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What Affects the Perceived Power of Farmers' Associations? Insights from Members' Opinions*

Abstract: Farmers' organisations in the European Union are usually portrayed as strong interest groups, possessing significant resources and able to influence state policy in many ways. This picture, however, conflicts with the situation in many new EU member states. In addition, there is a lack of in-depth research on the power of farmer organisations in post-socialist countries. This paper therefore aims to empirically explore the perceived power and resources of national farmers' associations and the channels they use to influence agricultural policy. Members' subjective beliefs were investigated, as they may provide additional information on the effectiveness of interest groups' activities, such as the farmers' mobilisation process. Using unique micro-survey data and structural equation modelling, it was shown that farmers' associations in Poland are perceived by their members as more powerful if they have more resources, especially those stemming from cooperation among organisations.

Keywords: interest groups, agricultural sector, perceived power, structural equation modelling (SEM), Poland.

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1. Introduction

Agricultural lobbies and farmers' organisations are frequently quoted as examples of important interest groups influencing agricultural policies (Mennig 2024; Nedergaard 2006). In the public choice literature, farmers in OECD countries are portrayed as a small, well-organised, and powerful group able to influence government decisions to receive economic rents (Salhofer, Hofreither, Sinabell 2000). However, in countries where small-scale farms prevail, farmers' political interest remains often unorganised and is perceived as "fragmented" (Rausser, Swinnen, Zusman 2011). The problem of a fragmented agricultural lobby has also been observed in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries that joined the European Union (EU) over two decades ago. For instance, Halamska (2008) as well as Śpiewak, Milczarek-Andrzejewska and Ciechomska (2016) documented the large number and heterogeneity of farmers' organisations in Poland, which complicate unified representation. Similarly, Evanson (2008) highlighted the limited political influence of the agricultural sector in Czechia, in contrast to the stronger lobbying capacity observed in several Western European countries. More recent studies continue to underline the challenges surrounding farmers' political representation in post-socialist CEE countries. Bilewicz, Mamonova and Burdyka (2022), for example, show how Polish farmers face persistent marginalisation and organisational fragmentation, which undermine their ability to act collectively, despite their substantial benefits from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Interestingly, today the issue of internal division and contested representation is not confined to post-socialist countries. Veitch (2025), in her analysis of the 2024 farmer protests in France, demonstrates that similar tensions over political representation have surfaced even in countries with long-established and powerful agricultural unions. Her findings reveal that many farmers are increasingly bypassing traditional unions and seeking to reclaim a political voice through grassroots mobilisation. This shift reflects a broader erosion of the authority and legitimacy of national farmer associations. As Matthews (2024) observes, farmers' growing sense of being unheard is not only about policy content but also about a transformed political environment, where traditional farm unions must now compete with environmental, climate, and public health actors. While these developments may suggest a declining influence of national associations, they also highlight the continuing importance of understanding how farmers themselves perceive the power and effectiveness of these organisations.

The question of the political representation of farmers, the power of national interest groups, their ability to access politicians, and the ways in which different resources influence power therefore remains very relevant for EU agricultural

policy. This paper aims to examine the perceived power of farmers' organisations in Poland, their resources, and the channels they use to influence agricultural policy. By surveying and analysing the opinions of members of national farmers' organisations, it attempts to contribute to the literature on interest-group formation and influence in a number of ways. First, we focus on national farmers' associations, which are not sufficiently investigated and understood by the existing literature on interest organisations in the EU. For example, Eising, Rasch and Rozbicka (2017) claim that many studies explore interest representation and organisations at EU level, but the role and the behaviour of national interest groups are not sufficiently covered. This observation is also supported by Binderkrantz and Rasmussen (2015) as well as Dobbins, Horvath and Labanino (2022), who argue that national interest groups often lobby both at national and EU level at the same time. However, there are still many unexplored issues concerning these two different contexts of interest-group activities. While this paper does not examine how national interest groups lobby EU institutions, it seeks to understand farmers' perceptions of the power and actions of national interest groups, which must both win the support of farmers in their country and adjust their lobbying strategies under the CAP.

Second, while other papers rely mostly on interviewing the leaders of farmer associations, this paper empirically targets farmers and analyses opinions of farmers as members of these associations. Since the views of "non-leader members" are often overlooked in other studies, and thus the self-interest and opinions of leaders are overrated, we target farmers directly and ask for their insights. Disagreements of opinions between leaders and regular members of agricultural associations (Milczarek-Andrzejewska, Śpiewak 2018) or, more generally, between self- and peer assessments (Dür 2008a) are also frequently raised in the literature. Our work can therefore deliver information on farmers' beliefs and their membership of agricultural associations. It can also provide additional insights into processes, such as farmers' mobilisation, which depend on the attitudes and activities of regular members. While based on subjective evaluations, these perspectives are valuable for understanding how farmers themselves interpret the role and influence of their organisations, which is often overlooked in more institutional or top-down analyses.

Third, to analyse subjective opinions of members of organisations and not directly observable concepts, such as power, we apply the structural equation model (SEM), which is an econometric approach widely used in psychological research but less frequently in political science and economics. Nevertheless, it has recently been increasingly employed by researchers to analyse farmers' perceptions of various issues, such as an administrative burden related to direct payments (Ritzel et al. 2020). To the best of our knowledge, our paper is the first to analyse perceived power using the SEM method. However, while the analysis of farmers' subjective

evaluations offers valuable insights into perceived power, we acknowledge that such perceptions are shaped by individual experiences and contextual factors, which introduces certain limitations to the interpretation of the findings.

Finally, research work that empirically investigates interest group influence in the new EU member states and the agricultural sector is rather scarce (some exceptions include e.g. Fałkowski 2018; Evanson 2008; Bednaříková, Jílková 2012). Our paper aims to fill this literature gap and broaden the knowledge of formal interest organisations in CEE countries, especially as the region appears to be an interesting case study due to the huge role of the CAP in supporting farmers' incomes, the importance of small farmers in some countries (such as Bulgaria, Poland and Romania) (Jambor, Gorton 2025), and the legacy of communism still affecting the activities and performance of collective-action organisations (Müller, Rommel 2018). The findings of our paper may then shed light on agricultural lobbying also of new member states that joined the EU after 2004, especially those with fragmented farm structures.

