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ORIGINAL PAPER

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ASSESSMENT OF THE MAIN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM INDICATORS IN THE PROTECTED AREAS OF THE GJIROKASTRA REGION

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study analyzes various tourism sustainability indicators within the protected areas (PAs) of the Gjirokastra region in Albania. Gjirokastra is a highly preferred destination, attracting a significant number of domestic and international visitors. Assessing tourism sustainability indicators in PAs is a necessary step to ensure that tourism growth in these regions remains balanced, sustainable, and aligned with the goals of nature conservation and biodiversity preservation. **Methods:** For this study, interviews were conducted with representatives of local institutions, and surveys were administered to the local community and visitors to the region's PAs. The selected indicators were examined from socio-economic, environmental, infrastructural, and institutional perspectives. Using descriptive statistics, we assessed the sustainability indicators by analyzing the results of 112 surveys from the local community and 168 surveys from visitors to these areas. **Results:** The analysis revealed an increased level of awareness among the local community regarding the benefits of PAs, particularly in relation to natural and cultural heritage. Additionally, visitors expressed a positive evaluation of socio-economic and environmental indicators. One of the key findings is the lack of information concerning planning and community involvement in the management of PAs. **Conclusions:** The primary challenge for the destination is establishing priorities for the sustainable development of the region, which necessitates collaboration among all stakeholders. To achieve this, tourism development must be carefully planned, with a focus on environmental preservation and improving the quality of life for residents.

Key words: sustainable tourism, protected areas, Gjirokastra, Albania

JEL codes: Q01, R10, Z32

INTRODUCTION

The Gjirokastra Region is situated in the southern part of Albania and is a rich tourist destination associated with a variety of natural and cultural attractions within a small geographical area, making it easily accessible to the European tourist markets [Boboli and Muça 2022]. The region also has a favorable geographical position, where agricultural space is the fundamental component of its agrarian ecosystem, presented as a complex of natural and human elements and factors in constant interaction and change [Boboli et al. 2023]. In the Gjirokastra Region, the tourism sector has transformed into one of the most important drivers of economic development. The economic and social impact has begun to be felt, as nearly all indi-

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cators in tourism components show growth. In 2024, Gjirokastra registered a record number of visitors – approximately 135,000 in protected areas (PAs), marking a 38% increase compared to 2023 [MTM 2024]. Especially in recent years, international attention has grown, accompanied not only by an increase in tourist numbers, but also by a rising awareness among locals to offer better hospitality capacities. The region's tourism offer is rich in cultural sites and natural monuments. The PA and, more recently, the declaration of the Vjosa River as a National Park, unique for the country and for Europe, place Albania and the Gjirokastra Region in particular in a new category on the European tourism map. This opens a new path toward economic and social sustainability, which requires careful management and balanced development of the PA.

Though the relationship is complex and sometimes argumentative, tourism is always a critical component to consider in the establishment and management of protected areas [Gúčik and Marciš 2020]. Tourism can make a significant contribution to three dimensions of sustainable development: creating jobs, generating trade opportunities, recognizing needs, and supporting tourism activities; creating important capacity that promotes environmental conservation priorities and cultural diversity [Baloch et al. 2022]. Gjirokastra offers many kinds of tourism, including historic, cultural, mountain, agritourism, ecotourism, archaeology, adventure, family, winter, health, and equestrian activities [Ktona et al. 2023].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable development requires the integration of its principles into all activities. This means that development does not include only environmental aspects, but also the positive conditions for residents and other stakeholders connected with social and economic benefits [Gúčik and Marciš 2020]. To measure sustainability indicators, it is important to use region-specific sets of indicators that include not only macro-level quantitative statistical data, such as the number of visitors, businesses, and employees, but also other data that reflect the level of satisfaction and involvement resulting from tourism development. These indicators provide valuable insights for decision-makers, investors, the local community, institutions, and local governance. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), various PAs have specific management objectives and need to achieve multiple goals (education, research, conservation, and recreation) [Sobhani et al. 2022]. Supporting innovation and ecological education for tourists and local communities is crucial [Pomianek and Kljajić 2025]. An analysis of the indicator set allows us to consider to what extent these indicators are likely to stimulate individual and collective change [Blackstock et al. 2014].

Sustainable development is the guiding principle for advancing human and economic development while maintaining the integrity of ecosystems and social systems on which the economy depends [Richardson 2021]. "Sustainability", "sustainable tourism", and "sustainable development" are all well-established terms that have often been used loosely and interchangeably in the tourism literature [Liu 2003]. Therefore, sustainable tourism requires not only a low environmental impact on natural resources, but also fair stakeholder benefits and participation rights [Zhang et al. 2022]. Precisely, sustainable tourism, especially within national parks and other high-protection zones, provides a framework for balancing the ecological, economic, and social dimensions of development [Matović et al. 2025]. Tourism in protected areas has unique characteristics that make it a potentially positive force for conservation. Tourism, recreation, and visitor use have been intricately linked to many protected areas since their conception [Leung et al. 2018].

Protected areas play a critical role in protecting the planet's biodiversity and promoting human well-being. An important way for PAs to provide cultural ecosystem services is through tourism; World Heritage Sites and biosphere reserves are also important tourist destinations [Zhang et al. 2022]. Nevertheless, in the context of PAs, tourism can also have harmful effects, including environmental degradation, pressure on natural resources, and disruptions caused by over-tourism or the cumulative ecological footprint of tourism-related activities. These risks underscore the need to integrate sustainability principles into tourism practices within PAs [Matović et al. 2025]. Incorporating the sustainability context enables a more representative evaluation of the actual condition of a protected area and facilitates appropriate actions to improve management effectiveness [Lee and Abdullah 2024]. Indicators of sustainable tourism development are evaluated over a specific period (yearly, monthly) or refer to a particular type of destination (official administrative unit, protected area). Indicators follow the concept of sustainability and its tools, involving a set of variables that provide information to understand the relationship between the impact of tourism on the cultural and natural resources on which tourism depends [Gúčik and Marciš 2020]. Sustainability indicators can be subjective or objective; both are useful in sustainable tourism planning and management [Zhang et al. 2022]. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has developed baseline "universal" tourism indicators that can be applied to all tourism destinations and has suggested indicators for specific destination areas [White et al. 2006]. Thus, developing, implementing, and interpreting indicators can be a way for all stakeholders to actively engage with the concept of sustainable tourism and what it means for their destination. Indicators are a concrete demonstration of the moral and political choices made in the quest to achieve sustainable tourism [Blackstock et al. 2014]. However, it is important to choose indicators that are useful at the national and regional levels to provide the baseline framework in which PA designation can be framed. By doing so, we can provide meaningful assessments of whether or not biodiversity targets are met [El-Hajj et al. 2017]. The expansion of the PA network needs to be accompanied by strategies and plans for the empowerment of PA management and the involvement of local communities in PAs' decision-making processes [Gatiso et al. 2022].

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Protected area in the Gjirokastra Region

The Gjirokastra Region includes seven protected areas and 82 natural monuments (Fig. 1). Their categorization and surface area are presented in Table 1 [ESPID 4 Vjosa 2024]. National Park Fir of Hotova-Dangëlli is the largest in the country and stands out for its high biodiversity value. It forms a vast green crown and, due to its size, represents the only major forest massif in the southern part of Albania. For this reason, it can be described as the "natural lung" of Southern Albania. National Park Vjosa River is one of the last wild rivers in Europe, becoming the first national park of a wild river in Europe. The Vjosa River and its main tributaries flow freely for over 400 km from the Pindus Mountains in Greece, where it is known as Aoös, to the Adriatic coast in Albania. The river and its surrounding areas are ecosystems of significant biodiversity and are home to over 1,100 species, including 13 animal species and two plant species classified as globally threatened by the IUCN. Natural Park Fir of Kardhiqi-Rzëzomë encompasses all phytoclimatic zones and harmoniously blends landscapes and ecosystems – rivers, shrublands, and forests – ranging from virgin or near-virgin forests to pastures and rocky terrains. Natural Park Fir of Zhulati is where all phytoclimatic zones converge, and landscapes and ecosystems – riverine, shrubland, and forest – intertwine harmoniously. These extend to virgin or near-virgin natural and semi-natural forests, pastures, and rocky terrains. This unique composition makes it a rare natural site. This park is distinguished by its high biodiversity of habitats and species: Natural Park Blue Eye. The most fascinating features of this park are its numerous karst springs and the surrounding forest ecosystem. Encircled by evergreen vegetation and centuries-old plane trees, the Blue Eye spring offers a mesmerizing view where colors blend and harmonize so seamlessly that it becomes difficult to distinguish the boundary between water and plants. Natural Park Fir of Sotira

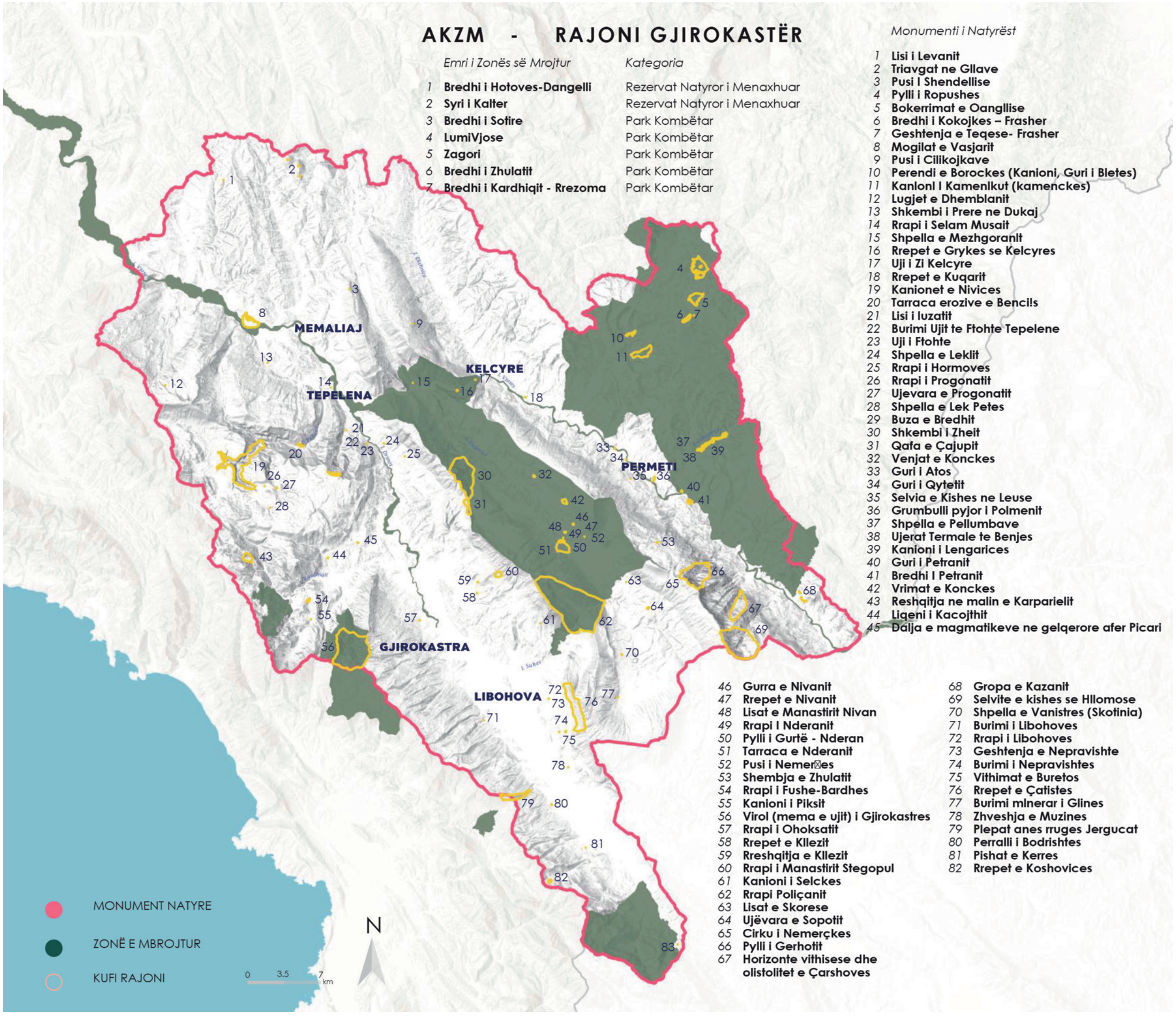

Fig. 1. Protected area in the Gjirokastra Region

Source: AKZM (n.d.).

is located in the southern part of the country, in rugged terrain where Mediterranean and mountain climates intertwine. Set far from the national road, this park offers a tranquil environment with high biodiversity in both habitats and species. Natural Park Zagori features a karst landscape represented by a variety of formations, with the Çajupi Plateau (2.5 km²) standing out for its tectonic-karstic origin. This mountainous plateau is renowned for its scenic beauty and healthy climate.

