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State Aid Trends in Poland and Finland – Similarities and Differences

Abstract

State aid is one of the financial instruments available to EU member states for intervention in domestic markets. On the one hand its use is prohibited by Article 107(1) TFEU, but on the other hand there are many exemptions, including regional and horizontal state aid. Given the centralised system for State aid in the EU, one could expect that the volume and structure in terms of forms and purposes of public aid granted should be similar from one member state to the next. Considering the diversity among what are now 27 member states, both from the perspective of experience in managing the economy and the directions of its development, the objective of this article is to capture and evaluate the similarities and differences in the approach taken to State aid as an instrument of intervention in two relatively different countries – Poland and Finland. To this end the comparative analysis will not only cover Poland and Finland themselves but also their respective groups of countries – the Visegrád Group and Scandinavian members of the EU. The above analysis permits the conclusion that the structure of public aid relative to the main purposes of granting differs significantly between Poland and Finland, in favour of Finland, from the perspective of the achievement of the EU objectives associated with the successive economic strategies.

Keywords: State Aid, Poland, Finland, European Union

Introduction

State aid is one of the available instruments of state intervention available in a free-market economy. Its purpose is to incentivise companies to take specific action they would not opt for in normal circumstances

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(von Mises, 2011), or to assist enterprises in connection with crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Ambroziak, 2022), as well as to achieve specific socio-economic goals of the grantor (Wojtyna, 1990). The accepted view is that for financial intervention of the state to be admissible, so-called market failure has to occur, i.e. the failure of the more or less idealised system of market economy to sustain desirable forms of activity (consumption and/or production) or prevent undesirable forms (also referring to consumption and/or production) (Bator, 1958). There is also the phenomenon of government failure due to the finite resource of information, skill and knowledge, limited and unsuccessful oversight by the state, incomplete control of bureaucracy, as well as political influence (Grand, 1991).

In light of the above, in a European Union characterised by four Treaty freedoms (movement of goods, services, capital and persons), a decision was made to prohibit State aid within the single market (Consolidated version of the Treaty, 2008, Article 107(1)). Simultaneously exceptions were made for narrowly defined categories of aid (Consolidated version of the Treaty, 2008, Articles 107(2), 107(3)) fulfilling the criteria of State aid granted owing to market failure. It must be emphasised that any intervention by the state, and above all financial aid, may have negative consequences for the beneficiary's competitors. In the case of the EU, without any tariff and non-tariff barriers such as physical control, technical requirements and the various systems of indirect taxation, this principle concerns not only companies from the relevant state but, in principle, all member states. As a consequence a somewhat restrictive system was created for the admissibility of specific categories, forms and volumes of public aid granted by the governments of EU member states, with the European Commission as the watchdog for reliance on its Treaty prerogatives. As a result the governments of member states are obliged to prepare so-called aid schemes according to Commission guidelines, with a requirement of prior notification for the purpose of securing the Commission's approval, or to prepare them in line with the regulation waiving the notification requirement (Commission Regulation, 2008; 2014).

Given the centralised system for public aid in the EU, one could expect that the volume and structure in terms of forms and purposes of public aid granted should be similar from one member state to the next. It should be observed, however, that although the rules for granting public aid have been harmonised the decisions themselves on whether to provide financial support for specified business organisations or as to the direction and intensity to be taken by such intervention relative to the economy as a whole are still the exclusive domain of the member states.

Considering the diversity among what are now 27 member states, both from the perspective of experience in managing the economy and the directions of its development, the objective of this article is to capture and evaluate the similarities and differences in the approach taken to public aid as an instrument of intervention in two relatively different countries – Finland and Poland. Each of them developed in different politico-socio-economic circumstances following World War II and neither of them founded the EEC in 1958. The difference in dates of accession to the EU is 19 years, the same as the length of Poland's membership in the EU at present. Moreover, moreover, both countries represent two different blocs: Central and Eastern Europe, including the Visegrád Group, and Scandinavia, respectively.

In order to capture the relative both similarities and differences between the approaches taken by the two countries regarding the problem of public aid, the comparative analysis will not only cover Poland and Finland themselves but also their respective groups of countries – the Visegrád Group (Poland, Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia) and Scandinavian members of the EU (Finland, Sweden and Denmark). The analysed period spans from 2004 to 2020, ensuring that comparable data is available.