The example of Poland analysed in our paper seems to be of particular interest. Polish farmers are commonly perceived to be represented by strong professional organisations. Preferential treatment with regard to tax or social security policies, as well as the size of transfers from national funds and the CAP, are often presented as an outcome of farmers' lobbying activity. Nevertheless, the agricultural sector continues to struggle with a fragmented farm structure, the poor income situation of small farms and the weak position of farmers vis-à-vis large food processing and retail operators (Fałkowski, Malak-Rawlikowska, Milczarek-Andrzejewska 2017). In addition, the picture of agricultural lobbying in Poland is relatively complex. According to Śpiewak, Milczarek-Andrzejewska and Ciechomska (2016) farmers' organisations in Poland are very diverse – some associations bring together mainly small and often semi-subsistence family farms, while others integrate large market-oriented farms. The specific political and cultural characteristics of Polish farmers' organisations also deserve attention, as they operate within a rural electorate traditionally marked by conservative, religious, and exclusionary attitudes (Žuk 2025), which may influence both their mobilisation strategies and representational claims.

Although the data were collected in 2016, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the subsequent grain crisis, the findings may still offer valuable insights – especially as the issue of farmer representation has gained renewed urgency amid the resilience crisis in European farming systems (Meuwissen et al. 2022) and widespread farmers' protests against the Green Deal (Finger et al. 2024). The rapidly changing agricultural landscape may affect the current relevance of some specific conclusions, but the study nonetheless sheds light on the foundations of organisational legitimacy, perceived influence, and policy channels – issues that

remain highly relevant today. By analysing how farmers evaluated their associations' ability to represent their interests, this research contributes to understanding their perceptions of representation and the role of interest organisations in post-socialist contexts. While the data reflect a specific moment in time, the findings may help contextualise broader challenges related to organisational cohesion and representation in CEE agriculture.

The next section describes the theoretical approach used in the study and recent empirical research on post-socialist countries. Section 3 discusses the research methodology and data. Section 4 provides the results of the empirical work and section 5 concludes.

2. Power, Resources, and Influence: Interest Groups in Post-Socialist Agriculture

The process of Europeanisation has significantly shaped the development of interest groups in CEE countries. In particular, organisations in countries such as Poland, Lithuania, and Slovenia have become increasingly integrated into EU policymaking structures, gaining improved access to decision-makers and participating more actively in EU governance (Novak, Lajh 2024). This transformation has been accompanied by a broader trend toward professionalisation, driven by both domestic and transnational influences – including funding opportunities, strategic inter-organisational cooperation, and the growing importance of EU-level engagement (Dobbins, Horvath, Labanino 2022).

Yet, while these developments signal positive institutional progress in many policy fields, the agricultural sector continues to present specific challenges. In post-socialist countries, power and influence of agricultural interest organisations – such as farmers' associations or unions – must be understood in light of historical legacies and structural constraints. Deep-rooted mistrust toward state institutions and collective structures – especially prevalent in rural areas as a legacy of the socialist period – continues to hamper the development of strong, representative organisations (Hagedorn 2014). Mistrust – and more generally, low levels of social capital – along with weak institutional support, limit the capacity for effective collective action, particularly in countries like Romania, where rural mobilisation remains constrained (Hajdu, Mamonova 2020). Although the potential benefits of cooperation – such as access to information, economic efficiency, and stronger advocacy – are widely recognised, participation in collective organisations remains limited. Local norms, leadership capacity, and institutional incentives all influence willingness to cooperate, but fragmentation continues to reduce the sector's bargaining power (Sokoli et al. 2021). These difficulties are further exacerbated by structural characteristics

of post-socialist agriculture, which is typically dominated by small and medium-sized farms (Jambor, Gorton 2025). As a result, large-scale, coordinated mobilisation at the national level is often difficult (Bilewicz, Mamonova, Burdyka 2022).

These structural limitations also help explain the nature and depth of farmers' dissatisfaction with EU agricultural policy. In countries like Poland, farmers' dissatisfaction with the EU's CAP cannot be reduced to funding disparities alone (Matthews 2024). Farmers increasingly express frustration over broader issues such as socio-economic marginalisation, cultural decline, and environmental pressures – concerns that are not easily addressed through existing policy mechanisms (Bilewicz, Mamonova, Burdyka 2022). While farmers' associations have played a role in articulating these concerns, their impact has been constrained both by structural fragmentation and questions of legitimacy. This is why protest has often served as an alternative or compensatory form of political expression, particularly where formal channels of representation have proven weak or ineffective. Research on Poland's farmer interest groups has highlighted the long-standing tradition of protest as a form of political expression. Farmers' mobilisation has been relatively frequent and, at times, well-organised (Bilewicz 2020). For example, Foryś (2008) describes how farmer protests in the 1990s became increasingly institutionalised, with growing cooperation among associations and the development of protest repertoires – ranging from road blockades to mass demonstrations. Foryś (2021) also argues that over the past three decades, Polish farmers have gradually shifted toward more institutionalised forms of engagement with the state. Protest is now often seen not as the primary mode of political struggle but as a supplement to formalised activity within producer groups, trade unions, or interest organisations. These developments suggest that a strong protest tradition coexists with growing engagement in formal representation structures, though organisational fragmentation persists. As Mroczkowska (2022) shows, however, many farmers choose to remain on the margins of these structures, resorting to informal and individualised resistance, which both reflects and reinforces this fragmentation.

In recent years, farmers in post-socialist countries have once again turned to protest in response to mounting external pressures. Since late 2023, demonstrations have intensified across Central and Eastern Europe, driven by discontent with the European Green Deal and increased agricultural imports from Ukraine (Finger et al. 2024). These mobilisations show that even in fragmented and institutionally weak environments, protest remains a powerful tool for collective action when farmers perceive immediate threats to their livelihoods. An important question therefore arises about the role and perceived power of farmers' associations in more routine, institutionalised forms of interest representation – especially as seen through the eyes of their members.

