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Changes in Rural Areas and Agriculture in Poland in the Period After Accession to the European Union: The Perspective of Agricultural Advisers

Abstract

Aim of the work: The main aim of this study was to assess the direction of structural changes taking place in agriculture and rural areas. This assessment was based on opinions obtained from employees of public and private advisory services.

Research method: Source materials were obtained through surveys covering eight voivodeships in south-eastern Poland. Responses from 148 respondents were included in the analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the results, which are presented in tabular form.

Key results: Based on information obtained from the literature review and the results of the conducted research, it can be concluded that the ongoing changes are leading to a gradual polarisation of farms – a fact noted by respondents. The availability of Community financial instruments supporting agriculture and rural areas is high. The opening of EU markets to Polish food products improves the income of agricultural producers. The financial dimension of EU accession was clearly recognised. In addition to the improved profitability of (some) farms, an improvement in the quality of life in rural areas was also noted. Respondents highlighted the development gap between areas undergoing suburbanisation and the rest of the countryside, particularly those remote from regional and local development centres. According to advisers, the positive changes occurring in rural communities in the 20 years following accession outweighed the negative ones.

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Main conclusions: Integration processes contributed to significant structural changes in agriculture and rural areas. The opening of EU markets to Polish agri-food products, combined with the modernisation of the food industry, contributed to an improved income for agricultural producers. Despite the positive assessment of the inflow of European funds for infrastructure development, it was emphasised that without activating endogenous potential, it will be difficult to ensure lasting and sustainable territorial development. At the same time, the need for more effective use of structural policy instruments was highlighted to strengthen the long-term competitiveness of rural areas.

Keywords: European integration, rural areas, structural changes.

1. Introduction

Constant change in the world economy means that the living conditions of populations on individual continents, countries and in regions are also being transformed. Regardless of the point of reference (an entire country or a region), differences within the centre–periphery and urban–rural arrangements are also visible in many cases. Historically, the emergence and growth of towns, associated with the concentration of population and with its social and economic activity in a given area, also meant a rise in the standard of living of urban residents (Miklaszewska, Marks-Krzyszkowska, Starosta, 2024). This phenomenon gradually encouraged the inhabitants of rural areas to migrate and to change their place of residence (to urban areas).

If rural areas are not to become merely a space of out-migration, they must offer at least attractive living and/or working conditions. In order to halt the negative effects of rural depopulation, it is necessary to limit the scale of the impact of the *push forces*, which include relatively poor living conditions, a low income, a limited local labour market and the associated poor opportunities for professional advance and self-fulfilment. Other forces pushing people out of the countryside are hard, low-paid work in the agricultural sector and impeded access to often unsatisfactory public services (Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska, 2019). With reference to rural areas, the *smart village* concept is postulated. The findings of its proponents suggest that the success of rural areas, and consequently the improvement in the quality of life of their inhabitants, depends on how quickly this idea is implemented and on the tools that the stakeholders of the process will have at their disposal. It is emphasised that the concept will probably neither prevent the ageing of society nor halt the depopulation of peripheral rural areas, but it may become an impulse for creating tools that improve the quality of life (Komorowski, Rosa, Kalinowski, 2023).

For many years, the need to develop the multifunctionality of agriculture has been emphasised as a measure aimed at diversifying economic activity in rural areas. Various reasons are indicated for the growing interest in the issue of the multifunctionality of rural areas. The first is connected with the declining economic importance of agriculture as a place of employment and a source of income. The second concerns the fact that rural areas, which occupy more than 90% of Poland's territory, contain most of the country's natural resources as well as a considerable part of its labour and production and material resources. The rational use of these resources is important from the perspective of society as a whole. Moreover, the changing functions of rural areas require a new way of supporting their development (Wilkin, 2011).

The analyses emphasise the fact that economic development does not take place in isolation from social development. The coexistence of these two components has already been documented in earlier research (Rosner, Stanny, 2007). Economic development taking place in rural areas therefore also means progress in the social dimension, which translates positively into the perception of the quality of life.

The 2024 edition of the periodically published study *Raport o stanie wsi* [Report on the State of Rural Areas] (Poczta, Hałasiewicz, 2024) states that the aim of rural development is the emergence of local economic and social structures capable of generating decent incomes for inhabitants and of not leading to unfavourable phenomena (such as agrarian overpopulation, depopulation, unemployment or poverty). A goal formulated in this way assumes, in addition to the creation of a coherent vision of development, opposition to the negative consequences of market transformations. Taking so many different aspects into account, this objective cannot be achieved by means of a single, universal model, because the development paths of local structures differ considerably (Stanny, 2012).