The data used in this article originates from State Aid Scoreboard, i.e. the European Commission's annually updated public-aid database, and Eurostat. The first part of the article will deal with the significance of the public aid granted by Finland and Poland in their economies. Next, in connection with the elaborate system of exclusions from the requirement of notification to the European Commission, the degree of use of available mechanisms by the two countries will be discussed. The third part will discuss the results of the comparative analysis of the structure of public aid by purpose in both countries with regard to the EU's programmatic documents. Conclusions and recommendations will mark the end of this article.

Intensity of State Aid

Neither Poland nor Finland were among the top state-grantors of public aid in 2004–2020. In the examined period the value of aid granted by Poland doubled from EUR 2.1 billion to EUR 5.2 billion, whereas in Finland it quadrupled from EUR 614 million to EUR 2.4 billion. Poland's total public aid in 2004–2020 constituted approximately 4.7% of all aid granted in the EU, while for Finland the corresponding figure is a low 1.8% (Chart 1). It is worth noting that neither the remaining member states of the Visegrád Group, of which Poland is a member, nor those of the Scandinavian Group, to which Finland belongs, are significant aid grantors, in contrast with the decisively increasing, since 2014, position of other EU Member States.

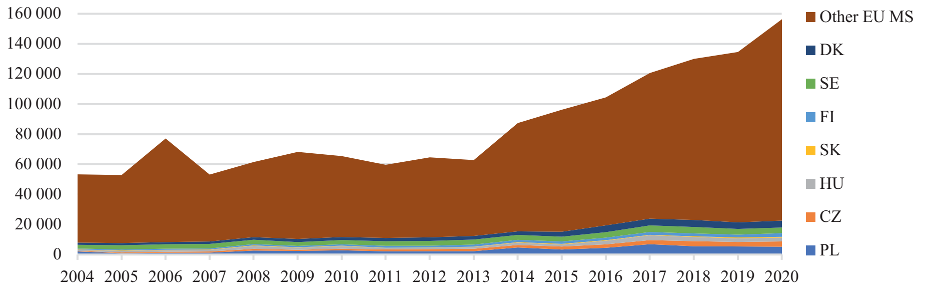


Figure 1. Structure of Public Aid in the EU According to Selected Countries in Years 2005–2020 (in mln EUR)

Source: Own calculations based on State Aid Scoreboard 2021 (European Commission, 2022).

In order to measure the intensity of public aid across EU member states, the Commission calculates the ratio of state aid to GDP. However, we decided to use a Relative State Aid Intensity Index (RSAI) based on the well-known Balassa (1965) Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) Index. The RSAI is calculated as the relationship between the value of state aid in either a given EU member state or the European Union as a whole, and the value added of selected sectors in a given EU member state or the EU. The RSAI measures the relative intensity of state aid in a given country against the average intensity of public aid in the European Union. In order to make sure that the output of our calculation of the Relative State Aid Intensity Index is symmetric, the final formula is as follows (Ambroziak, 2021):

$$RSAI_i = \left(\left({}^{x_i}/_{v_i}\right) / \left({}^{X_{EU}}/_{V_{EU}}\right) - 1 \right) / \left(\left({}^{x_i}/_{v_i}\right) / \left({}^{X_{EU}}/_{V_{EU}}\right) + 1 \right) \quad (1)$$

where:

x_i – value of state aid in country i;
v_i – value added of country i;
X_{EU} – value of state aid in the EU;
V_{EU} – value added of the EU.