To explore how farmers perceive the power of their organisations, it is first necessary to clarify how the concepts of power and influence are understood in the literature and how they are applied in this study. In our approach – in contrast to, for example, Stevens and De Bruycker (2020, p. 731), who conceptualise influence as “control over political outputs rather than control over actors” – we define power after Lukes (2005) as a capacity to influence others. We assume that the power of a given actor or group may alter the behaviour of other actors. It also may change the rules of access to or participation of other actors in various decision-making bodies. Finally, it may alter the other actors' perceptions, cognitions, and preferences for certain actions or related activities (Lukes 2005). Unlike many articles on the agricultural interest groups (Salhofer, Hofreither, Sinabell 2000), we therefore focus on ex-ante or perceived power rather than effects of these groups' activity.

Despite the above-mentioned differences in conceptualising power, one of the central issues explored in studies on the interest groups' power is the availability, control, and mobilisation of various types of resources.¹ Most social scientists agree that more resources increase the ability of interest groups to influence policy makers and policy outcomes (Rausser, Swinnen, Zusman 2011). Interest groups can have a significant impact on government policy, using resources that are valuable both during and outside elections (Van Winden 2004). They may also be able to influence public decision-making by controlling relevant information (Grossman, Helpman 2001). This is particularly true for business interest groups, as they usually possess many resources, such as money and expertise (Dür, Bernhagen, Marshall 2015). In the case of the EU CAP, the endowment with resources can also be a decisive factor in the ability of national interest groups to lobby EU institutions. As shown, for example, by Kohler-Koch, Kotzian and Quittkat (2017), more resources – especially financial ones – enable better access to the EU institutions. Resources are therefore often used as a proxy for an interest group's political power (Baumgartner et al. 2009).

Resources analysed in the literature on interest groups' influence typically include “money, legitimacy, political support, knowledge, expertise and information” (Dür 2008a, p. 1214). Researches also investigate characteristics of a group such as its size, its internal organisation, the type of membership, or the degree of geographical concentration of the membership (Dür 2008a, p. 1214). Group size is one of the most discussed issues in the interest-group literature (Pecorino 2015). However, it is not very useful to compare the absolute number of members of agricultural interest groups, because, as Klüver (2010, p. 184) shows, they are usually: “characterized by

¹ It is worth noting that the analysis of resources is also important in other than political or economic studies on power. For example, the resource-based theory developed within management science is used to investigate the bargaining power of various actors (Barney, Ketchen, Wright 2011).

a very heterogeneous member structure: Not only individuals can be a member, but also farms, companies or other associations.” This is also the case with farmers’ associations in Poland, where different types of entities (both individual farmers and agricultural companies) are their members (Śpiewak, Milczarek-Andrzejewska, Ciechomska 2016). A study by Fałkowski (2018) on small farmers’ access to political power in Poland supports these findings, as the author argues that the size of a group does not necessarily determine the scope of collective action.

Several authors indicate that the activity of the members of an interest group, rather than just the number of members, should be taken into account. For example, Swinnen (2018) emphasises the importance of the number of politically active members of an organisation in building its political power base. Empirical studies on collective action of Polish farmers confirm this relationship. Wolz, Fritzsche and Reinsberg (2006), who investigate the influence of farmers membership in formal organisations on their economic welfare, contrast passive membership (such as paying membership fees and attending meetings) with active membership (such as serving on the organisations’ self-governing bodies). The authors show that individual farmers can increase their agricultural income by joining and actively participating in formal organisations (Deininger 2003).

Another resource often discussed in studies on interest groups’ impact is expertise and information. As Van Winden (2004, p. 122) argues, “interest groups are often better informed about issues that are relevant” to politicians. But access to information is also important to members of organisations. For example, Bavorova, Curtiss and Jelinek (2005) found that one of the most important incentives for Czech farmers to become business group members is the advisory and consultancy activity of the association, i.e., its information services, lectures and seminars. Crombois (2019), who conducted a survey among Bulgarian business-interest associations, concluded that access to knowledge and information about the situation of a given sector was an important reason for national organisations to become members of EU trade associations.

However, while resources matter for the success of lobbying, it is also important to investigate conditions under which they lead to lobbying influence (Baumgartner et al. 2009). This is supported, for example, by the empirical findings of Stevens and De Bruycker (2020), who show that economic resources are important for lobbying influence, but that their impact depends also on the media salience of policy issues. Dür (2008a, p. 1213) distinguishes an additional three broad categories of determinants, other than resources, namely political institutions, issues characteristics, and interest-group strategies used to influence politicians. Since our paper focuses on the subjective opinions of members and the perceived power of interest groups, we do not investigate political institutions and issues

characteristics, and we only examine the strategies chosen by farmer organisations, as members are often involved in the activities undertaken by their organisations.

Interest groups can choose different strategies, or pathways of influence, depending on who they seek to influence (e.g. politicians or public opinion) and the stage of a policymaking (e.g. election campaign, passage of legislation, etc.) (Klüver 2013). Researchers typically distinguish between inside and outside strategies, the former being also referred to as “access strategies” and the latter as “messaging or voice strategies” (Eising 2017, p. 298). Access, defined by Dür (2008a, p. 1221) as “direct expression of demands to decision-makers”, includes submitting petitions or position letters, and personal meetings with politicians and officials. Voice channels (such as demonstrations or rallies), on the other hand, aim at influencing both public opinion and politicians (Beyers 2004). Both these strategies require considerable resources from lobbying groups. For example, Kohler-Koch, Kotzian and Quittkat (2017) show that the probability of access for business-interest associations increases with high financial resources. Binderkrantz, Christiansen and Pedersen (2015, p. 109) also find that “money and professional staff make groups more successful in gaining access across arenas.” Organising a protest is also an expensive process.

Another factor determining the choice of lobbying strategy is the cooperation between interest organisations. Weiler and Reißmann (2019) investigated how this choice is affected by the intensity of cooperation in lobbying coalitions in Switzerland and Germany. They show that the more intensely interest groups cooperate with each other, the more they directly target politicians and try to exert influence via the media and citizens (Weiler, Reißmann 2019). Klüver (2011) also lists the relative size of lobbying coalitions as a source of interest groups’ ability to succeed in shaping policy outcomes. In our approach, this is why we also take account of cooperation between organisations, as it may be seen by members as a valuable asset increasing resources endowment. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that coalition-building may be undertaken mainly by those interest groups that fear for their position and embrace cooperation to increase their chances of success. In this case, cooperation should be rather regarded as a “weapon of the weak” (Hanegraaff, Pritoni 2019, p. 202).

