

**ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY-BUILDING AS THE
SOLUTION FOR EFFECTIVE COHESION POLICY
PERFORMANCE? THE CASE OF THE OPERATIONAL
PROGRAMME 'TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE' IN POLAND**

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the importance of cohesion policy in boosting the economic growth, it was marked by some implementation problems across the European Union (EU). Particularly, those problems concern Member States' weaknesses in their administrative capacity, for example, administrative burden. Thus, the question arises whether cohesion policy investments contribute to regional development in and between the EU countries or it is impeded by administrative burden. During the programming period 2014-2020, a strong prominence was given to Member States' administrative capacity-building in cohesion policy with a view of maximizing the impact of available European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds. Nevertheless, little research has been done to interrogate the use of administrative capacity-building tools, such as via TA, to boost Member States' implementation performance in cohesion policy. Additionally, the existing literature has been marked by scholarly 'fault-lines' in the role of the shared management in cohesion policy implementation. This contribution has two objectives. First, it focuses on the particular administrative capacity-building policy tool, OP TA 2014-2020, to analyse its role on improving cohesion policy implementation in Poland. Poland constitutes a relevant case for this research due to being a primary beneficiary of ESI Funds as well as a complex architecture of cohesion policy implementation. Second, it examines how a multi-level, decentralized system of cohesion policy implementation, the shared management, influences cohesion policy implemented via the OP TA concerned. The findings show whether OP TA effectively contributed to administrative capacity-building in Poland, reinforcing cohesion policy implementation.

Keywords: Cohesion policy, administrative capacity-building, implementation performance, shared management

Administrative capacity-building as the solution for effective Cohesion Policy performance? The Case of the Operational Programme ‘Technical Assistance’ in Poland

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I Introduction

Cohesion policy serves as the European Union's (EU's) major investment policy aimed at reducing regional disparities and achieving social, economic and territorial cohesion in as well as between Member States. To support the regional development, it has a broad scope covering all regions across the Union as well as different target areas, for instance, transport, infrastructure, employment, education, environment (Hoerner and Stephenson, 2012; Ferry, 2013). Cohesion policy is implemented through three European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds: Cohesion Fund (CF), European Social Fund (ESF), European Regional and Development Fund (ERDF), which are spent on Operational Programmes (OPs) and projects on national and sub-national (i.e. regional and local) levels in Member States. The amounts of these Funds allocated to cohesion policy under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020 was EUR 367 billion, accounting to above one third of the total EU budget (European Parliament, 2020, p.20).

Cohesion policy implementation is characterized by a system called 'shared management'. This system implies that implementing responsibilities, including management and control activities, is shared between the European Commission and 27 Member States (European Court of Auditors, 2020; OECD, 2020). Decentralization is the essential element of the shared management, which means that the leading role in ESI spending is delegated to Member States' authorities (European Commission, 2010b; European Court of Auditors, 2020). As for the Commission, it performs a supervisory role in ensuring that cohesion policy spending is line with financial rules and agreed strategic priorities and objectives (European Commission, 2010b, p.6).

Notwithstanding its importance in the regional growth and reaching economic convergence between the EU's countries and their regions, cohesion policy has been marked by implementation problems. Over two recent decades, these problems have been, especially, observable in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries¹. A weak administrative capacity, lagging behind reforms in public administration, administrative burden, inefficient institutions responsible for ESI Funds implementation and management, insufficient and/or unstable human resources, corruption among public authorities, are observed as the underlying reasons hampering cohesion policy implementation (Verheijen, 2007; Bachtler, Mendez and Oraže, 2014; Surubaru, 2017a; Incaltarau, Pascariu and

¹ CEE countries refer to the EU Member States which were part of the former Eastern bloc: Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia.

Surubaru, 2020). Consequently, such challenges adversely affect the regional development in the Member States. This triggers a question how to make cohesion policy work effectively by addressing implementation problems.

To improve cohesion policy effectiveness in the MFF 2014-2020, a strong prominence was given to strengthening effective ESI Funds spending on cohesion policy OPs and projects. Therefore, cohesion policy funding offered specific investments under Thematic Objective (TO) 11 and Technical Assistance (TA) to Member States' authorities. TO 11 focused on enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders in charge of administering and using ESI Funds (European Commission, 2014). The investments under TO 11 covered three broad dimensions of institutional capacity-building: (1) structures and processes, (2) human resources, (3) service delivery (e.g. the providing infrastructure and equipment, reforming human resources strategies and processes to support the modernisation of public services in the areas such as social policies, health, education, employment, customs (OECD, 2020, pp. 27-28). It must be noted, however, that specific actions supported under TO 11 depended upon which specific Fund was involved. The ESF offered a wide scope to support efficiency of public administration (European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2020). The CF and ERDF focused on services and administration concerning the implementation of those two Funds respectively, or supporting the actions under the ESF (European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2020). Comparing to TO 11, TA focused on ESI Funds delivery only. Put differently, TA supported actions of Member States' authorities who administered and used ESI Funds in the implementation of OPs and projects (European Parliament, 2016). Those actions included supporting, for instance, administrative capacity-building in ESI Funds implementation; actions related to evaluation, auditing, monitoring and management; exchange of good practices between Member States' authorities and Funds beneficiaries; actions meant to reduce administrative burden (e.g. ICT systems); networking; information disseminating; training (European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2020). Moreover, TA could take two forms, either a distinct OP and/or a Priority Axis supporting other OPs implemented.

Although TO 11 and TA had different scopes and investments, both were relevant to improve cohesion policy implementation during MFF 2014-2020. Particularly, those cohesion policy investments to support institutional and administrative capacity-building were relevant for the CEE countries due those aforementioned problems.

To examine a case of improving cohesion policy effectiveness, this paper addresses the following research question (RQ): "Did administrative capacity-building, as stimulated via the Operational Programme "Technical Assistance"

2014-2020, contribute to enhancing cohesion policy implementation in Poland?”. This RQ investigates the role of Polish OP TA 2014-2020 in reinforcing the implementation of cohesion policy. To examine this Polish case, the paper combines quantitative (i.e. annual implementation reports) with qualitative (i.e. relevant guidelines, semi-structured interviews) methodology, which is elaborated in section III. The findings will demonstrate that, in spite of administrative capacity problems and a complexity of cohesion policy implementation system in Poland, OP TA played a relevant role in the Polish administrative capacity-building.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the analytical framework. The paper continues with elucidating ‘gaps’ in the existing literature, outlines its contributions and specifies its methodology. The fourth and fifth section presents and discusses the empirical findings. Lastly, the paper comments on its contributions and limitations.