If the final value of RSAI is a positive number it means that state-aid intensity in a given country in relation to its GDP is higher than the EU average, and when the value is a negative number it means that the intensity falls below the EU level. In the examined period Poland, along with Czechia and Hungary, belonged to the group of states with a relatively high amplitude of changes to the RSAI. For these states, periods of significant growth and fall strongly correlated with EU financing for various activities can be identified (Figure 2). It must be noted that the funds placed at the disposal of Polish central or local authorities, if forwarded to enterprises, are regarded as public funds meeting the criteria defined in Article 107(1) TFEU. As a consequence, in the case of Poland, one can observe a dynamic increase in the intensity of aid in 2008–2010, which is when during the financial crisis funds from the multi-annual perspective for 2007–2013 were released, and in 2016–2017, which is when the distribution of the funds from the 2014–2020 perspective started. In the years that followed, the respective nominal volume decreased and with

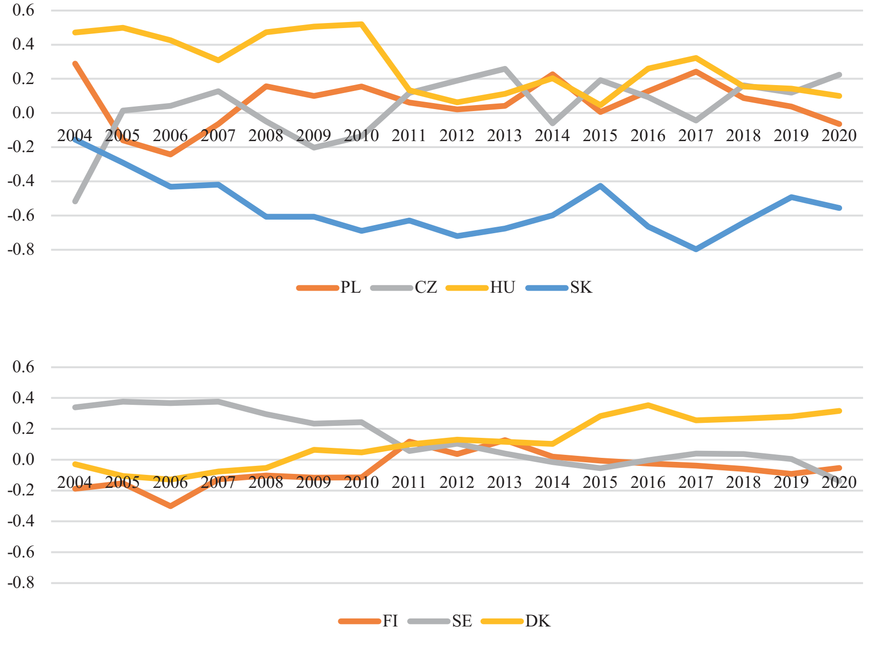


Figure 2. Revealed State Aid Intensity Index in Poland and Finland as Well as Selected EU Member States in 2004–2020

Source: Own calculation based on State Aid Scoreboard 2021 (European Commission, 2022).

it the degree of intensity of aid in Poland. Similar path of development was recorded by other Visegrád group countries, although sometimes with 1–2 years of delays due to prolonged negotiations with the Commission on respective national operational programs. A specific situation was observed in Slovakia, where aforementioned Relative State Aid Intensity Index recorded negative values. It means that the government of Slovakia less intervened in the market in comparison to the EU-27 average.

A similar correlation cannot be observed in the case of Finland and other Scandinavian states. Although the examined period shows an increasing trend for Finland's RSAI, this appears to be driven mostly by the years immediately following the economic and financial crisis. Over the years only in 2011 to 2013 did the RSAI increase significantly. By contrast, as for the other two Scandinavian countries, polar opposite trends can be identified – in Sweden the intensity of public aid decreased gradually until it fell below the EU average, and in Denmark it increased above the EU average.

GBER State Aid

Articles 107 and 108 TFEU require member states to notify the European Commission of each and every aid programme and refrain from any grants pending the Commission's approval. The more member states the greater the caseload and complexity of the programmes, leading to an elongated processing time. For this reason, in order to focus on the most important aid scenarios with significant potential for distorting the competition in the internal market, the Commission first introduced individual exemptions and, in 2008, a set of categories of aid exempted from the mandatory notification on the basis of the General Block Exemption Regulation – GBER (EC 2008), expanded in 2014 (EC 2014).

It must be emphasised that the greater the share of aid covered by the GBER, the more closely the direction of the state's intervention, including the intensity and categories of aid granted, aligns with the EU's general interests. The GBER has received several amendments due to a succession of multi-annual financial perspectives and new socio-economic strategies for the EU, from the Lisbon Strategy, through the Europe Strategy, to Fit for 55. Each such strategy provided focus for the European Union's activities and, through the GBER, to some degree also those of member states, prompting intervention in support knowledge, research and development, innovation and, recently, environmental protection and energy efficiency.