Taking account of the above discussion, we hypothesise that the resources at the farmers’ association’s disposal determine its perceived power within the political decision-making process (Hypothesis 1). However, this relationship is indirect, as resources are used for various types of pathways of influence. We hypothesise then that the perceived power of a farmers’ association in Poland is directly determined by strategies (pathways of influence) chosen by interest groups (Hypothesis 2) and these, in turn, positively depend on the resources they have (Hypothesis 3). Power perceived by members of an organisation in turn determines the perceived effects

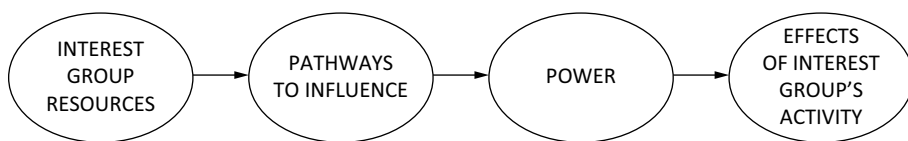


Figure 1. Conceptual model

Rysunek 1. Model koncepcyjny

Source: own study.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

it achieves (Hypothesis 4) (see detailed description in section 3.1). Figure 1 presents a very simple conceptual model used in the paper.

As the goal of the article is to investigate the perceived power and its determinants, we attempt to assess the attributed influence of farmers' organisations. This is one of the commonly used methods besides process-tracing and measuring the degree of preference attainment (Dür 2008b). All these methods have both strengths and weaknesses, mainly related to the possibility of generalising the results (Eising 2017). Assessing attributed influence is relatively simple and can be applied in many cases, but depends on the type of actors interviewed, "self-estimations can be biased both towards an exaggeration of influence and a playing down of influence" (Dür 2008b, p. 565). In addition, respondents may not be fully or properly informed (Eising 2017). For example, interest-group leaders and "expert assessment may be shaped by prominent cases or findings of other academic studies" (Klüver 2013, p. 61). These assessments are also subject to misleading incentives and may be used as a tool to influence policymakers. Interest-group leaders might both exaggerate their influence in order to signal success to their members or understate their influence in order to drive public authorities to grant them more access or to prevent counter-mobilisation (Eising 2017).

Despite the above disadvantages, we believe that this method provides valuable understanding of how farmers' associations operate. A growing body of research shows that incorporating subjective beliefs can yield insights that complement more objective measurement. For instance, in their analysis of rural protests in the UK, Woods et al. (2012) demonstrate that emotional responses to perceived threats are powerful drivers of political mobilisation. As they note, "these individual emotions are subsequently translated into collective action as emotions such as anger, frustration and desperation guide pathways for action" (Woods et al. 2012, p. 567). Recent studies confirm that it is often perceptions and beliefs – rather than purely objective conditions – that influence political and behavioural responses. Daxecker, Di Salvatore and Ruggeri (2019), for example, find that in Nigeria, perceived election

fraud was a stronger predictor of protest participation than actual incidents of fraud. Similarly, psychological factors such as attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control play a key role in shaping farmers' decisions, including their willingness to engage in collective action (Sander et al. 2024; Fałkowski, Chlebicka, Łopaciuk-Goncaryk 2017).

Disagreements of opinions between leaders and regular members of agricultural associations may also play a role. For example, Milczarek-Andrzejewska and Śpiwak (2018) show that members of farmers' interest groups in Poland portray farmers' organisations differently from their leaders. This might be explained by the fact that members judge their organisation based on expectations rather than actual performance. The opinions of members can therefore influence the activities of the interest group, as, for example, members who rate their organisation as weak may not support it financially (do not pay fees) and may not be motivated to mobilise politically (e.g. participate in protests organised by leaders) (Milczarek-Andrzejewska, Śpiwak 2018). These findings highlight the importance of analysing not only institutional and structural variables but also subjective understandings and emotional responses, which can inform both protest behaviour and broader patterns of participation in farmers' organisations.

To conclude, in our approach, we mainly follow political science studies that explore determinants of interest group influence (Dür 2008a) and show – among others – the importance of resource mobilisation (Klüver 2020). We also draw from political economy literature describing the costs and benefits of collective action and the conditions under which organised interest groups may be politically powerful (Rausser, Swinnen, Zusman 2011).

3. An Analytical Approach and Model Specification

We apply structural equation modelling (SEM) to analyse the perceived power of farmers' organisations, their resources and channels used to influence agricultural policy. We choose this approach because – unlike other statistical techniques like regression modelling or factor analysis – SEM allows researchers to measure the importance not only of observed but also latent variables like for example attitudes, intentions (Möllers et al. 2018) or trustworthiness (Gorton et al. 2015). This is crucial for our study as the key concept of our article – the power of farmers' associations in Poland – is not a directly observable variable and requires a distinctive approach to measurement, as proposed by the SEM method. In addition, this method estimates the multiple and interrelated dependences in a single analysis (Hoyle 1995). This is an important feature of SEM because in our study also other latent variables, such as the ability to protest and access to politicians, are expected

to be related to each other, as we presented in section 2. Last but not least, SEM is also widely used to analyse farmers' perceptions of issues such as environmental degradation (Bayard, Jolly 2007), voluntary vaccination schemes (Sok et al. 2015), and administrative burdens related to direct payments (Ritzel et al. 2020), etc.

SEM models were also used in several previous papers analysing "power" but mainly with respect to the food value chains. For example, in their study on sustainable economic relationships in European food chains, Fischer et al. (2008) operationalised a latent construct of an equal power distribution between buyers and suppliers. Other research by Gorton et al. (2015) aimed at explaining the relationship between buyer-seller power and trustworthiness in the Armenian dairy sector. The authors investigated various dimensions of the relative power of buyers and suppliers and their impact on trustworthiness in business relationships (Gorton et al. 2015). Our paper, however, uses a distinct approach and applies SEM to study the power of organisations rather than individual relations.