Against this background, it becomes justified to seek an answer to the question of how Poland's membership of the structures of the European Union (EU) affects the transformations taking place in rural areas. More than 20 years of Poland's presence in the EU, and the related implementation of many Community solutions in national economic and social policy, provide sufficient grounds for attempting such assessments. A comprehensive assessment of the changes occurring in rural areas is a complex and multi-faceted process that goes beyond the framework of a standard research article. For this reason, the present study attempts to show how the changes taking place in the countryside since 2004 are assessed by people who have permanent contact with the farming community and extensive experience, particularly in the use of the financial resources implemented under successive budgetary perspectives of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), that is, by agricultural advisers.

2. Methodological notes

The main aim of the study was to assess the transformations taking place in rural areas and in agriculture in Poland in the period after the country's accession to the EU on 1 May 2004. This assessment was made on the basis of a review and critical analysis of the subject literature and of opinions expressed by employees of public and private entities providing broadly understood advisory services to farm owners and to agribusiness entities. These were people representing the following institutions: voivodeship agricultural advisory centres, private agricultural advisory services, local government, the Agricultural Advisory Centre and chambers of agriculture. The research was carried out in 2022 and covered agricultural advisers from eight Polish voivodeships: Lubelskie, Łódzkie, Małopolskie, Mazowieckie, Opolskie, Podkarpackie, Śląskie and Świętokrzyskie.

Advisers were selected for the survey purposively. In the 2021/2022 academic year, the Faculty of Agriculture and Economics of the Hugo Kołłątaj University of Agriculture in Krakow ran a postgraduate programme in farm economics.¹ The survey was carried out among broadly understood advisory entities from those voivodeships to which information had been sent at the recruitment stage for the postgraduate programme (Table 1). More than half of the respondents were advisers from the Małopolskie voivodeship (56.08%). The Śląskie and the Świętokrzyskie voivodeships each accounted for 10% of respondents. The least numerous represented were the Łódzkie, Podkarpackie and Lubelskie voivodeships (respondents from these regions accounted for 1.35%, 3.38% and 4.05% of all those surveyed). Taking the place of employment into account, more than three quarters of those surveyed were representatives of public agricultural advisory services, while an equal share belonged to private advisory services and to chambers of agriculture (8.78% in both cases) (Table 2).

The research instrument was an online questionnaire, developed purposively in accordance with the assumptions arising from the research problem. The process of its construction began with the operationalisation of theoretical variables, which were transformed into measurable indicators in the form of survey questions. The instrument was divided into two parts. Questions characterising the respondent were placed at the beginning. These were followed by the substantive questions relating to the key research variables. The survey mainly used closed and semi-open questions. This type of approach made it possible to standardise the answers and to analyse them quantitatively. One question was open-ended, which allowed respondents to specify their answers. In constructing the questionnaire, particular

¹ The programme was co-financed by the EU from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

attention was paid to the clarity and unambiguity of the wording, to avoiding leading questions and to adapting the language to the level of the recipients. The instrument underwent a preliminary pilot in order to verify its comprehensibility and structural correctness.

The questionnaires were sent to agricultural advisers listed in the database published by the Agricultural Advisory Centre (CDR, n.d.), expanded by an address database of experts created for the purposes of the postgraduate 'farm economics' programme. In total, responses were received from 152 people, of whom four questionnaires were excluded because of incomplete data. Respondents had varied lengths of service in advisory work (Table 3). The most numerous groups were those who had worked in advisory services for between 4 and 10 years and for between 16 and 25 years, accounting for 23.65% of those surveyed in each case. Those employed for the shortest time (up to 3 years) accounted for 14.19% of all those surveyed.

Simple methods of descriptive statistics as well as graphical (tables) and descriptive methods were used in the study in order to present the results.

3. Economic, social and environmental determinants of the development of agriculture and rural areas

Development is a multidimensional process leading to positive changes in the entire economic and social system. In addition to growth in national income and changes in the volume and value of production, it also covers institutional, social and administrative transformations (Kozak, 2001). Understanding development in this way clearly links it to the structural changes occurring in the national economy as a whole, but also in its individual sectors. The pace of these structural changes remains correlated with the dynamics of development processes. Major structural changes are usually accompanied by high development dynamics, whereas when the dynamics of change are low this has an inhibiting effect on the processes of structural economic transformation (Klamut, 2006).

Owing to its links with many sectors of the national economy, agribusiness is subject to changes that adapt it to effective cooperation with entities of the national and international economy. The necessity and the inevitability of change in Polish agribusiness resulted, among other things, from the substantial development backlogs which this sector of the economy experienced during the period of the centrally planned economy and after the systemic transformation. A lack of significant change could have left this sector permanently behind and caused it to lose the ability to compete on the common European market and in an increasingly globalised world.

