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Europeanisation in neo-endogenous development: do local strategies address issues relevant to EU supranational objectives?

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ABSTRACT

The European Union (EU) promotes rural participatory development through Local Action Groups (LAGs), which create Local Development Strategies (LDSs) supported by EU funds. These strategies exemplify neo-endogenous development, blending top-down support with bottom-up initiatives. This study evaluates how the LDSs prepared in Poland during the 2014–2020 EU funding period reflected issues important for the supranational Europe 2020 Strategy targets. Using a content analysis of 293 strategies, we find alignment with the pan-European objectives on employment, education, and poverty reduction, but a limited focus on greenhouse gas reduction and renewable energy. Although the need for 'innovation' was frequently mentioned in LDSs, it was rarely related to real R&D actions. Statistical and spatial analyses suggest that local goals were shaped by access to funds, which is consistent with the assumptions of neo-endogenous development and top-down Europeanisation. However, achieving consistency between EU-wide eco-friendly targets and local income security needs is challenging.

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Community-led local development; neo-endogenous development; Europeanisation; local development strategies; local action groups; Poland

1. Introduction

The processes of interstate cooperation in formulating and implementing common goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals or the European Union's (EU) periodic strategies, have been widely studied at the level of nation-states and in terms of their influence on regional and local strategies and activities (Mazzara, Sangiorgi, and Siboni 2010; Vávra et al. 2022). Particular attention has been paid to the diffusion of top-down governance and policy adaptation at the local level in democratic, decentralized states (Schulze, Schoenefeld, and Hildén 2024). Within the EU, such dynamics are often understood through the lens of 'Europeanisation': the process by which formal and informal rules, procedures, policy frameworks, and norms originating in EU institutions

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become embedded in domestic institutions and policy-making, including at the subnational level (Bursens 2013; Radaelli 2004).

EU member states typically preserve significant local and regional autonomy (Guderjan and Verhelst 2021), making the relationship between EU supralocal objectives and grassroots priorities a pertinent area of enquiry. This interface is frequently explored through the concept of neo-endogenous development, which seeks to reconcile local and external needs within regional and local strategies supported by EU funds (Furmankiewicz, Atterton, and Macken-Walsh 2025; Gkartzios and Lowe 2019; Ray 2006). Although such strategies maintain substantial autonomy, administrative mechanisms (procedures, institutional competencies) and economic tools (funding incentives) intentionally shape how supralocal goals are adapted to enhance local capacity (Bosworth et al. 2016; Dąbrowski 2012; Luukkonen 2011). This type of influence of EU policies on local actions and development strategies is perceived as top-down Europeanisation (Dobrić Jambrović and Marešić 2020; Radaelli 2004). One key example is the role of Local Action Groups (LAGs), which are structured as area-based partnerships of public, private, and civil society actors. Their creation and common organizational form across the EU are examples of the Europeanisation of local development policies (Gonçalves et al. 2024). LAGs play a vital role in rural sustainable development by creating Local Development Strategies (LDSs) and implementing them using EU funds. However, tensions can arise between their bottom-up potential and the top-down constraints of EU and national rules and strategies (Konečný et al. 2021; Vávra et al. 2022).

The literature most often examines the implementation of European policies at the national level (Stec and Grzebyk 2018). The extent to which local strategies are consistent with transnational EU objectives has been analyzed less frequently (Furmankiewicz et al. 2021; Luukkonen 2011; Mazzara, Sangiorgi, and Siboni 2010). Our study aims to address this gap by engaging with theoretical debates on the role of top-down Europeanisation in shaping LDSs in the neo-endogenous development approach.

The main aim of this paper is to explore the extent to which LDSs address issues important for achieving the EU's supranational targets. To investigate, we applied text mining and content analysis to 293 LDSs prepared for the EU 2014–2020 Programming Period, during which the supranational EU Europe 2020 strategy was in force. Specifically, we ask:

1) Is the EU Europe 2020 supranational strategy directly considered in the LDSs?
2) Which issues related to EU targets are most commonly discussed in the LDSs?
3) Could funding from specific EU funds have influenced strategy content?
4) What is the spatial dimension of interest in issues related to EU targets in LDSs?

Although of historical relevance, the analyzed documents offer insight into the broader question of strategic territorial coherence between the local and EU levels. Poland presents a particularly interesting case, given its national hesitancy to adopt EU objectives related to the environment, decarbonization, migration, and social minorities (Brusilo 2020; Mrozowska, Wendt, and Tomaszewski 2021; Żuk and Szulecki 2020). Evaluating LDSs is critical for both the theoretical understanding and practical distribution of public funds (Kis, Gal, and Veha 2012). Our findings also contribute to

discussions on top-down Europeanisation and the influence of neo-endogenous development policy on local planning.

2. Relation between bottom-up and top-down EU development policy

EU budgets are organized in seven-year cycles, referred to as programming periods. The analyzed 2014–2020 period saw the application of the Europe 2020 strategy, announced for years 2010–2020 (Drumaux and Joyce 2020; European Commission 2010a). This strategy established three main priorities: 'smart', 'sustainable', and 'inclusive' growth (Budd 2013; Mendez 2013). Smart growth refers to economic development based on knowledge and innovation; sustainable growth aims to promote a greener, more resource-efficient, and competitive economy; and inclusive growth focuses on fostering a high-employment economy to ensure social and territorial cohesion. These priorities were operationalized into five quantifiable targets (European Commission 2010a):

- Target 1: Increase the employment rate of those aged 20–64 years to at least 75%.
- Target 2: Allocate 3% of the EU's GDP to research and development.
- Target 3: Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% from 1990 levels, ensure that renewables make up at least 20% of the final energy consumption, and improve energy efficiency by 20%.
- Target 4: Keep early school leaving below 10% and ensure that at least 40% of those aged 30–34 hold a tertiary degree.
- Target 5: Reduce the number of people at risk of poverty by approximately 20 million.