3.1. Model Specification

Following the literature review presented in section 2, the model estimated in the paper tests the hypothesis that POWER of the organisation is positively (and indirectly) determined by RESOURCES it possesses (Hypothesis 1). These RESOURCES are both tangible and intangible and they are constructed by ORGANISATION'S ACTIVITY, MEDIA, COOPERATION (with other organisations) and FARMER'S ACTIVITY (Hypothesis 1a). POWER, then, is directly and positively determined by strategies (pathways of influence) chosen by the organisation, i.e. PROTESTS it organises and ACCESS to politicians on the national and EU level (Hypothesis 2). PROTESTS and ACCESS to politicians also depend positively on the RESOURCES (Hypothesis 3). The POWER of organisations manifests itself in EFFECTS (an evaluation of the organisation's influence) (Hypothesis 4). The measurement of these constructs is explained below and Table 1 presents the questions asked in the survey.

The POWER of organisation is measured directly via one subjective indicator, namely an answer given by the interviewee: whether he/she perceives the organisations he/she belongs to as strong or weak. RESOURCES of organisations include the following four elements: organisation's activity (ACTIVITY), media resources (MEDIA), cooperation with other players (COOPERATION), and farmers' activity (FARMERS' ACTIVITY). ACTIVITY of organisation is assessed via two direct variables indicating whether: 1) the organisation has many active members and 2) it regularly organises members' meetings (at least once a year). MEDIA (media resources) are measured via assessment of two indicators, i.e.

Table 1. Variables' operationalisation for the model**Tabela 1.** Operacjonalizacja zmiennych dla modelu

Variables		Questions in the questionnaire
RESOURCES		
FARMER'S ACTIVITY	R_years	How many years have you been a member of your organisation?
	R_fee	Have you paid your membership fee in the last three years?
	R_meetings	Have you attended meetings of your organisation?
	R_protests	Have you been involved in any protests organised by your organisation?
	R_events	Have you participated in the events organised by your organisation?
	R_other	Have you been involved in other activities of your organisation?
ORGANISATION ACTIVITY	R_active members	Does the organisation you belong to have many active members?
	R_regular meetings	Does your organisation hold regular membership meetings (at least once a year)?
MEDIA	R_newspaper	Does your organisation publish a newspaper?
	R_website	Does your organisation have a website?
COOPERATION	R_coop_Polish	Does your organisation cooperate with other agricultural organisations in Poland?
	R_coop_EU	Does your organisation cooperate with other agricultural organisations in the EU?
ACCESS		
	A_parliament	Does your organisation cooperate with Members of Parliament?
	A_ministry	Does your organisation cooperate with officials of the Ministry of Agriculture?
	A_EU	Does your organisation cooperate with EU institutions, e.g. the European Commission?
PROTEST	Protest	Has your organisation organised any protests in the last three years?
POWER	Power	How do you rate the organisation you belong to? Is the organisation strong/weak?
EFFECTS		
	E_quality of life	Does your organisation have an impact on: the quality of life and working conditions of farmers?
	E_protection	representing farmers' interests and protecting their dignity and reputation?
	E_integration	improving the integration of farmers?
	E_qualifications	improving the qualifications of farmers?
	E_support	supporting farm households in difficult situations?
	E_competitiveness	increasing the competitiveness of Polish agriculture?
	E_environment	environment protection?

Source: own study.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

whether the organisation has: 1) its own website and 2) its own newspaper. COOPERATION (with other actors) is measured by: 1) cooperation with other agricultural organisations in the EU; 2) cooperation with other agricultural organisations in Poland. Individual farmers' activity (FARMER'S ACTIVITY) is measured by: 1) length of membership of the farmer in the organisation; 2) paying the organisations' fee; 3) participation in the organisation's meetings; 4) participation in the protests organised by the organisation; 5) participation in the events organised by the organisation; 6) participation in other forms of the organisation's activity. ACCESS (access to politicians on the local, national and international level) is measured by assessing whether the organisation: 1) cooperates with MPs; 2) cooperates with the Ministry of Agriculture; 3) cooperates with the EU institutions, e.g. European Commission. PROTEST (ability to mobilize members to protests), which is measured based on the assessment of whether the organisation organised any protest over the last three years. ACCESS and PROTEST influence the EFFECTS² (achieved by the organisation) which are measured via evaluation of its impact on: 1) quality of life and working conditions; 2) representing the interests of farmers and protecting their dignity and reputation; 3) integration of the agricultural society; 4) increasing farmers' qualifications; 5) supporting farm households in difficult situations; 6) increasing the competitiveness of Polish agriculture; 7) environmental protection.

3.2. Data

The data used for this analysis comes from a survey conducted in the summer of 2016 among members of farmers' associations in Poland. Following the description of farmers' organisations in Poland presented by (Śpiewak, Milczarek-Andrzejewska, Ciechomska 2016), the survey was carried out among members of the two most important types of organisations, namely agricultural trade unions and branch organisations. In 2016, there were twelve farmers' trade unions for mainly small farmers and more than forty nationwide branch organisations with market-oriented farms as members (Śpiewak, Milczarek-Andrzejewska, Ciechomska 2016).

We surveyed 601 farmers and collected 705 opinions, because some farmers belonged to more than one organisation. The questionnaire included questions about farmers' activities as members and the resources and activities undertaken by the organisation. Members were also asked to evaluate the effects of their organisation (Table 1). The survey was conducted in two of Poland's sixteen

² This variable was constructed on the basis of the research by Śpiewak, Milczarek-Andrzejewska and Ciechomska (2016), who analysed goals stated in the statutes of farmers' organisations in Poland.

regions: the Małopolskie Voivodeship (located in south-eastern Poland) and the Wielkopolskie Voivodeship (in western Poland). The two regions differ considerably in terms of agrarian structure, degree of land fragmentation, level of agricultural production, population density, level of human and social capital and traditions of cooperation between neighbouring farms (Rosner, Stanny 2017).

Due to problems in obtaining official membership lists from farmers' associations and due to the imprecise number of members of these organisations, we used quota sampling and drew the sample in two stages. We first divided the sample equally by region (into Małopolskie and Wielkopolskie Voivodeships) and then split it into two groups by type of organisation (trade unions and branch organisations). We assumed that each of these two groups must be represented in the sample at a minimum level of 40%.