II Analytical framework

The analytical framework of this paper incorporates two concepts, administrative capacity-building and multi-level governance. These specific concepts were selected as they constitute a relevant analytical grid to guide the paper towards answering the RQ. This section overviews the previous academic debates on these two concepts. The next section (see the *Operationalization* sub-section) explains how the concepts are applied and operationalized.

a. Administrative capacity (building)

Administrative capacity stands for the government’s capability of managing its physical and human resources to deliver on its objectives (Painter and Pierre, 2005). In line with this view, administrative capacity specifically focuses on how the policy implementation is organised, how network and agencies together with their managers, in charge of delivering policy promises, operate and perform (El-Taliawi and Van Der Wal, 2019). Further, it must be noted that this concept is related with the institution-building, implying the creation of the institutions needed for the adoption and implementation of the *acquis communautaire* (Dimitrova, 2002). Thus, administrative capacity refers to developing structures and systems, human resources along with management skills to implement the EU policies (e.g. Dimitrova, 2002; Versluis, 2007).

With regard to cohesion policy, administrative capacity constitutes a wide-ranging concept including systems, structures and resources (Mendez and Bachtler, 2017). In put it simple, administrative capacity is defined as the

institutions' ability to manage ESI Funds in accordance with the procedures and rules (Milio, 2007). In other words, it is linked with institutional, bureaucratic as well as human resources-related structures used for absorbing cohesion policy funding (Incaltarau, Pascariu and Surubaru, 2020).

To measure the Member States' administrative capacity in cohesion policy, some studies applied different sets of indicators/variables (Milio, 2007; Bachtler, Mendez and Oraže, 2014; Terracciano and Graziano, 2016; Surubaru, 2017a; Incaltarau, Pascariu and Surubaru, 2020). In their contribution on the CEE countries' performance in cohesion policy, Bachtler, Mendez and Oraže, (2014) used a set of seven indicators² clustered under three components, (1) organizational structures, (2) human resources, (3) administrative adaptability, rated on a scale of A to D (i.e. consolidated/strong, developing, basic, absent/rudimentary). Those Member States' administrative capacity was, in overall, found to be on the borderline between basic (C) and developing (D) (Bachtler, Mendez and Oraže, 2014).

To evaluate the determinants of increasing ESI Funds absorption across the EU-27 countries, Incaltarau, Pascariu and Surubaru (2020) assessed the importance of the administrative capacity and political governance. Administrative capacity was measured in terms of two variables, government effectiveness and regulatory quality (Incaltarau, Pascariu and Surubaru, 2020, p.13). That contribution underlined two findings concerning the role of administrative capacity. First, government effectiveness, in contrast to regulatory quality, was found to be a statistically significant variable for increasing ESI Funds absorption (Incaltarau, Pascariu and Surubaru, 2020, p.16). Second, government effectiveness has been observed to play more a higher role in accounting for the CEE countries' absorption levels when compared to the EU-15. (Incaltarau, Pascariu and Surubaru, 2020, p.16).

Further, Terracciano and Graziano (2016) developed a regional administrative capacity matrix (RACM) to assess administrative capacity in two Italian regions, Campania and Puglia. That specific model consists of four thematic performance indicators incorporated from Milio (2007): (1) programming; (2) management; (3) monitoring; (4) evaluation, together with two novel indicators: (1) the number of supplementary programming documents drafted throughout the programming period 2007-2013; (2) the ratio between internal and external competences (see: Terracciano and Graziano, 2016, pp.300-301). The assessment of administrative capacity level was scaled of 0 to 10 in four categories (absent, nascent, emerging, consolidated) (Terracciano and Graziano, 2016, p.300). Notably,

² The specific indicators are: allocation of competencies and responsibilities, coordination/cooperation among ministries and implementing bodies ((1)organizational structures); availability and suitability of qualified staff, human resource management ((2)human resources); establishment and adaptability of procedures and tools ((3)administrative adaptability)

administrative capacity was marked by a cross-regional variation: in Puglia, it was scored ‘nascent’ whereas, in Campania, it was scored ‘emerging’ (Terracciano and Graziano, 2016).

Smeriglio, Śliwowski and Bachtler (2016) showed key factors determining a higher administrative capacity in the field of cohesion policy. Those factors identified are: (1) the quality of administrative leadership; (2) the availability of experienced, skilled and motivated administrative human resources; (3) effective intra-organisational coordination between the units in the Managing Authorities (MAs); (4) usefulness of systems and tools such as audits, monitoring, audits (Smeriglio, Śliwowski and Bachtler, 2016, pp.183-185). Moreover, a recent study from the European Policies Research Centre (EPRC) (2020) has identified four types of key factors influencing effective administrative capacity-building in cohesion policy. First, institutional factors constitute organisational and political commitment, a proper baseline level of capabilities, ‘buy in’ from stakeholders, conducive governance and institutional framework (see: European Policies Research Centre, 2020, pp.64-66). Second, procedural factors stand for right mix of tools and support along with systematic learning (see: European Policies Research Centre, 2020, pp.66-67). Third, cultural factors are commitment to a long-term mind-set and fostering a culture of cooperation (see: European Policies Research Centre, 2020, p.67). Fourth, contextual factors (i.e. capacity-building, capacity adaptation, capacity coordination) together with different amounts of TA available influence the transferability of case study practices between Member States and OPs (see: European Policies Research Centre, 2020, pp.5,45).

As shown by this literature review, administrative capacity serves as a powerful factor in explaining why some Member States implement cohesion policy less effectively than others. This specific reason behind the implementation problems is line with the management school of thought (Chayes and Chayes, 1993; Hartlapp, 2007; Börzel *et al.*, 2010; Mendez and Bachtler, 2017). Thus, according to ‘managerialism’, administrative capacity-building serves as one of the key policy tools to improve cohesion policy implementation (Tallberg, 2002; Versluis, 2005; Börzel *et al.*, 2010). For instance, Smeriglio, Śliwowski and Bachtler (2016) stress that administrative capacity-building should be enhanced via investments in training, exchange of best practices as well as other interventions tailored-made for a Member State’s territorial context (p.188). In addition to that, Dimitrova (2002) notes that administrative capacity-building ought to be enhanced depending on countries’ individual needs such as human capital, skills, inter-organizational communication, support systems, overarching legislative and monitoring mechanisms (p.253). As argued by Dimitrova (2002), administrative capacity-building should not be a static process but dynamic and continuously upgraded (p.252). Along these lines, some scholars (Versluis and Tarr, 2013;

Surubaru, 2017b; Börzel and Buzogány, 2019) emphasise the importance of TA resources by such as cohesion policy funding to support administrative capacity-building.

b. Multi-level governance

‘Multi-level governance’ implies a conceptual model of governance developed by Marks, Hooghe and Blank (1996). It encompasses two notions, ‘governance’ and ‘multi-level’. ‘Governance’ refers to influential roles of both state and non-state actors in the policy-making process (Bache, 2012; Stephenson, 2013). ‘Multi-level’ implies the multiplicity of tiers of such governing system in which powers are not monopolized by a central authority but they are divided among various actors, from the supranational level to the subnational one (Marks, Hooghe and Blank, 1996; Blom-hansen, 2005; Stephenson, 2013; Tulumello, 2016). Thus, the involvement of various actors and division of powers among multiple tiers (i.e. supranational, national, regional and local) constitute the key features of multi-level governance system.

