

County Self-Government in Poland after 1998

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Abstract. The aim of the study is to analyze the formation and functioning of county self-government in Poland after the 1998 reform, focusing on the powers, organizational model, financial capacity, accountability and current challenges. The object of the study is county self-government in Poland as an intermediate level of public administration between the commune and the voivodeship, including its institutions, resources and practices of organizing supra-commune public services. The place of the county in the decentralization system is determined as an institution for coordinating tasks of a supra-commune nature that require a wider territorial coverage than the capabilities of a single commune, but at the same time must remain close to the needs of residents. The institutional model of county governance is characterized, including the role of the county council, executive board and starosta, and the differences between zemstvo counties and cities with county rights as two forms of exercising county powers are highlighted. It has been established that the key area of activity of counties is the organization of public service networks, in particular secondary and specialized education, part of county-level medical institutions, social support, labor market institutions, maintenance of county roads and transport accessibility, cadastral and geodetic functions, as well as anti-crisis coordination and security procedures within the competence of self-government. It has been proven that the financial architecture and rules for delegating tasks directly affect the actual autonomy of the county, its investment opportunities and ability to maintain service quality standards. The current challenges of the county level are characterized, including demographic aging, youth outflow, the need for digitalization of services, requirements for transparency and citizen participation, as well as the need for cooperation with communes, voivodeships and the central administration in development and crisis response policies. It is proven that the difference in human resources and administrative capacity between urban centers and peripheral areas increases the heterogeneity of results, so the topic requires further analysis of tools for leveling and improving administrative quality.

Keywords: county, county self-government, decentralization, public services, financial capacity, transfers, accountability, territorial coordination, Poland, administrative reform of 1998.

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Повітове самоврядування в Польщі після 1998 року

Анотація. Мета дослідження являє собою проаналізувати становлення та функціонування повітового самоврядування у Польщі після реформи 1998 року, зосереджуючись на повноваженнях, організаційній моделі, фінансовій спроможності, підзвітності та сучасних викликах. Об'єкт дослідження. це повітове самоврядування у Польщі як проміжний рівень публічного управління між гміною та воєводством, включно з його інституціями, ресурсами та практиками організації надгмінних публічних послуг. Визначено місце повіту в системі децентралізації як інституції координації завдань надгмінного характеру, що потребують ширшого територіального охоплення, ніж можливості однієї гміни, але водночас мають залишатися наближеними до потреб мешканців. Охарактеризовано інституційну модель управління повітом, включно з роллю ради повіту, виконавчого правління та старости, а також висвітлено відмінності між земськими повітами і містами на правах повіту як двома формами реалізації повітових повноважень. Встановлено, що ключовою сферою діяльності повітів є організація мереж публічних послуг, зокрема середньої та спеціалізованої освіти, частини медичних закладів повітового рівня, соціальної підтримки, інституцій ринку праці, утримання повітових доріг і транспортної доступності, кадастрових та геодезичних функцій, а також антикризової координації і безпекових процедур у межах компетенції самоврядування. Доведено, що фінансова архітектура і правила делегування завдань прямо впливають на фактичну автономію повіту, його інвестиційні можливості та здатність підтримувати стандарти якості послуг. Охарактеризовано сучасні виклики повітового рівня, серед яких демографічне старіння, відтік молоді, потреба цифровізації сервісів, вимоги до прозорості і участі громадян, а також необхідність співпраці з гмінами, воєводством і центральною адміністрацією у політиках розвитку та кризового реагування. Доведено, що різниця у кадровому потенціалі та адміністративній спроможності між урбанізованими центрами і периферійними територіями посилює неоднорідність результатів, тому тема потребує подальшого аналізу інструментів вирівнювання і підвищення управлінської якості.

Ключові слова: повіт, повітове самоврядування, децентралізація, публічні послуги, фінансова спроможність, трансферти, підзвітність, територіальна координація, Польща, адміністративна реформа 1998 року.