Research conducted by a team of scholars from the Poznań University of Life Sciences shows that modernisation processes in food production and in the creation of a modern agribusiness are taking place in Central and Eastern Europe (Mrówczyńska-Kamińska, Szuba-Barańska, Poczta, 2021). These transformations are, however, evolutionary in nature, which means that the gap separating the countries of Central and Eastern Europe from the EU-15 states remains significant. The scale of the differences separating these countries from the states that have long formed the EU justifies supporting the agribusiness of Central and Eastern European countries with pro-development public funds, including funds under the CAP, targeted primarily, however, at producing the desired allocation and efficiency effects.

A positive aspect of the transformations taking place is the decrease in the number of people employed in agriculture in Central and Eastern Europe. Attention is drawn to the fact that greater dynamics in this respect were achieved after accession to the EU. In-depth research proves that the share of those employed in agriculture is falling in favour of the other sectors that make up agribusiness (the production of means of production, and food processing and distribution). In the agribusiness sector of Central and Eastern European countries, the efficiency of production is also increasing and, which is particularly important, labour productivity is rising (Szuba-Barańska, Poczta, Mrówczyńska-Kamińska, 2020). The transformations taking place made it possible to reduce the share of GDP generated in agriculture in this region from about 9% to 2.5% in the years 1990–2016 (Baer-Nawrocka, 2016). In Poland, according to data from the agricultural censuses, this share fell from 4.5% in 2004 to 2.2% in 2021. In the same period, the proportion of people working in agriculture decreased from 15.6% to 9.8% (Poczta, Hałasiewicz, 2024; PSR, 2020).

The transformations taking place in agribusiness and in rural areas result to a large extent from the economic policy pursued. After accession to the EU structures in 2004, the Polish countryside changed significantly, and the key processes here were de-agrarianisation and an increase in multifunctionality (Śleszyński, 2024). The demographic problems that have been present in rural areas for years, manifested among other things in depopulation processes especially in peripheral areas, together with new issues connected with the energy transition, create further challenges for rural development policy. Nor should the natural conditions of agricultural production be forgotten. These are subject to powerful influences and modifications on the part of increasingly violent weather phenomena resulting from climate change. Polish agribusiness will need new solutions in this area as well, and the first barrier to their implementation is convincing agricultural producers of the inevitability of the changes taking place and of the legitimacy of introducing bottom-up, individual measures.

Although the key objectives of the CAP have not changed fundamentally over the many years of its implementation, successive reforms of this policy and the changes introduced have become a response to the experience associated with its existing set of instruments, as well as to the problems that accompanied its implementation. In many cases, efforts were also made to adapt specific CAP instruments to the emerging challenges related to the functioning of agriculture and its environment under changing market conditions (Wieliczko, 2015). Following this, the structure of expenditure on agriculture in the Community budget also changed, which meant a varied division of the allocated funds between the pillars of the CAP.

At the moment when Poland, together with nine other countries, was entering the EU structures, the dominant narrative concerning the existing assumptions of cohesion policy was being changed. From a redistributive policy it was being transformed into measures whose overriding objectives became efficiency and competitiveness (Mróz, 2024). Alongside the pursuit of greater social and economic cohesion, cohesion policy increasingly began to emphasise views associated with the neoliberal model of growth and innovation (Stanny, Mróz, 2024). Reforms of cohesion policy carried out in this spirit were not without influence on the shape of the operational programmes under which EU structural policy instruments were implemented in Poland.

Environmental issues were more strongly emphasised in the documents used to programme agricultural policy for the years 2021–2027. It was stressed that agriculture uses about 40% of land resources and about 70% of freshwater resources in its production processes and that it is, moreover, responsible for more than 20% of global greenhouse-gas emissions (European Court of Auditors, 2017). The instruments of agricultural and rural development policy currently being implemented frequently make the receipt of financial support conditional on meeting specific environmental and climate requirements.

Meeting the requirements necessary to obtain support under agricultural policy is not an easy process for entities operating in rural areas. This is intended to favour the directing of funds to units that genuinely need assistance and that meet the conditions for obtaining it. Both of these issues, however, are highly controversial. It is not difficult to recognise doubts concerning not only the purposefulness of the use of EU funds, but also who the beneficiary of the support is (Sroka, 2018).

It is worth looking at the opinions of people with extensive experience of working with the problems in rural areas, which agricultural advisers undoubtedly are. An analysis of their statements makes it possible to assess these processes from an expert position on the one hand and, on the other and equally importantly, from a position that has the features of participant observation, given the closeness and the frequency of contacts between farmers and advisers. This will constitute

a kind of attempt to sum up two decades of Polish agriculture in the EU. This balance of benefits and challenges has the potential to become a contribution to the evaluation of the policy of supporting rural areas and agriculture, while critical analysis will make it possible to allocate public funds better in the future.