In particular, the multi-level governance is dominating in the field of cohesion policy (Blom-Hansen, 2005; Stephenson, 2013; Dąbrowski, Bachtler and Bafoil, 2014; Tulumello, 2016). Indeed, cohesion policy constitutes the primary policy domain in which the multi-level governance is applied (Stephenson, 2013). This system is linked with cohesion policy objectives since it is regarded as an instrument of improving governance and institutional structures (Tulumello, 2016). In other words, the multi-level governance in cohesion policy is mainly reflected by the partnership principle. This principle implies a close cooperation between those three levels of governance and requires the involvement of various stakeholder in the policy-process (Kelleher, Batterbury and Stern, 1999; Dąbrowski, Bachtler and Bafoil, 2014). It must be noted, however, the role of the multi-level governance in cohesion policy implementation, as reflected by the partnership principle, has been marked by conflicting scholarly views.

On the one hand, some academics (Kelleher, Batterbury and Stern, 1999; Leonardi, 2005; Dąbrowski, 2014; Surubaru, 2020) argue that the partnership is a driving factor contributing to effective cohesion policy implementation. For instance, Surubaru (2020) interrogated the impact of ESI Funds on socio-economic development in Romania and Bulgaria. Indeed, the application of the partnership principle, as reflected by the involvement of both governmental and non-governmental actors, creates a spill-over effect (Surubaru, 2020). Thus, the partnership principle was observed to contribute more effective cohesion policy implementation, leading in turn to socio-economic growth in Bulgaria and Romania (Surubaru, 2020). Along these lines, the partnership principle is argued to serve as one of the most crucial sources of the added-value generated by cohesion policy due

to favouring the capacity-building as well as creating opportunities for policy learning and innovation across organizational boundaries (Kelleher, Batterbury and Stern, 1999; Dąbrowski, 2014).

On the other hand, the partnership principle was found to actually impede cohesion policy implementation (Blomhansen, 2005; Dąbrowski, Bachtler and Bafoil, 2014; Milio, 2014) challenged that assumption claiming that the partnership principles impedes cohesion policy implementation. For example, the partnership principle is marked by some shortcomings, such as, limited involvement of non-governmental actors in some Member States (e.g. in Greece and Hungary), increased administrative burden of central and sub-national authorities, uneven balance of power between governmental actors and relevant stakeholders (e.g. in Italy) (Dąbrowski, Bachtler and Bafoil, 2014). Moreover, the partnership principle was observed to have two adverse effects on political accountability of regional authorities and stakeholders in the case of cohesion policy implementation in Italy (Milio, 2014). First, it had a blurring effect and “shifting the blames” to a different governmental level, as proved in the case of Sicily (Milio, 2014). Put differently, that effect stemmed from shifting responsibilities by regional authorities to a higher or lower level of governance as regards justifying a poor policy performance (Milio, 2014, p.391). Second, the partnership principle had a conflicting impact on stakeholder engagement in the policy-making process, as evidenced from the regions of Campania, Puglia and Calabria. This could stem from not only politicians’ unwillingness to listen to stakeholders’ interests, but also those societal actors’ weakness “in collecting preferences and elaborating feasible proposals” (Milio, 2014, p.392).

III New approaches to studying cohesion policy administrative capacity-building – Contribution, Operationalisation, Methodology

Considering the existing cohesion policy studies and their contributions discussed above, two ‘gaps’ need to be highlighted. First, the role of the shared management in cohesion policy implementation, as mirrored by the partnership principle, have been marked by scholarly ‘fault-lines’. Consequently, the question arises whether the shared management hampers or contributes to more effective cohesion policy implementation. Second, some investments for enhancing the administrative capacity-building have been discussed by previous research. Importantly, the study by European Policies Research Centre (2020) showed a prominent use of TA for administrative capacity-building during the programming period 2014-2020. First of all, the TA mainly period focused on strategic capacity-building, introduction of innovations, better management of human resources, and scaling-up existing practices (European Policies Research Centre, 2020, p.4). Human Resources constituted the

primacy allocation of TA resources amounting to 65%, majority of which was spent to operational staff salaries (European Policies Research Centre, 2020, p.3). Further, the study has demonstrated several good practice examples of the use of TA for administrative capacity-building, such as, boosting programme authorities' capacity to provide training for beneficiaries (e.g. in Bulgaria), strengthening high level bodies responsible for ESI Funds implementation and management (e.g. in Finland, Sweden, Interreg OP Saxony-Czech Republic), or strengthening ICT systems and digital tools used by programme authorities (e.g. in Latvia, Czech Republic, Sweden), providing professional development for programme authorities via staff training and other development actions (e.g. in Sweden and Slovakia) (see: European Policies Research Centre, 2020, pp.56-63). In addition to that, TA was observed to play an important role in administrative capacity-building in Poland, for instance, in external specialist support, support for beneficiaries by Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) Implementing Body (e.g. seminars and meetings) (pp. 55,58). Nevertheless, that research focused only on the local level, namely the Polish Wałbrzych whereas the national level was understudied.

These two 'gaps' trigger the necessity of further cohesion policy research on the role of administrative capacity-building. This paper seeks to bring two contributions. First, it examines the role of OP TA 2014-2020 on cohesion policy implementation in Poland. Second, this paper pinpoints the relationship between the shared management and administrative capacity-building in the case of Polish 'TA' Programme.

The following section outlines this paper's research design including the case study selection, the specific operationalization of the concepts selected, how data was collected and analysed.

a. Case selection

This paper uses a single case study, focusing on one country, Poland. Poland constitutes a relevant case to examine the role of administrative capacity-building in cohesion policy implementation. First, Poland has been the supreme Member State benefiting from ESI Funds since 2007 onwards. For the MFF 2014-2020, EUR 86 billion was allocated to Poland, which was significantly more when compared to MFF 2007-2013 (EUR 67 billion). Second, since its accession to the EU, Poland had been observed to face some administrative problems hampering the implementation of cohesion policy. Those problems were instability (i.e. fluctuations) in human resources responsible for ESI implementation and management, administrative burden due to frequent changes to a centralized and complex set of procedures, money misuse (e.g. corruption) among public authorities (Bachtler, Mendez and Oražec, 2014; Nyikos and Talaga, 2015; PwC, 2019). Considering those obstacles to cohesion policy implementation, Poland serves as the least-likely case. Thus, at first glance, those domestic factors suggest that OP

TA 2014-2020 could not enhance Poland's administrative capacity in cohesion policy implementation. Nevertheless, the findings will show that the final outcomes turned out to be different.

OP TA 2014-2020 was selected due to its importance to ensuring an efficient system of cohesion policy implementation in Poland (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020a, p.7). In other words, the primary objective of the TA Programme was to reinforce Poland's administrative in managing and implementing ESI Funds (European Commission, n.d.). The TA Programme had two funding priorities under the CF. First, strengthening Polish national authorities' capacity in the implementation, management and audit of ESI Funds (European Commission, n.d.). Second, improving the beneficiaries' capacity in preparing and implementing cohesion policy projects (European Commission, n.d.) In this regard, it is important to recognise a complex architecture of the cohesion policy implementation system in Poland. During the programming period 2014-2020, Poland would implement 22 OPs including 6 national and 16 regional ones. Notably, most of the regional OPs were funded by the ERDF and the ESF, and one national OP (i.e. Infrastructure and Development) was funded by the CF and ERDF (see: European Commission, 2021). Such a complexity triggered another administrative capacity challenges for ensuring effective implementation of all Programmes along local projects.