The targets were applied to the EU as a whole. Individual member states were not required to meet them independently but were obligated to incorporate them into all programmes financed through EU funds. The Europe 2020 strategy text contains numerous references to the need for 'economic, social and territorial cohesion' in the EU; however, the established targets do not cover issues of territorial differences, but only focus on general indicators for the entire EU. In 2020, almost every EU-wide objective set out in the strategy was fulfilled (Silander 2023). However, the results highlighted significant national and regional diversification, with Poland's relatively weak position on environmental issues (Gontkovičová and Duľová Spišáková 2023; Kasprzyk and Wojnar 2021; Walesiak, Dehnel, and Obrębalski 2021). The successor to this strategy is the European Green Deal (2020–2050) (Vela Almeida et al. 2023).

The EU also mandates the preparation of multiannual area-based development strategies at the national, regional, and local levels to ensure the effective use of structural and cohesion funds. These strategies aim to secure long-term value, foster economic cohesion, and enhance accountability (Mairate 2006). Three main channels describe the influence of the EU on local planning: (1) regulations and directives, (2) funds and subsidies, and (3) strategic policy documents (Purkarthofer 2016). Cotella (2020) elaborates these as: (1) structural – when domestic laws change to meet EU directives; (2) instrumental – where EU funding shifts local cost–benefit calculations; and (3) discursive – when EU concepts are voluntarily adopted by local actors to advance their agendas. Therefore, local stakeholders are involved with the influence of the EU through legislative compliance, fund management, and selective use of EU ideas, all under the broader

process of top-down Europeanisation (Lackowska-Madurowicz 2011; Luukkonen 2011; Radaelli 2004).

Strategic subnational territorial planning serves as a guide to shape long-term development, aligned with the constraints and opportunities of the local environment. Subnational strategies typically outline the mission, vision, key values, SWOT analysis, strategic goals, preferred actions, resource allocations, measurable outcomes, and relevant stakeholders (Koliński and Kołodziejczak 2021; Mazzara, Sangiorgi, and Siboni 2010). They should also be adaptable to changing contexts and foster sustainable development by balancing economic growth, social equity and environmental care (Sargsyan 2024).

EU-wide strategies do not mandate identical targets across member states and regions, leaving local and regional interpretations open. Consequently, local strategies vary depending on how domestic actors interpret and use EU policies to fit their objectives (Cotella and Stead 2011; Purkarthofer 2016; Schoenefeld et al. 2023), and on national rules (Cárdenas Alonso and Masot 2020). Social science literature also highlights the tensions between transnational EU elites and the needs of locally rooted actors (Clark and Jones 2008).

One of the important EU territorial policy instruments is Community-Led Local Development (CLLD, formerly the LEADER approach). The CLLD does not formulate universal development targets, apart from EU-wide recommendations regarding the application of specific organizational principles based on grassroots cooperation of local stakeholders and the exchange of knowledge and information in cooperation networks (Bumbalová et al. 2016; Servillo and De Bruijn 2018). In this approach, Local Action Groups (LAGs, in Poland in the form of registered associations) are established, an intersectoral partnership operating under shared principles throughout the EU (Konečný 2019; Moseley 2003). Extensively discussed in the literature (Cejudo and Navarro 2020; Moseley 2003), LAGs are tied to the idea of neo-endogenous development, which bridges top-down and bottom-up approaches (Böcher 2008; Nieto Masot and Alonso 2024; Ray 2006). This model encourages negotiations among stakeholders from various territorial levels, blending local needs with EU goals without imposing rigid actions (Bosworth et al. 2016). Supported LAGs are expected to ensure that their bottom-up participatory local development strategies (LDSs) align with the goals of national and EU guidelines (Konečný et al. 2021; Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi 2019). However, several studies have revealed that LAGs often do not follow the EU methodologies recommended (Olar and Jitea 2020) or neglect climate-related targets (Furmankiewicz, Hewitt, et al. 2021).

In Poland, most LAGs were financed through the Rural Development Programme for 2014–2020, co-funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) (Zajda et al. 2017). National rules mandated that each LDS must cover a minimum of two municipalities (rural, urban-rural, or small urban up to 20,000 inhabitants) and that strategy boundaries could not split individual municipalities, although they need not align with county or provincial (*voivodeship*) borders. LDSs can be applied to areas with populations between 30,000 and 150,000 (Zespół Roboczy ds. Opracowania Zakresu Lokalnych Strategii Rozwoju 2015). For the 2014–2020 period, 324 LDSs prepared by rural, fisheries, and urban LAG associations were initially selected for funding in Poland (Furmankiewicz, Atterton, and Macken-Walsh 2025).

The analyses conducted so far indicate a mismatch between the bottom-up potential of LAGs for local development and top-down, supralocal objectives (Olar and Jitea 2020; Vávra et al. 2022). In Poland, this was particularly true for the relatively weak interest in climate change issues and the implementation of a low-carbon economy (Furmankiewicz et al. 2020).

Overall, the literature shows that while EU policy frameworks set ambitious goals, their local implementation varies considerably because of governance constraints, limited resources, and conflicting priorities. The compatibility of LDSs with EU goals reflects the wider challenges of ensuring coherent policy application across diverse local contexts.

3. Methodology

This study examines the Local Development Strategies (LDSs) prepared by rural Local Action Groups (LAGs) in Poland, developed for the 2014–2020 EU Programming Period. We deliberately excluded seven urban LAGs funded solely by the European Social Fund (ESF) and 12 fishing LAGs financed exclusively through the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) from the analysis because they are LAGs of a different type. The analysis covers only LAGs supported by the Rural Development Programme and one multi-fund LAG in Podlaskie province using only ERDF and ESF, amounting to 293 LAGs (Figure 1). While LDSs were not fully implemented and settled during the last period of our study (2022), the real outcomes of these strategies are beyond the scope of this study. LDSs in PDF or DOCX format were downloaded from the official websites of Polish LAGs and compiled into searchable text files. We employed document content analysis (Babbie 2011), used in studies related to the LEADER approach (Boukalova, Kolarova, and Lostak 2016; Hudečková and Lošťák 2008) and Europe 2020 strategy evaluations (Drumaux and Joyce 2020).