4. The importance of advisory services in rural development

Agricultural advisory services are one of the more important activities supporting socio-economic activity in rural areas in which farms are still active. The progressive depreciation of the agricultural functions of the countryside means that food production is becoming an occupation pursued by a small group of rural residents, which does not at all mean that it is a marginal occupation. The specialisation of farms results in the emergence of units run by highly qualified specialists, some of whom focus solely on running a farm while others combine professional activity with work on the land. For both of these groups it is important to use the support of advisory entities, because without professional advice for farmers, and also for the inhabitants of rural areas (Parzonko, 2010), such aspects of life as food security or the protection of the environment and its biodiversity may be at risk. Changes in the model of running a farm in Poland, from mostly small and economically inefficient entities towards commercial farms, have not eliminated the demand for advisory services, but have limited it quite considerably. The structure of the needs reported by agricultural producers with regard to professional advice has also changed, which is visible not only among farmers in Poland but also in other EU countries (Balezantis et al., 2020). A farmer who is aware of their capabilities but also of their shortcomings is not afraid to reach for advisory support at various stages of running a business, but does so increasingly often because of the frequently complicated procedure for submitting documents for external financial support, and not because of the need to supplement knowledge of the technologies used in agricultural production (Andrýšková, Foltýnek, 2006). Consequently, the emphasis in interpreting the notion of an agricultural adviser should indicate that 'agricultural' refers to the entity to which advisory services are provided (a farm, an entity operating in the environment of agriculture), and not to the type of advice provided as such.

Several decades ago, the successor taking over a farm was perceived as the weakest and the least able, potentially having the greatest difficulty in finding a place on the labour market. Today, farmers are entrepreneurs for whom economic categories are the dominant premise for production decisions. Although in practice they are not called business owners, they often act in that role, managing considerable assets and labour. They calculate different possibilities and compare options, but

above all they know that a properly prepared adviser is able to help them achieve measurable economic benefits. Hence the availability of advisory services in rural areas can hardly be overestimated. Entities providing advisory services are meeting these needs, since the specialisation of advisory firms is progressing. The model of domination by public advisory entities is under threat, and private companies are increasingly offering their services. Their number in Poland is currently estimated at about 300 (Laskowski, 2025).

Agricultural advisory services in Poland have a public-law character. They comprise both entities whose functioning is financed from the state budget and private ones. Public advisory services are based on advisory centres organised at the voivodeship level, with offices in individual voivodeships. The public institutions providing advisory services also include the bodies of agricultural self-government, that is, the chambers of agriculture, which operate in individual voivodeships and have representative offices in some poviats (Laskowski, 2021). The public institution responsible for training advisers is the Agricultural Advisory Centre (AAC; Polish: CDR). In addition to the groups listed above, advisory services for farmers are also provided by employees of research institutes, universities of life sciences and banks cooperating with farmers. Private entities offer a variety of advisory services in the field of the organisation and technology of production, but most of them focus on professional financial advice and on keeping records on behalf of farmers. The group of private entities includes, among others, various organisations and trade associations which provide advice connected with the profile of the activity they pursue. Advisers employed by commercial entities supplying farmers with the means of agricultural production are also of great importance to farmers. In the case of these entities, advisory services are related to the specific nature of the products offered.

For farmers, advisory services increasingly mean using the support of commercial units. Public entities, above all the agricultural advisory centres (ODR), have to compete with private companies, which often have better technical, staffing and research facilities for advisory activity. This has been reflected, among other things, in the falling number of employees of the voivodeship ODRs, from 5,850 in 1992 to 3,668 in 2020, with a simultaneous increase in employment in private advisory entities. Polish advisory services are evolving towards a public-private model that has been present in EU countries for many years (MRiRW, 2021; Wawrzyniak, 2021).

An undoubted asset of public advisory services is the long tradition of cooperation with farmers and the trust that state entities enjoy among them. Agricultural advisers are often treated by farmers as a kind of bridge between farmers, the local and central levels. In this perspective, hopes are attached to these advisers that the farmer's voice will reach the appropriate group of people and that

the measures postulated will not go unconsidered (Staniszewski, 2014). Private entities, in turn, are perceived as more useful in providing advice related to the financing of agricultural activity and as better adapted to meeting farmers' needs (Baer-Nawrocka, Sadowski, Wigier, 2024; Ingram et al., 2022).