However, it should be emphasised that there is no available data for the population of members of farmers' associations in Poland that could be compared with the structure of the data collected for the purposes of this study. We must therefore conclude that our study may not be representative of such a group. In fact, as mentioned above, we focused on the two most important types of farmers' organisations (branch organisations and trade unions) and the two spatial regions (the two voivodships mentioned). Our sampling strategy was to collect a fairly large and internally diverse sample, which allowed us to cover differences between regions or the type of organisation.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

The farmers surveyed were on average 40–49 years old, had secondary education, and had been members of their organisations for about 20 years. The majority of members interviewed paid membership fees to their organisations (85%), participated in meetings (80%) and events organised by their organisations (89%) (Table 2). According to members, their organisations were well equipped with tangible and intangible resources and very active. Farmers claimed that their organisations held regular meetings for members (91%), had many active members (75%), and their own website (73%). 70% of the respondents said that their organisation cooperated with other Polish farmers' organisations. On the other hand, cooperation with the European Union organisations of farmers was less frequent (38% of members indicated such cooperation).

According to members, their organisations had a relatively good access to the national decision-makers. 68% of farmers surveyed said that their organisation worked with officials at the Ministry of Agriculture and 57% with members

of parliament. Not surprisingly, the organisations had less access to EU decision-makers (only 26% of farmers said their organisation had such contacts). However, only 21% of respondents indicated that their organisation had held a protest in the past three years. This may explain the low share of positive responses to the question about farmers' involvement in protests (17%).

Respondents' positive perceptions of the organisations, which stem from assessments about resources and pathways of influence, are not confirmed by the evaluation of the power and impact of the organisations' activities. Less than 50% of farmers surveyed agreed with the statement that the organisation they belong to is strong or very strong. Less than half of respondents also said that their organisation had a strong or very strong impact on improving farmers' skills (41%), improving farmers' integration (40%), and representing farmers' interests and protecting their

Table 2. Selected opinions about organisations expressed by their members (n = 705)

Tabela 2. Wybrane opinie o organizacjach wyrażone przez ich członków (n = 705)

Opinions	Share of answers (%)
I pay membership fees in my organisation	85%
I have attended meetings of my organisation	80%
I have been involved in protests organised by my organisation	17%
I have participated in the events organised by my organisation	89%
My organisation has many active members	75%
My organisation holds meetings for members on a regular basis	91%
My organisation has its own website	73%
My organisation cooperates with other organisations of farmers in Poland	70%
My organisation cooperates with other organisations of farmers in the EU	38%
My organisation cooperates with Members of Parliament	57%
My organisation cooperates with officials of the Ministry of Agriculture	68%
My organisation cooperates with officials of the EU institutions	26%
My organisation has organised protests within the last three years	21%
The organisation I belong to is strong or very strong	48%
My organisation has a strong or very strong impact on:	
the quality of life and working conditions of farmers	16%
representing farmers' interests and protecting their dignity and reputation	39%
improving the integration of farmers	40%
improving the qualifications of farmers	41%
supporting farm households in difficult situations	17%
increasing the competitiveness of Polish agriculture	28%
environment protection	38%

Source: own study.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

dignity and reputation (39%). A small percentage of farmers admitted that their organisation had a strong or very strong impact on the quality of life and working conditions of farmers (16%), supporting farm households in difficult situations (17%), and increasing the competitiveness of Polish agriculture (28%).

To summarise, the members of the organisations perceived them being active (except in organising protests) and well-endowed with resources. However, less than half of farmers evaluated their organisation as strong. Farmers also scored the effects of the organisation's activities relatively low.

4.2. Model Estimation

Our model was estimated with the use of the maximum likelihood using the SPSS AMOS v21 program. The best performing model for the data is shown in Figure 2. The maximum-likelihood algorithm was used for discrepancy estimation. Observable variables were grouped in nine factors. The model fits the data collected rather well, with all the goodness-of-fit measures above the recommended acceptance levels (AGFI = 0.876; RMSEA = 0.066). Table 3 presents a numeric summary of the structural equation model.

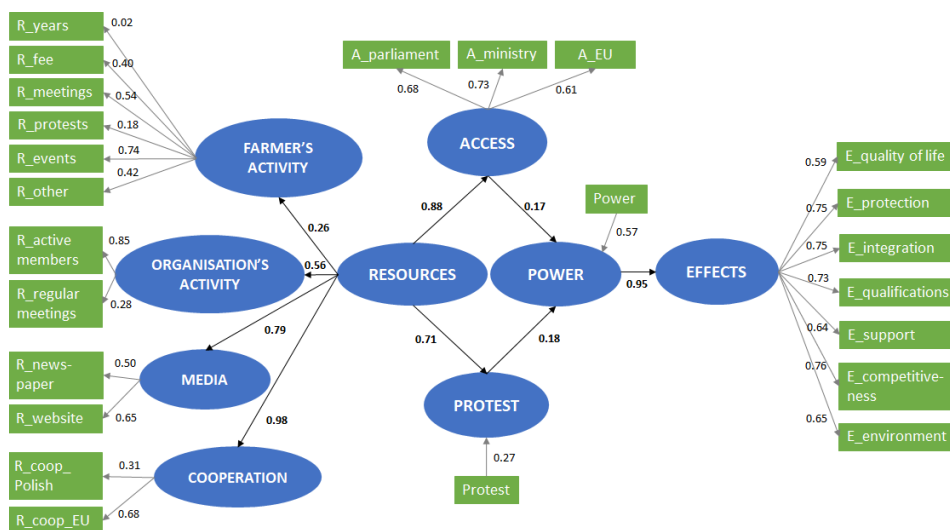


Figure 2. Results of the structural equation model

Rysunek 2. Wyniki modelu równań strukturalnych

Source: own study.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

Table 3. Standardised total effects of the structural equation model**Tabela 3.** Standaryzowane efekty całkowite modelu równań strukturalnych

VARIABLES	RESOURCES	PROTEST	ACCESS	POWER
POWER	0.280	0.181	0.172	0
RESOURCES: FARMER'S ACTIVITY	0.256	0	0	0
RESOURCES: ORGANISATION'S ACTIVITY	0.555	0	0	0
RESOURCES: COOPERATION	0.981	0	0	0
RESOURCES: MEDIA	0.794	0	0	0
PROTEST	0.709	0	0	0
ACCESS	0.880	0	0	0
EFFECTS	0.265	0.171	0.163	0.946