Already during the first years of the new system, the share of GBER-covered aid reached 36% of the total value of public financial support in Poland, to increase in the following years and eventually exceed 70% after the year 2017, which saw the launch of funds from the last multi-annual financial perspective (MAFP). Out of other states belonging to the Visegrád Group a similar path was followed by Hungary, resulting in a level slightly in excess of 80%. Czechia took a somewhat different approach, observing a significant increase of the index in the 2007–2013 MAFP period, although followed by a decrease in 2014–2020. To this regard Scandinavian states, and Finland in particular, opted for a similar course of action to Poland, gradually increasing the GBER share in the general aid mix, although they stopped at lower levels – 56.5% (Denmark) and 65.5% (Finland).

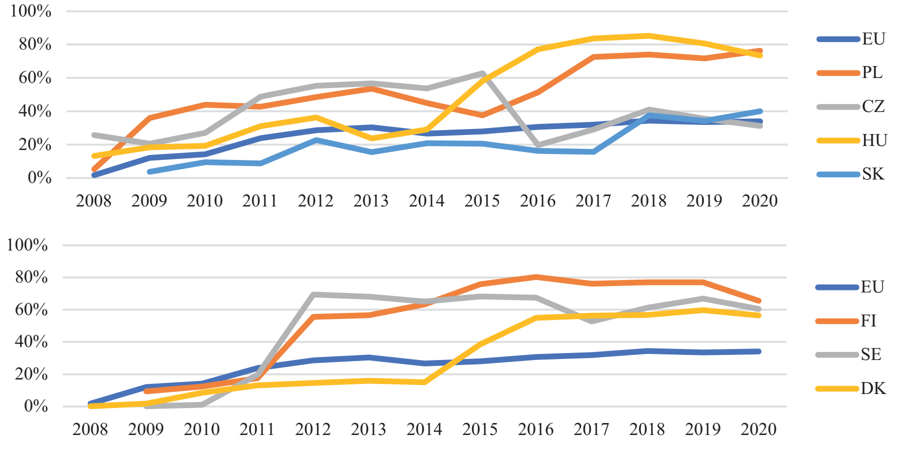


Figure 3. Share of State Aid Covered by Exemptions From the Mandatory Notification of Aid Programmes to the European Commission

Source: Own calculation based on State Aid Scoreboard 2021 (European Commission, 2022).

Similarities of State-aid Structures to the EU Average

To map Poland's position *vis-à-vis* Finland and other EU member states in terms of state-aid objectives, we introduced a similarity index (For more information see Ambroziak 2021). The formula of the state aid similarity index (SASI) is as follows:

$$SASI_j = \{\textstyle\sum_i \min\,[X_j^i, X_{EU}^i]\}100 \qquad (2)$$

where:
X_j^i – represents the share of category *i* in total state aid in EU member state *j*
X_{EU}^i – represents the share of category *i* in total state aid in the European Union

The SASI range is from 0%, indicating the lack of similarity of the state aid structure by categories, to 100%, which represents a structure identical to the EU overall structure. In Poland's case SASI placed between 43 and 68% in the examined period (Figure 3). Other than 2004 the lowest values were recorded in 2011–2013, i.e. the final years of the 2007–2014 MAFP, with European financing drawing to an end. Simultaneously the index took high values during the period of the largest access to EU funds in Poland. A similar trend was identified in respect of Czechia and Slovakia, although the respective SASI exceeded 80% and 70% in the last two years.

When it comes to the Scandinavian countries, the indisputable leader is Finland, for which the SASI exceeded 80% already in 2005–2006 and, following several years in decline, even 65%, returning to the previous high level in recent years. The other states of the region gradually approximated their aid structures to the EU average, resulting in above-70% levels, similarly to Czechia and Slovakia.