5. Advisers' opinions on changes in agriculture and rural areas after Poland's accession to the EU

Agricultural advisers have extensive knowledge of the practical and theoretical aspects of conducting activity in rural areas. Their experience and competences support the inhabitants of rural areas, including farmers, in pursuing various types of activity. Particularly important, however, is the experience of this professional group in the practical implementation of instruments supporting agriculture under the CAP, and the sharing of knowledge in this area. Advisers, meeting farmers on a daily basis, are best able to assess whether the policy currently pursued is appropriate, what its measurable effects are and in which aspects the greatest problems arise. The information they provide also makes it possible to react smoothly and to adapt better the offer addressed to active members of local communities in support of their activity.

Analyses conducted by other authors have shown that Poland's integration with the EU brought benefits to agriculture, including a stable, upward trend in agricultural production and the strengthening of links between farms and the market, an increase in the incomes of agricultural producers, and growth in the volume and a change in the geographical structure of Polish trade in agri-food products after the adoption of the EU Common Commercial Policy (Poczta, 2023; Smędzik-Ambroży, Sapa, 2019). At the same time, it is worth noting the disquieting fact that the improvement in incomes occurred mainly thanks to the subsidies received by agricultural producers. Such dependence of farms on subsidies gives no grounds for optimism as regards the durability of their functioning. This state of affairs is worrying even where these payments are perceived as compensation for the non-productive services provided by agriculture as the fulfilment of the so-called non-commercial functions of this sector of the national economy (Pawlak, Poczta, 2025).

As part of the research for this study, respondents were asked a number of questions concerning their opinions on whether they perceive positive and negative changes in rural areas and in Polish agriculture after Poland's accession to the EU. Because the period to which the questions referred was distant (more than 20 years of Polish agriculture and rural areas within EU structures), the answers obtained were analysed with respondents divided according to their length of service in

advisory work. It was assumed that such an approach would best capture the differences in the assessment of changes in rural areas and in agriculture from the point of view of people involved in advisory work.

The first question concerned the positive changes in rural areas that advisers perceive after Poland's accession to the EU. From the six answers proposed, respondents could select a maximum of three. Regardless of their length of service, advisers most frequently indicated two changes, namely access to EU financial support instruments and the inflow of EU funds for infrastructure development. The financial aspect of change clearly comes to the fore here and was assessed as the most important. Slightly more than half of those surveyed noticed positive changes manifested in an improvement in income and in the quality of life of rural residents. The positive change indicated least frequently by respondents overall was the stabilisation of instruments dedicated to supporting rural development, an answer chosen by 14.19% of those surveyed. An analysis of the answers for individual groups of advisers showed a similar tendency, although only in the group of people employed in advisory work for between 4 and 10 years was the least frequently indicated change the acceleration of the transformation of the agri-food industry (Table 4). None of the respondents put forward their own answer to this question.

The question about positive changes in rural areas was complemented by a question concerning negative changes (Table 5). Here too, respondents could indicate a maximum of three answers. All the people employed in advisory work for less than 25 years pointed to the problem of investments made in fields that have no development prospects in the countryside, which can be interpreted directly as an inaccurate choice of ways of directing financial support. People with the longest length of service in advisory work, in turn, drew attention to the deepening of the disproportions between the western and the eastern part of the country as regards the development of rural areas. The problem of the uneven economic development of eastern and western Poland can be observed as far back as the period when the country was under the partitions (Kraska, Kot, 2021). Particular emphasis is placed on the disproportions growing since the beginning of the 1990s, and many authors indicate as a reason for this state of affairs, among other things, the high share of low-efficiency agriculture in the economy of the regions of Eastern Poland.

The answers concerning changes of a negative nature that respondents added beyond the catalogue of proposed answers are interesting. Some of them referred to the change in the agricultural landscape of rural areas resulting from the falling number of farms, especially small farms, and from the search by people leaving agriculture for a more attractive place of employment. Also interesting are the indications concerning transformations in the social layer of rural areas, since advisers raised the problem of the blurring of cultural differences, customs,

traditions and national distinctiveness. Another negative consequence of the changes in rural areas after Poland's accession to the EU is, in the respondents' opinion, the bureaucratisation of many areas of life.

A separate issue in the questions addressed to agricultural advisers was the positive changes in agriculture after Poland's accession to the EU. A relatively high level of convergence among respondents in answering this question is noticeable (Table 6). Regardless of their length of service in advisory work, they most frequently chose the answer 'access to EU instruments of financial support for agriculture', in second place came the indication 'the opening of EU markets to Polish products', and in third 'the inflow of EU funds for infrastructure development'. It is worth noting that all these responses point to a connection with the financial benefits of the Polish economy functioning within EU structures. Perceiving positive changes mainly through the prism of the financial situation, or at least of the increased availability of funds whose task is to support development, is symptomatic of the assessment of many aspects of Poland's membership of the EU (Churski, 2014). Advisers with the longest experience least frequently indicated the stabilisation of agricultural policy instruments as a positive change, which draws attention to the problems in this area, and it is particularly valuable that they are perceived from the perspective of many years of work with farmers.

