advance for what type of projects we will be able to get external support? With such reasoning, the formulation of goals, which seems to be wrong from the standpoint of an orthodox understanding of strategic management adopted by

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those who developed this concept, appears reasonable, and even desirable. If the priority in the development programme is "almost everything", then we are free to apply for any measures that appear on the horizon

Ability to implement own strategy for the region by means of IROP was obviously limited, if only because it was a uniform program, implemented under the identical scheme throughout the country. Key objectives were defined at the national level and regional authorities had relatively limited flexibility in adjusting the allocation of resources to the development visions. In comparison to the funds transferred to regions in the 2007-2013 perspective, these resources were also scarce. All of this does not mean that the selection of specific projects for implementation could not be linked with the priorities arising from the regional strategy. The idea was to link this vision with IROP through ongoing discussions within the Regional Steering Committees, as well as final decisions taken by regional boards. We can also imagine submissions of project applications consistent with the vision of regional development and inspired by regional governments' offices.

In practice however, as it is documented by empirical studies, in the opinion of the main actors of regional policy making, the strategy has been treated in rather bureaucratic way - it was a document serving as a "support document", and not one that directs the regional development. In that meaning the strategy was important, it supported applications for structural funds, but it was not difficult, since the strategic goals were defined in a very broad way, enabling justification of almost any project.

So what does the success in IROP implementation, so often invoked by interviewees, mean? It comes down to two things: (1) spending all or almost all of the granted resources; (2) avoiding "mishaps" of a formal nature. Politicians and officials from regional and local authorities, when saying about the success, had in mind to a much lesser degree, the implementation of projects that would have a significant impact on regional development in the most desirable direction. This is shown, for example, by a fragment of a conversation with a member of the board of one of the surveyed regions:

*I wanted to ask about your overall assessment of the IROP implementation in the region – what was the greatest success, what do you see as a failure? [...]
Although it was the first programme on such a large scale, we managed together with the beneficiaries to pass it up pretty well. There were no major appeals or complaints about the decisions of individual bodies*

I think that, given such an attitude we should maintain moderate criticism. To a large extent it is understandable. IROP was the first programme on such a scale, implemented by the regional governments, thus lacked experience and many things had to be learnt "offhand". We should not forget that the central authorities gave very complicated procedures and specific requirements for regions that go far beyond the formal rigor imposed by the European Union⁵. At the same time regional media were interested in finding and publicising vivid cases of

⁵ Many authors have written about this excessive bureaucratisation and complexity of the process. Cf. studies of: Kozak 2006, Grosse 2004, Klimczak, Pylak & Podyma 2006, and Swianiewicz et al 2008.

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unused or poorly used funds. In the final stage of the programme, it sometimes happened that funds were awarded to projects from a "round-up" (so long as applications did not contain formal errors), trying to avoid at all costs low level of absorption. Therefore all these drawbacks have rational explanation and justification, but it does not change the fact that the observed practices differed significantly from the ideal strategic management of regional development. And the adoption of the strategic model of management remains *absorption* rather than *transformation* level of Europeanization.

The situation described above had an impact on the logic of the process of selecting projects for implementation under the IROP. Lack of strategic thinking meant the absence of guidance on the selection of projects resulting from the thought-out policies. When the politicians in power at the regional level were faced with the problem of using funds from the IROP, tools at their disposal - in the form of previously developed strategies for regional development - could not help them, because they were created in a completely different purpose. They were not treated as documents for the actual selection of investment priorities, but as "supporting documents". **In making decisions on allocating resources from the IROP, decision-makers did not have any policy documents that would facilitate their decision-making.** The logic leading to the final selection of projects can be traced on the successive stages of the process.