AIM AND METHODS

This study was survey-based. The aim of this study was to examine selected indicators of sustainable tourism development in the protected areas of the Gjirokastra Region in Albania, which is among the most attractive tourist destinations in the country, attracting a considerable number of domestic and international visitors. The data used in this study were collected through mixed methods

Table 1. Protected areas of the Gjirokastra Region

Site	Area [ha]	Category by IUCN classification
National Park Fir of Hotova-Dangëlli	36,004	II
National Park Vjosa River	12,727 (50.47% is part of Gjirokastra District	II
National Park Fir of Kardhiqi-Rrëzomë	4,304	IV
Natural Park Fir of Zhulati	936.2	IV
Natural Park Blue Eye	293.3	IV
Natural Park Fir of Sotira	4,928	IV
Natural Park Zagori	24,608	IV

Source: own work based on AKZM (n.d.) and ESPID 4 Vjosa (2024).

to provide sufficient evidence regarding the sustainability indicators of tourism in the PAs of the Gjirokastra Region. Detailed interviews were conducted with representatives of local institutions, and field data was gathered through semi-structured questionnaires addressed to the local community and visitors in the PAs. The working group conducted open interviews with representatives from the seven municipalities in the district, RAPA Gjirokastër. These interviews aimed to gather information regarding institutional support, the legal framework, the PA management plans, and inter-institutional cooperation. According to Baker et al. [2012, p. 15], "One interview is sometimes quite sufficient to establish that something is possible." Subsequently, this information was used to design the questionnaires. Quantitative data was also collected from local institutions and the Albanian Ministry of Tourism and Environment (MTM). The working group continued with the design and extraction of sustainable tourism indicators along with socio-economic, infrastructural, environmental, and institutional dimensions. The indicators were selected based on a literature review, focusing on those most commonly used in measuring the sustainable development of tourism [White et al. 2006, Blackstock et al. 2014, Latip et al. 2015, Gúčik and Marciš 2020, Sobhani et al. 2022, Zhang et al. 2022, Matović et al. 2025]. Indicators were selected by taking into account the specific characteristics of the destination, as well as their relevance, measurability, adaptability, comparability, territorial representation, sensitivity, and communicability. Additionally, the selection process considered challenges and shortcomings in collecting and cross-referencing official data, the presence of informality, and the difficulty of detailing the activities of local businesses, particularly regarding the types of services offered. For the measurement of certain indicators, primary data was required. Elements such as attractions, service quality, investments, tourism infrastructure, and tourism activities were assessed through the perceptions of the local community and visitors. The indicators can simplify, clarify, and, with aggregated information, help integrate economic, natural, and social effects into decision-making, measure, and refine progress in sustainable development [Gúčik and Marciš 2020]. The indicators used are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Indicators of sustainability in protected areas

Category	Indicator
Socio-economic	Direct income from tourism
	Standard of living
	Creating new jobs
	Employing young people
	Employing women
	Abandonment of the area
	Sustainability of local businesses
	Number of visitors
	Level of prices
	Promoting private investments
	Number of services related to tourism
	Number of tourism activities
	Culture and lifestyle
	Preserving cultural traditions
	Level of security
Environmental	Protecting the environment
	Awareness of the local community
	Environmental authenticity
	Biodiversity
	Extensive development of tourism
	Intensive development of tourism
Infrastructure	Public investments
	Improving infrastructure
	Telecommunication and related services
	Water supply network
Institutional	Community involvement
	Community information

Source: own work.

Two questionnaires were developed. The first was addressed to the local community in the PA, where data was collected regarding their opinions and perceptions about the benefits of tourism, its impact, community participation in decision-making, and development policies. The second questionnaire targeted visitors, gathering data on their opinions and perceptions related to the PA. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and took place during group work in the field from April to May 2025, in the region's PA, following a pre-established schedule. A total of 120 questionnaires were completed on-site by community members, of which 112 were deemed valid, and 180 questionnaires were completed by visitors, of which 168 were valid. Respondents were asked to rate their viewpoints and level of agreement regarding tourism sustainability in the studied areas using a Likert scale ("strongly disagree = 1", "disagree = 2", "neutral = 3", "agree = 4", and "strongly agree = 5").

RESULTS

Community opinion

From the analysis of the community questionnaire data, it was found that 68.8% of respondents benefit from tourism, while 29.5% have family members directly employed in the tourism sector. Of the respondents, 45.5% were male, and 54.5% were female.

Respondents were asked to evaluate the community benefits resulting from tourism development. A summary of the results is presented in Figure 2. Regarding "improving infrastructure", the majority of respondents rated this as "disagree" at 24%. For the indicators "protecting the environment", "promoting investments", "sustainability of local businesses", "employing women", "employing young people", "creating new jobs", and "direct income from tourism", the majority of respondents rated them as "neutral" at 28%, 32%, 34%, 30%, 35%, 35%, and 33%, respectively. For the indicator "improving quality of life", the majority of respondents rated it as "agree" at 27%, while for "preserving cultural traditions", the majority, at 30%, rated it as "strongly agree". Respondents were also asked to share their opinions regarding the impact of tourism development in the study area by classifying the indicators into socio-economic, environmental, infrastructural, and institutional dimensions. Regarding the socio-economic dimension, the majority expressed a "neutral" stance on the statements "the culture and lifestyle of the community have not changed with the development of tourism", "the number of tourists in your area is higher compared to other rural areas that are not part of the PA", and "income and the standard of living in rural areas have generally increased in recent years due to the development of tourism in PA", with 38%, 31%, and 40%. In contrast, for the statements "the development of tourism will help reduce the abandonment of the area", "the awareness of the local community regarding the benefits from the PA has increased", "the number of tourism activities (recreational and entertaining) organized by the local government has increased", and "the number of services related to tourism (directly or indirectly) has increased: accommodation, restaurants, various services, etc.", the majority expressed "agree", with 25%, 37%, 38%, and 38%, respectively (Fig. 3).

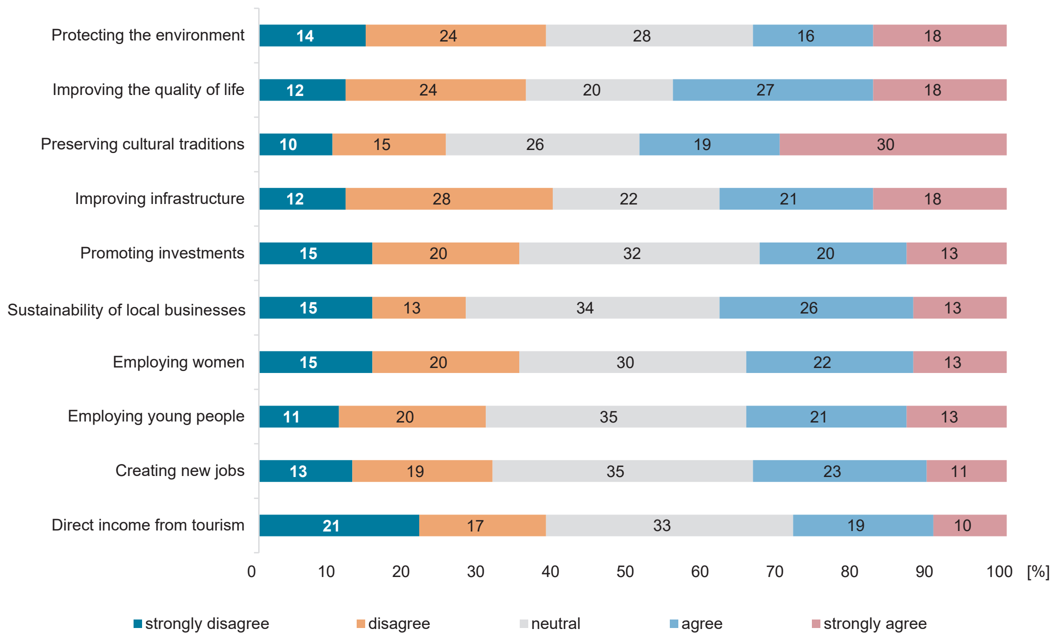

Fig. 2. Benefits from tourism – community opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

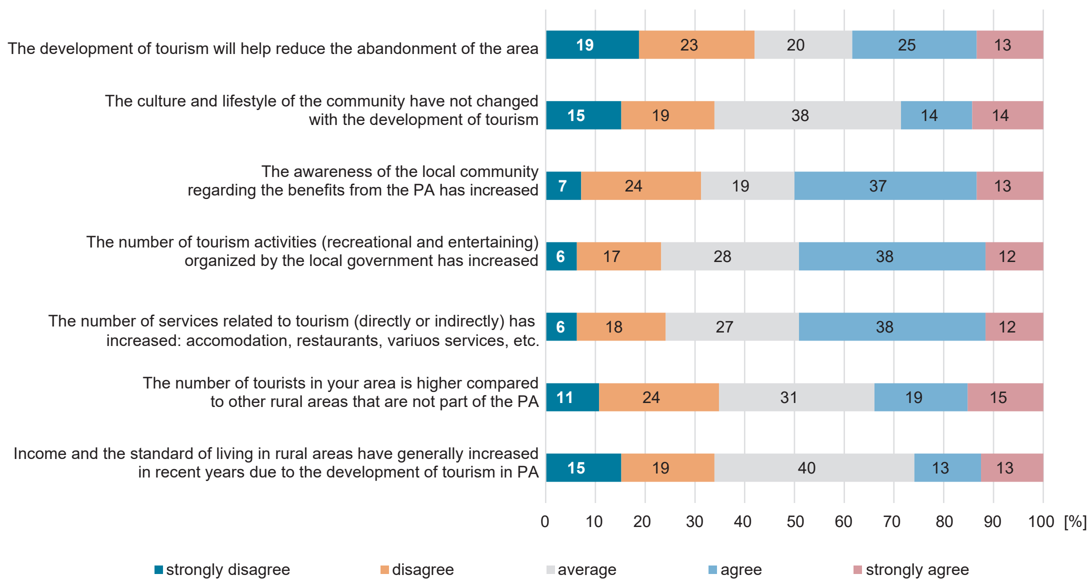

Fig. 3. Socio-economic dimension – community opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

Regarding the infrastructural dimension, the majority expressed a "neutral" stance on the following: "the drinking water supply network has been improved", "mobile telecommunication network, internet and related services have improved", and "public investments in improving tourism infrastructure (roads, signs, tables etc.) have increased", with 30%, 36%, and 35%, respectively (Fig. 4).

Regarding the environmental dimension, the majority expressed a "neutral" stance on the following: "the local community has become aware and takes care of the environment" and "the local community has become aware and takes care of the natural heritage", with 41% and 31%, respectively (Fig. 5).

As for the institutional dimension, the majority, 28%, expressed "disagree" with the statement "the local community living in PA is informed about management planning laws, rights, and other relevant aspects", while 21% expressed "neutral" regarding the statement "the local community living in PA is involved in the planning and management of the PA" (Fig. 6).

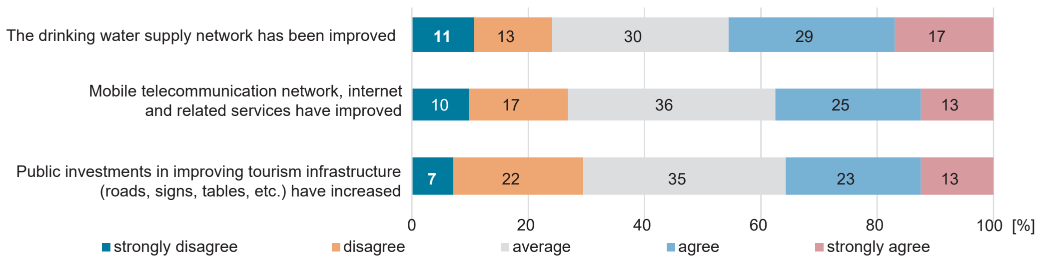

Fig. 4. Infrastructural dimension – community opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

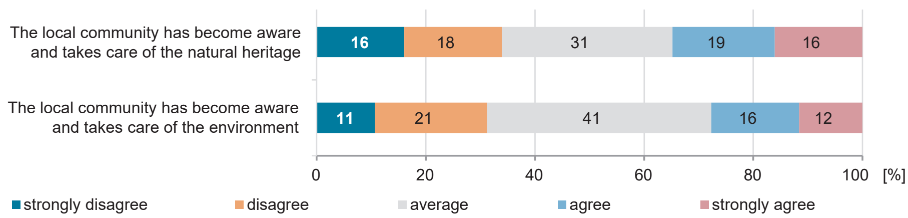

Fig. 5. Environmental dimension – community opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

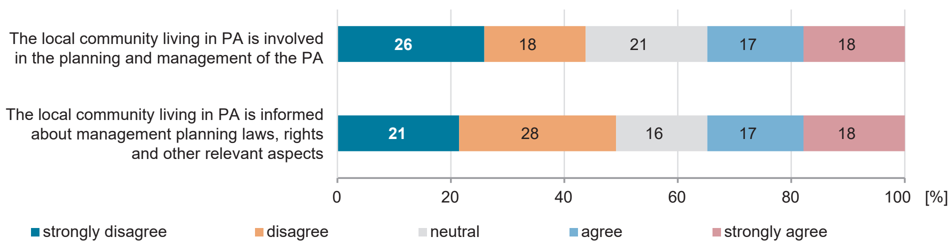

Fig. 6. Institutional dimension – community opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

Visitors' opinion

According to the analysis of visitor survey data, it was found that 44.64% of the visitors were male and 55.36% were female. Among them, 72.65% were visiting the study area for the first time, while 83.30% stated they would visit it again, and 69.64% had a multi-day visit to the area. Respondents were asked to share their opinions regarding their visit to the area by classifying indicators into socio-economic, environmental, and infrastructural dimensions.

Regarding the socio-economic dimension, 36% expressed "neutral" regarding the statement "the price level is satisfactory in relation to the quality of services offered". For the statements "the area preserves its cultural authenticity" and "the quality of tourism services is satisfactory (accommodation, restaurants, various services, etc.)", the majority rated them as "agree", with 36% and 38%, respectively. The majority (61%) expressed "strongly agree" with the statement "it is a peaceful and safe place to visit" (Fig. 7).