The question concerning positive changes was supplemented by a question about the negative changes perceived in agriculture after 2004. Regardless of the length of service in advisory work, in each of the groups distinguished the two most frequently indicated changes perceived as negative were the polarisation of farms and rising production costs (Table 7). In this respect, however, it is worth noting that the polarisation of farms was assessed most negatively by respondents from the following regions: Małopolskie, Mazowieckie, Świętokrzyskie and Opolskie. In the case of the first three voivodeships, this may be justified by the defective structure of farms in these regions, which has persisted for a long time (and by the lack of sufficient incentives to change it). Greater understanding of the need for farms to differentiate (also in terms of the volume of production) was expressed, in turn, by employees of institutions in the environment of agriculture from the Śląskie voivodeship. This region is characterised by a higher level of professionalisation of agricultural activity. The level of acceptance of the polarisation of farms in the group of employees of private advisory firms was at a similar level to that in the group of respondents representing public advisory services.

It is worth quoting the respondents' answers concerning negative changes that were indicated as 'other', from outside the catalogue of answers presented to them for selection. Here advisers pointed, among other things, to 'investment purchases disproportionate to the size of the farms', to the limitation of production

(especially livestock production) and, through inappropriately targeted financial support, to contributing to the functioning of farms 'only on paper' and thereby to the entrenchment of a defective agrarian structure. The problem of excessive bureaucratisation was raised, as were the lack of clarity of the solutions introduced and inequalities in the interpretation and the methods of control of the regulations concerning agricultural production in relation to other EU countries. Some of those surveyed noticed problems related to cooperation between producers and agri-food processing entities, pointing to difficulties in access to sales markets (for example high entry barriers, too small a scale of production, farmers' weak bargaining power in setting the terms of cooperation) and to the takeover, and in many cases also the closure, of entities processing raw materials of agricultural origin (for example sugar factories and slaughterhouses).

6. Discussion

When analysing changes in rural areas and in agriculture itself, one may venture the following questions: is the development of agriculture keeping pace with the development of rural areas, and how is the support directed through the instruments offered by the EU positioned within this problem? It is also possible to discuss how the opinions on this subject obtained during the survey with agricultural advisers look when confronted with the opinions and experiences of other stakeholders in rural development. The financial assistance flowing under Pillars I and II of the CAP in previous programme periods evolved from support for the multifunctionality of agriculture and rural areas, through improving the competitiveness of the agricultural sector, the state of the natural environment and rural areas, and improving the quality of life in rural areas and diversifying the rural economy (CAP 2007–2013), to a sustainable approach to the management of natural resources, action in the sphere of climate and the sustainable territorial development of rural areas (2014–2020 and 2021–2022) (KE, n.d.).

Rural areas in Poland (and not only there) are characterised by dynamic processes of de-ruralisation, de-agrarianisation and de-productivisation (including de-animalisation), which are present with varying intensity in different regions of the country depending on their level of socio-economic development (Musiał, Krawczyk, 2022; Zegar, 2018). In Poland, in the period between the two most recent agricultural censuses (2010–2020), the number of farms engaged exclusively in crop production increased by about 25%. In the same period, the number of farms declaring mixed production fell by about a third (PSR, 2020). The problem of the abandonment of agricultural land and of the cessation of agricultural production as an effect of implementing CAP instruments is not a new issue (Ortyl, Kasprzyk,

2022; Ortyl, Kasprzyk, Jadczyzyn, 2024). Farmers are under constant pressure to raise efficiency while at the same time striving to produce in a sustainable way and facing expectations concerning the high quality parameters of the products they manufacture. They are, however, helped in this respect by the financial support instruments under the CAP, which was noticed by the advisers surveyed. The higher profitability of farms in Poland achieved thanks to this is visible in particular in the decreasing income disparity between farmers and other social groups (Kata, Wosiek, 2023). Nevertheless, the changes taking place in rural areas are not uniform across the whole of their territory, although, as selected authors indicate, after years of focusing on the pursuit of economic growth, countries with a long record of membership have shifted their emphasis to sustainable development, including the pursuit of a reduction in regional disproportions (Bachtler, Begg, 2018). Inequalities in the development of individual parts of a country are a problem that appeared after accession not only in Poland (the division into eastern and western Poland), but also in other countries, an example of which may be Romania (Goschin, 2014).