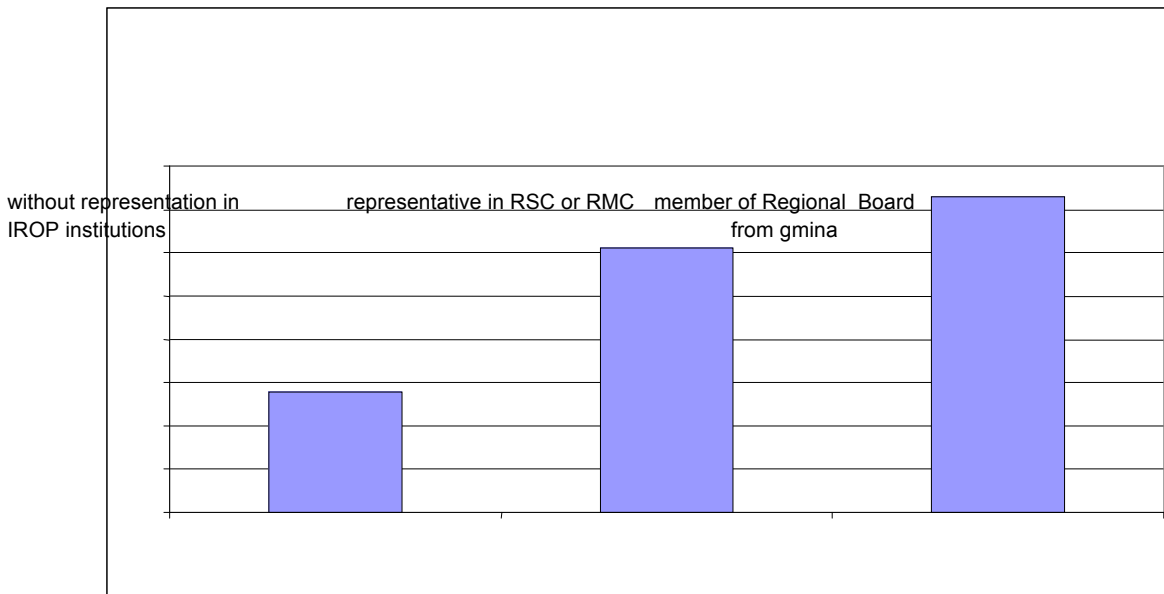
In the absence of priorities organizing the process of generation and selection of priorities, there is nothing surprising in the fact that the selection was decided by other criteria. An important role among them was played by the applicant's position in the network of social actors in regional policy. In other words, the access to key decision makers was important. This issue has been described in details in earlier studies (especially Swianiewicz et. al 2010, but also studies of Bielecka 2006, Bukowski 2008). Figure 7 illustrates that municipalities which were represented in formal IROP management institutions as well as municipalities from which members of regional executive board, were able to obtain larger grants than other local government units.

In this sense, in the process of the IROP implementation, we observed a superficial process of Europeanization. The actors in the Polish regions (sub-central authorities of all three tiers) have adapted to formal requirements in EU programmes, but this adaptation was often superficial. This can be formulated even more sharply: EU policy has not changed the strategy and policy objectives of regions, because there was nothing to change - these goals and strategies existed only on paper.

Figure 7

(2004-2007, the average for 5 regions)

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Such instrumental attitude towards the strategic planning does not concern only IROP implementation nor regional tier only. One can provide examples of cities, in which Capital Investment Programmes are treated more as preparation of formal “support document” for applications for EU funding, than real management instruments increasing efficiency of policy making and implementation (see e.g. Purzyński 2011).

The IROP procedures assumed establishment of Regional Steering Committees (RSC), which would be an element of partnership model of regional Policy making. The idea of RSC (and Regional Monitoring Committees) was to be a place where a vision for regional development is discussed and where proper selection of projects, in line with that vision, is taken care of. In practice, however, most members of RSC did not have competence for such an assessment, was not interested in this kind of discussion and perceived their role differently.

Dominant role in the work of RSC from most regions was played by representatives of potential beneficiaries of the projects – municipal and county governments. Representatives of professional bodies, employer associations and academic circles, co-opted to RSC, mostly remained as extras in the game, which de facto was between local governments joined in territorial alliances (unless they fought for projects for their institutions).

The process of co-optation of RSC members from societal organizations had several weaknesses related both to the weakness of civic society (small number of organizations, which would not only defend narrow particular interests, but which would be ready to undertake responsibility for co-production of regional policy – see Bukowski et al 2008) and to the low level of trust between regional governments and societal organizations (and identified cases of manipulations in selection of NGO representatives to RSC).

The only repeatable trend in the quasi-programme debates at RSC was to strive for a moderately even distribution of resources between different parts of the region. This resulted in a very widely adopted by politicians at regional and local special understanding of the

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concept of "sustainable development"⁶, usually understood as the “even” allocation of financial resources, according to the adopted criterion, most often relating to the population⁷. This approach, of course, had nothing to do with sustainable development as such, it is an anecdotal example of the superficial adoption of concepts relating to theories underlying the regional policy, and at the same time the use of certain words, which well matched the justification of the dispersal of resources to beneficiaries in different parts of the region.