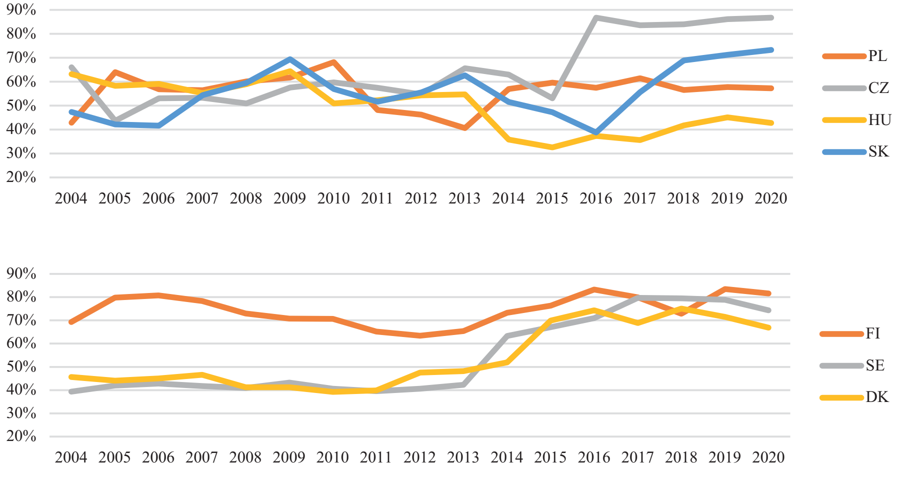


Figure 3. SASI in Selected EU Member States

Source: Own calculation based on State Aid Scoreboard 2021 (European Commission, 2022).

The significant difference between Poland and Finland in SASI levels results primarily from differences in the structure of public aid granted. In Finland's case environmental protection, including energy savings, began to dominate already in 2011, to exceed 64.9% in 2020 (Figure 4). This appears to be the result of the EU's climate targets (Oberthür, von Homeyer, 2022). This is a much better score compared to Denmark, where the share exceeded 50% of the total value of public aid only in 2015, but also a much weaker score compared to Sweden, with the latter's approximately 80% ratio in 2004–2016. In Poland's case similar increases were observed, and in the first years of implementation of multi-annual financial perspectives, i.e. 2008–2011 and 2014–2018 – to 12.8% and even 28.6%, respectively. It is worth noting, however, that the percentage fell significantly near the end of the 2007–2013 MAFP and continued at around 22–25% in 2019–2020. A similar trajectory applies to Czechia and to a lesser extent Slovakia, with the role of environmental aid increasing significantly to approximately 60% and 40% respectively, under the 2014–2020 MAFP. The weakest result belongs to Hungary – under 10%. However, it must be emphasised that, considering the average EU index at more than 50%, the values recorded for Poland are decisively low.