Regarding the environmental dimension, the majority expressed "strongly agree" with the statement "the area

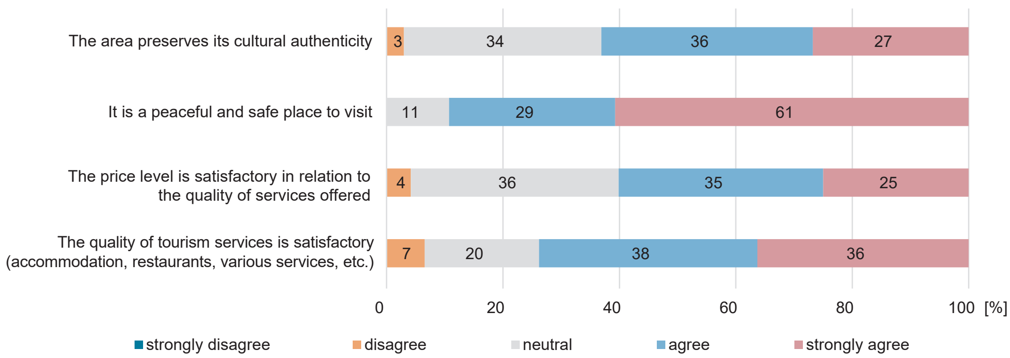

Fig. 7. Socio-economic dimension – visitors' opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

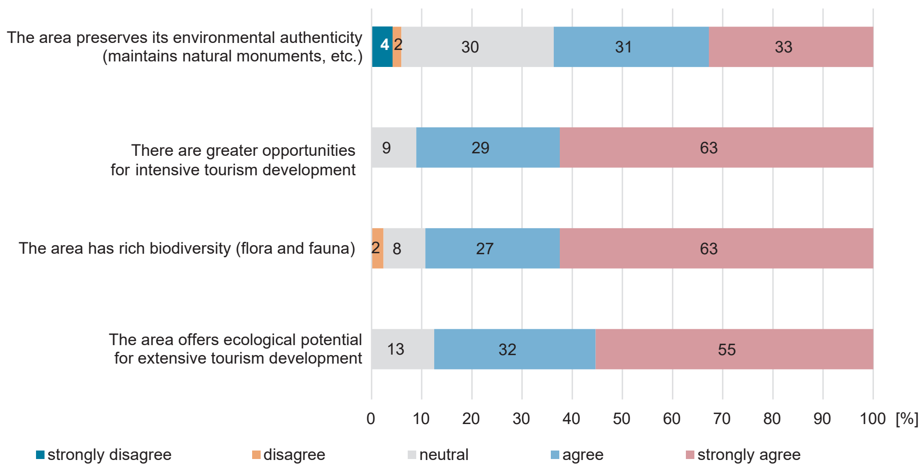

Fig. 8. Environmental dimension – visitors' opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

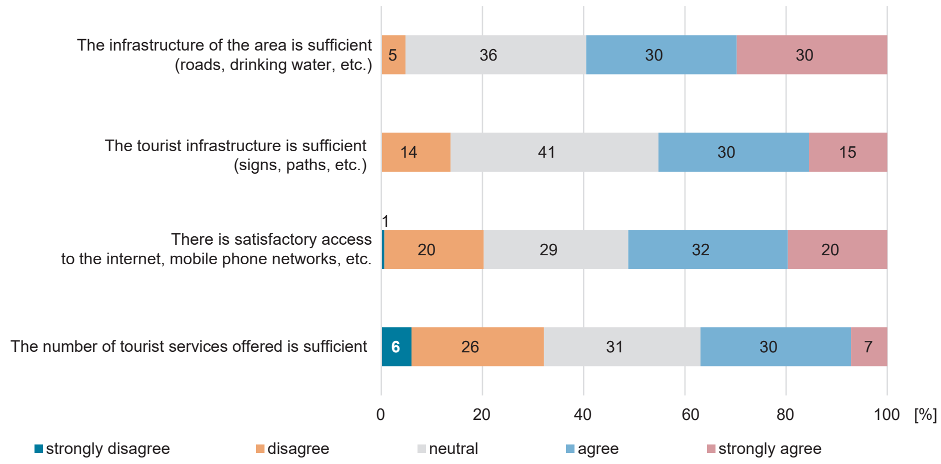

Fig. 9. Infrastructural dimension – visitors' opinions

Source: own research from 2025.

preserves its environmental authenticity (maintains natural monuments etc.)", "there are greater opportunities for intensive tourism development", "the area has rich biodiversity (flora and fauna)", and "the area offers ecological potential for extensive tourism development", with 33%, 63%, 63%, and 55%, respectively (Fig. 8).

Regarding the infrastructural dimension, the majority expressed a "neutral" stance on the statements "the infrastructure of the area is sufficient", "the tourist infrastructure is sufficient", and "the number of tourist services offered is sufficient", with respective percentages of 36%, 41%, and 31%. The majority, 32%, expressed "agree" with the statement "there is satisfactory access to the internet, mobile phone networks, etc." (Fig. 9).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has provided an analysis of the evaluation of tourism sustainability indicators in PAs of the Gjirokastra Region. Indicators of sustainable tourism are used for the multidimensional assessment of destination development. The application of indicators must be tailored to each destination and depends on various factors, including data availability, type of destination, stakeholders' contributions, and tourism development objectives [Gúčik and Marciš 2020].

In this study, we evaluated sustainability indicators from the perspective of both the local community and visitors to the area, classifying them into socio-economic, environmental, infrastructural, and institutional dimensions. The analysis revealed an increased level of awareness among the local community regarding the benefits of PAs, particularly in relation to natural and cultural heritage. Furthermore, the community primarily values the benefits of tourism in terms of job creation, encouraging investment in the sector, and improving the quality of life. Regarding visitors' opinions, the analysis indicates a positive evaluation of socio-economic and environmental indicators, while the area's infrastructure is rated as average. One of the key findings is the lack of information concerning planning and community involvement in the management of PAs. The main challenge is setting priorities for the sustainable development of the region. To achieve this, tourism development must be carefully planned, with a focus on environmental preservation and improving the quality of life for residents. Therefore, governments cannot continue to view tourism development as a random phenomenon; instead, a proper strategy is needed to transform tourism into an industry, according to strategic planning and management [Muça et al. 2022].

During the data collection process, the working group encountered several challenges, particularly in accessing secondary data and due to the limited empirical knowledge among stakeholders. As highlighted by Gúčik and Marciš [2020], and Matović et al. [2025], approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data contribute to a deeper analysis of the specific characteristics of PAs and support the identification of more suitable policies for their management and the development of strategic planning.

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OCENA GŁÓWNYCH WSKAŹNIKÓW TURYSTYKI ZRÓWNOWAŻONEJ NA OBSZARACH CHRONIONYCH REGIONU GJIROKASTRA

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem badania było zbadanie wybranych wskaźników rozwoju zrównoważonego turystyki na obszarach chronionych regionu Gjirokastra w Albanii. Region Gjirokastra należy do najbardziej atrakcyjnych turystycznie obszarów kraju, przyciąga znaczną liczbę turystów krajowych i zagranicznych. Ocena wskaźników rozwoju zrównoważonego na obszarach chronionych stanowi niezbędny etap w zapewnieniu, że turystyka w tych regionach rozwija się harmonijnie i zgodnie z celami ochrony przyrody i zachowania bioróżnorodności. **Metody:** Na potrzeby badania przeprowadzono wywiady z przedstawicielami instytucji lokalnych oraz ankiety wśród społeczności lokalnej i odwiedzających obszary chronione regionu. Wybrane wskaźniki poddano analizie z perspektyw społeczno-ekonomicznej, środowiskowej, infrastrukturalnej i instytucjonalnej. Za pomocą statystyki opisowej dokonano oceny wskaźników rozwoju zrównoważonego, analizując wyniki 112 ankiet wypełnionych przez przedstawicieli społeczności lokalnej oraz 168 ankiet uzyskanych od turystów odwiedzających badane obszary. **Wyniki:** Dzięki analizie wykazano wzrost poziomu świadomości społeczności lokalnej w zakresie korzyści wynikających z funkcjonowania obszarów chronionych, szczególnie w kontekście dziedzictwa przyrodniczego i kulturowego. Ponadto odwiedzający ocenili pozytywnie wskaźniki społeczno-ekonomiczne oraz środowiskowe. Brak informacji dotyczących planowania oraz niedostateczny poziom zaangażowania społeczności lokalnej w proces zarządzania obszarami chronionymi to główne ustalenia badania. **Wnioski:** Głównym wyzwaniem dla badanego obszaru jest określenie priorytetów w zakresie rozwoju zrównoważonego regionu, co wymaga współpracy wszystkich interesariuszy. Aby osiągnąć ten cel, rozwój turystyki powinien być starannie planowany z uwzględnieniem ochrony środowiska oraz poprawy jakości życia mieszkańców.

Słowa kluczowe: turystyka zrównoważona, obszary chronione, Gjirokastra, Albania

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AREA OR ECONOMIC SIZE? THE ROLE OF SPECIALIZATION IN PRODUCTIVITY CONVERGENCE OF SUBSISTENCE FARMS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE FROM 2005 TO 2016

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The aim is to provide an economic analysis of the extent to which the area size and economic size of small farms below 5 ha helped productivity development for survival in the EU-10 after joining the EU (period 2005–2016). **Methods:** Based on Eurostat data, a special database was established. The indices approach was used to analyze productivity development. Dynamics of capacity variables (number, utilized agricultural area, and standard output) and productivity indicators (average farm size, area productivity, and total productivity) were calculated. The distance of the EU-10 averages from the EU-15 was measured. Ten specialist farm types were observed in the following categories: below 2 ha, 2.0–4.9 ha, below 5 ha, below 2,000 EUR, below 2 ha and 2,000 EUR, and below 5 ha and below 2,000 EUR. **Results:** EU-10: a) The decline in the number of very small specialist farms was below the average; b) The dynamics of both area and total productivity of specialist farms exceeded EU-15 averages; c) In subsistence farms, the economic size was more supportive of increasing productivity, while in semi-subsistence farms, the area size was more supportive of increasing productivity; d) Small specialist semi-subsistence farms with an output below 2,000 EUR contributed more to convergence; e) The gap of specialist subsistence farms below 2,000 EUR between the EU-10 and EU-15, both in total and area productivity, increased. **Conclusions:** Farms below 5 ha in the EU-10 increased productivity, more so in specialist semi-subsistence farms, supporting convergence. Poland has achieved outstanding growth in convergence related to small specialist farms, both in terms of area and economic size. The dynamics of indicators for specialist semi-subsistence farms contributed to convergence in Poland, Hungary, and Romania.

Key words: agriculture, productivity, specialization, subsistence farm, semi-subsistence farm, SFs, SSFs, convergence

JEL codes: Q1

INTRODUCTION

Radical political changes that occurred in Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs/EU-10) during the last decade of the 20th century significantly transformed the farm structure in these countries. Based on the Soviet-type farm structure, with the exceptions of Poland and Slovenia, state farms and agricultural cooperatives accounted for the majority of production. Besides Poland and Slovenia, which have traditionally had small household farms integrated by cooperatives, these also played a significant role in providing one-third of Hungary's agricultural production.

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As a result of reprivatization, restitution, and land distribution, the number of very small farms under 5 ha (UAA) in CEECs increased dramatically. In 2005, out of 14.5 million registered agricultural holdings in the EU-27 (prior to Brexit, excluding Croatia), more than two-thirds had an area below 5 ha, and nearly 70% of them were in CEECs.

Although the number of subsistence farms (below 2 ha) and semi-subsistence farms (2.0–4.9 ha) further declined until 2016 in the EU-27 overall, it is worth providing insight into how these small farms in the EU-10 have been struggling to survive during the decade after EU eastward enlargement by using the advantages of specialization, economic scale, and territorial scale in order to increase productivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Radical changes in farm structure after 1989 strongly affected the agricultural output of these countries. Forgács [2004] pointed out that one decade was not enough for most of the EU-10 member states to reach the gross agricultural output (GAO) of the last year of the pre-reform period. An asymmetric farm structure emerged in the EU-10 between 1990 and 2005. In 2005, 80% of very small farms (below 5 ha) farmed 19.5% of the land area (UAA), while the other end of the spectrum saw only 2.8% of farms (20 ha and above) farming 56.6% of the UAA. The proportion of medium-sized farms (5.0–19.9 ha) in farmland in the CEECs was relatively low (14.4%), compared to the EU-15 average of 23.6%. The issue of the dual face of farm structure in the CEECs was discussed by Csáki and Forgács [2008]. However, subsistence farms (SFs) and semi-subsistence farms (SSFs) play a significant role in the food supply of the population, partly in farm households and partly on the market (SSFs), generating additional income for the family.

Regarding small farms, there is no universally accepted definition. Three main indicators define small farms: area, economic size, and labor used. Hubbard [2009] discussed the size issue of small farms. The link between semi-subsistence farming, farm income, and social capital was analyzed in Bulgaria by Wolz et al. [2010]. The distinction between small and family farms was clarified by Matthew [2000]. The issue of supporting small farms has been a constant focus on the EU agenda. Taking into account the importance of the topic, Gordon et al. [2014] released a special issue on SSFs in Europe. The volume included several studies discussing various aspects, such as the role, importance, development paths, strategies, and agricultural policies of semi-subsistence farms. Davidova [2014] analyzed the significance and development paths of small and semi-subsistence farms in the EU. The roles of small and semi-subsistence farms in the EU were explored by Davidova and Bailey [2014]. It also addressed how semi-subsistence farms can be integrated into supply chains [Gorton et al. 2014]. Future possibilities of small farms were analyzed by Forgács [2006]. Thomson [2014] provided an overview of the EU policy treatment of small and semi-subsistence farms. The viewpoint of new member states was explored by Erjavec et al. [2014], focusing on the structural changes of SSFs and related agricultural policy. Hubbard et al. [2014] discussed the aspects of the survival strategy of semi--subsistence farms in Romania and Bulgaria. The productivity of small and large farms was also a focus for researchers. Aragón et al. [2021] noted that the positive relationship between farm productivity and land size may become negative when yields are considered. Rabinowicz [2014] draws attention to the economic, social, and environmental advantages of small farms, explaining their importance and underlining that they are often owned by the poor and provide benefits in public goods. Concerning environmental issues, Stępień et al. [2021] emphasized that while contractual integration enhances the eco-efficiency of small-scale farms in Poland, dependence on state support has the opposite effect. Dwyer [2014] summarizes the CAP reform proposals that support small and semi-subsistence farms, highlighting how the Small Farms Scheme provides assistance to small farms in the EU. Forgács [2016] concludes that the analysis provides grounds to support the contention that small farms have found further specialization as a path of development, helping them to survive; however, the speed at which specialization has been achieved varies according to country and farm type. On the policy side, the EU Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development discussed the future of small agricultural holdings in the 2013/2096(INI) EU report [Popescu 2014].

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Based on Eurostat data, a special database was created in an Excel file, comprising approximately 40,000 rows and 1,600 columns. The analysis focuses on the dynamics of capacity variables (number of farms, utilized agricultural area, and standard output) and productivity indicators (average farm size, area productivity, and total productivity). The average distances from the EU-10 to EU-15 were measured. Ten specialist farm types were observed in the following categories: below 2 ha, 2.0–4.9 ha, below 5 ha, below 2,000 EUR, below 2 ha and 2,000 EUR, and below 5 ha and below 2,000 EUR.