Source: own study.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

According to the results presented in Table 3, the most important contributor to the POWER of the farmers' organisation were its RESOURCES (with a standardised regression weight of 0.280). The most important resources were related to COOPERATION ($0.275 = 0.981 \times 0.280$) and MEDIA ($0.222 = 0.794 \times 0.280$). ORGANISATION'S ACTIVITY and individual FARMER'S ACTIVITY determined its POWER to a lesser degree ($0.155 = 0.555 \times 0.280$ and $0.072 = 0.256 \times 0.280$ respectively). There was a positive and strong correlation between RESOURCES and PROTEST as well as ACCESS (0.709 and 0.880). PROTEST and ACCESS influenced POWER positively but the correlation between these variables was relatively weak (0.181 and 0.172 respectively). The EFFECTS were determined directly by POWER and this correlation was relatively strong (0.946). They were also determined indirectly by RESOURCES (with a standardised regression weight of 0.265). All hypotheses were therefore positively verified.

5. Discussion

Before interpreting the findings, it is important to acknowledge that the data were collected in 2016, and the situation – both in Poland and across Europe – has since changed significantly since then. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the resulting economic and geopolitical crises have likely affected farmers' perceptions, and their relationships with organisations representing their interests. These events have introduced new pressures and uncertainties, potentially altering both the perceived and actual power of farmers' associations.

While the findings offer insights into perceived power of farmers' associations, they should therefore be interpreted with caution when applied to the current context.

Overall, our results show that from the perspective of a regular member, the effects achieved by his/her organisation were positively correlated with its perceived power. This relationship is relatively strong and suggests that farmers were indeed evaluating the performance of their organisation through its power. Since the main goal of the paper is to investigate what constitutes power according to members, below we focus on the resources and channels used by these organisations to influence agricultural policy.

The results indicate that farmers' associations were perceived by their members to be more powerful if they had more resources, especially those stemming from cooperation among organisations. Such great importance of cooperation may be surprising. However, it can be explained according to the arguments put forward by Hanegraaff and Pritoni (2019, p. 202), who wrote that interest groups "which fear that they will have more limited impact on decision-making procedures will mainly resort to coalition lobbying." The results of our study may therefore suggest that members surveyed were aware that their organisation must form an alliance if it wants its demands to be reflected in policymaking. This may also be supported by relatively low share of farmers evaluating their organisation as strong or very strong as presented in section 4.1. These findings confirm arguments about the problem of fragmented agricultural lobby in the European post-communist countries, for example, made by Evanson (2008), who discussed the lack of political influence of the agricultural sector in Czechia, or Śpiewak, Milczarek-Andrzejewska and Ciechomska (2016) describing farmer organisations in Poland as very numerous and heterogeneous. Our findings are also consistent with Bilewicz, Mamonova and Burdyka (2022), who argue that fragmented representation and lack of solidarity hinder effective mobilisation in Polish agriculture, despite widespread dissatisfaction. It seems that the members surveyed were aware of the lack of unity among farmers' organisations in Poland.

The above arguments may also help explain the relatively weak relationship between an organisation's activity and its perceived power. The members surveyed seemed to believe that acting alone, even if it affects power of an organisation in a positive way, is not as important as lobbying in coalitions. Moreover, the activity of individual members, measured by the membership length, payment of membership fees, as well as participation in meetings and the events it organises, appeared to play a minor role. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Wolz, Fritzsche and Reinsberg (2006), who emphasised the importance of active membership in formal organisations. The results of Mroczkowska's (2022) study complement this conclusion by showing that many farmers disengage from formal organisations when they

perceive them to be ineffective, fragmented, or unresponsive to shared concerns. Her work highlights that without visible cooperation farmers tend to adopt individualised strategies, further weakening organisational legitimacy. This reinforces the idea that it is not individual activity alone, but meaningful inter-organisational cooperation that shapes how farmers evaluate the power and relevance of their associations.

On the other hand, another important type of resource that determined the power of an organisation – second only to cooperation between farmers' organisations – relates to the dissemination of information via media (e.g., an own newspaper or website). Our findings are therefore in line with a more positive view of interest-group activity and confirm the argument that the possession of information by interest groups is a valuable resource (Van Winden 2004). They also confirm the results of empirical studies on motivation for membership of agricultural associations in Czechia (Bavorova, Curtiss, Jelinek 2005) and Bulgaria (Crombois 2019). Although the recent literature reviewed in section 2 does not explicitly address this aspect, our findings resonate with research highlighting the importance of visibility and communication tools in farmer mobilisation. For instance, Bilewicz, Mamonova and Burdyka (2022) demonstrate how Agrounia – a farmers' movement that has been mobilising farmers for protests – used social media effectively to broaden its support base, while Finger et al. (2024) emphasise how extensive media coverage helped amplify farmer protests across Europe. These examples suggest that information dissemination is increasingly central to farmers' organisational influence in both public and political arenas.

As expected, from the farmers' perspective, the channels of influence depended on the resources held by the organisation. This relationship was positive and strong, suggesting that members were aware that both access to politicians and protests are costly and require considerable resources from lobbying groups. But the farmers seemed to expect that these resources should be accumulated more through the collective efforts of organisations than individual contributions from members. Nevertheless, these results are in line with the conclusions of other researchers, indicating that having greater resources increases the likelihood that interest groups will use these strategies (Kohler-Koch, Kotzian, Quittkat 2017; Binderkrantz, Christiansen, Pedersen 2015).