Summing up, RSC’s were very imperfect attempt to implement the partnership principle of management. Their establishment may be interpreted as structural change having character of *accommodation*. But in spite of the fact that in some regions RSC had significant impact on the selection of the projects to be financed from IROP, it is hard to say about *transformation* of the style of regional policy making.

6.2. Policies of urban neighbourhood regeneration

It happens that city governments try to tailor the language used in their neighbourhood regeneration programmes to expectations of EU Commission (and related formal requirements of operational programmes) in a way which does not reflect the real transformation of policy making. The language and content of the programmes is totally subordinated to the tactics of application of funds. Such a phenomenon often concerns the rules of neighbourhood selection, public consultations, the principle of partnership in policy making and implementation as well as the requirement of integrated strategy (including physical, social, economic and environment dimensions of the regeneration).

When we start to read the Local Neighbourhood Regeneration Programmes, the basic approach to the revitalization looks very comprehensive. General goals usually include economic, physical and social dimensions. E.g. the starting definition of the Regeneration Programme of Bydgoszcz says that it is “*a multi-year programme of actions related to technical, social, economic and ecological dimensions, aiming at liquidation of crisis situations and providing a ground for development of the selected areas*”⁸. But in practice this comprehensive approach to the regeneration of Bydgoszcz neighbourhoods is not confirmed in the further part of the document. The concrete projects included in the programme are almost exclusively physical investments in infrastructure and housing renovation. There are just very few social projects, moreover their connection with the goals of regeneration is very doubtful; in fact, these are not area-based interventions, since they cover the whole territory of the city⁹. It seems that the city government has added a few social projects, which it wanted to

⁶ The reason for this misunderstanding comes from the terms in Polish language. The Polish term for “sustainable development” is almost the same as for the “even development”.

⁷ “Capitation” was the term often used by our interviewees demonstrating the popularity of this criterion, understood as the use of indicators and the distribution of grants in terms of their height per capita.

⁸ LPR-B, Local Revitalisation Programme of the City of Bydgoszcz, 2009

⁹ In Bydgoszcz it is difficult to find additional programmes focused on the social dimension of revitalization of the “priority areas”. We were able to identify one such a programme – focused on the support for the schools with the weakest results of the final exams (such a schools are located in the “problem districts” of the city). But this programme was one-shot intervention implemented during one year only, with no intention

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be co-financed by EU funds, but their relevance for social regeneration of the concrete areas is almost negligible. Interestingly enough, Bydgoszcz has a clear set of indicators for monitoring of revitalization process, and this set includes variables related to social change. But it is never explained in the documents how the physical change alone can influence the values of these indicators. Is it a silent assumption that more attractive urban land will be purchased by private investors, more affluent residents will move in and current citizens will be re-located elsewhere? Or is it an assumption that nicer urban environment will have a “magic” influence on people, who would not be willing to commit any crimes or drink alcohol in such a nice place? One can only guess, because authors of the programme do not discuss the possible impact neither they try to address the social problems directly by their policies¹⁰.

But the above conclusion should not be generalized for all other cities as well. The situation in Gdańsk is significantly different¹¹. If we look at projects written in the Gdańsk Urban Regeneration Programme there seems to be a similar bias towards the investment infrastructural and housing projects. But the social component is existing as well. Moreover, since most of investment funds have been eaten-up by the new priority *Letnica* neighbourhood (which – as it was mentioned above – is located close to the major Euro 2012 investment and is important in the city promotion strategy), the actual implementation of the programmes in remaining priority areas is unexpectedly focused on soft, social projects.

It is widely (at least verbally) accepted that **programmes that are addressed to specific areas should be prepared in a way which involves various stakeholders**. Despite the fact, that both Regeneration Programmes contain information on public consultation, only in Gdansk we managed to get some reports on the outcomes of the consultation (eg. data from surveys conducted with residents of areas covered by the programme, documents referring to the discussions with relevant NGOs etc).