Aim

The aim is to provide an economic analysis of the extent to which the area size and economic size of small farms (below 5 ha, below 2,000 EUR) contributed to the productivity development of SFs and SSFs for survival in the EU-10 during the challenging transition period (2004–2016) after joining the EU. This analysis will examine how the farm structure's legacy from the communist regime differentiated the dynamics of convergence of very small farms in selected CEECs.

Research hypotheses

Subsistence farms use the entire volume of production to provide the family with food, and nothing is left for market sale. Higher productivity enables an increase in self-sufficiency. The primary economic goal of SFs is to reduce expenditure on food purchases in the markets.

Hypothesis 1: *The productivity growth of subsistence farms is primarily determined by the economic size of the farm.*

Semi-subsistence farms pursue two goals. The primary goal is to ensure the family's food supply. Second, due to their larger territorial size, they produce a surplus that enables them to obtain additional income from the market and improve their family's financial situation. The effectiveness of market sales depends on the level of farm productivity. SSFs are interested in further increasing productivity, and the territorial size of the farm is the determining factor in this.

Hypothesis 2: *The increase in productivity of semi-subsistence farms is primarily determined by the territorial size of the farm.*

The cases of SFs and SSFs have always been on the agenda of all EU member state governments, as well as in EU agricultural policy. Different aspects of SFs/SSFs are of great importance. Furthermore, the size of farms (in terms of area and economy), age, gender, educational background, role in rural development, and opportunities for off-farm jobs in the region are the most important factors. This paper examines the economic aspects of farm performance, focusing on productivity development and specialization. Other aspects require further research.

A detailed clarification of the abbreviations used, the indicators applied, as well as the classification of specialist farm types is presented in Table 1. This table provides a concise reference framework that supports the interpretation of the analysis results discussed in subsequent sections.

RESULTS

Radical political changes that occurred in Central and Eastern European member states (CEECs/EU-10) during the last decade of the 20th century significantly transformed the farm structure in these countries. The agricultural crisis reached its lowest point in 1992–1993. Slovenia needed five years to recover, while Poland was close to reaching the basic level after one decade. For other EU-10 member states, one decade was not even enough to close the basic gap, and even Romania experienced a downward trend just after 2000.

Table 1. Explanation of abbreviations, indicators, and specialist farm types

	Abbreviations
1	EU-27: Prior to Brexit, excluding Croatia.
2	EU-15: Old member states (excluding Cyprus and Malta).
3	EU-10: Central and Eastern European Countries (former socialist countries, new member states).
4	CEE: Central and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia).
5	CEECs: Central and Eastern European Countries.
6	SFs: Subsistence farms: those farms producing food to meet the needs of a farmer's family or a small group, with little or no surplus for sale.
7	SSFs: Semi-subsistence farms are those agricultural holdings that primarily produce food for the farmer's own household consumption but also sell a portion of their output on the market.
8	GAO: Gross agricultural output: It is the total value of all crops, livestock, and other products produced by the agricultural sector in a given period.
9	UAA: Utilized agricultural area.
10	SO: Standard output: It is the average monetary value of the agricultural output at farm-gate price, in EUR per hectare or per head of livestock. There is a regional SO coefficient for each product, representing the average value over a 5-year reference period.
	Indicators
1	UAA/farm: Average farm area/territorial size: per farm below 2 ha, 2–4–9 ha, below 5 ha/EU-10 countries/10 farm types/ /EU-27/EU-10/EU-15.
2	SO/farm: Total farm productivity, average farm economic size: per farm below 2 ha, 2–4–9 ha, below 5 ha/EU-10 countries/farm type/EU-27/EU-10/EU-15.
3	SO/UAA: Farms' area productivity: per farm below 2 ha, 2–4–9 ha, below 5 ha/EU-10 countries/farm type/EU-27/EU-10/EU-15.
	Specialist farm types observed
1	Specialist cereals, oilseed, and protein crops (calculated with SO)
2	Specialist horticulture indoor (calculated with SO)
3	Specialist horticulture outdoor (calculated with SO)
4	Specialist vineyards (calculated with SO)
5	Specialist fruit and citrus fruit (calculated with SO)
6	Specialist olives (calculated with SO)
7	Specialist dairying (calculated with SO)
8	Specialist cattle-rearing and fattening (calculated with SO)
9	Specialist pigs (calculated with SO)
10	Specialist poultry (calculated with SO)

Source: own work.

Specialization as the main driver of convergence of SFs/SSFs in EU-10 agriculture – An area size approach

In addition to the values of the indicators, relative changes and dynamics are considered, highlighting which indicators contributed most to the convergence of the EU-10. The study focuses on small farms with less than 5 ha and SO of less than 2,000 EUR. In 2005, approximately 60% of the 14.5 million agricultural holdings in the EU-27 were located in the EU-10, decreasing to 56.4% by 2016; meanwhile, the share in land area (UAA) accounted for around 27%, essentially unchanged. Regarding the share of SO in the EU-10, it increased slightly from 14.7% to 16.5%, reaching one-fifth of the EU-15 average.

The number of farms below 5 ha (UAA) declined drastically in the EU in general. In the case of SO of these very small farms, the decline was only 16.4%, while its value per farm even increased by 30%. The average territorial size of small farms in the EU-10 (1.4 ha) was only 71.5% of the EU-15 average in 2016. From a convergence point of view, the difference in size indicates a very significant lag of EU-10 agriculture, where the productivity ratio of small farms compared to the EU-15 average increased from 22% in 2005 to only 23.3% in 2016.

In the case of specialist farms under 5 ha, the situation is similar to the mainstream of convergence, with the difference that the degree of productivity lagging behind the EU-15 has been narrowed. In 2016, the largest distance in the EU-10 compared to the EU-15 average can be observed in total and area productivity (convergence values of 15.1% and 21.7%, respectively). The lag is partly explained by the lower territorial size; the other part can be attributed to the low level of capitalization of farms, the use of outdated technology, and poor operational management (Tables 2 and 3).

Convergence of SFs and SSFs of EU-10 – An economic size approach

Out of the EU-27 (14.5 million farms), 6.4 million (44%) had the SO below 2,000 EUR in 2005. 80% of them came from the EU-10, both in 2005 and 2016. This farm category lost the most farms (39.1%) during the transition between 2005 and 2016, with no significant difference between the EU-10 and EU-15. The share of total land use (UAA) in the EU-27 decreased from 4.8% in 2005 to 2.9% in 2016. The average farm size amounts to 1.3 ha (approximately 1.1 ha in the EU-10 and 2.3 ha

Table 2. Dynamics of capacity variables by farm area/economic size, below 2,000 EUR, in the EU-27, EU-10, and EU-15, and selected EU-10 countries (for the period 2016/2005)

Variable	EU-27	EU-10	EU-15	Poland	Hungary	Romania
	Number of farms [%]					
Farms total	71.4	67.9	76.4	57.0	60.2	80.4
Spec farms total	82.7	83.4	82.1	83.5	67.8	89.0
Farms below 5 ha total	65.2	64.2	67.3	43.7	0.0	81.9
Spec farms below 5 ha total	88.4	75.8	74.3	103.6	52.9	74.3
Spec farms below 2,000 EUR, below 2 ha	67.8	69.6	62.8	26.5	60.8	90.9
	UAA of farms [%]					
Farms total	99.8	101.8	99.1	97.6	109.5	89.9
Spec farms total	114.8	140.7	107.5	136.2	135.0	128.4
Farms below 5 ha total	70.3	68.5	73.1	73.6	62.7	70.3
Spec farms below 5 ha total	88.4	97.5	75.3	114.4	83.6	75.3
Spec farms below 2,000 EUR, below 2 ha	73.4	72.9	74.2	55.6	57.5	85.3
	SO of farms [%]					
Farms total	126.2	141.8	123.6	155.5	132.7	115.4
Spec farms total	136.5	184.3	131.3	205.0	163.3	183.6
Farms below 5 ha total	84.1	83.6	84.3	98.0	64.7	88.0
Spec farms below 5 ha total	88.8	113.6	76.3	127.8	75.0	76.3
Spec farms below 2,000 EUR, below 2 ha	64.7	61.3	68.8	58.4	35.4	75.6

Source: own work based on Eurostat data.

Table 3. Dynamics of indicators by area size, below 2,000 EUR, in the EU-27, EU-10, and EU-15, and selected EU-10 countries (for the period 2016/2005)

Indicator	EU-27	EU-10	EU-15	Poland	Hungary	Romania
			UAA/farms [%]			
Farms, total	139.8	149.9	129.7	171.4	182.0	111.8
Spec farms, total	138.9	168.8	130.9	124.5	199.0	121.0
Farms below 5 ha, total	107.8	106.8	108.6	168.4	129.5	85.8
Spec farms below 5 ha, total	117.7	128.7	110.9	187.2	158.0	78.3
			SO/farms [%]			
Farms, total	176.8	208.8	161.8	272.9	220.6	143.5
Spec farms, total	165.1	221.0	159.9	163.0	240.7	144.2
Farms below 5 ha, total	129.0	130.3	125.2	224.0	133.6	85.8
Spec farms below 5 ha, total	118.2	149.9	115.1	209.2	141.6	78.3
			SO/UAA [%]			
Farms, total	126.4	139.3	124.7	159.2	121.2	128.4
Spec farms, total	118.9	131.0	122.2	150.5	121.0	143.0
Farms below 5 ha, total	119.7	122.0	115.3	133.0	103.2	125.2
Spec farms below 5 ha, total	100.4	116.5	103.8	111.7	89.7	81.3

Source: own work based on Eurostat data.

in the EU-15), representing a relatively small change between 2005 and 2016. The decline of capacity factors (number of farms, UAA) affects small specialist farms less in the EU-27. It is the same for both the EU-10 and EU-15, with one exception: total production (SO) in the EU-10.

The average farm size of specialist SSFs declined by 9.5% in the EU-10 but increased by 4.6% in specialist SFs. Small farms in the EU-15 followed a different development path, where the average farm size also increased in SFs more than in the EU-10; however, total productivity did not decline but rather increased by 9.5%. In the case of SSFs, the average farm size and total productivity (SO/farms) practically remained unchanged in the EU-15. In the EU-10, farm size decreased by 10%, but total productivity increased by 21% at the same time (Tables 4 and 5).

Selected cases of the EU-10 – Poland, Hungary, and Romania

Besides the EU-27, EU-10, and EU-15 average figures for the number of farms, UAA, and SO were also calculated for Poland, Hungary, and Romania, which have different backgrounds concerning their heritage from the socialist farm structure system. In each of the three cases, dynamic figures for: a) farm total; b) spec farms total; c) farms below 5 ha total; d) spec farms below 5 ha total; e) farms below 2,000 EUR total; f) spec farms below 2,000 EUR; g) small spec farms below 2,000 EUR and below 2 ha; h) small spec farms below 2,000 EUR and 2.0–4.9 ha; and i) small spec farms below 2,000 EUR and below 5 ha were calculated. It can be concluded that, in the convergence of EU-10 agriculture to EU-15, specialization was the driving force for all three CEE countries, particularly in terms of g rowth speed, although it was less pronounced in SFs and more pronounced in SSFs.

A higher share of specialist farms could survive in each country; their total UAA increased by 28.4–36.2%, and the growth of SO was outstanding, at 63.3–105%. However, small farms with an area of less than 2 ha and an annual revenue of less than 2,000 EUR lost the most in these countries, except in Poland. The dynamics of farm size (apart from SSFs), total productivity, and area productivity of very small specialist farms (below 5 ha, and within that below 2,000 EUR) were

Table 4. Dynamics of variables by farm economic size, below 2,000 EUR, in the EU-27, EU-10, and EU-15, and selected EU-10 countries (for the period 2016/2005)

Variable	EU-27	EU-10	EU-15	Poland	Hungary	Romania
	Number of farms [%]					
Farms below 2,000 EUR, total	60.7	60.9	59.2	29.3	52.1	82.5
Spec farms below 2,000 EUR, total	66.5	67.7	63.5	36.0	60.3	83.8
Small spec farms below 2,000 EUR, below 5 ha	67.2	68.4	63.8	37.2	60.3	84.5
	UAA of farms [%]					
Farms below 2,000 EUR, total	58.9	58.1	60.6	43.9	59.6	67.5
Spec farms below 2,000 EUR, total	63.3	59.8	69.2	54.6	53.9	59.2
Small spec farms below 2,000 EUR, below 5 ha	67.0	64.3	72.2	67.0	54.3	63.3
	SO of farms [%]					
Farms below 2,000 EUR, total	66.0	67.4	61.8	52.1	57.2	84.4
Spec farms below 2,000 EUR, total	65.0	62.8	67.8	73.5	37.4	67.9
Small spec farms below 2,000 EUR, below 5 ha	66.5	64.7	68.8	81.0	37.3	69.2

Source: own work based on Eurostat data.

Table 5. Dynamics of indicators by farm economic size below 2,000 EUR, in the EU-27, EU-10, and EU-15, and selected EU-10 countries (for the period 2016/2005)

Variable	EU-27	EU-10	EU-15	Poland	Hungary	Romania
	UAA/farms [%]					
Farms below 2,000 EUR, total	97.1	95.3	102.5	149.6	114.3	81.8
Spec farms below 2,000 EUR, total	95.1	88.4	108.9	151.5	89.4	70.6
Small spec farms below 2,000 EUR, below 5 ha	99.7	93.9	113.0	179.9	90.0	74.9
	SO/farms [%]					
Farms below 2,000 EUR, total	108.8	110.6	104.5	177.7	109.7	102.3
Spec farms below 2,000 EUR, total	97.6	92.9	106.7	204.1	62.0	81.1
Small spec farms below 2,000 EUR, below 5 ha	99.0	94.6	107.8	217.5	61.8	81.9
	SO/UAA [%]					
Farms below 2,000 EUR, total	112.0	116.0	102.0	118.8	96.0	125.0
Spec farms below 2,000 EUR, total	102.7	105.0	98.0	134.7	115.7	114.8
Small spec farms below 2,000 EUR, below 5 ha	99.3	100.7	95.4	120.9	121.4	109.3

Source: own work based on Eurostat data.

convincingly high in Poland. In Hungary and Romania, the advantage of specialization contributed to increased growth in area productivity in general but resulted in a decrease in farm size (UAA/farm) and total productivity (SO/farm) in SFs (Table 6).