However, the relationship between access to politicians and perceived power of the organisation appears relatively weak. As described in section 4.1, farmers believed that their organisations had relatively good access to national decision-makers. Yet in their view this access is not significantly translated into actual influence. Similarly, while protests positively correlated with perceived power, they were not assessed as a particularly important determinant. This finding seems to challenge the literature reviewed in section 2, which highlights the frequent use

of protest as a political tool by farmer organisations in Poland. As mentioned above, this may be related to the fact that agricultural lobbying in many CEE countries remains fragmented and characterised by numerous, diverse, and often competing organisations (Śpiewak, Milczarek-Andrzejewska, Ciechomska 2016; Evanson 2008). Protests, like coalition building, may thus function as a “weapon of the weak” (Hanegraaff, Pritoni 2019), deployed when conventional forms of influence prove ineffective. This interpretation is supported by recent research on farmer mobilisations in both CEE and Western Europe. Veitch (2025), in her study of the 2024 farmer protests in France, shows that even in countries with long-established agricultural unions, farmers are increasingly bypassing formal channels and seeking to reclaim political agency through grassroots action – often driven by dissatisfaction with representation rather than lack of access. Similarly, Żuk (2025) emphasises that recent farmer protests in Poland reflected deep socio-political frustration and perceived identity threats, rather than the outcomes of structured lobbying campaigns. Finger et al. (2024) also note that the 2023–2024 protests across Europe were triggered by a sense of exclusion from decision-making and policy design, despite formal consultation mechanisms being in place. These insights help explain why farmers in our study may view institutional access or protest not as sufficient sources of organisational power, but rather as fall-back strategies when more cooperative or representative models fail to deliver results.

In conclusion, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The most significant is the temporal distance between the 2016 data collection and the present context, which has been addressed earlier in this section. In addition, the study relies on farmers' subjective evaluations, which are shaped by individual experience, local conditions, and possibly limited knowledge of organisational activities at national or EU levels. As highlighted in the literature, self-reported data are vulnerable to various forms of bias, including social desirability, acquiescence, and common method bias (Yao, Xu 2024). Similar concerns have been raised in recent studies on farmers' perceptions – for example, regarding conservation behaviour (Kaine, Wright 2024) or land use changes (Feng et al. 2022) – where responses tend to be context-dependent and difficult to generalise. This also applies to our study, as farmers' answers may be influenced by cognitive factors and their current economic situation, further limiting the generalisability of the findings. Lastly, there is a risk that key variables were omitted during the operationalisation of constructs such as power. Future studies could refine these models through improved conceptualisation and measurement. Despite these limitations, we believe that the study offers valuable insight into how farmers perceive the power and effectiveness of their associations – an important yet understudied dimension of agricultural interest representation in post-socialist contexts.

6. Conclusions

This paper aimed to contribute to empirical research on the influence of interest groups on the CAP, especially in the post-communist countries that joined the EU at the beginning of the 21st century. The objective of the study was to examine farmers' perceptions of the power, resources and channels through which national farmers' organisations can influence agricultural policy in Poland. To operationalise the concept of power of farmers' associations we used structural equation model (SEM) and conducted a survey with 601 members of these interest groups.

According to the results of the study, the farmers surveyed assessed their organisations as being active and well-endowed with resources. But under half the farmers evaluated their organisation as being strong. Farmers also scored the effects of the organisation's activities relatively low. The results of the SEM modelling indicate that their members perceived farmers' associations as being more powerful if they had more resources, especially those stemming from cooperation among organisations. In addition, the relationship between resources and the channels of influence used by the organisation was positive and strong, suggesting that members knew that both access to politicians and protests were costly and required considerable resources from lobbying groups. However, this did not translate into farmers' perceptions of the importance of these channels to the perceived power of the organisation. Members surveyed therefore seemed to believe that acting alone, even if positively influencing organisational power, is not as important as lobbying in coalitions. We therefore argue that protests, like coalition building by organisations, should be considered in this case as a "weapon of the weak", activated only when other ways of influencing decision-makers fail. The Polish case, in particular, therefore illustrates the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of agricultural representation: while farmers are often perceived as politically well-organised, the sector remains highly fragmented, with deep structural and socio-political divisions shaping how interest groups operate and are viewed. These dynamics highlight the importance of examining how farmers themselves assess the power of the organisations that claim to represent them.

Despite several limitations that should be considered when interpreting our results – most notably the temporal distance between data collection and the present context and the subjectivity of farmers' evaluations – we believe that our study contributes to extending empirical research on the power of interest groups by applying structural equation modelling. Although the data for this study were collected in 2016, the findings may still offer valuable insights for ongoing discussions on the role of national farmers' organisations, particularly in the new EU member states. This topic remains under-researched in the broader literature

on interest representation in the EU, and our results may serve as a foundation for further studies that take into account the profound changes brought by recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Recent developments have likely affected both the conditions under which farmers' associations function and farmers' expectations toward them, highlighting the need to investigate how these organisations adapt and maintain legitimacy. The question has gained renewed significance in light of the widespread farmers' protests in 2024 against the EU Green Deal, which exposed growing dissatisfaction with current agricultural policies and the representation of farmers' interests.

Our conclusions may also be of practical interest to various stakeholders – managers, leaders, and members of farmers' associations, as well as policymakers at both national and EU levels. One key policy recommendation that emerges from our findings is the need to foster stronger cooperation between fragmented farmers' organisations, which remains a challenge in many new member states. Enhanced collaboration could improve the sector's ability to articulate its demands more effectively, especially given that farmers tend to view protest as a costly and last-resort strategy. From the farmers' perspective, this suggests a need to actively encourage their representatives to prioritise strategic alliances and joint actions across organisational boundaries.

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Co wpływa na postrzeganą siłę organizacji rolniczych? Wnioski na podstawie opinii członków organizacji

Streszczenie: Organizacje rolnicze w Unii Europejskiej (UE) są zwykle przedstawiane jako silne grupy interesu posiadające znaczne zasoby oraz możliwości wpływu na politykę państwa. W wielu nowych państwach członkowskich UE obraz ten odbiega jednak od rzeczywistości. Dodatkowo brakuje dogłębnych badań dotyczących siły organizacji rolniczych w krajach postsocjalistycznych. Celem niniejszego artykułu było więc empiryczne zbadanie postrzeganej siły, zasobów i kanałów, których używają polskie organizacje do wpływania na politykę rolną. Zbadano subiektywne opinie członków organizacji, ponieważ mogą one dostarczyć dodatkowych informacji na temat działań grup interesu, takich jak proces mobilizacji rolników. Wykorzystując unikalne dane z ankiety i modele równań strukturalnych, pokazano, że organizacje rolników w Polsce są postrzegane przez swoich członków jako silniejsze, jeśli mają więcej zasobów, zwłaszcza tych wynikających ze współpracy między organizacjami.

Słowa kluczowe: grupy interesu, sektor rolny, postrzegana siła, modelowanie równań strukturalnych, Polska.