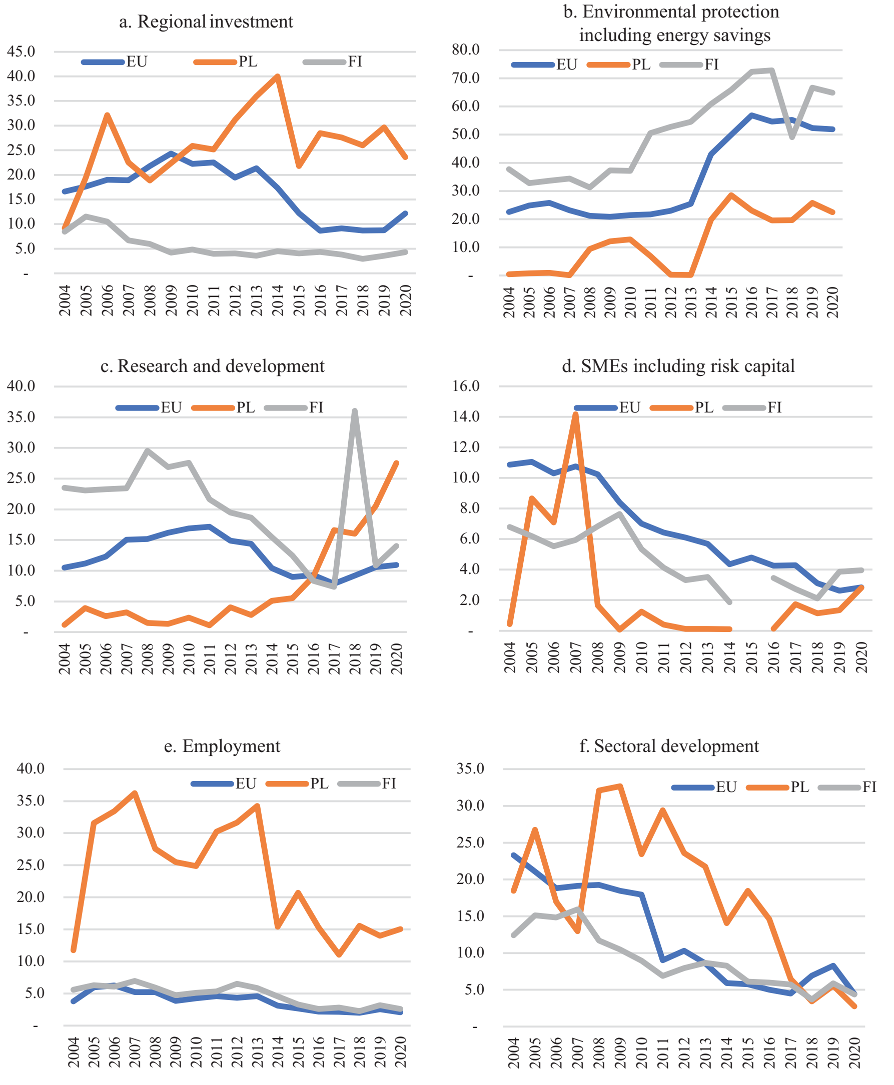
Regional investment aid was a particularly significant category of public aid in Poland's case. It predominated in the mix of public funding for entrepreneurs since the accession to the EU, reaching 32.1% already in 2006, to reach 40% in 2014, even after falling to 18.8% in 2008. In the recent years of 2019 and 2020, the share of this aid in public funding granted to enterprises was 29.6% and 23.6% respectively. Even higher values have been observed for Hungary and Slovakia, approximately 40% and 30% respectively of total public aid, for several years now. These levels decisively exceed the average EU values, by more than double for Poland in the last few years. In Finland and Sweden's cases the share of regional investment aid in the total value of public aid decreased gradually in the examined period to a level of 3–4% in recent years, and in Denmark's case it has never exceeded 0.5%.

The third category of public aid in the EU in terms of significance is support provided for research, development and innovation (RDI). For Poland this was insignificant for many years in the examined period, with a share not exceeding 5% until 2014. It was the inclusion of funds from the 2014–2020 financial perspective that brought about a significant re-evaluation of the aid policy in Poland resulting in a direction more favourable to supporting research, development and innovation. As a consequence, in 2019–2020 the share reached 20.5% and 27.6%, meaning double the EU average for the relevant period. Other countries in the Visegrád Group also recorded increases under the succeeding financial perspectives, although not in the same spectacular degree as Poland did in 2020 (Czechia 15.3%, Hungary 8.8% and Slovakia 4.1%). The situation was completely different in Finland, where the examined period 2004–2020 saw a gradual (with the exception of 2018) decrease in the significance of this type of aid to 14% of the total value of public aid. Even lower values were recorded by Sweden and Denmark (4.0% and 4.5% respectively).

Of especial importance to Poland is employment aid, and thus assistance to create new workplaces and retain existing ones. In the period 2005–2013 employment aid constituted more than a third of the total value of public aid, primarily thanks to EU funds and the aid-programme structure in the country. Under the 2014–2020 MAFP this share decreased by more than a half. However, the fact that the significance of this type of aid depends on the national authorities is attested by the insignificance of Czechia's and Slovakia's scores (approximately 0.01%) and the variance of Hungary's (from 2.4% to 30.6%). The importance of employment aid in the Finnish aid mix is similar to the EU average, keeping within the 5.9–7.0% limits until 2013, later to decrease gradually to 2.6% in 2020. The significance of this type of aid in Sweden and Denmark was a wholly different picture. While the share in total public aid in Sweden was essentially void of significance (not exceeding 0.3% in 2004–2020), in Denmark it maintained a very high level owing to special employment programmes until 2014 (49–65%), later to decrease gradually to 14.3% in 2020.