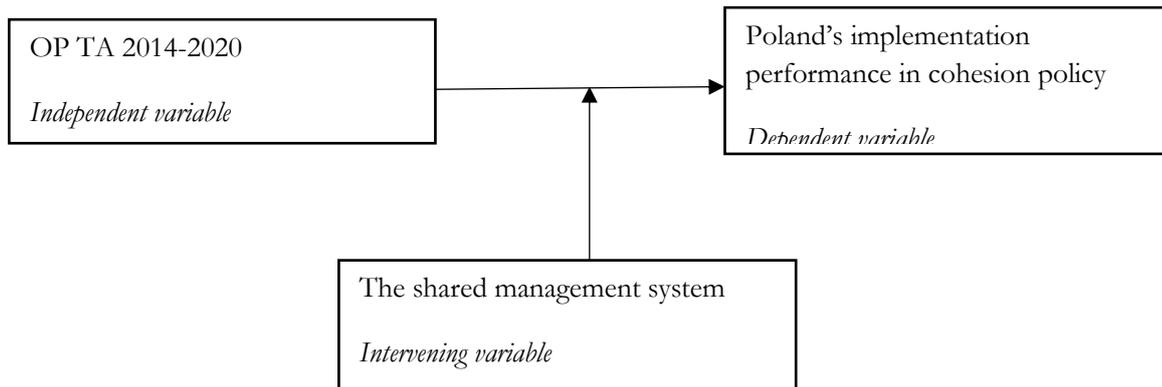
In term of temporality, this paper chose the programming period 2014-2020 as a relevant time framework due to the cohesion policy changes applicable to that period. Those changes, including the allocation under 11 TOs, and reinforcing effectiveness and performance were designed to maximize the impact of available ESI Funds. That would facilitate cohesion policy to deliver Europe 2020 Strategy based on inclusive growth and sustainable innovation for the following 10 years (European Commission, 2013). In addition to that, a strong emphasis was put on administrative capacity-building in that MFF to ensure effective investments of cohesion policy funding (European Parliament, 2014; OECD, 2020).

b. Operationalization

As mentioned above, this paper applies two concepts, administrative capacity-building and multi-level governance. To translate these theoretical concepts into 'real-life' concepts, operationalization is made. Thereby, administrative capacity-building is operationalized as the OP TA 2014-2020 because of similar objectives of this particular Polish Programme. The multi-level governance is operationalized as the shared management since this system mirrors a multi-level structure of cohesion policy implementation.

In this case study, administrative capacity-building serves as the independent variable (IV) whereas Poland’s implementation performance is cohesion policy is the dependent variable (DV). Further, this paper argues that the shared management system may influence the relationship between these two variables. Thereby, the shared management serves as intervening variable. The relationship between these three variables is presented in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1. The relationship between OP TA 2014-2020 and Poland’s implementation performance in cohesion policy influenced by the shared management system.



Source: Author’s figure.

To measure the concepts selected, eleven specific indicators are used (see: *Table 1*). The ‘Results’ and ‘Products’ indicators were taken from *Annual reports on the implementation of OP TA 2014-2020*. The third ‘Result’ indicator is measured in a scale 1-5 which stems from the original methodology used in *Annual reports on the implementation of OP TA 2014-2020*. In other words, ‘Result’ indicators illustrate outcomes of specific interventions during the programme implementation whereas ‘Product’ ones denote specific actions directly ‘produced’ during this process. Regarding the ninth, tenth and eleventh indicator, these three ones were developed by the author based on documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews concerning the ‘TA’ Programme implementation.

Table 1. Operationalization of the concepts.

Concept	Indicators	
<i>Administrative capacity-building</i>	Result indicators	Product indicators
	(1) The level of fluctuation of the institutional staff involved in cohesion policy implementation	(5) Yearly number of participants in training forms of institutions

	<p>(2) Average yearly number of training forms per staff member of the institutional system of cohesion policy implementation</p> <p>(3) Average assessment of the central ICT system (in scale 1-5)</p> <p>(4) Average time of project approval</p>	<p>(6) Number of full-time positions financed from Technical Assistance resources</p> <p>(7) Yearly number of seminars, working meetings, conferences</p> <p>(8) Yearly number of conducted evaluations</p>
<i>Multi-level governance</i>	<p>(9) The institutional system of OP TA 2014-2020</p> <p>(10) The ESI Funds control system in OP TA 2014-2020</p> <p>(11) Application of the partnership principle in OP TA 2014-2020</p>	

Source: Author's table.

c. Methods of data collection and data analysis

To measure the specific indicators, a documentary content analysis which combines qualitative and a quantitative dataset has been used. The qualitative dataset comprises institutional sources such as the programme text of the Polish OP TA 2014-2020 and the national guidelines published. The quantitative dataset has been developed on the basis of the *Annual implementation reports of OP TA 2014-2020*.

The findings from the documentary analysis are completed with seven qualitative, semi-structured interviews, which allow for enhancing validity and the credibility of the paper's findings. Three interviews were conducted with four representatives of Unit F3 Poland in the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) as that specific unit was in charge of OP 'TA' 2014-2020 implementation in cooperation with the Polish authorities. Four interviews were conducted with four representatives of Poland's Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Development. Interviewing the representatives of DG REGIO as well as Polish authorities was relevant to acknowledge the standpoints of both sides.

In order to conceptualise the specificity of the Polish case, the next section outlines the specific institutional system of OP TA 2014-2020 and discusses the role of the shared management in this Programme implementation.

IV The shared management system in cohesion policy implementation: the case of Polish OP TA 2014-2020

Under the shared management system, three national authorities – the Managing Authority (MA), the Auditing Authority (AA), and the Certifying Authority (CA) – are the key actors responsible for management and implementation of cohesion policy. They constitute three levels of control at a Member State’s national level. First, the MA (the 1st level of control) is responsible for correct and effective implementation of OPs. Second, the CA (the 2nd level of control) submits expenditure being declared for reimbursement to the Commission. Third, the AA (the 3rd level of control) audits the functionality and effectiveness of ESI control system as well as reports its annual work in audit reports to the Commission (European Commission, 2010b). Moreover, the European Commission performs the supervisory role over national systems ensuring that Funds are spent in line with cohesion policy priorities and the financial rules applicable to them at EU level (Centre for Industrial Studies, 2010; European Commission, 2010a). How did the shared management influence cohesion policy implementation in the case of Polish OP TA 2014-2020 ? Two elements of this system, the partnership principle and control system of EU Funds, are interrogated vis-à-vis the TA Programme implementation.

Table 2. Institutional system of OP TA 2014-2020: Poland.