Our basic approach involved classical text processing aimed at identifying specific word roots (stems), noun phrases, and collocations (referred to as 'tokens'). A similar term frequency approach provides a suitable foundation for text exploration (Feldman, Dagan, and Hirsh 1998; Gaikwad, Chaugule, and Patil 2014). In this method, keyword (term) frequency is interpreted as an indicator of salience or emphasis (Krippendorff 2004, 59; Guthrie et al. 2004). Keyword text analysis, while less detailed than deep semantic parsing, is often sufficient to yield useful results (Mazzara, Sangiorgi, and Siboni 2010). We apply 'information extraction' by identifying a predefined set of expressions from the relevant thematic field. The analysis involved searching for terms related to the targets of the Europe 2020 strategy.

Given the linguistic complexities of Polish, we adopted a three-stage content-analysis process. First, we used a heuristic approach to generate a list of keywords aligned with the targets of the Europe 2020 strategy. Using expert selection, we identified two to five words or word roots that were best suited to each target (listed in Appendix 1). The initial token list was refined based on a pilot study involving 27 LAGs from two Polish provinces. We also searched for strategies that directly reference the Europe 2020 strategy.

In the second phase, we used NVivo software to automate the search and count of predefined tokens within the 293 LAG strategies. The output consisted of quantitative data showing the number of tokens identified and basic Term Frequency (TF) indicators (number of tokens (terms) to number of words in the document) (Gaikwad, Chaugule,

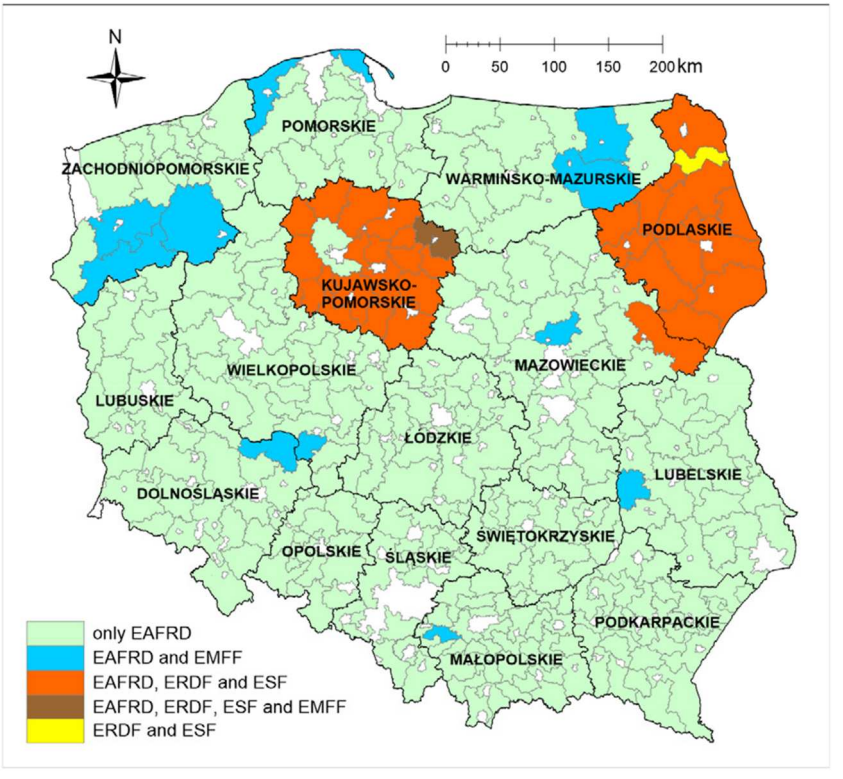

Figure 1. Territories of LDSs covered by the analysis (293 LAGs, CLLD 2014-2020) and their financing sources, and provinces (*voivodeships*) in Poland. Acronyms: EMFF – European Maritime and Fisheries Fund; ERDF – European Regional Development Fund; ESF – European Social Fund; EAFRD – European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development;

Source: The authors' own work.

and Patil 2014). We assumed that TF serves as a proxy for the importance attributed to a particular issue by the authors of a given LDSs, a common simplification in text analysis.

The third phase involved a qualitative assessment of the contextual use of keywords and verification of their actual relevance to the Europe 2020 targets. Representative quotations from the strategies were used to support our interpretation. This analysis was performed manually by the authors without the use of AI tools (Section 4.1).

To examine whether the source of funding influences the content of the strategy, we grouped the LDSs according to their funding sources (Table 1). We excluded types 4

Table 1. Sources of financing for the analyzed LDSs.

Type number	Main sources of financing	*N*
1	EAFRD	251
2	EAFRD and EMFF	11
3	EAFRD, ERDF and ESF	29
4	EAFRD, ERDF, ESF and EMFF	1
5	ERDF and ESF	1

Funds: EAFRD, European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development; EMFF, European Maritime and Fisheries Fund; ERDF, European Regional Development Fund; ESF, European Social Fund; N, number of LDSs in group.

(financed by EAFRD, ERDF, ESF, and EMFF) and 5 (financed by ERDF and ESF) from the statistical analysis (only two strategies in total). We compared type 2 with the combined set of types 1 and 3 (analysis of the effect of the EFMF) and type 3 with the combined set of types 1 and 2 (analysis of the effect of the ERDF and ESF). We used the Mann–Whitney U test (non-parametric), which does not require the assumption of a normal distribution and is suitable for comparing groups of different sizes. The null hypothesis (H_0) is 'the distributions of values (frequency coefficients of tokens) are the same in both groups'. A one-tailed test ('greater') assessed whether the medians in Type 2, and then separately in Type 3, were greater than the combined groups of the others. In addition, the Common Language Effect Size (CLES) and Cliff's delta were calculated as a measure of effect size (Section 4.2).