Introduction

The relevance of the problem. It was the administrative reform of 1998 that restored the county as a key link in public administration between the commune and the voivodeship, and this created a new architecture of responsibility for daily services that citizens experience directly in their lives, including secondary education, hospitals and health care at the county level, social support, road maintenance, public transport, crisis management, geodesy and a number of administrative services that require coordination that is broader than the capabilities of a single commune, but at the same time closer to residents than at the voivodeship level. The justification for the relevance is strengthened by the fact that county self-government in Poland has become one of the practical mechanisms for implementing the principle of subsidiarity, when decisions are made at the level closest to the people, capable of effectively performing the task, and therefore, an analysis of how counties work after 1998 is actually an analysis of the extent to which the state has been able to combine decentralization with the quality of services, accountability, and fair distribution of resources.

Research on county level self-government in Poland after the 1998 reform, implemented from 1999, increasingly focuses on the practical relations between tiers of territorial

governance, the fiscal capacity of local units, and the development effects of intergovernmental finance [1-10]. In this context, Matykowski and Konecka-Szydłowska [1] provide an important territorial perspective by examining conflicts, competition, and cooperation among self-government units in Wielkopolska after the 1999 administrative reform. Their analysis is valuable for studies of powiat self-government because it shows that the reform did not only create new institutional borders, it also reshaped incentives for collaboration and rivalry across municipalities, counties, and regional authorities. By highlighting how neighbouring units negotiate competences, resources, and strategic priorities, the authors help explain why the formal division of tasks often produces complex governance outcomes. Their contribution is especially relevant for understanding county self-government as a coordination level, since many powiat responsibilities require cooperation with municipalities and alignment with regional development policies, while political and economic competition can weaken such cooperation. A second stream of literature addresses the specific role of cities with county rights, which combine municipal and county competences, and therefore represent a distinct pathway of county-level service provision and financing. Krasucka [2] examines how these cities engage in financing tasks related to physical culture, which is a useful lens for broader questions about the financial engagement of county-capable urban governments in public service delivery. The study points to the practical budgetary choices and prioritisation mechanisms that shape whether such tasks are financed adequately, and how responsibilities are interpreted when institutional designs overlap. This perspective complements county-focused analyses because it illuminates an important asymmetry in Poland's local government landscape. Cities with county rights often have stronger revenue bases and greater administrative capacity than many land counties, which influences their ability to fund services and invest in development. This asymmetry matters for evaluating equity in access to public services across territories, as well as for assessing the real autonomy of county-level governance under differing fiscal conditions. Financial capacity and development potential also appear as central themes in the work of Dziekański [3], who analyses the financial situation of cities with powiat rights in Eastern Poland and relates it to diversification of development potential. Even though the unit of analysis is not the land county, the findings are directly informative for studies of county self-government after 1998 because they show how territorial location, socio-economic structure, and fiscal performance interact.

The aim of the study is to analyze the formation and functioning of county self-government in Poland after the 1998 reform, focusing on the powers, organizational model, financial capacity, accountability and current challenges. The object of the study is county self-government in Poland as an intermediate level of public administration between the commune and the voivodeship, including its institutions, resources and practices of organizing supra-commune public services.

Results

After the administrative reform of 1998, the county was restored in Poland as an intermediate level of self-government between the commune and the voivodeship, and from 1999 this model became fully operational. The logic of the changes was to transfer to a level closer to the citizens those functions that are "supra-commune", that is, require a wider scope than a single commune, but do not necessarily have to be performed at the voivodeship or central administration level. In this sense, the county became an institution for coordination and provision of services, where symbolic powers are not so important as the ability to organize networks of institutions and services for several communes. The restoration of counties meant the creation of elected councils, an executive body headed by a starosta, their own administrative structures and planning mechanisms, which expanded democratic accountability in areas that were previously dispersed or managed more centrally. A separate

plot of this reform is connected with the dualism of territorial organization, because in parallel there exist “zemsky” counties and cities with county rights, which received a full set of county competencies, but implement them within the framework of a large urban organism, and this creates different management models and different financial opportunities (Table 1).