Authority	The name of the responsible institution and department	The head of the institution
Managing Authority (MA)	Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy: Department of Assistance Programmes	Minister of Development Funds and Regional Policy
Certifying Authority (CA)	Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy: Department of Assistance Programmes: Department of Public Funds	Minister of Development Funds and Regional Policy
Auditing Authority (AA)	Ministry of Finance: Department of Public Finance Audit, and 16 chambers of Treasury Administration	General Inspector of Treasury Control

Source: Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020, p.37.

Table 2 explains the actual institutional system for the governance of the Polish ‘TA’ Programme 2014-2020. As shown in the table, the institutional system of Polish TA Programme was specific due to a double position held by the Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy (MDFRP). The MDFRP was both the MA and the CA. As the MA, it had the following responsibilities: (1) determining the OP TA 2014-2020 implementation system, (2) monitoring implementation progress of the program its evaluation and annual reporting, (3) ensuring valid and correct electronic data in the central ICT system to monitor this program implementation, (4) financial resources (i.e. CF) management meant to this program implementation, (5) preparing annual control plans of OP TA 2014-2020 (Interview 5). As the CA, that Ministry was in charge of verifying the statement of payment applications and expenditures before their submission to the Commission, certifying the accurateness of expenditures and verifying the controls conducted by the MA and the AA (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020; Interview 4). As explained by Interviewee 4, the CA was empowered with carrying out internal audits which entailed the cooperation with auditors from the AA, the European Commission and the European Court of Auditors. The AA was responsible for controlling the MA through conducting internal audits to verify the functioning of the institutional system of OP TA 2014-2020 as well as spending of the financial resources (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020; Interview 4). As far as the Unit F3 of DG REGIO is concerned, it performed the supervisory role over OP TA 2014-2020 implementation, which involved conducting annual comprehensive monitoring, providing recommendations, participating in the Monitoring Committee meetings, and scrutinizing the payments claims made by the CA (Interviews 4&6).

a. ESI Funds control system

Owing to the specificity of the Polish cohesion policy control system for the OP TA 2014-2020, there were three, instead of four, levels of control mechanisms. Thus, the MA (i.e. 1st level) and the AA (i.e. the 2nd level) were the primary levels whereas the European Commission was the supreme one (i.e. the 3rd level). As stressed by the representatives of both DG REGIO’s and Polish sides, the control mechanisms entailed comprehensive, complementary financial controls, such as, annual audits carried out by the AA and the Commission, controls of payments claims and cohesion policy projects financed by ESI Funds. Further, Interviewee 4 noted “a continual cooperation” between the MA and the AA in the field of financial controls. Specifically, that cooperation included annual monitoring and controls of the MA by the AA, clarifying accounting matters (e.g. eligibility of the Funds expenditures), financial statements made by the MA (Interview 4).

To streamline the system of financial control in OP TA 2014-2020, training and awareness-raising activities were undertaken which encompassed the participation of the MA staff in conferences series “Control and irregularities in the disbursement of ESI Funds” (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2018, p.18). Furthermore, the MA was the primary institution responsible for controlling the projects implemented in terms of OP TA 2014-2020 in line with the drawn up Annual Control Plan (Interview 5; Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Development, 2018). Next to those projects controls, the MA undertook anti-irregularities measures (i.e. preventive and detection measures), such as training and awareness-raising activities, irregularities reporting irregularities³ and imposition financial corrections in the case of ineligible expenditures identified (Interviews 4 & 5). It must be remarked, however, the Polish respondents did not mention on the effectiveness of those measures. This brings into question whether those measures were effective in reduction the likelihood of irregularities.

b. The partnership principle

In the case of Poland as well as the other CEE Member States, the partnership principle is supposed to have an important impact on administrative capacity-building by promoting greater cooperation among policy actors and for cohesion policy implementation (Kelleher, Batterbury and Stern, 1999; Bachtler and McMaster, 2008; Dąbrowski, 2014). As far as the Polish OP TA 2014-2020 is concerned, different forms cooperation were observed by the respondents from MDFRPP and DG REGIO. Interviewee 4 emphasized regular cooperation between the MA and the Programme beneficiaries. That cooperation was evident by guidelines and recommendations issued by the MA to the beneficiaries and the bilateral annual meetings (Interview 4). In particular, those bilateral meetings were crucial as regards financial and accounting matters, for instance how to avoid irregularities-related mistakes (Interview 4). DG REGIO officials were in the regular, daily contact with the Polish authorities from the MDFRP (Interviews 2,4 &7). As argued by Interviewees 3 and 4, the permanent Program Supervisor from the Commission closely cooperated with the MA on regular basis both indirectly (e.g. contacts via phone or ICT system) and directly (e.g. bilateral meetings at least three times per year). Moreover, some respondents from the Polish as well as DG REGIO’s side stressed very positive and continual cooperation among the MA, the AA, and the Commission in the field of anti-irregularities measures. That cooperation involved financial controls and consultations on proper interpretation and application relevant financial rules, such as, public procurement ones (Interview 3 & 4).

³ Only irregularities amounting above 10 000 EUR had to be reported to the European Commission (Ministry of Investment and Development, 2018; Interview 5).

Importantly, the bilateral cooperation between the MA and the European Commission under the shared management was founded on mutual trust and understanding (Interview 2). Interviewee 3 explained it in the following way:

“The European Commission entrusts the MA with appropriate spending of CF on the OP TA 2014-2020. However, this trust is comprehensively controlled by carrying out annual audits by the Commission. Thus, mutual trust is a vital issue under the shared management, otherwise the European would have to control everything concerning the implementation of this Programme.”

Importantly, the Monitoring Committee (MC) mirrored the partnership principle in the ‘TA’ Programme implementation.. The MC was an independent body responsible for reporting the implementation progress of TA Programme. It was composed of multiply actors from different levels: from governmental as well as non-governmental side (e.g. the National Agreement of Trade Unions, the Business Centre Club), and observers (e.g. the representatives of the MA, the European Commission, the National Evaluation Unit). Such the MC’s composition strived for balance between its representatives with a view to applying the partnership principle (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020a, p.40). As stressed by Interviewee 7, the European Commission’s representatives regularly participated in the meeting of the MC.

Concluding this part of the analysis, the implementation of OP TA 2014-2020 was characterized by a multilateral cooperation, demonstrating the application of the partnership principle and a comprehensive system of ESI Funds control. These elements demonstrate the important role of the shared management in TA Programme. In particular, the bilateral cooperation between the European Commission and the Polish authorities did reflect the partnership principle due to division of responsibilities, which prevented from the administrative burden, a crucial component of the administrative capacity-building (Interview 2). According to one respondent from DG REGIO’s side, however, the partnership principle was mainly observed to be well applied at the central level. As regards the Polish regional level, some shortcomings were observed. As explained by Interviewee 7, the regional authorities were not always invited for the Working Groups meetings. Consequently, limited access of those actors in some relevant aspects of OP TA 2014-2020 implementation, for instance, support in the programming stage or exchange of best practices to build administrative capacity in implementation of ESI Funds. It is notable that, however, those shortcomings in the partnership principle were not remarked by the representatives from the Polish side. Thus, this puts into question whether the Polish authorities did not observe that gap or they did not intend to touch upon it.