Similar to the main trend, in the three countries, a higher proportion of specialized farms were able to survive the 2004–2016 period. In Poland, specialized small farms with an average UAA of less than 2 ha and a total area value of less than 2,000 EUR more

Table 6. Selected EU-10/EU-15 countries average ratio of indicators in 2005 and 2016

Indicator	Poland		Hungary		Romania	
	Share in EU-15 average [%]					
	2005	2016	2005	2016	2005	2016
Farms, total						
UAA/farm	27.8	36.8	27.9	39.1	15.3	13.2
SO/farm	15.6	26.3	16.5	22.5	5.9	5.2
SO/UAA	55.9	71.4	59.2	57.5	38.7	39.8
Specialist farms, total						
UAA/farm	38.3	47.7	33.7	51.2	17.4	19.2
SO/farm	20.9	32.0	15.8	23.8	4.7	6.1
SO/UAA	54.5	67.2	46.8	46.4	27.0	31.6
Small farms below 5 ha, total						
UAA/farm	81.7	126.7	33.4	39.9	74.9	59.2
SO/farm	16.8	30.0	15.2	16.2	14.9	12.8
SO/UAA	20.5	23.7	45.4	40.7	19.9	21.7
Small spec farms below 5 ha, total						
UAA/farm	81.8	138.2	28.6	40.7	56.5	51.3
SO/farm	19.2	35.0	11.4	14.0	6.6	8.5
SO/UAA	23.5	25.3	39.9	34.5	11.6	16.5
Small spec farms below 2,000 EUR, total						
UAA/farm	98.2	136.7	17.2	54.7	68.7	44.6
SO/farm	56.2	107.5	68.2	104.2	55.6	42.3
SO/UAA	57.2	78.7	397.1	190.4	81.0	94.9
Small spec farms below 2 ha, below 2,000 EUR, total						
UAA/farm	95.5	169.3	46.0	36.8	70.3	55.8
SO/farm	47.1	94.8	69.8	37.1	45.9	34.9
SO/UAA	49.4	56.0	151.9	100.8	65.3	62.5
Small spec farms 2.0–4.9 ha and below 2,000 EUR, total						
UAA/farms	102.6	90.9	93.6	85.5	98.8	87.1
SO/farm	78.5	119.1	102.3	120.3	104.0	122.7
SO/UAA	76.5	131.1	109.3	140.6	105.3	141.0
Small spec farms below 5 ha and below 2,000 EUR, total						
UAA/farms	101.4	161.4	40.9	32.6	79.9	53.0
SO/farm	53.6	108.1	69.9	40.1	55.8	42.4
SO/UAA	52.8	67.0	170.8	122.9	69.8	79.9

Source: own work based on Eurostat data.

than doubled their average area size, achieving a 120% increase in total productivity.

In the case of Hungary, these figures indicate a decrease in the average size of the holdings by almost 5%, and in terms of total productivity, the decline exceeded 40%.

Within the farms with a value below 2,000 EUR, the figures for specialized farms with an area of 2.0–4.9 ha are as follows: In Hungary, the average area size shows a decrease of 8.4%, while the total productivity indicator increased by 17%. In Poland, there was a 12% decrease in the average area size, accompanied by an outstanding improvement in total productivity, which reached 51%. In Romania, the average area size, similar to Poland, decreased by 12%, but the total productivity indicator increased by 17%.

The average farm size below 5 ha in the EU-15 member states in 2005 was almost four times bigger than that of the EU-10; the distance gap (relative share) from the EU-15 average narrowed from 74.4% in 2005 to 70.5% in 2016. In terms of area productivity, the EU-10 is significantly behind the EU-15 average; in 2016, it accounted for only slightly more than half (51.6%) of it. The growth indices of the EU-10 indicators, with the exception of area productivity (SO/UAA), are all more favorable in specialized farms, indicating that specialization plays a decisive role in convergence. In the EU-10, the average farm size of specialist farms (below 5 ha) grew faster, but even in 2016, it did not reach half of the EU-15 average (45.7%).

Examining the number of capacity variables by specialist SFs and SSFs separately, the figures reveal significant differences. The decline in both the number of farms and UAA in SFs was lower in specialist farms below 2,000 EUR compared to specialist farms below 2 ha (UAA), but it was the opposite in SSFs. Standard output dropped more in specialist SSFs compared to the average of total specialist farms, and to a lesser extent in the case of SFs.

Despite the fact that the average farm size in the EU-10 is lower compared to the EU-15 average, the area productivity (SO/UAA) of these farms exceeds the EU-15 average both in 2005 and 2016 (by 47.3% and 67.5% respectively), indicating that farms below 2,000 EUR run more intensive land use in the EU-10 than in the EU-15. The advantage of specialization in the EU-10 can also be observed in the case of small farms with an area below 2,000 EUR.

The total area of UAA of specialized farms under 5 ha increased by almost 15% in Poland, and the advantage of specialized farms in terms of total output was 27.8%. The increase in average farm area in Hungary and Poland was significantly higher (58% and 87%) than the average growth in the EU-15 (28.7%). Their total productivity index, compared to the increase of almost 50% in the EU-15, was almost 110% in Poland and 33.3% in Hungary.

Poland achieved outstanding growth in convergence related to small farms, both in terms of area and economic size. Concerning the dynamics of specialist SFs/SSFs, both area and economic size approaches are showing evidence of convergence in all three CEE countries, more so in semi-subsistence farms and less so in subsistence farms.

DISCUSSION

Between 2005 and 2016, approximately 3.5 million small farms with a UAA of less than 5 ha disappeared in the EU-27; however, 6.6 million farms are still operational, with more than two-thirds located in the EU-10 countries. The survival rate of subsistence and semi-subsistence farms in these countries, as well as in the EU-15, was higher in specialized farms. The latter, by increasing labor use, increased total productivity compared to non-specialized small farms. In 2016, 6.3 million ha (13%) of land were still cultivated by very small farms in CEECs (3.3% in the EU-15), playing an important role in food supply, protecting the environment, producing public goods, contributing to sustainable agricultural production, and providing jobs for millions of people living mostly in rural areas, most of whom are very poor.

Between 2005 and 2016, concerning convergence in productivity among the EU-10, specialization was the driving force behind narrowing the gap between the EU-10 and EU-15 averages, as well as in subsistence and semi-subsistence farms. In the EU-10 area size was more supportive of convergence than economic size. However, in the case of small farms with a value below 2,000 EUR, specialist SSFs in the EU-10 made a greater step forward in convergence to the EU-15 average compared to that of SFs. Regarding the growth of area productivity, the very small farms, by economic size, are lagging behind in total productivity growth. It can be expected that in the future, specialization will play a significant role in the convergence of the EU-10 to the EU-15 in general, and in the case of SSF farms as well.

EU agricultural policy needs to focus on providing more support to small farms, slowing the rate of their decline in the years ahead. Research results indicate that in the case of subsistence farms, subsidies should focus more on income support, while for semi-subsistence farms, tools to increase farm area size appear to be a helpful aid.

CONCLUSIONS

In the EU-10, the territorial size of farms below 5 ha, especially in SSFs, helped increase productivity more than the economic size below 2,000 EUR did. The area and total productivity of SSFs declined slightly in the EU-15 but increased in the EU-10. However, a significant improvement in the convergence of productivity growth of SFs/SSFs categories in the EU-10 requires a longer period. Poland, traditionally characterized by a stronger small farm structure, has achieved outstanding growth in productivity convergence related to small farms, both in terms of area and economic size. Concerning the total and area productivity development of farms with a total value below 2,000 EUR, the dynamics of productivity in SSFs were significantly high (21% in total and 33% in area productivity), while a decline (12% and 16%, respectively) was observed in SFs in the EU-10.

ORIGINALITY AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

This study provides the first comprehensive assessment of the production and productivity trajectories of subsistence and semi-subsistence farms in the EU-10 (Central and Eastern European) countries, conducted through both area-based and economic-size approaches, and benchmarked against the averages observed in the EU-15. The results indicate that the growth of productivity in subsistence farms is predominantly shaped by their economic size (Hypothesis 1: justified), whereas the improvement in semi-subsistence farm productivity is largely associated with their territorial scale (Hypothesis 2: justified). Further investigation should therefore focus on the performance and productivity dynamics of farms belonging to higher area and economic size categories, to obtain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underpinning productivity convergence within European agriculture.

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POWIERZCHNIA CZY WIELKOŚĆ EKONOMICZNA? ROLA SPECJALIZACJI W KONWERGENCJI PRODUKTYWNOŚCI GOSPODARSTW SAMOWYSTARCZALNYCH W EUROPIE ŚRODKOWO-WSCHODNIEJ W LATACH 2005–2016

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem artykułu jest analiza ekonomiczna zakresu, w jakim wielkość obszarowa oraz wielkość ekonomiczna małych gospodarstw o powierzchni poniżej 5 ha przyczyniły się do rozwoju produktywności umożliwiającej przetrwanie w państwach UE-10 po akcesji do Unii Europejskiej (w latach 2005–2016). **Metody:** Na podstawie danych Eurostatu utworzono specjalną bazę danych. Do analizy rozwoju produktywności zastosowano podejście wskaźnikowe. Obliczono dynamikę zmiennych dotyczących potencjału (liczba gospodarstw, użytkowana powierzchnia użytków rolnych oraz standardowa produkcja) oraz wskaźników produktywności (przeciętna wielkość gospodarstwa, produktywność ziemi oraz produktywność ogółem). Zmierzono również dystans średnich wartości dla UE-10 względem UE-15. Obserwacji poddano 10 typów gospodarstw wyspecjalizowanych w następujących kategoriach: poniżej 2 ha, 2,0–4,9 ha, poniżej 5 ha, poniżej 2000 EUR, poniżej 2 ha i 2000 EUR, poniżej 5 ha i poniżej 2000 EUR. **Wyniki:** W krajach UE-10: a) Spadek liczby bardzo małych gospodarstw wyspecjalizowanych był mniejszy od średniej. b) Dynamika produktywności ziemi i produktywności ogółem w gospodarstwach wyspecjalizowanych przekroczyła średnie wartości dla UE-15. c) W gospodarstwach samowystarczalnych większe znaczenie dla wzrostu produktywności miała wielkość ekonomiczna, natomiast w gospodarstwach częściowo samowystarczalnych większą rolę odgrywała wielkość obszarowa. d) Małe gospodarstwa częściowo samowystarczalne o produkcji poniżej 2000 EUR silniej wspierały proces konwergencji. e) Luka między UE-10 a UE-15 w zakresie produktywności ogółem i produktywności ziemi wśród gospodarstw wyspecjalizowanych poniżej 2000 EUR się powiększyła. **Wnioski:** Gospodarstwa poniżej 5 ha w UE-10 zwiększyły swoją produktywność, przy czym efekt ten był silniejszy wśród wyspecjalizowanych gospodarstw częściowo samowystarczalnych, co sprzyjało konwergencji. Polska odnotowała szczególnie duży wzrost konwergencji w odniesieniu do małych gospodarstw wyspecjalizowanych, pod względem wielkości obszarowej i ekonomicznej. Dynamika wskaźników dla wyspecjalizowanych gospodarstw częściowo samowystarczalnych przyczyniła się do konwergencji zwłaszcza w Polsce, na Węgrzech i w Rumunii.

Słowa kluczowe: rolnictwo, produktywność, specjalizacja, gospodarstwa samowystarczalne, gospodarstwa częściowo samowystarczalne, konwergencja

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ORIGINAL PAPER

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CIVIC EDUCATION THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL LISTENING AND THE PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG RESIDENTS AS KRAKÓW'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of civic education classes as a tool supporting the development of local civic participation among primary and secondary school students in Kraków. The work aims to understand why young people show low interest in participating in local participatory mechanisms and to assess the effectiveness of civics education in shaping pro-social attitudes and social engagement. **Methods:** The research analysis is based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted among students from Kraków schools. Observations of civics classes, group interviews, and case studies on youth participation in participatory budgeting and public consultations were used. A literature review on civic education and youth participation was also conducted. **Results:** Research has shown that, despite the growing availability and diversity of participation forms, youth interest in participating in local mechanisms remains low. Civics classes have a positive impact on students' civic awareness, but they do not always translate into genuine engagement in local community life. Factors that demotivate young people include a lack of information, a sense of ineffectiveness, and limited opportunities to actually influence decisions. **Conclusions:** Civic education in the form of civic classes is an important element in shaping pro-social attitudes and developing civic awareness among young people. However, to effectively increase their participation in local initiatives, it is essential to simultaneously create authentic and accessible spaces for action and strengthen their sense of influence on the surrounding reality. Further research and innovative teaching approaches are necessary to combine theory with practice and motivate young citizens.

Key words: urban participation, civic budgeting, public consultations, civic education classes, Kraków

JEL codes: R21, R31, R38

INTRODUCTION

In the face of dynamic social and political changes, contemporary societies face a significant challenge: raising informed, responsible, and engaged citizens [Rahnema 2020]. Education focused on developing civic competences plays a key role in this process, enabling young people not only to understand the principles of state functioning but also to actively participate in public life and influence the reality around them. A special role in this context is played by school youth, who will

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eventually become decision-makers and leaders in social, political, and civic life.

Civic education is therefore a crucial element in shaping participatory attitudes, especially at the local level, where individuals have a direct influence on decisions affecting their community [Hamant 2021]. In the case of Kraków, a city with a strongly established historical identity, rich cultural heritage, and vibrant social life, civic education takes on particular importance. Civic classes conducted in primary and secondary schools, which integrate both theoretical and practical components, provide a tool that enables young people not only to acquire knowledge of law, the democratic system, and the functioning of local government, but also to become truly involved in local affairs. Thus, they support the development of competencies necessary for active participation in civic life from an early stage of education.