Finally, the arithmetic means of individual TF related to territorial LDSs enabled us to show the spatial dimension of interest in particular topics (section 4.3). In Section 5, we discuss our results in relation to the existing literature. In these two sections, at the reviewer's request, we also compare the average TF thematic indicators in the LDS for LAGs registered in a given province (*voivodeship*) with the selected characteristics of the province. However, owing to numerous limitations, these data are not suitable for statistical analysis. Among other things, rural LAG activities could not cover cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants (Zespół Roboczy ds. Opracowania Zakresu Lokalnych Strategii Rozwoju 2015), whilst the data from the provinces include cities. Some LAGs are partially located in two provinces. Therefore, we have limited ourselves to a qualitative description (Sandelowski 2000), and the data are attached in Appendix 2 of this paper.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive content analysis

Analyzed LDSs most often refer to issues related to the development of local innovations and the transfer of innovations from other areas (Figure 2).

LDSs use the definitions provided in the documents of the programmes supporting the LAG financially; for example, one of the strategies specifies that innovation should concern: '*implementation of a new or significantly improved product (goods or services), a new or significantly improved process, application of a new technology or a new way of using or mobilising existing local natural, historical, cultural, or social resources in the LAG area* (Partnerstwo Sowiogórskie LAG)'. Some LAGs highlight three principal forms of innovation: product innovation, understood as introducing a new good or service to the local market or substantially improving existing offerings; process innovation, referring to new or significantly enhanced methods of production or delivery; and marketing innovation, involving new marketing approaches such as notable changes to a product's design, packaging, positioning, promotion, pricing, or business model arising from a revised marketing strategy. The strategies most frequently emphasize the adoption of innovation within local enterprises and the delivery of social activities. However, references to collaboration between local entities and research institutions, such as for conducting studies or refining processes, are rare. For example, only one LAG mentioned the need to conduct a '*policy supporting cooperation between the scientific sphere and business* (Stowarzyszenie Kłodzka Wstęga Sudetów LAG)'.

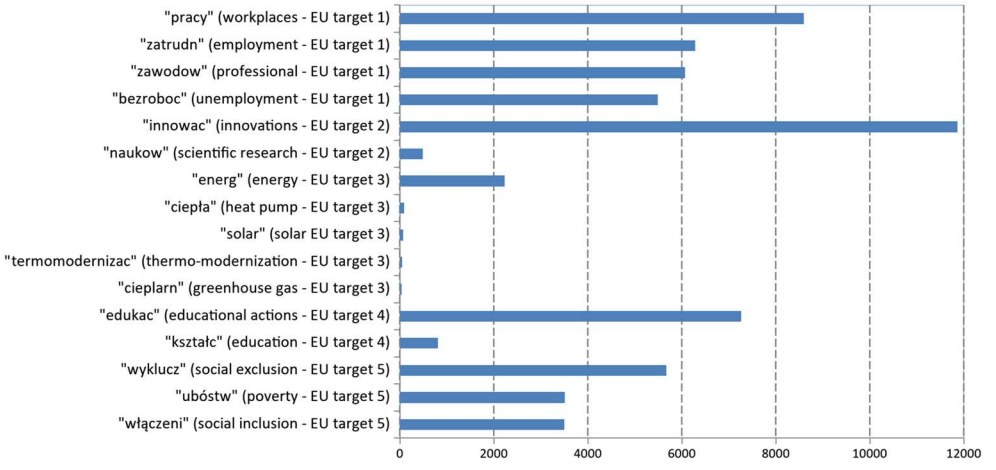

Figure 2. The total number of occurrences of individual tokens in the 293 local development strategies.

Source: Authors' own studies.

According to the OECD, research and development (R&D) comprises creative and systematic work carried out to increase the stock of knowledge and develop new applications of available knowledge related to new products, services, or new organizational structures. The activity must be novel, creative, uncertain, systematic, transferable, and/or reproducible (OECD 2015, 28). However, locally perceived innovation in LDSs is most commonly not related to research into new technologies or production processes, but rather involves limited attempts to use them at the local level. In LDSs, even small changes (e.g. selling local products via an Internet application) are considered innovations.

All LDSs included job creation and maintenance, usually related to business start-ups and support for the development of existing small and medium enterprises. A frequent objective was to increase and diversify employment, increase self-employment (business start-ups), and increase labor mobility. These issues were combined in the strategy's priority objectives, for example, '*Increase employment, competitiveness, and the development of entrepreneurship in the LAG area* (LAG Zakole Dolnej Wisły)'. In doing so, more attention was paid to '*employment growth*' (collocation found in 125 LDS) and less to '*diversification of income sources*' (found in 59 LDSs). In 20 LDSs, attention was given to the need to '*diversify activities*' of entrepreneurs, farmers, and the fishing sector.

Poverty reduction, social exclusion, and inclusion were issues raised in all strategies. The need to support disadvantaged groups, including people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, was frequently indicated. At the same time, it should be emphasized that poor and disabled people are considered the most frequently excluded groups. At the same time, LAGs most frequently mentioned the following 'disadvantaged groups': unemployed, young people under 35 years of age, women, and people over 50 years of age. The 13 LDSs noted the problem of '*digital exclusion*' of some rural residents, especially the elderly.

All LDSs include various types of educational activities. In 140 LDSs, special attention was paid to the education of children and young people (extracurricular education, including entrepreneurship and prevention). The need for '*lifelong learning*' was mentioned in 59 documents, the collocation '*education of residents*' occurred in 18 LDSs, and the need for '*adult education*' in three LDSs. This may indicate an underestimation of lifelong learning, which may be particularly important in rural areas, where, on average, the educational level of residents is lower than that in urban areas.

Issues related to the development of renewable energy and energy efficiency were less frequent in the strategies. The issue of reducing greenhouse gas emissions was particularly rare (only 16 LDSs mentioned it). A positive example is the support for local companies from the LAG Ziemia Biłgorajska concerning '*the use of renewable energy sources for production*' and activities '*improving the energy efficiency of facilities*', which, according to the authors of the strategies, was supposed to contribute to '*the development of entrepreneurialism with the simultaneous protection of the natural environment by reducing greenhouse gas emissions to the atmosphere and limiting heat consumption*'.