Bydgoszcz is an example of a more common approach, where the information on results of public consultation process boils down to several press releases presented in the appendix to the Regeneration Programme. In the Appendix 2 to the Bydgoszcz Regeneration Programme we see **identification of provision of information to citizens with consultation** (*a wide information campaign, i.e. the consultation* – as we read in the document). If we locate such an approach on Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation we deal with “open authoritarian

to be continued in the subsequent years (the leaders of the education department in the city explained us that their intention was to focus on the best schools and the most talented pupils in the following years).

¹⁰ One of these „social projects” is a creation of a new faculty at the local university. One of city hall officers asked about the expected positive influence of the project on social condition of the neighbourhood told us, that the effect is obvious – *students will come to the neighbourhood, they will need some services, they will be doing shopping at local groceries...* This is a good example of the neo-liberal way of thinking about “social” initiatives very typical for political elite in Bydgoszcz.

¹¹ In June 2010, there was a big “Congress of Cities Revitalization” organized in Kraków, during which several cities presented their programmes. It is very telling, that both presentations from Bydgoszcz did not mentioned the social dimension at all, concentrating exclusively on physical investments in public space and infrastructure. It is a clear contrast with Gdańsk, which had as many as four presentations on the same congress, and all of them either focused on or at least considered the social dimension.

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style”, which is not considered as “interactive style” of policy making. The main element of “consultation” was **recruitment of local businessman and other potential beneficiaries of the projects**, who could provide their own matching funds and develop the application for the relevant component of the EU funded Regional Operating Programmes. During this stage the city has organized training for potential beneficiaries, which was treated as an important element of the consultation phase. There was also a public meeting with citizens but it was organized after selection of the main areas of intervention. The meeting had more informative than consultative character. The other attempts at consultation were made in a very simplistic way – in the best case there was a public announcement that the city is awaiting opinions, with no organized way of encouraging different stakeholders to express their opinions.

It seems that the main motivation for organization of any consultations was the **formal requirement** of the EU programmes. As it was explained in one of the articles in the local press “*because the funding has been provided by EU, it was necessary to conduct public consultations*” (“Rewitalizacja Dworcowej...” 2009). One of the top level politicians told us in an interview: „*to be frank we do not need them (consultations with NGO), because we know exactly what should be done*”. Referring to theoretical concepts mentioned in the introductory section, this is a clear example of a *thin Europeanization* or *absorption* in the meaning of Börzell and Risse concept.

Once again the approach of Gdańsk is very contrasting. The preparation of the programme was accompanied by the massive public consultations (including survey of citizens, focus group interviews and meetings with citizens), conducted with a support of sociologists from the Gdańsk University. In addition to the urban regeneration programme, city is also involved in the separate social programme “Open *Dolne Miasto*”, which is a partnership of 18 NGOs and the city government itself. The programme is in fact a **bottom-up initiative of NGOs**, and the role of the city was facilitation and coordination as well as financial support for proposed projects, rather than initiation of the programme. More precisely, this role of the city has been mostly performed by one employee of the city “unit for urban regeneration”, who took a lead in the programme. Her activity has been somehow passively supported (or rather accepted?) by the administrative and political leaders of the city. It is difficult to assess if social and cultural focus would be present in the programme if not the NGOs’ initiatives. It is not to say that the process of public consultation in Gdańsk has been fully successful. According to the survey of citizens (see Swianiewicz et al 2011) significant proportion of citizens does not feel that they are well informed about city government policies towards their neighbourhood and many citizens does not trust that the plans would be actually implemented. Many **residents complain** that “*there has been too many of these consultations, but nothing concrete is going on. We do not want more surveys but actual investments in our neighbourhood*”.

In both cases the role of **city administration** is strong. The dominant role in policy formulation is attributed to city hall departments or main political leaders. This domination is rarely questioned by other actors. At least in case of policy areas that consume much money (investment, infrastructure etc.) the *government* approach is clearly dominating over *governance* and partnerships. As it was mentioned above, only in Gdańsk and only in one part of the Programme, we may note the crucial role played in policy preparation and

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implementation by the societal organizations. Referring to the Europeanization context – as revitalisation programmes are most frequently seen as bureaucratic requirement for applying for external funds - strong political leadership, strategic vision and promotion of the area-based approach seem to be unnecessary.