Table 1
County self-government in Poland after 1998, key design logic and practical implications

Dimension	Substantive explanation
Institutional role of the powiat	The powiat operates as the intermediate self-government tier between the gmina and the voivodeship, designed to manage tasks that exceed the capacity or territorial scale of a single municipality. In practice, it functions as a coordinator of service networks and a “connector” that aligns local needs with regional planning, while also handling certain delegated public administration functions
Core service responsibilities	Typical powiat responsibilities include managing upper-secondary and specialized education networks, selected health and social assistance functions, labour market institutions, county roads and transport coordination, geodesy and cadastre services, as well as elements of crisis management within statutory competences. These tasks are structurally network-based, meaning performance depends on stable management of institutions, staffing, and inter-municipal coordination rather than one-off projects
Governance and accountability	Powiat governance is built around an elected council and an executive led by the starosta, which creates democratic legitimacy but also exposes county policy to political cycles and local interest bargaining. Accountability is shaped by legal supervision and financial control, while day-to-day legitimacy depends on service accessibility and perceived fairness across municipalities within the county
Typical tensions after the reform	A persistent tension arises from the mismatch between broad service obligations and limited own-revenue capacity, which increases dependence on transfers and equalisation. This can restrict strategic investment and produce uneven service outcomes between land counties and cities with county rights, especially where demographic decline and spatial peripherality raise unit costs of service provision

The powers of the county after 1998 are concentrated in those sectors where scale, professionalization and network management are required. In practical terms, these are primarily secondary education and specialized educational institutions, part of the county-level healthcare institutions, social assistance and family support, employment and the labor market through institutions working with unemployment and retraining, maintenance of county roads and transport organization at the inter-commune level, geodesy, cadastral and cartographic functions, environmental and water issues, civil protection, security and anti-crisis response within the competence of the county. This is where the meaning of the intermediate level becomes clear, since one commune often cannot effectively maintain a hospital, a network of specialized schools or a system of roads connecting several territories, and the voivodeship is too large a level for daily operational coordination. It is also important that the county performs some tasks as a local government body and some as an element of the state administration on the ground, when the state delegates functions to it through legislative mechanisms, and at this point discussions often arise about the adequacy of funding, service standards and the limits of autonomy. The quality of the county's work is well reflected in how it organizes the availability of services in small towns and rural areas, how it

manages infrastructure, and how it is able to be a partner for communes in large inter-territorial projects (Table 2).

Table 2

Governance performance areas in counties and cities with county rights, risks and improvement levers

Performance area	Typical risks and constraints	High-impact improvement levers
Financial sustainability and fiscal space	Limited own revenues, strong dependence on intergovernmental transfers, and exposure to consolidation pressures can reduce flexibility, crowd out investment, and increase “maintenance-first” budgeting. For cities with county rights, stronger revenue bases may widen disparities versus land counties, especially in less developed areas	Multi-year budgeting linked to service standards, clearer costing of delegated tasks, and stronger equalisation rules that better reflect real service costs, including demographic and spatial factors. Introduce performance-informed transfer components that reward efficient network management without punishing structurally disadvantaged territories
Service network effectiveness	Counties manage multi-institution networks, such as schools, roads, social support entities, and selected health facilities. Risks include fragmentation across municipalities, duplication of services, insufficient scale in peripheral areas, and difficulties sustaining staffing and quality under demographic ageing	Inter-municipal service agreements and shared procurement, integrated transport and accessibility planning, and “network audits” that map demand, capacity, and quality gaps. Use digital tools for scheduling, case management, and service routing, with clear local accessibility targets
Intergovernmental coordination and legitimacy	Competition and political bargaining across units can weaken cooperation, distort priorities, and slow joint investments. Citizens may perceive county institutions as distant if they do not clearly associate the powiat with concrete service improvements	Formalised coordination forums with gminas and the voivodeship, transparent public reporting on outcomes and waiting times, and participatory mechanisms focused on service priorities. Strengthen communication that links county decisions to visible improvements in mobility, education pathways, and social support access
Administrative capacity and implementation	Smaller land counties may face shortages of specialised staff, weaker project management capacity, and limited analytical infrastructure for evidence-based decisions. Cities with county rights often outperform due to scale and talent attraction, reinforcing territorial inequality	Capacity-building programmes targeting land counties, shared expert pools across counties, and standardised toolkits for project appraisal and procurement. Develop a county-level analytics function focused on demand forecasting, unit costs, and quality indicators, supported by interoperable digital systems