Summarizing the frequency of key terms linked to the Europe 2020 objectives at the national level, LAG strategies most commonly addressed employment-related issues, including entrepreneurship development and job creation or retention (Figure 3). This was followed by attention to the need for innovation in rural areas, poverty reduction, and the educational development of children, young people, and adults. The least emphasis was placed on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, including renewable energy development, despite being a highly significant concern within EU policy.

4.2. Statistical analysis

LDSs financed by the EMFF have significantly higher values of thematic TF indicators for Target 3 only (Table 2). CLES and Cliff's δ suggest a large effect. The statistics therefore indicate that LDSs financed by the EMFF more often address the topic of energy transition.

LDSs additionally financed from the ERDF and ESF had increased values of relative thematic TF indicators, especially Target 5 (very large effect), Target 1 (large effect),

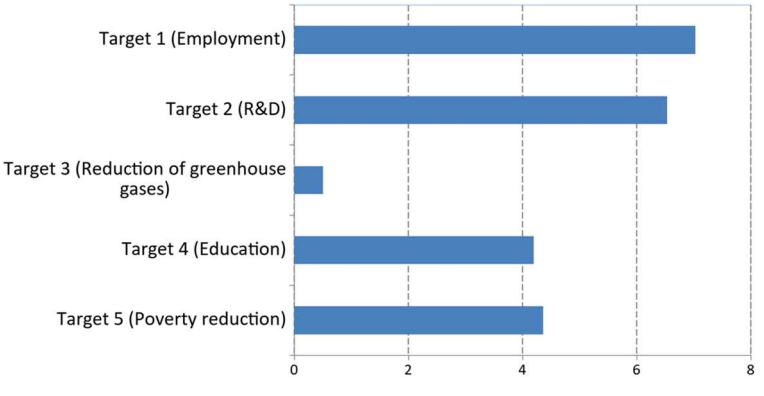

Figure 3. Number of occurrences of tokens per 10000 total words, grouped as the arithmetic mean of tokens assigned to each of the Europe 2020 targets.

Table 2. Statistical analyses assessing the effect of EMFF funding on the analyzed TF indicators: LDSs financed by the EAFRD and EMFF (Type 2) vs. Others.

Indicator	Median Type 2	Median Others	Mann-Whitney U	*P* (two-sided)	CLES	Cliff's δ	Effect
Target_1	6.276	6.844	1288	0.357	0.418	−0.164	Average
Target_2	6.739	5.754	2033	0.072	0.660	0.320	Average
Target_3	0.547	0.339	2102	0.040*	0.682	0.365	Large
Target_4	4.447	3.576	1939	0.145	0.630	0.259	Average
Target_5	2.551	3.534	1133	0.137	0.368	−0.264	Average
E2020	0.000	0.000	1469	0.746	0.477	−0.046	Low

*Statistically significant; CLES – Common Language Effect Size.

and Target 4 (large effect) (Table 3). In contrast, Target 2 indicators in this group are lower, suggesting a different nature of this indicator. This means that financing strategies from the ERDF and ESF significantly increased interest in social issues (poverty, social exclusion, and inclusion) and had a slightly weaker impact on interest in issues related to jobs, entrepreneurship, and public education. However, interest in innovation (Target 2) was lower in this group.

4.3. Geographical analysis

Owing to the territorial scope of the development strategy, it is possible to analyse the spatial dimension of interest in the analyzed terms and issues (Figure 4). Most LAGs in Poland (71%) did not mention the existence of the Europe 2020 strategy in LDSs (despite the need to include a strategy section, ensuring its consistency with other higher-level strategies). The declaration of including actions related to the Europe 2020 strategy in LDSs was most often declared by LAGs from the Łódzkie and Dolnośląskie voivodeships. On the other hand, a particular lack of interest in this document was visible in strategies from the Świętokrzyskie, Pomorskie, and Lubuskie voivodeships.

Goals related to maintaining and increasing the number of jobs and developing entrepreneurship (Target 1, TF means, and comparative indicators shown in Appendix 2). were most frequently mentioned in northeastern Poland (Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Podlaskie, and Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodeships). Meanwhile, the highest unemployment rates were observed in the Świętokrzyskie and Podkarpackie provinces. Only the Warmińsko-Mazurskie province had the lowest labor force participation rate in Poland and a relatively high unemployment rate. Innovation-related issues were distributed quite irregularly throughout Poland, but there was slightly greater interest in this topic in Zachodniopomorskie and underdeveloped Świętokrzyskie. Meanwhile, R&D

Table 3. Statistical analyses assessing the possible effect of ERDF and ESF funding on the analyzed TF indicators: LDSs financed by the EAFRD, ERDF, and ESF (Type 3) vs. Others.

Indicator	Median Type 3	Median Others	Mann-Whitney U	*P* (two-sided)	CLES	Cliff's δ	Effect
Target_1	9.537	6.605	6112	<0.001*	0.804	0.609	Large
Target_2	3.262	6.109	1356	<0.001*	0.178	−0.643	Large
Target_3	0.451	0.339	4342	0.207	0.571	0.143	Low
Target_4	4.497	3.437	5101	0.002*	0.671	0.343	Large
Target_5	11.659	3.282	7441	<0.000*	0.979	0.959	Very Large
E2020	0.000	0.000	3671	0.711	0.483	−0.034	Low

* statistically significant; CLES — Common Language Effect Size.