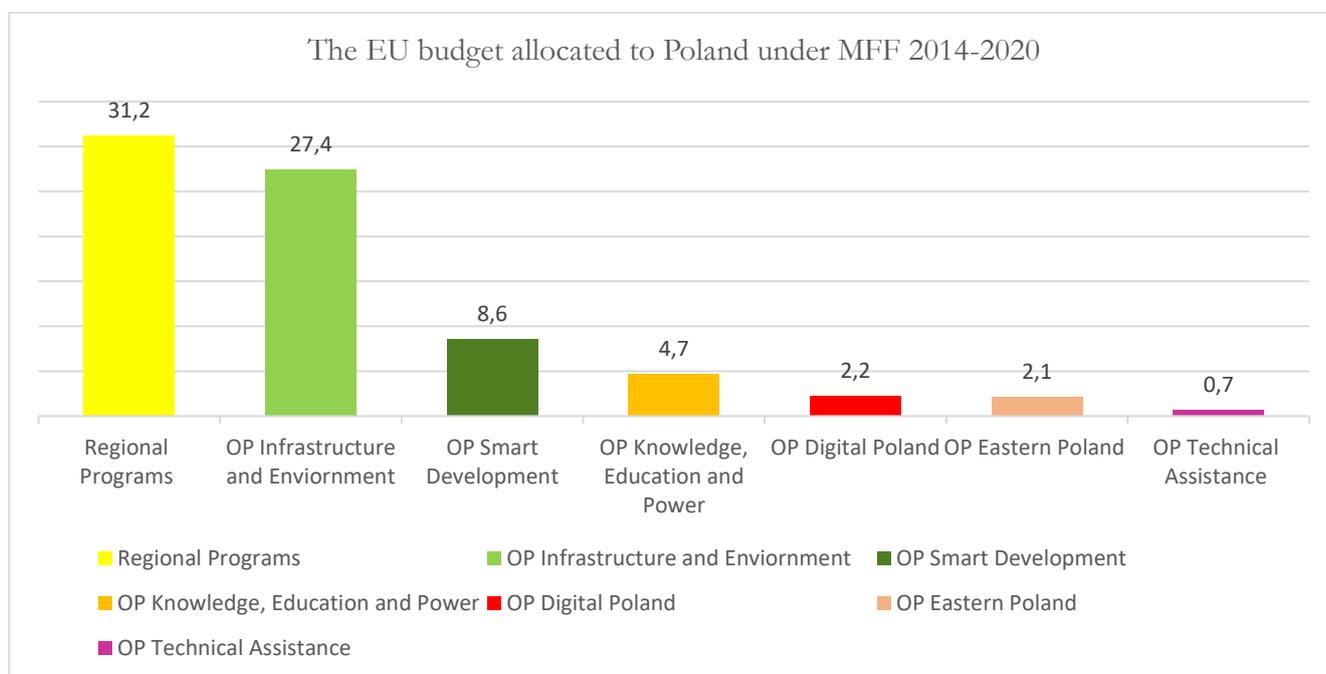
The following section examines the implementation progress of OP TA 2014-2020. The analysis shows the impact of that Programme on Poland’s administrative capacity-building during the programming period 2014-2020.

V Effective cohesion policy implementation system in Poland during 2014-2020 period?: implementation progress of OP TA

During the programming period 2014-2020, Cohesion Policy funds in Poland were spent on sixteen regional OPs, which account for sixteen Polish provinces (i.e. voivodeships), and six national OPs. Therefore, as explained earlier, the Polish implementation system of cohesion policy was complex due to that numerous OPs to be managed and distribution of ESI funding among them.

Thus, despite being the smallest national OP, ‘Technical Assistance’ bore a fundamental role for the implementation system of cohesion policy in Poland. In accordance with the Partnership Agreement, ensuring an effective cohesion policy implementation system for the period 2014-2020 was the major objective of that Programme (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020a, p.7). To achieve that objective, four specific objectives along with corresponding priority axes were implemented (see: *Table 3*).

Figure 2. Allocation of cohesion policy Funds to Poland in MFF 2014-2020 (in EUR mln).



Source: Ministry of Investment and Development, 2014, p.2

Table 3. OP TA 2014-2020: four specific objectives and corresponding priority axes.

Specific objective	Priority axis
(1) Providing necessary human resources and conditions guaranteeing the efficient operation of the institution	(1) Human resources
(2) Efficient system of cohesion policy implementation	(2) Efficient and effective system of cohesion policy implementation
(3) Development of beneficiaries potential with particular emphasis on the territorial dimension of cohesion policy	(3) EU Funds beneficiaries' potential
(4) Efficient and effective information and dissemination of EU Funds	(4) Information and dissemination

Source: Author's table based on Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020a.

To assess the achievement of the main objectives of OP TA 2014-2020, this section analyses the implementation progress of that Programme measured with the values of selected 'Result' and 'Product' indicators. Owing to numerous indicators set by the MA to assess the implementation progress of OP TA 2014-2020, a more refined selection of indicators had to be made. This analysis focuses on the key indicators ascribed to Priority Axes 1 and 2. Thus, regarding both 'Result indicators' and 'Product indicators, two indicators of Priority Axis 1 and two indicators of Priority Axis 2 were selected (see: Table 4 & 5). It can be argued that these specific indicators serve as the most essential ones to assess the implementation progress of OP TA 2014-2020.

To begin with, it must be remarked that the programming period 2014-2020 in Poland was followed by some delays in spending of Cohesion Policy funds on all OPs. Those implementation delays resulted from some problems with Poland's public administration including delays at the national level with the acceptance of legal acts and other relevant documents, acceptance of the OPs together with the criteria of projects selection generation, meeting ex-ante requirements. As regards OP TA 2014-2020, it was accepted by the European Commission on 9 December 2014 (Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020b, p.5). As a result, the implementation of the 'Technical Assistance' Programme actually started in 2015.

In the following, the analysis is divided into two parts. The first part examines the implementation progress of OP TA 2014-2020 taking into account the values of the selected 'Result indicators' whereas the latter one – the values of the selected 'Product indicators'. Lastly, the findings of this analysis are summarized.

a. Implementation progress of OP TA 2014-2020: 'Result indicators'

As shown in *Table 3* below, the 'Result indicators' have target and base values. Base values concern those values obtained in the last year of the programming period 2007-2013 whereas target values denote these ones aimed at achieving before 2023. Thus, considering the base and target values of each of 'Result indicators' allow to providing more detailed analysis of the implementation progress of OP TA 2014-2020.

The first implementation year (i.e. 2015) of the TA Programme was followed by a good implementation progress since the values of the first (i.e. The level of fluctuation of the institutional staff involved in Cohesion Policy implementation) and fourth (i.e. Average time of project approval) 'Result indicators' neared to the target ones. The exception concerns the third indicator (i.e. Average assessment of the central ICT system) as its values are measured in every three years. The value of the second indicator (i.e. Average yearly number of training forms per staff member of the institutional system of Cohesion Policy implementation) was not considered in assessing the implementation progress for 2015 (Interview 1 & 6).