Having in mind the dynamics of Gdańsk Urban Regeneration Programme it seems that we may note the gradual change from the *absorption* to the *transformation* level of Europeanization. It may be noted in the gradually increasing attention placed at partnership with local societal actors and change in the focus of the programme – from focusing on physical regeneration only to a more comprehensive approach (including also “soft” social interventions). This change is partially initiated by the city hall but to some extent it is also a reaction for bottom-up initiatives. But that deep level of Europeanization can be found only in a few Polish cities. The dominant seem to be *absorption* and *accommodation*, which may be identified with the *thin learning* process. The earlier studies concerning the URBAN initiative (Frank et al 2006) made the distinction between North European countries in which URBAN methodology corresponded with earlier practices of national policies, and Southern Europe in which the promoted approach was a difficult innovation. Following this distinction, we may say that most of Polish cities is more similar to Southern than to Northern Europe.

6.3. Policies on pre-school education

It is often that a partnership between local governments and societal organization is required to apply for the funds allocated for pre-school education. Such partnership agreements are often initiated by associations or foundations which operate on a national (or regional scale) and are not a part of local community. These are for example Association “Elementarz” from Katowice or “Edukator” from Łomża, both operating in a couple of regions. But it also happens that the funds from Human Capital Operating Programme act as catalyst for emergence of new, local associations. One of such examples is provided by the Foundation “Wzrastanie” (Growth), which has been created with an active involvement of local politicians in one of counties of south-eastern Poland and which concentrates its activity in the same region. The long-term effect of the projects co-financed by the structural funds is emergence of new forms of formal co-operation between public and non-public institutions. However, our research suggests that such cooperation is usually superficial and it rarely initiates a deeper transformation in local government operation. The research suggests that absorption of EU funds have rarely led to the increased willingness of local authorities to consult their decisions with local communities, nor initiated new forms of community involvement in local policy making and implementation. In this case we may rather note the *accommodation* level of Europeanization (involving formal institutional change), but not *transformation*.

6. Conclusions: thick Europeanization as unintended effect?

The data provided in the paper prove that the change in local governments being result of EU integration and access to EU funds is tremendous. Sub-national investments have become heavily dependent upon grants from the structural funds and this process concerns not only

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Poland but most of the New Member States. The vast majority of new projects which are seen as the most significant by the mayors would not be started in the current form if not access to EU funds.

In several of examples described in this article it is clear that the change induced by the EU funded projects usually starts as an *absorption*. Willingness to access the available funds is the main motive. But the goals and the ways of their achieving should remain the same. Some of evidences from other countries in the region (e.g. Tosics 2010, Bernt 2009) suggest that Poland is not a unique but rather typical case in this respect. However, it happens that during the project implementation we may note the evolution which remains the *transformation* level as defined in the Börzell & Risse concept. Sometimes this change is unintended. Trying to utilize opportunities related to available funds and undertaking steps necessary to obtain grants, local governments gradually change their way of thinking about the main issue of the project, ways of achieving their goals and sometimes even about the importance of various policy goals. So even if processes of *absorption* and sometimes *accommodation* (where we note durable change of institutional structures) are dominants levels of Europeanization, there are cases in which we may see the more complex *transformation*. Referring to Radaelli concept we may talk about the gradual change form thin to thick learning in the process of Europeanization.

Figure 8. Levels of Europeanization in the described cases

	Administrative structures	Goals (priorities) of local policies	Styles of policy making and policy implementation
thin	Absorption	Bydgoszcz and Gdańsk urban regeneration Pre-school education	IROP Bydgoszcz urban regeneration
	Accommodation	IROP Bydgoszcz urban regeneration Gdańsk urban regeneration	Pre-school education
thick learning	Transformation		Gdańsk urban regeneration

Source: own development of the Author.

The discussed cases clearly suggest that describing the Europeanization of local and regional policies in Poland through one level of Europeanization (as defined by Börzell & Risse) would be a simplification. In fact, the situation varies depending on sectors of sub-national governments operation and also depending on individual city or region. Some of these

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variations are illustrated on the figure 7. In case of pre-school education policies we could note the change from absorption to transformation in the way how local priorities are formulated. Similar evolution could be noted in the style of urban regeneration policy implementation in Gdańsk (although in the city of Bydgoszcz the same change is hard to notice). The reasons of the variation between cities and regions might be the focus of separate, comprehensive research. Some of the observations made during the research projects which have been referred to in this paper, suggest that the *transformation* might be easier in cities (regions) with more developed civic society institutions and higher level of social capital.

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