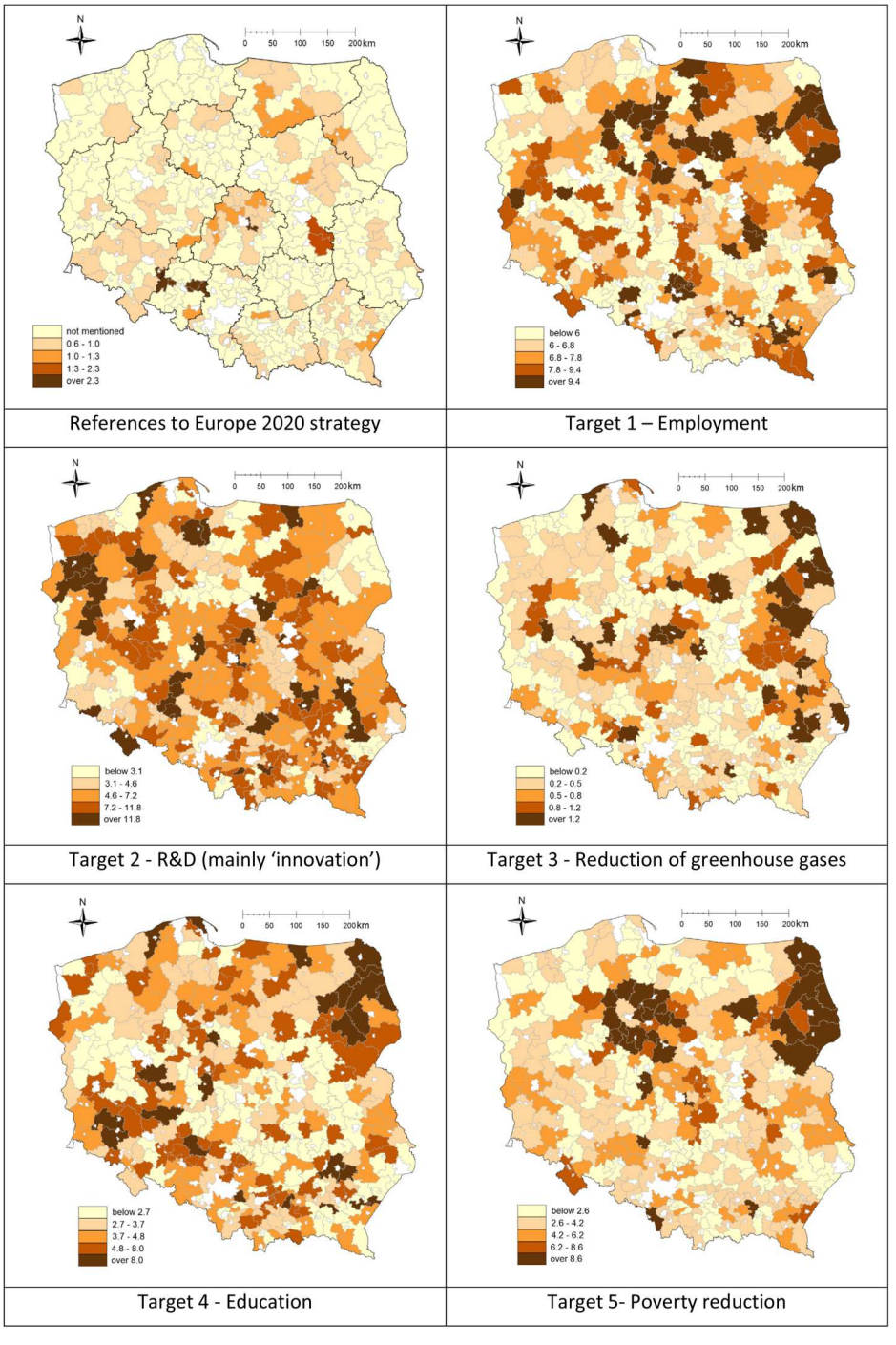

Figure 4. Importance of issues in territorial LDSs of LAGs (arithmetic mean of TF related to a specific target of the Europe 2020 Strategy in LDSs). Note: division into classes in accordance with the Jenks natural breaks method (Jenks 1967) – separate range boundaries were determined for each choropleth map depending on the range of values of a given feature; hence, each choropleth map should be analyzed separately.

expenditure was lowest in Lubuskie and Zachodniopomorskie, although it was also very low in Świętokrzyskie. Goals related to reducing greenhouse gases and developing renewable energy sources were mentioned most frequently in eastern Poland (Podlaskie and Lubelskie). Podlaskie had the lowest GHG emissions in Poland and the second highest share of RES in electricity production. Only Lubelskie had unfavorable indicators in this regard. The education and training of residents of different ages was of the greatest interest in the provinces of Podlaskie and Dolnośląskie, but the highest proportion of early leavers from education was in Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Zachodniopomorskie. Interest in poverty reduction was particularly visible in Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Podlaskie, while the highest number of people at risk of poverty was in Lubelskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie. These results indicate that the grassroots needs of the rural population in LAGs do not coincide with the objectives defined by socioeconomic indicators.

5. Discussion

LDSs rarely mentioned the existence of the Europe 2020 strategy (answer to RQ1). This may be related to the low level of awareness of the principles of EU development policy among rural communities (Stosik and Sekunda 2023) or the prioritization of local objectives, as the bottom-up nature of the strategy is emphasized in programmes such as LEADER and CLLD, which support LAGs (Furmankiewicz, Atterton, and Macken-Walsh 2025; Thuesen and Nielsen 2014). Ignorance and relatively low formal education of rural area inhabitants result in greater susceptibility to accepting false information spread by anti-EU circles (Fortunato and Pecoraro 2022; Żuk 2025).

Interest in the topics identified as the most important for the development of the EU varies. The most popular issues were those related to social security, job creation, and local business development (related to Target 1). LDSs also highly emphasized the role of local innovation and innovation transfer in local development, but it was not related to conducting scientific research or cooperation with research institutions. LDSs considered the issues of education and training, as well as the elimination of poverty, to be of medium importance; however, 'exclusion' was considered at the local level mainly in relation to poverty and rarely to disabilities, not in relation to social minorities or immigrants. LDSs most commonly did not see the local community's role and importance in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the transformation towards a post-carbon economy; these goals of the EU strategies were the most underestimated at the local level (answer to RQ2).