The contemporary realities of democracy reveal a significant neglect in implementing the principles of decentralization of power and supporting active citizen participation in local decision-making processes. Democracy should not be reduced solely to the act of voting or formally influencing public policy, but should also encompass the everyday, conscious participation of citizens in shaping the reality around them. Unfortunately, local social participation in Poland remains marginal, and citizens' awareness of the available participation mechanisms remains low.

Among the available participatory tools, such as the participatory budget and public consultations, only the former enjoys wider public recognition [Kazimierczak 2011]. The popularity of the participatory budget stems from its widespread promotion and relatively simple operating principles, which make it easier for citizens to understand its essence and mechanisms. The ability to directly decide on the allocation of public funds and influence specific changes in urban space is a particularly valuable incentive to convince residents to become involved [Falanga et al. 2021]. In this context, conducting reliable statistical analyses of the number of participants in specific forms of participation is especially important, making it possible to better assess the effectiveness and social impact of these tools.

Young people's decisions on the allocation of funds, for example, within the participatory budget, can have a significant impact on how local resources are distributed. The participation of young people in such processes gives voice to needs and priorities that often differ from the perspective of older residents. Young people typically focus on projects related to education, culture, sports, or ecology, such as recreational areas, meeting spaces, bike paths, or pro-environmental initiatives. This focus can shift a portion of local budgets from traditional infrastructure investments, such as road and sidewalk construction, to projects that improve the quality of social life [Pyżalski 2017]. Involving young residents in the decision-making process also encourages innovative solutions, especially in the area of new technologies. Projects related to the digitization of public services, the creation of city apps, and the development of infrastructure for electric mobility are examples of modernizing local resource management. Thus, the decisions made by young citizens not only respond to their current needs but also guide the future development of municipalities and cities.

Participatory budgeting in this context can be analyzed from the perspective of both economic efficiency and equality. In terms of efficiency, this mechanism allows public spending to be better aligned with the actual needs of the community, as residents themselves indicate which projects are most valuable to them. In terms of equality, participatory budgeting provides an opportunity to include groups that have traditionally been marginalized in decision-making processes, including young people. As a result, it becomes possible not only to distribute funds more fairly but also to strengthen social capital and citizens' sense of agency, which in the long term promotes the sustainable development of local communities.

AIM AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of civics classes as a tool supporting the development of local civic participation among primary and secondary school students in Kraków. The work aims to understand why young people show low interest in participating in local participatory mechanisms and to assess the effectiveness of civics education in shaping pro-social attitudes and social engagement. The research methods employed were quantitative and based on face-to-face interviews with students. This enabled the collection of data on both the level of knowledge and interests of young people regarding local participation. The research was conducted as part of a civic education project, which encompassed 57 Kraków schools – both primary and secondary – from 11 February to the end of June 2025. During the project, the author conducted classes on civic participation, which involved over 5,000 students and teachers. During the research, a significant legal barrier was encountered, related to the requirements of the so-called "Ustawa Kamilka" [Ustawa z dnia 13 maja 2016 r.]. These regulations require individuals conducting classes with children and young people to have a certificate of no criminal record, which is intended to reduce the risk of violence and abuse against minors. The introduction of this requirement has been met with ambivalence among teachers – on the one hand, it is perceived as a positive mechanism for improving student safety, but on the other, it is sometimes criticized due to the lengthy formal and legal procedures that can hinder the efficient organization of educational activities and civic initiatives implemented in schools.

WHAT IS PARTICIPATION

Civic dialogue and various forms of social participation are crucial elements in the functioning of contemporary societies, permeating all spheres of collective life. According to Długosz and Wygański [2005], the concept of participation can be understood in three basic dimensions:

- The first dimension is horizontal participation, also known as community participation, which is based on the active participation of citizens in activities undertaken within local communities, including through civic groups and associations.
- The second dimension is public (vertical) participation, which refers to the relationship between citizens and public institutions. In this case, individuals engage in co-decision processes through participation in administrative structures, consultations, and formal democratic procedures.
- The third aspect is individual participation, which focuses on an individual's personal involvement in social life – for example, by initiating activities, expressing opinions, or participating in local debates.

Each of these levels plays a crucial role in shaping civil society and can serve as a foundation for civic education, particularly in the context of youth work.

Civic participation refers to the active involvement of citizens in legislative and public decision-making processes. Its essence is social dialogue, in which institutions, organizations, and civic groups express their needs and demands, thus seeking to gain real influence on the actions of public authorities. As Kaźmierczak [2011] points out, participation and social dialogue shape various forms of residents' involvement in social life, contributing to the development of a civil society. Among the most important forms of civic participation, the author distinguishes four categories:

- Public activity, understood as the initiation of grassroots activities by citizens in the spirit of community development, brings benefits to both local communities and public administration.
- Electoral participation is a form of expressing political will through participation in elections, which is a basic manifestation of democratic involvement.
- Another type is mandatory participation, which refers to forced actions of citizens, such as paying taxes, which, despite not being voluntary, constitute an element of social activity.
- The last category is citizen engagement, i.e., forms of participation supervised and coordinated by public institutions, aimed at increasing the effectiveness of decision-making by involving citizens in the consultation process.

Each of the above-mentioned forms plays a different role in a democratic system, and knowing about and understanding them should be a key component of civic education, especially among young people entering the world of socio-political activity.

In the public sector economics literature, participatory budgeting can be analyzed primarily in light of the functions of the state identified by Musgrave and Peacock [1958], namely allocation, redistribution, and stabilization. The participation of young people in decision-making processes directly strengthens the allocation function, as it allows for a better alignment of public spending with actual social preferences and reveals previously overlooked needs. Oates's theory of fiscal federalism [1993] indicates that decentralization of decision-making increases efficiency, as local entities are able to identify local needs more accurately than the central government. In this context, participatory budgeting – especially with the active participation of young people – serves as a practical example of the implementation of Oates's postulate, as it transfers the decision-making process to the community level, where the community knows its own priorities best. This makes it possible to simultaneously increase the economic efficiency of public spending and improve equality in access to funds by including groups that have been underrepresented in traditional budgetary procedures.

PARTICIPATORY TOOLS

The literature emphasizes that the decision-making process within civic dialogue not only brings social benefits but can also contribute to more effective public finance management, generating savings in time and resources [Jurek 2023]. Implementing participatory mechanisms proves profitable not only from a social perspective but also from an economic one, making them an important tool in local politics. However, the scope and intensity of citizens' engagement in public life depend on several contextual factors:

- Firstly, the size of a local government unit influences the method of organizing participation –the possibilities and needs of larger municipalities differ significantly from those observed in smaller towns.
- Another important aspect is the geographical conditions, including the location of the commune, which influences access to resources and the logistical possibilities of engaging the local community.
- Equally important are indicators of socio-economic development – units with a higher level of development usually have better organizational resources and greater institutional potential to conduct participatory activities.
- Civic attitudes are also influenced by local history and social traditions, which may strengthen or limit residents' willingness to participate in public life.
- Sometimes, existing social conflicts act as a barrier to cooperation, although they can also mobilize the community to be active in certain situations.
- The level of participation is also influenced by the socio-demographic structure, including factors such as age, education level, social status, and ethnic diversity.
- The last, but extremely important element is the style of local governance – the openness of local government authorities to dialogue, their willingness to cooperate, and the ability to build social trust largely determine the degree of actual involvement of citizens in decision-making processes.

Both in terms of the number of participants and the quality of activities, social participation is most effective in smaller towns and cities. In such communities, residents demonstrate a greater willingness to actively participate in decision-making processes and support initiatives undertaken by local authorities [Hajduk 2021]. The key goal of a well-planned participatory process is to develop a common position on issues related to social and administrative changes, while engaging citizens in dialogue with the authorities.

Kraków, as the second-largest city in Poland, stands out nationally for its extensive use of participatory mechanisms, the most common of which are participatory budgeting and public consultations. The latter is a form of direct democracy whose primary goal is to gather residents' opinions on planned administrative actions. Through consultations, local government bodies gain insight into the needs and expectations of the local community, allowing them to make decisions that better reflect the true interests of the citizens [Mikołajczyk and Leśniewska-Napierała 2022]. The consultation process is preceded by an appropriate information campaign, ensuring widespread access to information about planned activities. This also allows those less knowledgeable about the topic to familiarize themselves with its details and prepare to express their opinions during meetings. Such activities provide citizens with the opportunity to exercise initial public control over local government decisions. It is worth emphasizing that public consultations are dialogical and bilateral in nature, similar to the mediation process. The goal is to reach a consensus through negotiations and compromises, in which each party has the opportunity to present its own position [Lengerer et al. 2022]. Participants play an active role in this process, sharing their suggestions and proposing specific solutions, making consultations an effective tool for strengthening civic participation.

Public consultations can take various forms, and in Kraków, in accordance with Resolution No. CXI/2904/18 of the Kraków City Council of 26 September 2018, the following can be distinguished [Uchwała nr CXI/2904/18 Rady Miasta Krakowa]:

- workshop activities,
- collecting written comments,
- paper and online surveys,
- deliberative surveys,
- expert consultations, including academics,
- quantitative and qualitative research,
- citizen panels.

The entire process of conducting public consultations is complex and takes at least 21 days. They can be organized at the initiative of the Mayor or the Kraków City Council, or based on an application from [Uchwała nr CXI/2904/18 Rady Miasta Krakowa]:

- a group of at least 300 residents,
- the Kraków District Council,
- a group of at least eight non-governmental organizations (NGOs),
- the Kraków Council for Public Benefit Activities (KRDPP),
- the Kraków Seniors' Council,
- a Kraków Council task force or committee,
- the Kraków Youth Council,
- the Civic Dialogue Commission,
- the District Social Council for Persons with Disabilities.

The literature on the subject emphasizes the multidimensional nature of public consultations, which not only constitute a form of civic dialogue but also fulfill a number of important functions in the public management system. These functions were characterized particularly clearly by Zychowicz [2014], who points out that the most important aspects of consultations are several functions:

- The diagnostic function refers to the recognition and analysis of socio-economic phenomena, which enables better adjustment of public policies to the real needs of residents.
- Public consultations also serve an educational purpose, raising citizens' awareness of the local government's planned actions. Increasing residents' awareness of decision-making mechanisms contributes to their increased civic competences and willingness to actively participate.
- Another important component of the consultation process is the articulation function, which allows residents to express their own positions, expectations, and demands. This, in turn, is linked to the participatory function, ensuring citizens have real influence on the decisions being made.
- Another important function of consultation is legitimization or giving political and administrative decisions greater legitimacy through prior consultation with citizens. Public participation in the decision-making process increases residents' sense of agency and strengthens trust in local authorities.
- The control function remains equally important, as it allows the local community to monitor the actions taken by decision-makers, thus increasing the level of transparency of public life.
- The last function indicated by Zychowicz is the activation function – effectively conducted social consultations contribute to increasing citizens' willingness to participate in subsequent initiatives, thus strengthening the durability and quality of local social capital.

Participatory budgeting is a form of participatory democracy in which residents of a given territorial unit – a city, district, or rural commune – gain real influence on decisions regarding the allocation of public funds. This mechanism allows local communities to directly engage in the budget planning process, thus activating citizens and strengthening trust in public institutions. The origins of the modern participatory budget date back to 1989, in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, where this innovative model of local community co-decision-making on public spending was first implemented. This was a groundbreaking event that later inspired other countries to implement similar solutions. In Europe, the idea emerged in the early 21st century, gaining popularity in countries such as Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, and Switzerland.

Participatory budgeting has also been used in some African countries, such as Cameroon, demonstrating the universal potential of this form of social participation.

As noted, the concept of participatory budgeting does not have a single, universally accepted definition [Błaszczak 2023]. In the Polish context, it is considered an innovative tool for managing public finances, which serves not only to increase the efficiency of spending but also to build a civil society by supporting dialogue and cooperation between residents and public administration [Jurek 2025].

One of the key tools supporting local participation remains the participatory budget, whose effectiveness depends on ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the solutions implemented within it. This makes it possible not only to monitor the quality and effectiveness of the process but also to identify potential barriers and best practices in public engagement.

Resident involvement in participatory budgeting is seen as a significant element supporting the activities of local authorities, and a manifestation of the community's civic maturity. This tool not only strengthens participation but also fosters social integration and a sense of shared responsibility for the common good. A crucial aspect of this process is the opportunity for residents to actively engage – both by submitting their own projects and by voting on their implementation.

The participatory budget creates space for grassroots initiatives and provides institutional support for social activists and local leaders. Submitted projects undergo verification and formal assessment, and are then submitted to a public vote, where the local community decides whether to accept or reject them. Implementation of approved proposals takes place within the established budget limit. It is important to emphasize that the organizational framework of the process – including the schedule, project submission rules, and voting procedures – is determined on a case-by-case basis by local government authorities, based on previous experience and the local socio-organizational context.

In Poland, participatory budgeting was launched in Sopot in 2011, and in Kraków, the first edition took place in 2013. In 2023, Kraków celebrated the tenth anniversary of the system, which provides a good opportunity to review each edition and the amount of funds invested, both for the entire city and for individual districts. Throughout its existence, participatory budgeting has enjoyed considerable popularity. One reason is that residents want to influence what happens in their neighborhoods and decisions regarding investments financed from public funds [Sobol 2017]:

- politicians' fears of losing control over budget allocation,
- the need for greater involvement of politicians and officials,
- the need to prepare a budget plan in advance.

RESULTS

The classes conducted as part of the civic education project were carefully tailored to the age and developmental level of the participants, ensuring the appropriateness of the educational content delivered. The instructor utilized a variety of teaching methods, integrating traditional lectures with workshop elements and open dialogue with students. The interactive format of the classes fostered participant engagement and enabled a direct assessment of their level of knowledge, civic awareness, and interest in the topic of social participation.

During the classes, questions were used that not only assessed their knowledge of issues related to civic participation but also aimed to stimulate reflection and motivate the young people to actively participate in public life. Examples of questions used during the classes included:[1]

- Are you familiar with the term "participation" and do you know what it means?
- Can you name participatory tools?
- Do you know what public consultations are?
- Are you familiar with the concept of a local initiative?
- Do you know what a Participatory Budget is?
- Have you voted on projects under the Participatory Budget?