The financial side of county self-government is one of the most difficult parts of the topic, because the county has broad responsibilities but often limited own revenue

instruments, and therefore depends heavily on transfers, subventions and grants, as well as on equalization mechanisms. This creates a classic managerial tension between responsibility for services and the real ability to finance them, especially in sectors with high fixed costs, such as hospitals, social institutions or special education. This also gives rise to practical problems when counties are forced to balance between the costs of maintaining a network of institutions and investments in development, or between standards set at the national level and local needs. Another characteristic of the Polish model is that cities with county rights usually have a stronger financial base and administrative potential than *zemstvo* counties, which affects the quality of services and the possibilities for modernization. Therefore, in the analysis of the topic, it is important to show how the financial architecture, the structure of expenditures and the relationship with the state budget shape the actual autonomy of counties, as well as how counties use planning, partnerships and intermunicipal cooperation to compensate for the lack of resources. In the same context, the issues of budget transparency, debt management, control of cost-effectiveness and accountability are important, since it is through finances that it is most noticeable whether the county level is able to carry out delegated and own tasks (Fig.1).

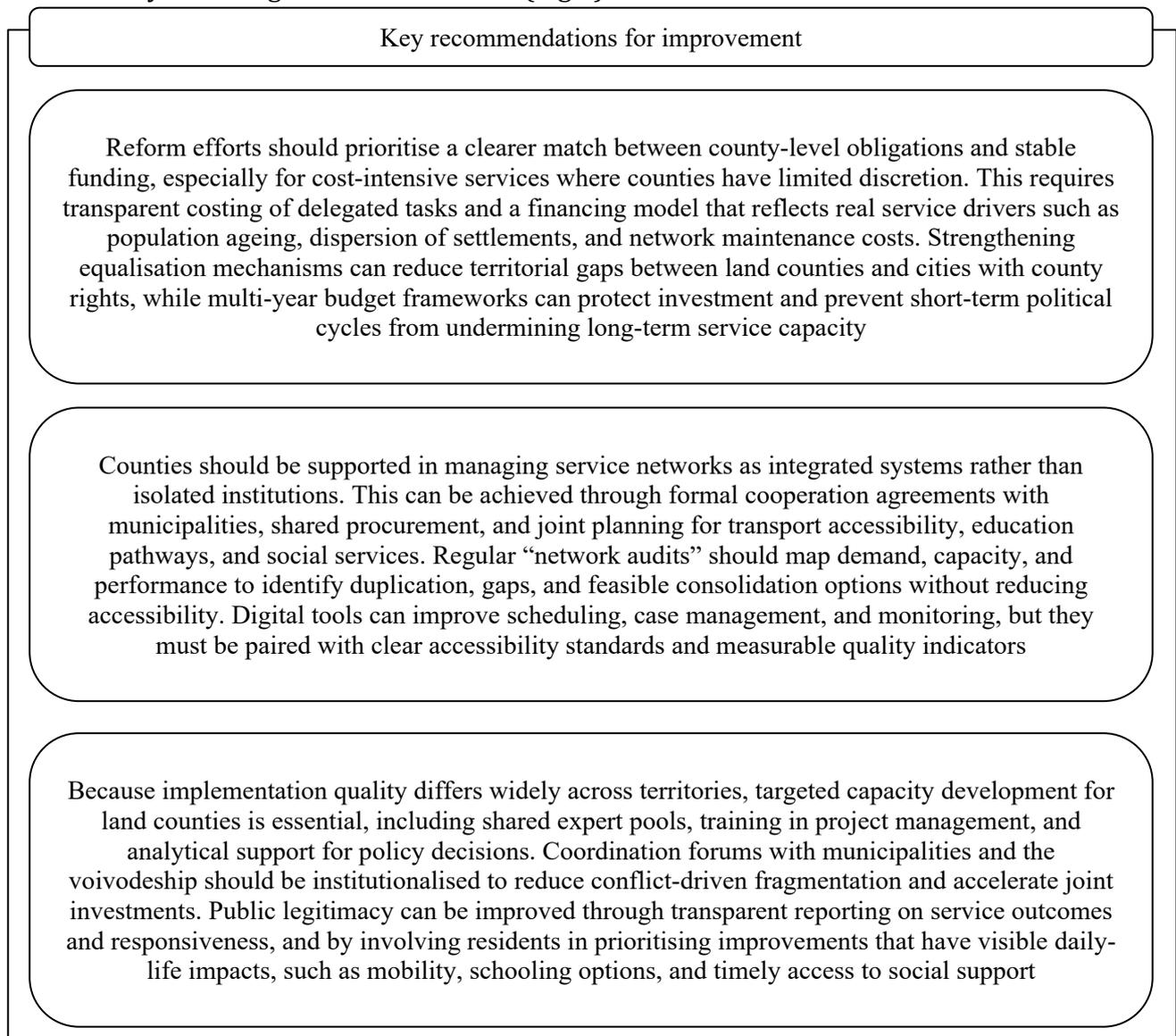


Figure.1. Three key recommendations for improvement

The current development of county self-government in Poland after 1998 should be seen as a continuous process of adaptation to changes, rather than as a completed model. In practice, counties are faced with demographic challenges, an aging population and the need to

expand social and health services, with the migration of young people to large cities, which weakens the human resource base and tax potential of peripheral territories, with the need to digitize services and administrative procedures, with the requirements for transparency and citizen participation in decision-making, as well as with the need to coordinate the development of transport, educational and social networks in larger functional