Abstract

This dissertation examines the impact of state aid instruments on the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises [1] (SMEs) in Poland's Northern Macroregion [2], in the context of dynamic economic transformations, intensifying market competition, and the growing importance of innovation and organizational adaptability. SMEs are conceptualized as a cornerstone of economic development, a driver of employment and innovation, and a key contributor to economic resilience. The study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of public assistance schemes in fostering sustainable competitive advantages among enterprises.

Four research hypotheses are formulated, addressing the relationship between public support and competitiveness, the propensity of firms to engage with support instruments, and their perception of the economic climate. A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining theoretical and empirical perspectives. The analysis draws on both primary data (surveys and interviews) and secondary sources, including the Public Aid Data Sharing System[3] (UOKiK), the Central Statistical Office[4] (GUS), commercial business intelligence databases[5], and the National Court Register[6] maintained by the Ministry of Justice. Quantitative methods (correlation tests, statistical modelling, analysis of variance) are complemented by qualitative techniques (content analysis). The research covers the period 2014–2019, with an update conducted in 2025 to reflect recent developments.

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1 Pursuant to Commission Recommendation of 6 May 2003 concerning the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (*notified under document No. C(2003) 1422*) (Text with EEA relevance) *(2003/361/EC): an enterprise is considered to be any entity engaged in an economic activity, regardless of its legal form. This includes, in particular, self-employed persons and family businesses engaged in craft activities or other types of activities, as well as civil-law partnerships or associations regularly carrying out an economic activity*. The decisive factor is therefore the fact of conducting an economic activity, not the legal form. http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition_pl. Accessed on 17.05.2020.

2 Commission Regulation (EU) 2016/2066 of 21 November 2016 amending the annexes to Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a common classification of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) (OJ L 322, 29.11.2016). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/PL/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32016R2066. Accessed on 17.07.2023.

3 Information made available through the SUDOP system originates from reports on granted state aid prepared via the SHRIMP application by aid-granting entities pursuant to Article 32 of the Act of 30 April 2004 *on proceedings in matters concerning state aid* (Journal of Laws 2018, item 362).

4 Enterprises disclosed in the National Official Register of the Territorial Division of the Country (TERYT) maintained by the Central Statistical Office: http://eteryt.stat.gov.pl/eTeryt/re-jestr_teryt/aktualnosci. Accessed on 11.05.2020.

5 https://www.coface.pl. Accessed on 01-30.06.2021.

6 Enterprises disclosed in the Register of Entities maintained by the National Court Register of the Ministry of Justice: https://ekrs.ms.gov.pl. Accessed on 01-31.05.2021.

The findings demonstrate that public aid significantly contributes to the development of human, informational, and innovation-related resources. The structure of aid absorption is closely linked to the perceived economic climate: enterprises are more likely to engage with development-oriented programmes during periods of economic growth, while protective measures are preferred in times of uncertainty. The study also identifies uneven allocation of resources and emphasizes the need for improved communication of programme outcomes.

The dissertation is structured to present the research problem in a systematic and coherent manner, progressing from methodological foundations through theoretical background and micro- and macroeconomic analysis, to the empirical investigation and formulation of conclusions. The initial chapter outlines the research objectives, hypotheses, and methodology. Subsequent chapters explore the concepts of competition and competitiveness from organizational, regional, and EU policy perspectives, with particular emphasis on SMEs. The final chapter presents original research findings, assesses the competitive potential of enterprises, and evaluates the impact of public support. The study concludes with a synthesis of results, practical recommendations, and directions for future research, highlighting its contribution to the understanding of SME competitiveness and the effectiveness of institutional support.

The originality of the dissertation lies in the application of a dedicated framework for measuring the competitiveness of public aid beneficiaries, a comprehensive classification of support programmes and competitiveness determinants, the use of mixed research methods, and the contextualization of findings within the specific characteristics of SMEs in the Northern Macroregion. By integrating macroeconomic, behavioural, and structural dimensions, the study offers practical implications for economics, finance, and regional development policy.