Importantly, the level of fluctuation of the institutional staff involved in Cohesion Policy implementation must be considered because effective implementation of cohesion policy, to a large extent, depends upon retention of administrative staff members having appropriate competences, as well as ensuring organizational continuity of the institutions involved (PwC, 2019, p.38). During the period 2015-2019, the values of this indicator were marked by fluctuations, which may indicate a high level of vacating positions in the institutions involved in OP TA 2014-2020 implementation. In general, a high level of fluctuations does not constitute an extraordinary phenomenon for the public administration (STOS, 2019, p.6). Nevertheless, as regards the administrative staff responsible for cohesion policy implementation, the fluctuations observed were significantly high (STOS, 2019, p.6). Those fluctuations showed a key challenge for TA Programme implementation due to the resignation of experienced, highly-skilled, institutional staff members (75% of all resignations from the respective Polish Ministries), which mainly resulted from a low salary, limited opportunities of promotion or competences development (PwC, 2019; STOS, 2019). Particularly, 2018 must be considered because of a significant rise of this indicator value, which was almost three times higher than the target value (STOS, 2019, p.6). In 2019, the level of fluctuations notably felt in, however, that yearly value was still higher than the target value. Importantly, even if motivating activities meant to work in

fund administration were recommended and therein implemented, the target value would be unlikely to be achieved till 2023 (STOS, 2019, pp.7-8).

As regards 'Average yearly number of training forms per staff member of the institutional system of Cohesion Policy implementation', some fluctuations between 2016 and 2019 are observed. In 2016, the value of this 'Result' indicator was twice lower than the basic value, which was followed by twofold decrease in 2017. According to some respondents from the Polish side, those low values of this indicator were caused by limited availability of suitable forms of training for the institutional staff members. In 2018, however, the value of the second indicator quadrupled in comparison with the previous year. Indeed, another fall of this indicator value is observed in 2019. Nonetheless, that decrease in 2019 is less sharp comparing to downward trends from the previous year. Thus, the target value may be achievable by 2023.

When it comes to the first measurement (i.e. in 2016) of 'Average assessment of the central ICT system', the value was low against the basic value. That downward trend resulted from two reasons. First, during 2015-2016 of the ICT system functionality dedicated to the implementation of Cohesion Policy was low (STOS, 2019, p.10). Second, users of the ICT system (i.e. the administrative staff members) needed to learn how to use it efficiently (STOS, 2019, p.10). Notably, however, by 2019, the value of this indicator not only exceeded the basic one but it also neared the target value, which could depict an improvement in the quality of the central ICT system. Since progress in technology transfer is a crucial aspect of the administrative-capacity building (Dimitrova, 2002; Versluis, 2005), that upward trend of this indicator was relevant to enhancing the Poland's implementation system of Cohesion Policy.

Regarding the fluctuations in values of 'Average time of project approval between 2015 and 2019, two reasons must be recognised. On the hand, a pro-beneficiary attitude of the MA staff members, and, on the other hand, the MA's staff efforts to maximally simplify the process of beneficiaries' projects approval (STOS, 2019, p.10). Nevertheless, those fluctuations were not considerable, thus, the achievement of the target value at the end of the programing period was not put under risk (STOS, 2019, p.10).

Table 4. Selected 'Result' indicators.

Indicator	Unit of measurement	Target value (2023)	Base value (2013)	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Priority Axis 1									
(1) The level of fluctuation of the institutional staff involved in cohesion policy implementation	%	5.5.	3	0	5.7	10.79	10.9	14.11	11.53
(2) Average yearly number of training forms per staff member of the institutional system of cohesion policy implementation	Number	3	2.58	0	n/d	1.09	0.5	2.44	1.84
Priority Axis 2									
(3) Average assessment of the quality of the central ICT system*	Scale 1-5	4	3.61	-	-	3.5	-	-	3.8
(4) Average time of beneficiary's project approval**	Days	40	44.49	0	32.24	35.86	25.42	27.71	33

* Under the provisions of methodology in Guidelines regarding the use of 'Technical Assistance' funds for 2014-2020, this indicator is measured in every 3 years (Interview 1).

** Time concerned ranges from submission of a project application to signing the contract on financing that project.

Source: Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020b.

b. Implementation progress of OP TA 2014-2020: Product indicators.

It must be noted that 'Product' indicators comprise neither base nor target values. Thus, it might seem challenging, as compared to the Result indicators, to assess the implementation progress of OP TA 2014-2020. Importantly, both group of indicators must be considered because they serve as the complementary ones in the implementation assessment (Interview 6).

Taking into account the first indicator (i.e. Yearly number of participants in training forms of institutions), it was marked by a fall in value between 2015 and 2016. Similarly, the values of the third indicator (i.e. Yearly number of seminars, working meetings, conferences) had downwards trends in the same period. In the case of both indicators, those falls were caused by several factors, such as, low availability of suitable trainings or conferences for the institutional staff, refusal to participate in such events abroad, unavailability of the staff members to participate in such events due to current, numerous tasks, or long-lasting procedures of accepting the trainings applications (STOS, 2019). Nonetheless, after 2016, the values of both indicators had considerably improved. This shows that not only could more institutional staff members, responsible for implementing cohesion policy, benefit from those training activities, but also more suitable activities became available to them. Indeed, trainings activities, conferences and seminars were relevant to the administrative capacity-building as they enabled the national authorities to exchange best practices and help avoid commonly-made mistakes (Interview 4). The benefits from those opportunities mirror the policy learning, an essential driver of effective cohesion policy implementation (Dotti and et al., 2016; Sbaraglia, 2016). Thus, the high values of the first and third indicator in 2019 indicate the opportunities of strengthening both institutional staff's and beneficiaries' competences, contributing in turn to Poland's administrative-capacity in cohesion policy implementation.

As for 'Number of full-time positions financed by Technical Assistance resources', a stagnation of its value was reported in 2015. According to the representatives from the Polish and the European Commission's side, that stagnation resulted from the initial period of OP TA 2014-2020 implementation. Along these lines, both sides argued that a lot of efforts were put under TA Programme implementation to ensure competent human resources

for the cohesion policy system. As explained by Interviewee 3, “OP TA 2014-2020 increased pays” making the work in the public administration more attractive. Indeed, those efforts under Priority Axis 1 are evident by a significantly upward trend of the second indicator values between 2016 and 2019.

Lastly, ‘Yearly number of conducted evaluations’ was marked by little progress between 2016 and 2017. As claimed by some respondents from the Polish side, the implementation of TA Programme started in 2015, which might account for the lack of evaluations conducted in 2015. Notably, between 2017 and 2019, the value of this indicator was followed by a yearly rise. In fact, regarding implementation of cohesion policy programmes, evaluations are relevant tools as they allow assessing the effectiveness and impact of ESI Funds spent (Bachtler and Wren, 2006; Hoerner and Stephenson, 2012). Therefore, that significant rise in the number of yearly conducted evaluations in the post-2017 period depicts a progress in OP TA 2014-2020 implementation.

Table 5. ‘Product’ indicators.