The local contribution to the transformation towards a low-carbon economy (energy transition) is particularly difficult. Polish residents are among those who do not believe in anthropogenic climate change. In a Eurobarometer survey in 2015 (when most of the strategies analyzed were developed), respondents relatively rarely perceived climate change as a serious problem (11% compared to an average of 15% in EU28), and few people engaged in action to fight climate change compared to other EU countries (30% compared to a mean of 49 in EU28) (European Commission 2015). In the 2025 survey, this attitude worsened, with 52% of respondents in Poland believing that climate change was not caused by human activity (European Commission 2025). The link between local goals and scientific and technological development is also relatively

weak in rural regions. It is difficult to think of local communities contributing to advanced technologies, but there is nothing to prevent, for example, farmers and entrepreneurs collaborating with research units in the development of new agricultural and technological solutions. However, a well-known limitation in rural areas is the relatively low education of rural residents and aging communities in peripheral areas, including farmers, and their difficulty in adopting technical and social innovations (Biczkowski, Jezierska-Thöle, and Rudnicki 2021; Komorowski 2024; Salemink, Strijker, and Bosworth 2017). Furthermore, between 2010 and 2024, the number of respondents in Poland who agreed that knowledge of science was not important in their daily lives increased from 32 to 54% (European Commission 2010b, 2025). In many local government strategies, their authors focus on standardized goals and indicators for economic growth and improving the quality of public infrastructure (Ignacy and Kopyściański 2011). For comparison, in the local strategies of Italian municipalities, the priorities were promoting social inclusion and equal opportunities, actions for SMEs and microenterprises, and improving employability by raising levels of educational achievement and training (Mazzara, Sangiorgi, and Siboni 2010, 504). Similarly, other analyses of LDSs have found a secondary focus on ecological objectives (Furmankiewicz, Hewitt, et al. 2021).

Our results indicate a preference for income security rather than improvements in environmental quality, such as clean air, renewable energy infrastructure, and climate resilience. These may shift as society's wealth increases, as observed in cross-national studies showing stronger environmental prioritization in wealthier societies (Franzen and Vogl 2013). This pattern aligns with the observed differences between Western and Eastern European countries in adopting low-carbon economy concepts, which have been attributed to wealth disparities, historical experiences with different governance models, and varying levels of post-material value orientations (European Commission 2015). Low community interest in supporting a low-carbon economy can hinder the achievement of pan-European goals. This may also be due to the focus of public funds on supporting entrepreneurship, soft local NGOs activities, and standard municipal infrastructure (Zajda et al. 2017).

Political-ideological orientations may shape development priorities. The authors suggest that conservative communities tend to prioritize traditional values and social security over environmental sustainability (Kulin, Sevä, and Dunlap 2021; Neumayer 2004). In Poland, the political landscape during the 2014–2020 period was characterized by growing conservatism, particularly in rural areas, which may have reinforced preferences for traditional welfare and income security concerns rather than environmental objectives (Baranowski et al. 2025; Żuk 2025). However, the strategies examined were prepared most commonly in 2015, that is, before the intensification of anti-EU propaganda in Poland (Żuk and Szulecki 2020).

Statistical analysis indicated that the EMFF increased interest in Target 3 objectives (energy efficiency, GHG emissions, and RES development). Fisheries LAGs in Poland consider climate and environmental protection objectives to a greater extent because of the sensitivity of aquatic environments and EMFF objectives (Furmankiewicz, Hewitt, et al. 2021; Pawlewicz, Szamrowski, and Pawlewicz 2014). On the other hand, additional funding from the ERDF and ESF had a large effect on increasing interest in topics related to Target 5 and 1, and to a lesser extent 4 (social inclusion, poverty,

jobs, education), which we associate primarily with the ESF objectives. In this case, the issue of 'innovation' was raised relatively less often (answer to RQ3).

The geographical variation in the extent to which certain issues are addressed in strategies in Poland was primarily related to the political decisions of two regional authorities (Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Podlaskie), which enabled the creation of multi-fund LAGs in these regions. In these provinces, poverty reduction and the development of places of work were most important in LDSs, which can be linked to the influence of European Social Fund objectives (answer to RQ4). In the descriptive analysis, interest in the studied issues did not show a clear relationship with the socio-economic indicators of all regions. Similarly, our results do not suggest a relationship with dominant political support in regions (Neumayer 2004; Baranowski et al. 2025). The difference in the goals of communities in southeastern Poland, which typically support conservative right-wing parties, is not visible in our findings. In contrast, there is a greater interest in RES. Specific financial benefits for residents may be more locally important than ideological bias. Local factors influencing LDSs merit further systematic investigation

Our study has many limitations related to the weaknesses of text mining and its interpretations (Krippendorff 2004; Neuendorf 2002). In addition, our analysis covered all strategy documents without examining the number of words in individual sections, such as the description of the current situation, objectives, and proposed tasks. We suggest that future analyses should consider the structure of the document sections. We did not analyse what resources were planned for achieving LDSs objectives, nor which resources were actually utilized. For example, the mere mention of various types of 'innovations' in the strategy text and fund objectives does not necessarily mean that they will be implemented by local grant recipients (Zajda 2013). Different types of local and external conditions may influence the non-implementation or non-attainment of some local communities' objectives, which can be identified in surveys.

6. Conclusions

This analysis illustrates that while certain supralocal goals – especially employment and (very basic) forms of locally understood innovation – are readily embraced at the local level, others, such as greenhouse gas reduction, do not resonate so strongly. Thus, neo-endogenous policy works only to the extent that local stakeholders see practical relevance or financial support for specific EU objectives. Simultaneously, we note that the funds supporting non-mandatory local activities support top-down Europeanisation. The role of the funds is based on a simple mechanism known from rational choice theory: local actions and policy changes that bring tangible benefits to local communities are more easily accepted.

Moreover, the divergence of local and supralocal interests makes harmonized policy development and Europeanisation difficult. CLLD can be effective for bottom-up engagement, but coherence with broader EU goals depends on targeted funding mechanisms, local knowledge, and a shared sense of policy relevance. If an EU priority is seen locally as remote or too costly, local strategies may marginally address or ignore it.

From a methodological perspective, our results confirm that keyword-based content analysis, augmented by qualitative checks, can serve as a systematic tool to

assess the overlap between local and supranational objectives. Although it cannot gauge real spending or final outcomes, it reveals how local actors frame and emphasize issues. Future studies could compare these textual findings with actual projects financed or employ AI-assisted text processing to refine analyses across multiple languages.