Another problem indicated by those surveyed, the polarisation of farms, is consistent with the reports already published in this area (Hornowski, Parzonko, 2023; Wojewodzic, Paluch, Martynowicz, 2023). Intensification and an increase in the scale of production are taking place on some farms, which corresponds with a small, but nonetheless real, decline in the share of the smallest farms in terms of area, very often no longer engaged in any agricultural production at all. The literature emphasises that considerable disproportions in production structures, visible in territorial terms, occur in national agriculture. The phenomenon of the regional polarisation of farms in Poland is important in so far as it points to the regional differences with regard to future changes in the agrarian structure in Poland (Baer-Nawrocka, Poczta, 2020). Also positive is the stable upward trend in agricultural production recorded over a longer period, as well as the strengthening of the contractual links between farms and agricultural markets (Poczta, Hałasiewicz, 2024).

The previously mentioned processes of de-ruralisation, de-agrarianisation and de-productivisation (including de-animalisation) are also visible in the agricultural landscape, with, as some authors indicate, de-agrarianisation usually being accompanied by an increase in the multifunctionality of rural areas (Śleszyński, 2024), which should be read as a positive change.

In the survey *Polska wieś i rolnictwo 2022* [The Polish countryside and agriculture 2022], carried out on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, a sense of security and access to water supply and sewage infrastructure were indicated as the basic factors shaping satisfaction with the place of residence.

At the same time, among the reasons for dissatisfaction with the place of residence and the desire to change it, respondents indicated poor access to public services (for example the lack of opportunities to improve their level of education, limited access to healthcare, to non-agricultural jobs or to the possibility of using public transport). It is worth mentioning that these reasons have been reported for many years and indicate the need to take measures that solve the development problems identified (Dudek, Drygas, 2023).

The reflections of the agricultural advisers participating in the survey on changes in agriculture and rural areas after accession to the EU are not isolated (Jambor, Gorton, 2025). Similar problems, but also directions of change, are postulated and described in the literature (Pawlak, Poczta, 2025). It seems that an important issue, yet one omitted in the advisers' opinions, is the impact of climate change on the situation of agricultural producers. This aspect may be one of the postulated directions for further research in this area.

7. Conclusion

Poland's membership of the EU has brought about a number of changes in the functioning of many areas of the national economy. The need to adapt to operating under the rules of the single-market community was a challenge for most economic entities. A certain opportunity to carry out preparations was provided by the pre-accession period, in which national economic entities could confront the regulations that were to become fully binding from 1 May 2004.

Particularly many concerns were associated at that time with the functioning of Polish agriculture and the food industry under the conditions of the single market. The considerable fragmentation of farms, the small scale of production and low efficiency constituted a substantial challenge. The transformations taking place in this sector of the economy and in rural areas, however, resulting both from European integration and as a natural consequence of the changes following the systemic transformation, have brought about significant changes in the perception of agriculture and the countryside. The transformations under way are leading to a gradual polarisation of farms. The number of entities engaged in commercial production is increasing steadily, although slowly. The group of farms, especially the smallest ones, that have limited or abandoned agricultural production is also growing.

Advisers with direct experience of working with farmers have noticed this process of polarisation. At the same time, they clearly assessed positively the availability of Community financial instruments supporting agriculture and rural areas. The opening of EU markets to Polish food products was also emphasised,

which, together with the transformation of the food industry, made it possible to improve the income situation of agricultural producers. Nevertheless, in the respondents' opinion, the wide availability of financial resources leads in some cases to excessive investment in fields that have no development prospects. A deepening development gap was also noted between areas undergoing suburbanisation and the rest of the countryside, especially those areas remote from development centres. Although in the vast majority of cases the inflow of European funds for infrastructure development was perceived and assessed positively, without activating the endogenous potential and halting the depopulation process in some rural areas it will be difficult to prevent negative processes and to ensure sustainable territorial development. In the advisers' opinions, the positive changes taking place in rural communities outweighed the negative ones. It is worth using the experience of the first 20 years of EU membership, however, in order to employ the structural policy instruments currently available in such a way that they bring the best possible results for all stakeholders, ensuring the long-term competitiveness of rural areas.

Table 1. Structure of respondents by voivodeship in which they were professionally active

Voivodeship	Number	Share (in %)
Małopolskie	83	56.08
łódzkie	2	1.35
Lubelskie	6	4.05
Mazowieckie	9	6.08
Opolskie	12	8.11
Podkarpackie	5	3.38
Śląskie	15	10.14
Świętokrzyskie	16	10.81
Total	148	100.00

Source: own study based on survey results.