A specific type of public aid is support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The importance of that category of beneficiaries consists of being the most populous in every member state of the EU due to very often representing family enterprises and sole-traders. That last case is often the legal form taken by self-employment so that one can work for a given employer but do so on the basis of a business-to-business contract, thanks to which all fiscal and social burdens are shifted to the independent contractor. As a consequence, permissible SME aid allocations under EU law (for participation in fairs, consulting and collaboration) are relatively insignificant in Poland from the perspective of their share in the total value of public aid (2.8% in 2020). A similar value was recorded in Slovakia (3.6% in 2020); however, in the light of the preceding years, similarly to Hungary's and Czechia's cases, that aid does not play a significant role. SMEs in Finland can count on decisively more systematic support, at a 2.1–4.0% ratio in recent years. By contrast, in both Sweden and Denmark the significance of SME aid is next to none (below 0.7% in 2020).

Attention is drawn to 2020, which is when member states launched numerous assistance programmes to support enterprises affected by lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of Poland such support is estimated to have been especially large compared to the country's GDP, translating into a reduction in financing from standard European funds. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the European Commission allowed public aid for enterprises suffering from lockdowns. That aid

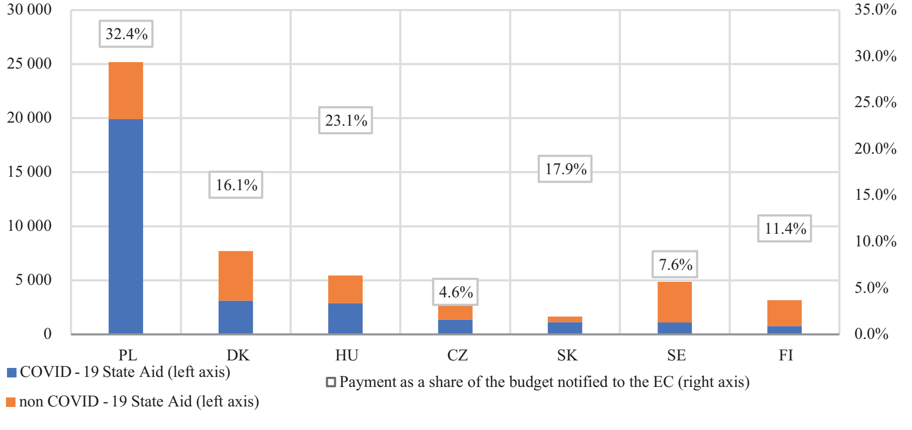


Note: to keep the clarity and transparency of charts presentation only Poland, Finland, and the EU-27 are presented on the graphs.

Figure 4. Major Categories of State Aid in Poland and Finland in the Context of the EU in 2004–2020 (as a share in total state aid in %)

Source: Own calculation based on State Aid Scoreboard 2021 (European Commission, 2022).

was offered on separate terms, in significantly higher amounts for all entrepreneurs compared to the previous situation (Ambroziak, 2022). It would be difficult to fit into one of the standard aid categories, but its analysis clearly assists with the identification of the approach taken by the member states to the problem of potential losses incurred by companies. Before granting the aid, member states were required to obtain approval for their aid programmes. That was the case with Poland and Finland, notifying the European Commission of programmes totalling EUR 61.4 billion and EUR 6.7 billion respectively, reflecting 11.7% and 2.8% of their respective GDPs (Figure 5). For the remaining Visegrád states, the ratio oscillated from 6.9% to 13.7%, with 3.1% to 6.2% for Scandinavian states. This increasing trend for market intervention is confirmed by data on the utilisation of the Commission-approved budget and the value of aid granted relative to the GDP. In 2020 Poland consumed 32.4% of the total notified to the European Commission, while Finland only 11.4%. That translates to, respectively, 3.78% and 0.32% of their GDPs.



Note: the ratio of COVID-19 state aid in relation to GDP is provided in parentheses.

Figure 5. COVID-19 State-aid Budgets and Payments in EU Member States in 2020

Source: Own calculations based on State Aid Scoreboard 2021 (European Commission, 2022).