In summary, we find that top-down Europeanisation in neo-endogenous development can enable partial European integration, but true alignment rests on robust local engagement with all supralocal priorities and a policy framework that incentivises them. Improving clarity on why these goals matter and how they can bring visible benefits to local communities could enhance local willingness to adopt supralocal strategic objectives.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Table A1. The stems and keywords (tokens) used in text mining procedures related to Europa 2020 strategy targets with an explanation of the studied semantic context.

Short name	The Europe 2020 strategy targets (European Commission, 2010)	Search tokens (stems or keywords in Polish) and related collocations (translated in English)
1. Employment	Achieving a minimum share of 75% of employment for people aged 20–64	'zatrudn' (increasing employment); 'pracy' (jobs); 'zawodow' (professional activation); 'bezrob' (counteracting unemployment, level of unemployment)
2. R&D	At least 3% of EU GDP should be spent on research and development	'naukow' (research); 'innowac' (searching for innovative solutions)
3. Reduction of GHGs	Achievement: 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, 20% share of renewable energy sources in final energy consumption, and 20% increase in energy efficiency.	'energ' (renewable energy, energy saving, energy efficiency); 'cieplarn' (greenhouse gases); 'ciepła' (heat pump); 'termomodernizac' (thermo-modernization); 'solar' (solar installations)
4. Education	The share of early school leavers should be reduced to 10%, while tertiary education should be obtained by at least 40% of people aged 30–34.	'kształc' (education, increasing the quality of education); 'edukac' (educational activities, youth education)
5. Poverty reduction	The number of people at risk of poverty in the EU should be reduced by at least 20 million people.	'ubóstw' (combating poverty, preventing poverty); 'wyklucz' (counteracting social exclusion); 'włączeni' (actions towards social inclusion).

Source: Original elaboration by the authors and the Europe 2020 strategy.

Appendix 2

Table A2. Average TF values for LAGs registered in a given region and statistical data related to the Europe 2020 strategy targets around 2015 (the approximate time of preparation of most of the examined LDSs).

NUTS 2 region	Name of statistical region	TF-T1 mean	Employment [Y20-64]	Unem-ployment [Y15-74]	TF-T2 mean	GERD /GDP 2016	TF-T3 mean	RES [%]	GHGs [kton CO2eq]	TF-T4 mean	Early leavers [Y18-24]	Tertiary educ. [Y30-34]	TF-T5 mean	At risk of poverty [%]
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
PL21	Małopolskie	6.3	67.6	7.2	6.8	2.2	0.4	7.0	22066	4.5	3.4	42.7	2.9	16.0
PL22	Śląskie	7.2	64.3	7.2	5.6	0.5	0.5	5.8	65818	3.8	5.3	40.1	3.7	10.7
PL41	Wielkopolskie	6.3	69.6	5.8	7.3	0.6	0.6	14.6	33284	4.0	5.7	40.3	3.7	14.6
PL42	Zachodniopomorskie	6.2	64.1	7.5	7.8	0.3	0.3	38.6	20017	4.0	9.7	39.9	2.6	12.7
PL43	Lubuskie	7.5	66.9	6.4	5.8	0.2	0.4	14.4	9205	3.5	8.4	37.3	3.9	11.6
PL51	Dolnośląskie	7.0	67.7	7.0	6.4	0.7	0.4	9.4	26071	6.0	8.2	39.7	3.9	11.0
PL52	Opolskie	6.3	67.7	6.5	7.0	0.4	0.5	7.6	19944	5.5	n.a.	39.1	4.4	14.6
PL61	Kujawsko-pomorskie	9.3	65.7	7.9	3.8	0.4	0.4	68.6	17809	4.1	6.3	33.4	11.5	19.7
PL62	Warmińsko-mazurskie	7.5	61.8	9.5	6.1	0.3	0.4	83.4	7365	4.6	10.2	33.6	3.0	19.9
PL63	Pomorskie	6.5	68.6	6.6	7.2	1.1	0.5	45.9	12768	5.1	5.6	41.3	2.8	12.8
PL71	Łódzkie	6.9	69.3	7.7	7.4	0.6	0.6	3.3	42307	2.7	5.3	44.1	4.9	14.3
PL72	Świętokrzyskie	6.4	65.9	10.1	7.5	0.3	0.2	27.5	18433	2.2	n.a.	41.4	2.8	18.1
PL81	Lubelskie	6.5	66.9	9.3	6.9	0.9	0.9	5.8	21448	3.1	3.9	41.9	3.6	26.5
PL82	Podkarpackie	7.3	63.1	11.6	6.5	1.0	0.3	19.8	11879	3.8	3.2	38.9	3.8	19.4
PL84	Podlaskie	8.7	69.8	7.0	3.8	0.4	1.2	70.1	6940	9.2	n.a.	44.8	10.1	18.8
PL92	Mazowiecki regionalny	7.4	68.9	8.3	7.0	0.3	0.4	n.a. (7.9*)	37736	3.5	5.3	36.8	3.7	19.8

Note: Additional explanations: n.a. – not available; (1) EU NUTS 2 region code; The PL91 'Warszawski stołeczny' area (covering the city of Warsaw) was deliberately not considered, as Warsaw cannot be a member of LAGs; (2) The names in Polish are also used by Eurostat; (3, 6, 8, 11, 14) – arithmetic mean of TM thematic indicators for LAGs registered in a given region; (4) Employment rates of people aged 20–64 (2015); (5) Unemployment rates of people aged 15–74 (2015); (7) Percentage of gross domestic expenditure on R&D (GERD) in gross domestic product (GDP) at current market prices (2016, no data for 2015); (9) Share of renewable energy in total electricity production (2015) according to GUS (*data for PL 92 with Warsaw city); (10) Emissions of GHG in [kton CO2eq] using Global Warming Potential Values (GWP-100) from IPCC AR5 and they include fossil CO2 only, CH4, N2O and F-gases (Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research-EDGAR); (12) Early leavers (people aged 18–24) from education and training (2015, low reliability of data); (13) Percentage of population aged 30–34 in private households with tertiary education (2015); (15) At-risk-of-poverty rate (2019, no regional data for 2015–2016). Source: Eurostat, GUS, and EDGAR.