[1] Own data taken from civic education classes.

- Have you submitted, or would you like to submit, your own project under the Participatory Budget in the future?
- What projects would you like to implement with Participatory Budget funds?
- Do you know of projects implemented in Kraków under the Participatory Budget?
- Do you know of examples of public consultations conducted in Kraków?
- Do you believe that participatory tools are necessary for the city's development and for local governments to meet the needs of their residents?

The questions asked during the classes were open-ended, which made it possible to obtain qualitative information on students' opinions and attitudes toward issues related to civic participation.

Of the over 5,000 students who participated in the civic education project, only 21 declared familiarity with the term "civic participation" or admitted to having previously encountered the concept. None of the workshop participants was able to identify specific participation tools. Only four participants declared knowledge of public consultations, while the concept of local initiative remained unfamiliar across all study groups.

In terms of familiarity with the participatory budget, a higher level of recognition was observed – over 700 students indicated that they knew what the participatory budget was, but none of the respondents were able to precisely define its goals or mechanisms. Furthermore, approximately 540 students admitted to voting on projects under the participatory budget at least once. The remaining participants expressed the belief that they could not vote due to being underage, indicating significant gaps in knowledge regarding the principles of participation, which is also available to younger social groups.

Despite their limited theoretical knowledge, the students demonstrated considerable creativity and commitment, presenting numerous project proposals that they believed could be implemented under the participatory budget. Among the most interesting and frequently repeated initiatives were:

- free vaccinations against human papilloma virus (HPV), free vaccinations against tick-borne encephalitis,
- development of an island in Zalew Nowohucki,
- creation of so-called pocket gardens,
- installation of photovoltaic panels at bus stops, enabling charging of mobile devices,
- revitalization of areas in Krakow's Nowa Huta and Kazimierz districts,
- purchase and installation of automated external defibrillators (AEDs) in public spaces,
- creation of a sports museum in the Kraków,
- launch of public water transport.

Knowledge of projects implemented under the participatory budget proved relatively limited – approximately 480 students were able to name at least one. At the same time, none of the participants were able to cite examples of public consultations conducted in Kraków, even the most media-promoted and controversial ones, such as the consultations regarding the introduction of the clean transport zone. However, this state of knowledge can be partially explained by the students' age and their limited exposure to topics related to urban policy.

The final question, regarding the importance of participatory tools, was met with a very positive response. Students considered the participatory budget to be the most effective and accessible tool supporting residents' participation in decision-making processes. At the same time, they expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of public consultations and local initiatives, pointing to their invisibility and incomprehensibility in the public sphere.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the results of the civic education project indicates a relatively low level of youth interest in local participation. Of the over 5,000 participants, only a small group, approximately 1% (45–50 individuals), demonstrated a clear interest in the mechanisms of the participatory budget. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a manifestation of the young generation's limited civic awareness and a lack of motivation to actively participate in social and public life at the local level.

The low levels of engagement may also be a result of a number of environmental and cultural factors, including the evolving lifestyle of young people, whose daily lives increasingly focus on digital activities. It can be assumed that widespread access to the Internet, including social media, instant messaging, and artificial intelligence-based tools (e.g., chatbots like ChatGPT), may foster the development of passive attitudes and limit the need to engage in real activities for the local community. Additionally, young people's significant involvement in computer games, despite their potential for developing logical and strategic competencies, may contribute to a decreased interest in civic and social activities. It should be emphasized, however, that the factors indicated are hypothetical in nature, requiring further interdisciplinary research to clearly determine their impact. Nevertheless, the observed limited participation of young people in participatory processes poses a significant challenge for educational and local government policies. This points to the need to implement innovative and attractive forms of activating young citizens that take into account their needs, the language of communication, and the specificity of the environment in which they operate. This can contribute to a more effective introduction to the first stages of active civic participation.

By involving residents – including young people – in the decision-making process, participatory budgeting contributes to strengthening the development potential of local communities through more precise alignment of investments with identified needs. Citizen activation enables more effective use of municipal funds, as the allocation of resources is based on the preferences of users of public goods and services. Participation also promotes greater transparency and accountability of local authorities, which translates into higher-quality management of public resources. At the same time, this process strengthens the socio-economic capital by fostering bonds of trust, cooperation, and a sense of shared responsibility for the common good. As a result, participatory budgeting is an instrument not only for a more equitable distribution of funds but also for long-term support for the endogenous development of local communities.

Involving young people in participatory budgeting can contribute to generating long-term economic benefits, as it promotes the development of entrepreneurial, innovative, and organizational skills. Participation in publicly funded projects teaches young people planning, resource management, and performance evaluation, which may increase their activity and productivity in the labor market in the future. In addition, practical experience in co-decision-making shapes pro-social attitudes and responsibility for the common good, which are important elements of human and social capital. However, the costs associated with the institutionalization of civic education, including program development, teacher training, and the organization of workshops, must be taken into account. These costs can be treated as an investment, the return on which is manifested in the form of higher-quality human capital and increased efficiency in the allocation of public resources in the long term.

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EDUKACJA OBYWATELSKA POPRZEZ SŁUCHANIE ORGANIZACYJNE I PARTYCYPACJĘ MŁODYCH MIESZKAŃCÓW JAKO KAPITAŁ SPOŁECZNO-EKONOMICZNY KRAKOWA

Cel: Celem niniejszego opracowania jest analiza roli lekcji obywatelskich jako narzędzia wspierającego rozwój lokalnej partycypacji obywatelskiej wśród uczniów szkół podstawowych i ponadpodstawowych na terenie Krakowa. Istotą podjętego tematu było zrozumienie przyczyn słabego zainteresowania młodych ludzi uczestnictwem w lokalnych mechanizmach partycypacyjnych oraz ocena skuteczności edukacji obywatelskiej w kształtowaniu postaw prospołecznych i zaangażowania społecznego. **Metody:** Analiza badawcza opiera się na badaniach jakościowych i ilościowych przeprowadzonych wśród uczniów krakowskich szkół. Wykorzystano obserwacje lekcji obywatelskich, wywiady grupowe oraz studia przypadku dotyczące uczestnictwa młodzieży w budżecie obywatelskim oraz konsultacjach społecznych. Dodatkowo przeprowadzono przegląd literatury przedmiotu dotyczącej edukacji obywatelskiej i partycypacji młodzieży. **Wyniki:** Badania wykazały, że pomimo rosnącej dostępności i różnorodności form partycypacji, zainteresowanie młodzieży udziałem w lokalnych mechanizmach jest nadal niskie. Lekcje obywatelskie pozytywnie wpływają na świadomość obywatelską uczniów, jednak nie zawsze przekładają się na realne zaangażowanie w życie lokalnej społeczności. Czynniki demotywujące młodzież to m.in. brak informacji, poczucie nieskuteczności oraz ograniczone możliwości faktycznego wpływu na decyzje. **Wnioski:** Edukacja obywatelska w formie lekcji obywatelskich jest ważnym elementem kształtowania postaw prospołecznych i rozwijania świadomości obywatelskiej wśród młodzieży. Aby skutecznie zwiększyć ich partycypację w lokalnych inicjatywach, niezbędne jest jednak równoczesne tworzenie autentycznych i dostępnych przestrzeni do działania oraz wzmacnianie poczucia wpływu na otaczającą rzeczywistość. Konieczne są dalsze badania i innowacyjne podejścia dydaktyczne, które połączą teorię z praktyką i motywacją młodych obywateli.

Słowa kluczowe: partycypacja miejska, budżet obywatelski, konsultacje społeczne, lekcje obywatelskie, Kraków

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REASSESSING INTERNATIONAL TRADE COSTS: THE ROLE OF CONVENTIONAL AND UNCONVENTIONAL BARRIERS

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study reassesses the nature of international trade costs by examining both conventional barriers (e.g., tariffs, transportation costs) and unconventional ones (e.g., cultural, institutional, and conflict-related frictions). Special attention is given to conceptualizing interstate soft conflicts – non-violent, informal tensions between countries that can disrupt trade without relying on formal sanctions or militarized force. It revisits the author's previously introduced concept of "interstate soft conflict" within a broader framework of trade resistance and informal economic pressures. **Methods:** A qualitative case study approach was used to identify 20 instances of interstate soft conflict between 2000 and 2020. Cases were gathered through systematic keyword searches across media and public sources and categorized based on the type of conflict (direct or indirect), the actors involved (state, organization, or individual), and the nature of the actions taken (e.g., boycotts, protests, diplomatic retaliation). **Results:** The analysis reveals that interstate soft conflicts, though informal and non-institutional, can act as de facto trade barriers. They emerge from political, ethical, and cultural disputes and often lead to reputational damage, reduced trade engagement, and shifts in consumer behavior. These conflicts operate across multiple channels – state-led, organization-led, and consumer-led – and reflect broader geopolitical and ideological divides. **Conclusions:** In an era where formal trade barriers are declining, informal tensions are becoming a more significant source of trade friction. Recognizing interstate soft conflicts as part of the trade cost landscape is essential for understanding contemporary trade patterns and for designing policies that are resilient to both institutional and informal disruptions.

Key words: international trade costs, conventional and unconventional trade barriers, interstate soft conflicts

JEL codes: F13, F51, F59

INTRODUCTION

International trade plays a pivotal role in global development, enabling economic integration, technology diffusion, and market diversification. The costs of international trade vary widely. Bilateral resistance can arise from traditional barriers such as tariffs or transportation costs, as well as from unconventional barriers, including disparities in institutional quality, language, culture, and religion, or from conflict-related costs associated with various forms and levels of hostility. Therefore, bilateral resistance to trade can stem not only from measurable economic constraints, but also from more abstract or intangible sources, including divergent values, historical grievances, or political tensions [Heilmann 2016].

In a highly interconnected and globalized world, trade costs are a critical policy issue for all countries

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and a significant determinant of international trade volume. They help a country establish its position within global trade and production networks. Minimizing these costs enhances a country's competitiveness, attracts foreign investment, and integrates it into global supply chains. In contrast, high trade costs isolate countries from world markets, reduce access to goods and services, hinder economic growth, and limit the benefits of specialization [Arvis et al. 2013].

Although conventional trade barriers have declined substantially over the past few decades – most notably tariffs following the establishment of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) – the persistence of high trade costs in many bilateral relationships suggests that deeper frictions continue to constrain the full potential of global trade. Although accurate estimates of trade costs are very difficult to obtain due to their high variability across countries and commodities, limited data, or the fact that some types of trade costs are not directly observable (such as cultural barriers, communication, and information costs, etc.), according to Anderson and van Wincoop [2004], a reasonable estimate for the trade costs faced by a representative developed country is around 170%[1] of the producer price of exported goods and includes all transport, border-related, and local distribution costs from producer to final user.

In the economic literature, "Trade costs, broadly defined, include all costs incurred in getting a good to a final user other than the cost of producing the good itself: transportation costs (both freight costs and time costs), policy barriers (tariffs and non-tariff measures), information costs, contract enforcement costs, costs associated with the use of different currencies, legal and regulatory costs, and local distribution costs (wholesale and retail)" [Anderson and van Wincoop 2004, p. 691].

Over the past few decades, international trade has experienced significant growth due to advances in transportation, communication, and technology, as well as economic integration and a substantial reduction in international trade costs to a relatively low level. Jacks et al. [2011, p. 186] find that "in the forty years prior to World War I, the average level of the trade cost measure (expressed in tariff equivalent terms) fell by 33%. From 1921 to the beginning of World War II, the average level increased by 13%. Finally, the average trade cost measure has fallen by 16% in the years from 1950." However, Eaton and Kortum [2002] argue that trade would be five times what is currently observed if trade were frictionless. This "mystery of missing trade" [Trefler 1995] suggests that trade barriers are persistent and remain significant determinants of the volume and patterns of trade between countries. Addressing these barriers is crucial for fostering greater international trade and promoting global economic growth and prosperity.

While considerable research focuses on conventional trade costs, such as tariffs, distance, and logistics, comparatively less attention has been given to unconventional barriers, including cultural dissimilarities, institutional mismatches, and non-militarized interstate tensions, all of which can significantly disrupt trade flows [Taralashvili 2024b]. Recent literature highlights the growing importance of these unconventional frictions. Góes and Bekkers [2022] argue that trade patterns are increasingly shaped not just by economic fundamentals, but by rising geopolitical risks and fragmentation, which impose indirect but persistent trade costs. A recent study by Mostafiz et al. [2024] underscores the importance of cultural dissimilarities in shaping trade flows, while Taralashvili [2024b] offers a novel perspective on how soft conflicts can disrupt bilateral trade relations. Together, these contributions suggest a shift toward recognizing the non-economic dimensions of trade barriers. Building on these insights, this paper contributes to the expanding literature on unconventional trade costs and emphasizes their growing relevance

[1] The total is made up of international trade costs of around 74% (this number breaks down into 21% for transportation costs and 44% for border-related barriers) and domestic distribution costs of around 55%. Since trade costs are reported in terms of ad valorem tax equivalent, trade costs are multiplicative, not additive ($1.7 = 1.74 \times 1.55 - 1$). A breakdown of the 44% ad valorem equivalent of border-related trade barriers is as follows: 8% policy barrier, 7% language barrier, 14% currency barrier, 6% information cost barrier, and 3% security barrier. Meanwhile, 21% of transport costs are split into 9% time costs and 10.7% for the United States average direct transport costs. All numbers are based on representative evidence for developed countries.

in an increasingly complex global landscape. While prior literature often refers to such factors as informal trade costs or frictions, this study adopts the broader term unconventional trade barriers to capture both ideational and non-institutionalized sources of trade resistance, particularly in the context of interstate soft conflicts [Taralashvili 2024a, 2024b].

This study builds upon the author's prior empirical analyses of interstate soft conflicts and their effects on trade and migration. While those earlier papers introduced and empirically examined the impact of soft conflicts, outlining a preliminary typology, this study revisits the conceptual framework from a broader theoretical perspective. It aims to strengthen the recognition of informal tensions, such as economically significant costs, and to clarify why their inclusion is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of global trade dynamics.