Conclusions

The analysis of the intensity of public aid in Finland and Poland clearly highlights a difference in the approaches taken by the two countries. In Poland's case there is a growth trend stimulated by EU funds, resulting in a general increase in state aid intensity exceeding the EU average, although slightly lowering in the last 3 years of the period under research. Finland, in turn, sustained its engagement on a relatively even (constant) level below the EU average.

Considering the high share of GBER-covered aid in the total value of public aid both in Poland and Finland, one can conjecture that a significant portion of that aid goes to purposes coinciding with the assumptions of long-term EU strategies. A problem surfaces, however, when analysing the aid structure according to the purpose. For Poland, despite the gradual increase of the Similarity State Aid Index to almost 60%, there is still a drastic difference compared to Finland and other Scandinavian states. That attests to the gradual but decisively too slow adoption and fulfilment of European Union objectives supported by state intervention. In other words, public aid in Poland was granted for different purposes than in Finland, the latter somewhat significantly approaching the overall EU index.

The above disparities arose primarily within the structure of the public aid granted. In Poland's case the share of aid granted for environmental protection and energy efficiency was three times less than in Finland and twice less than in the EU. This means that the climate goals adopted in the EU are covered with public funding, including EU funds, only in an insignificant degree. If the ambitious goals of climate policy were to be achieved in Poland, this deficiency in public funding would have to be compensated with private funds belonging to enterprises. At the same time Poland recorded a several-times-higher share of regional investment aid compared to Finland. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, Poland truly has regions meeting the conditions for regional aid, i.e. aid for new investment and creation of new and retention of existing workplaces (Consolidated version of the Treaty, 2008, Article 107(3)(a)); it would appear that the investment attractiveness of such regions needs to be improved. Secondly, this type of support is both the easiest for the public administration to grant and for the beneficiaries to account for. The consequence is the aforementioned significant share of support sometimes attracting investments (sometimes, due to the problematic institution of the so-called incentive effect, it will suffice to file an aid application before initiating the investment and the aid will be accepted as indispensable to the implementation), without any precise definition of an ultimate purpose coinciding with the EU's development objectives. With regard to aid for research, development and innovation, Poland decisively increased the share of that aid in the total value of public aid granted, whereas Finland, similarly to the EU as a whole, recorded a gradual decrease following the significant growth during the 2007–2013 MAFP. This means, on the one hand, that Polish enterprises had expected and required support in this regard, although the intervention was somewhat late in coming compared to the EU's more developed member states. Whereas the current dominant is environmental-protection aid in support of modern solutions that require research and development with a view toward innovative solutions anyway, Poland is focusing on aid for unspecified RDI activities (while continuing to fall behind the schedule on the European Union's climate goals). It is also worth noting the SME aid that provides a specific financial support for that sector, as it concerns itself with a narrow pool of purposes, due to which the role of such support has been decreasing gradually both in Poland and in Finland.

The above analysis permits the conclusion that the structure of public aid relative to the main purposes of granting differs significantly between Poland and Finland, in favour of Finland, from the perspective of the achievement of the EU objectives associated with the successive economic strategies – from focusing the intervention on R&D to environmental protection and energy efficiency. Analysis of both countries against the background of their neighbours within the Visegrád and the Scandinavian groups, respectively, supports the conclusion that the specific direction of the former case is the consequence of goals and assumptions adopted as part of the multi-annual financial perspectives. The above mean that for countries such as Poland, their aid policies are shaped largely, though not fully, by EU funds. An example can be found in the specific categories of employment aid and R&D aid, with significant differences highlighted in the discussed groups. At the same time one can see that Finland's aid policy is aligned with EU objectives, as attested by the increased funding for environmental protection and energy efficiency in the last couple of years. Poland can also be seen to follow the direction taken by other member states, such as Finland, but with a several years' delay. Simultaneously one has to emphasise that Poland's economic policy is based precisely on public aid, as exemplified by the pandemic period, during which the COVID-19 share reached the highest level in the EU at 3.78%, with 0.32% in Finland.

To identify the causes of the discovered differences one would have to analyse the various aid programmes, both in Poland and in Finland, from the perspective of the main beneficiaries, purposes and budgets disposed and spent. Such a study would make it possible to verify the hypothesis of Poland's delay in action relative to EU-level activities, as offered in the final part of this article.

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