Table 2. Structure of respondents by type of institution they represent

Type of institution	Number	Share (in %)
Public advisory services	116	78.38
Private advisory services	13	8.78
Local government	1	0.68
Agricultural Advisory Centre (AAC)	4	2.70
Chambers of agriculture	13	8.78
Other	1	0.68
Total	148	100.00

Source: own study based on survey results.

Table 3. Structure of respondents by length of service in consulting

Adviser's length of service	Number	Share (in %)
Up to 3 years	21	14.19
4–10 years	35	23.65
11–15 years	29	19.59
16–25 years	35	23.65
Over 25 years	28	18.92
Total	148	100.00

Source: own study based on survey results.

Table 4. Structure of responses to the question: what positive changes do you see in rural areas after Poland’s accession to the EU? (in %)

Positive changes	Adviser's length of service in years					All advisers
	up to 3	4–10	11–15	16–25	over 25	
Stabilisation of instruments dedicated to supporting rural development	14.29	25.71	6.90	14.29	7.14	14.19
Access to EU financial support instruments	80.95	91.43	82.76	82.86	92.86	86.49
Acceleration of the transformation of the agri-food industry	23.81	14.29	13.79	22.86	14.29	17.57

Table 4. – cont.

Positive changes	Adviser's length of service in years					All advisers
	up to 3	4–10	11–15	16–25	over 25	
Inflow of EU funds for infrastructure development	80.95	80.00	68.97	77.14	78.57	77.03
Improvement in the income situation of rural residents	52.38	45.71	58.62	51.43	53.57	52.03
Improvement in the quality of life in rural areas	42.86	42.86	68.97	51.43	53.57	52.03

Source: own study based on survey results.

Table 5. Structure of responses to the question: what negative changes do you see in rural areas after Poland's accession to the EU? (in %)

Negative changes	Adviser's length of service in years					All advisers
	up to 3	4–10	11–15	16–25	over 25	
'Eating up' of the funds obtained for development	47.62	68.57	79.31	71.43	67.86	68.24
Investments in fields that have no development prospects	95.24	88.57	86.21	85.71	78.57	86.49
Territorial stratification: benefits for rural areas on the outskirts of large cities	66.67	68.57	68.97	71.43	60.71	67.57
Deepening of the disproportions between the western and the eastern part of the country	71.43	62.86	48.28	62.86	82.14	64.86
Other	9.52	11.43	17.24	8.57	10.71	11.49

Source: own study based on survey results.

Table 6. Structure of responses to the question: what positive changes do you see in agriculture after Poland's accession to the EU? (in %)

Positive changes	Adviser's length of service in years					All advisers
	up to 3	4–10	11–15	16–25	over 25	
Stabilisation of agricultural policy instruments	19.05	22.86	6.90	11.43	7.14	13.51
Opening of EU markets to Polish products	76.19	60.00	58.62	57.14	71.43	63.51

Table 6. – cont.

Positive changes	Adviser's length of service in years					All advisers
	up to 3	4–10	11–15	16–25	over 25	
Access to EU instruments of financial support for agriculture	80.95	88.57	68.97	68.57	82.14	77.70
Acceleration of the transformation of the agri-food industry	9.52	20.00	6.90	28.57	21.43	18.24
Inflow of EU funds for infrastructure development	42.86	54.29	55.17	51.43	46.43	50.68
Improvement in the income situation of agricultural producers	42.86	34.29	55.17	48.57	35.71	43.24
Improvement in the quality of life of agricultural producers	23.81	20.00	48.28	34.29	35.71	32.43
Other	4.76	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.68

Source: own study based on survey results.

Table 7. Structure of responses to the question: what negative changes do you see in agriculture after Poland's accession to the EU? (in %)

Negative changes	Adviser's length of service in years					All advisers
	up to 3	4–10	11–15	16–25	over 25	
Tightening of national regulations on land trading	28.57	31.43	31.03	42.86	35.71	34.46
Slowed outflow of resources (land, labour) from small farms	23.81	31.43	20.69	28.57	42.86	29.73
Deepening of the division into small and large farms	71.43	54.29	72.41	60.00	60.71	62.84
Restrictive regulations governing food production	42.86	34.29	37.93	42.86	32.14	37.84
Subordination of food production issues to the decisions of EU bodies	38.10	51.43	41.38	25.71	21.43	35.81
Increased competition from EU products	33.33	34.29	6.90	28.57	28.57	26.35
Increase in the prices of the means of production	57.14	60.00	72.41	68.57	67.86	65.54
Other	4.76	2.86	17.24	2.86	10.71	7.43

Source: own study based on survey results.

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