areas. At the same time, county self-government remains an important instrument of territorial cohesion, because it is at this level that it is possible to coordinate the decisions of several communes, equalize access to basic services and create common infrastructure solutions. The relationship between the county and the voivodeship and central institutions is also important in the topic, in particular the question of where the line between the autonomy of self-government and state standards is drawn, how the supervision of the legality of decisions works, how development priorities are formed and who is responsible for the results in areas where decisions are made at several levels simultaneously. That is why the disclosure of the topic "County Self-Government in Poland after 1998" requires simultaneously an institutional, financial and socio-managerial view, because the county in Poland is an example of how decentralization can work through specific services and their organization, and how the success of this model depends on the balance between competencies, resources, managerial capacity and the trust of citizens.

Conclusions

As a result, the county self-government in Poland after the 1998 reform has become a key pillar of the decentralized system of public administration, because it is at this level that the organization of supra-municipal services is concentrated, which require scale, coordination and professional management, while remaining sufficiently close to the needs of residents. Its real effectiveness is determined not only by the legal structure of the authorities, but primarily by the ability to ensure stable financing, maintain networks of education, health care, social support and infrastructure, as well as coordinate the actions of several communes in common territorial interests. At the same time, dependence on transfers and different capacities of territories make the issues of financial sustainability, transparency and accountability central to the assessment of this model. Thus, the analysis of the county after 1998 shows how the principle of subsidiarity, managerial coordination and accountability are combined in practice, and why the availability and equality of public services in different parts of Poland depend on the balance between powers, resources and organizational quality.

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