Indicator	Unit of measurement	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Priority Axis 1							
(1) Annual number of participants in trainings for the staff implementing ESI Funds	Number	0	17442	868	3094	7049	10118
(2) Number of full-time positions financed from Technical Assistance resources	Item	0	0	31 562,48	68 739,64	111 962, 69	150 490, 47
Priority Axis 2							
(3) Annual number of working meetings, conferences, seminars	Number	0	937	57	251	420	523

(4) Yearly number of conducted evaluations	Number	0	0	7	5	34	42
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Source: Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020b.

To sum up, the analysis of the 'Result' and 'Product' indicators showed some important findings of the implementation of OP TA 2014-2020. First and foremost, despite those implementation delays, the first actual implementation year (i.e. 2015) was, in general, followed by the implementation progress of TA Programme. This is evident in the case of values of most indicators concerned. Second, the next reporting year, 2016, was marked by considerable fall of the values of both 'Result' and 'Product' indicators, which may indicate a regress in the implementation of OP TA 2014-2020. Third, however, the reporting period 2017-2019 was characterized by a significant rise of both 'Result' and 'Product' indicators, demonstrating increased effectiveness of OP TA 2014-2020 implementation. Thus, this shows potential enhancements in Poland's administrative capacity-building for Cohesion Policy implementation.

In 2018, however, a high level of fluctuation of the institutional staff involved in cohesion policy implementation was observed, which was followed by a fall in 2019. Indeed, in the last reporting year, 2019, the value of that indicator was still high, exceeding twice the target value. Nevertheless, appropriate measures taken under the next Action Plans to ensure the administrative capacity of the institutions involved in cohesion policy implementation contributed to reducing the level of fluctuation (PwC, 2019, p.7). As a result, those measures allowed to maintaining organizational and competence continuity of the institutions in question (PwC, 2019, p.7). Those observed challenges in the administrative staff stability, as reflected by a twice as high level of fluctuation, is accounted for by economic situation external to TA programme, mainly the improving situation on the labour market (PwC, 2019, p.7). Put differently, it refers to salary increase dynamics in the entrepreneurial sector, which is higher than in the public administration. Along these lines, the problem with the stability of human resources was observable in the whole sector of public administration, affecting the institutions involved in Cohesion Policy funds implementation. However, as discussed previously, OP TA 2014-2020 improved the financial attractiveness of the public administration through wage increase for the institutional staff members as well as increased number of full-time positions financed by TA resources (Interviews 3&4).

VI Conclusions

The research on cohesion policy implementation has expanded over a recent decade, demonstrating the significance of the administrative capacity factor and its necessity to ensure effective ESI Funds spending. However, specific administrative capacity-building interventions, for instance, via Technical Assistance, was meant to improve cohesion policy implementation, had to be further expanded. To address this gap, this contribution examined the role Polish OP TA 2014-2020 in administrative capacity building during the MFF 2014-2020. Additionally, this paper contributed to understanding role of the shared management in cohesion policy implementation.

Poland's domestic problems in the public administration sector, as evident by a high level of fluctuations, and delays in implementation of OPs at the beginning of MFF 2014-2020, made this country least likely case of boosting its administrative capacity. Those problems put initially forward into consideration that administrative capacity-building, via OP TA 2014-2020, would be rather the least likely scenario. However, the findings shown yield relevant implications for the cohesion policy literature.

First of all, as confirmed by the interviewees from the Polish and DG REGIO's side, OP TA enhanced Poland's administrative capacity contributing to effective implementation system of cohesion policy during the programming period 2014-2020. As stressed by Interviewee 3, "such Poland's administrative potential shows the whole functional system of implementing ESI Funds, which is actually perceived as the best in the EU". Specifically, this Poland's potential was observed in three components of the administrative capacity: qualified institutional staff, efficient ICT central system, solid evaluation capacity (Interview 3 & 4). Moreover, OP TA 2014-2020 was regarded as a "safe Programme" because of no implementation delays in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic seriously hit the EU and its Member States (Interview 3). Thereby, coming back to the RQ posted, OP TA 2014-2020 indeed played a fundamental role in boosting Poland's administrative capacity in Cohesion Policy implementation.

Second, the case of the Polish TA Programme showed a relevant role of the shared management system in enhancing Cohesion Policy implementation. As shown by the findings, this multi-level, decentralized system is founded on clearly specified, shared responsibilities among the different policy actors concerned who complement

and cooperate. Despite this strength of the shared management was recognised by the respondents from the Commission and Polish side, the question remains whether those comprehensive financial controls in OP TA 2014-2020 implementation did not show a complexity of this system, “many hands, many eyes” (Cipriani, 2010).

Last but not least, some limitations of this contribution must be acknowledged. First, quantitative data concerning the implementation year 2020 was not covered because of the lack of any official reports published by the Polish authorities. This issue was addressed in qualitative interviews, which helped to draw conclusions on the entire period of OP TA 2014-2020 implementation. It must be kept in mind however, that the interviewees reflected individuals’ standpoints, not necessarily the official position of the institutions they belong to. This depicts some subjective respondents’ opinions presented in this paper. Did such standpoints undermine the findings on the role of TA in administrative capacity-building in Poland? As discussed earlier, the previous study by the EPRC (2020) demonstrated some good practice examples of the use TA in administrative capacity, which were evidenced in the Polish case (i.e. the city of Walbrzych). Similarly to that study, this paper found a crucial role of Technical Assistance resources to boost Poland’s administrative capacity in Cohesion Policy implementation. Such findings convergence shows that Poland was a successful case in administrative capacity-building via OP TA.

Second, this paper focused on a single Member State to examine the role of OP TA in reinforcing the cohesion policy implementation system. Therefore, further studies could make a comparative analysis taking into account other Member States which implemented the same OP TA during MFF 2014-2020, such as Romania, the Czech Republic or Slovakia. This further research would make it possible to compare the implementation results of the same OP in similar Member States. As result, the findings would show whether OP TA effectively contributed to enhancing cohesion policy implementation across European countries.

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Annex I: Information on the interviews

Interview 1: Representative of the Managing Authority of Operational Programme Technical Assistance

Interview 2: 3 Representatives of Unit F3 Poland, DG REGIO – the Head of the Unit F3, Permanent Supervisor of Operational Programme Technical Assistance, Policy officer responsible for administrative capacity-building

Interview 3: Permanent Supervisor of Operational Programme Technical Assistance

Interview 4: Vice-head of the Department of Assistance Programmes, Poland's Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy (Managing Authority of Operational Programme Technical Assistance)

Interview 5: Head of the Department of Technical Assistance and Cooperation Development, Poland's Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy (Managing Authority of Operational Programme Technical Assistance)

Interview 6: Representative of the Managing Authority of Operational Programme Technical Assistance

Interview 7: Team leader of Unit F3 – Poland, DG REGIO

Disclaimer

The presented views and opinions of both the European Commission's and Polish officials who I contacted for my research are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the institutions they belong to.

ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY-BUILDING AS THE SOLUTION FOR EFFECTIVE COHESION POLICY PERFORMANCE? THE CASE OF THE OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME ‘TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE’ IN POLAND

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