CONVENTIONAL TRADE COSTS

To explain trade costs, we must examine the barriers that contribute to these costs. Barriers related to physical geography and economic policies have historically impeded trade between countries.

Despite the rise in international trade flows and the ongoing controversy over the so-called "death of distance" [Friedman 2005], a wide range of literature shows that geographic distance remains one of the most significant determinants of trade. Melitz [2008] argues that distance can generate a negative impact on international trade flows. Disdier and Head [2008] find that, on average, a 10% increase in distance lowers bilateral trade by about 9%. Leamer [2007, p. 110] stresses that trade declines sharply with distance, stating that the impact of distance on international trade described by the gravity model is possibly "the only important finding that has fully withstood the scrutiny of time and the onslaught of econometric technique."

Therefore, the most obvious explanation for bilateral resistance to trade is geographical distance, which leads to increased transportation costs.

Transportation costs, defined as all shipping expenses for internationally traded goods, represent one of the major components of trade costs, alongside tariffs and non-tariff measures (NTMs). However, according to Anderson and van Wincoop [2004] transportation-related costs are estimated to exceed tariffs.

High freight costs are influenced by various factors. Distance and other geographical characteristics, such as sharing a common border or being landlocked, as well as the quality of infrastructure and transportation-related services, the types of products traded, and whether these goods are shipped by road, sea, or air freight, all affect the measured costs. Limão and Venables [2001] state that doubling the distance increases overall freight rates and that landlocked countries face higher transportation costs than economies sharing a common border, while improving infrastructure enhances trade.

Although maritime shipping has traditionally been the primary and most cost-effective mode of transport between countries without a common border, and land transportation has been widely used among countries sharing a border, air freight has gained increasing importance over time. The main reason for this is the time saved in transit, as long delivery times increase costs and, consequently, act as barriers to trade, negatively impacting trade flows.

Overall, the high costs of transportation and the time spent in transit present obstacles to trade, making it challenging for the country to access other markets and reap the benefits of trade liberalization. According to Martínez-Zarzoso et al. [2003], doubling transport costs leads to a reduction in import value of between three and five times. In contrast, Skiba [2007] finds empirical evidence that transportation costs decrease as trade flows increase. Korinek and Sourdin [2011] claim that longer shipping times diminish trade volume, while Hummels and Schaur [2013] calculate the ad-valorem tariff equivalent of consumers' willingness to pay more for a good to be delivered one day earlier, finding that the time cost of one day in transit is equivalent to an ad-valorem tariff rate of 0.6–2.1%.

In addition to the barriers related to physical geography mentioned above, economic policies have historically impeded trade between nations.

As the most widely used policy tool to restrict trade, tariffs (a tax imposed by one country on goods and services imported from another) have steadily decreased since the establishment of the GATT in 1948, from an average of approximately 20%

to 30% to less than 4% [WTO, 2007]. Most tariff cuts have occurred since the formation of the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), or as a result of preferential trade agreements in favor of developed, developing, and least-developed countries. While applied tariffs have been declining, governments have started to use non-tariff measures (NTMs). Niu et al. [2018] show that despite the reduction in tariffs between 1997 and 2015, NTMs have become the predominant source of trade protection.

NTMs are generally defined as "policy measures other than ordinary customs tariffs that can potentially have an economic effect on international trade in goods, changing quantities traded, prices, or both" [UNCTAD 2019, p. 5]. NTMs can be quite diverse, encompassing technical measures – sanitary and phytosanitary measures (SPS), technical barriers to trade (TBTs) – various traditional trade-restricting instruments (quotas, subsidies, price controls, rules of origin), and other behind-the-border measures (trade-related investment measures, government procurement, or distribution restrictions).[2]

Regarding studies that examine how tariffs and NTMs affect trade, Berden et al. [2009] argue that NTMs are more restrictive on the United States-EU trade and investment than tariffs. Hoekman and Nicita [2008] find that, on average, trade decreases more if NTMs are implemented rather than tariffs. Limão and Tovar [2011] show that tariff obligations in trade agreements increase the likelihood while limiting the capabilities of NTMs. Nicita and Gourdon [2013] state that the use of NTMs is extensive and increasing, especially concerning technical measures (SPS measures and TBTs). A large share (about 30%) of international trade is found to be affected by TBTs, and about 15% by SPS measures. Cadot and Gourdon [2016, p. ii] show that "deep-integration clauses in regional trade agreements, in particular the mutual recognition of conformity-assessment procedures, substantially reduce the price-raising effect of NTMs." They find that NTMs raise trade unit values, with an average price-raising effect of about 8% (3% for SPS measures and 5% for TBT ones). While Bernini et al. [2024] provide empirical evidence on the impact of import licensing, a type of non-tariff barrier, on trade volumes and market dynamics in Argentina, their analysis shows a 46% reduction in total imports, an 18% decrease in exports, and a 3% decline in employment.

UNCONVENTIONAL TRADE COSTS

International trade costs have traditionally been associated with formal, measurable barriers, such as tariffs, quotas, and regulatory restrictions, often referred to as conventional trade barriers. These are institutionalized and policy-based, making them relatively visible and quantifiable in trade models. However, beyond these conventional factors, trade patterns are also shaped by unconventional trade barriers: informal, non-institutionalized frictions that arise from incomplete information, cultural and linguistic differences, religious or ideological divergence, and institutional mismatches.

Unconventional barriers also include tensions and conflicts that emerge from various forms of hostility, whether political, diplomatic, or social, which create intangible yet impactful obstacles to trade. Unlike conventional barriers, these forms of friction are difficult to observe or quantify directly, but they can significantly depress trade flows.

Although traditional trade barriers have declined over recent decades, unconventional barriers continue to exert a strong and often underestimated influence on international economic relationships. This broader terminology builds on earlier literature discussing informal trade costs and frictions while also accommodating newer forms of ideational and reputational conflict that fall outside formal trade policy frameworks.

The cost of dissimilarity

To trade, individuals need to communicate, and communication is essential to facilitate the flow of information. The cost of obtaining information is similar to an intangible trade tax, influenced by various factors such as distance, language, expenses, and the quality of communication channels, etc. Fink et al. [2005] find that higher communication costs, measured

[2] For detailed information about NTMs classification, see: UNCTAD [2019].

as the average per-minute bilateral calling price charged to importers and exporters, negatively affect trade. The twentieth century was characterized by advances in communication and technology, which reduced communication costs and provided effective channels for searching, collecting, and exchanging information.

It is generally accepted that, alongside advanced telecommunication technologies, the use of a common language facilitates communication, reduces costs, positively impacts trade relations, and intensifies them. Melitz and Toubal [2014] state that two countries sharing the same official language tend to have a higher level of trade than two similar countries that do not share a common language.

This is why language has been a key variable that literature has used as a proxy for information costs and as a measure of the ease of communication between countries. Melitz [2008] demonstrates that a shared language, as a direct means of communication, has a significant impact on bilateral trade.

Apart from language, distance can be used as a proxy for information costs. Portes and Rey [2002] assert that the coefficient on bilateral distance decreases from −0.55 to −0.23 after including informational variables such as telephone call traffic and the number of multinational bank branches, along with distance, in the benchmark trade flows equation.

Cultural factors are well-known determinants of trade. To represent trade costs, many studies have extended the basic gravity equation of trade to include trade-facilitating factors such as common language and religion, a colonial past, and have found significant positive effects on the magnitude of bilateral trade flows [Hutchinson 2002, Melitz 2008]. Cultural similarity can facilitate more efficient communication between countries, as trading partners will better understand each other's cultures, beliefs, and values, thereby making trade easier. However, people are generally less informed about foreign markets and cultures. Cultural distance between countries, which increases with differences in language, religion, educational status, ideology, customs, and values, as well as a lack of historical ties and considerable geographical distance, raises costs and reduces trade.

Since international trade involves multiple governance systems, the quality of domestic institutions in securing property rights and contracts is an important determinant of trade costs. Anderson and Marcouiller [2022, p. 342] state that insecurity of property and contract enforcement imposes high costs on trade: "Corruption and imperfect contract enforcement dramatically reduce international trade. Contracts may not be enforceable across jurisdictional boundaries, customs officials may extort bribes, and shipments may even be hijacked." Conversely, when trade is supported by an effective rule of law and government regulation is transparent, countries tend to trade more. Jansen and Nordås [2004] claim that quality institutions increase openness and bilateral trade.

The cost of interstate conflicts

Among unconventional types of trade barriers, conflict-related costs have been found to have a substantial impact on international trade. When we imagine interstate conflict, we often think of large-scale disagreements among countries. However, beyond violent disputes and wars, interstate conflict can be defined more broadly, taking on different forms and levels of hostility. "Conflicts have different levels of intensity: lower-intensity conflict (trade disputes, sanctions, and threats of force); higher-intensity conflict (mobilization, use of armed force, and full-blown war); and the escalatory and de-escalatory processes that move conflicts from one level to another" [Mansfield and Pollins 2001, p. 852].

A significant amount of theoretical and empirical literature in political science[3] and in the field of economics examines the interrelationship between deteriorated relations and trade.

Theory suggests that trading countries experience a welfare gain, while conflicts deteriorate trade. Polachek [1980] was the first to explain the relationship between trade and conflict, demonstrating that a higher level of bilateral trade and increased interdependence

[3] Political scientists try to evaluate whether trade promotes peace (liberal school) or if increased asymmetries in existing relationships lead to a conflict between trading partners, affecting their economic relations (neo-Marxist school, realists). Even so, both theories agree that conflicts have a negative impact on trade [Barbieri and Levy 1999].

among partner countries minimize the incentives for conflict due to the high costs of tension. Martin et al. [2008] show that countries with more bilateral trade have a lower likelihood of bilateral war, while those engaged in multilateral trade, although reducing their degree of bilateral interdependence and minimizing their costs of bilateral conflict, have a higher probability of bilateral war. Pollins [1989] claims that in the long run, there is a two-way causality, where trade relations affect the level of conflict and cooperation among countries, and political relations affect trade flows.

It seems obvious that, *ceteris paribus*, the effect of conflict must be troublesome for economic activities, likely leading to a reduction in trade flows due to increased costs for traders. A wide range of literature empirically validates this view, demonstrating that wars and other forms of military conflict have a negative impact on trade flows. Nitsch and Schumacher [2004], likewise, Blomberg and Hess [2006] find that terrorism and large-scale violence have a negative effect on international trade. Glick and Taylor [2010] observe a persistent negative impact of both world wars on bilateral trade flows. Jacks et al. [2011] show that during the war, trade was entirely driven by the increase in trade costs caused by the war, highlighting that the importance of conflict on trade costs cannot be ignored. Long [2008] argues that expectations of armed conflict diminish trade as a result of increased transportation, transaction, and production costs of trade. Yet, some studies, e.g., Barbieri and Levy [1999], Morrow et al. [1998], find that war among major economies does not have a permanent, long-term effect on their trade relations.

Another stream of recent empirical literature, while supporting the view that conflict diminishes trade, also shows that trade promotes peace. Hegre et al. [2010], while affirming that the presence of military conflicts negatively affects bilateral trade flows because violence is costly, also support the idea that trade promotes peace and reduces the likelihood of conflict. Similarly, Oneal et al. [2003] find that trade has a significant effect in reducing dyadic militarized disputes, while militarized disputes reduce trade. Keshk et al. [2004] state that conflict impedes trade, while they do not find significant results for the effect of dyadic interdependence on conflict. McDonald [2004] demonstrates that higher levels of trade reduce military conflict.

Nowadays, instability in relationships is not linked to the extreme outcomes of war. According to Davis and Meunier [2011], in most cases, political relations range from normal to tense and occasionally to the risk of using force. Thus, changes in political relations occur within a less extreme range.

The political relationship at the governmental level involves deciding whether to maintain peace or engage in conflict with other nations. Several papers examine the extent to which political relations within this predominantly moderate range influence bilateral trade.

Pollins [1989] states that a tense bilateral political relationship negatively affects economic exchange due to decisions made by government representatives and the diplomatic or political climate. Numerous studies have examined the extent to which political relations under less extreme conditions impact bilateral trade. Davis and Meunier [2011], analyzing the trade patterns between the United States and Japan, find no negative impact of political tensions on bilateral trade. In contrast, Fuchs and Klann [2013], using the reception of the Dalai Lama as a measure of political tensions with China, show that countries hosting the Dalai Lama (the spiritual leader of Tibet who supports Tibet's sovereignty) at the highest political level experience a decline in export flows to China. While Anderson and Dollar [2000] argue that votes in the United Nations (UN) are a reliable indication of political alliances between countries – given that the nature of votes in the UN is highly correlated with alliances and similarities in economic and geographic interests – Mityakov et al. [2013] provide evidence that the deterioration in relations between the United States and its partner country, measured through changes in their voting patterns in the UN General Assembly, reduces United States imports from that country.

On the other hand, friendly bilateral diplomatic ties can promote economic activity. Rose [2007] finds that the presence of foreign missions (embassies, consulates, and the Foreign Service) is positively correlated with exports, and that each additional consulate is associated with an increase in exports. Lederman et al. [2010] state that a rise in the budget of export promotion agencies increases exports. Nitsch [2007] finds that state and official visits increase bilateral exports for the USA, France, and Germany. Creusen and Lejour [2011] state that the presence of Dutch support offices abroad and trade missions in destination countries promotes trade and increases exports.

The impact of political tensions on trade flows can also arise at the individual level, as consumers tend to alter their decisions due to deteriorating bilateral political relations. Consumers may hesitate to purchase products produced in a country with which their own country is experiencing tensions. Consumer behavior studies suggest that animosity increases consumers' desire to boycott, which leads to a decrease in demand for goods associated with the opposing country [Klein et al. 1998]. Boycotts triggered by such tensions can serve as a tool to punish or change the behavior of trading partners or companies. According to Pollins [1989], consumer boycotts represent commercial weapons that can be used instead of military force.

Consumer boycotts have become more prevalent in recent decades due to the internet's role as a fast and efficient means of communication, allowing protests to be organized and supporters to be gathered simply by using hashtags on Twitter, Facebook posts, or WhatsApp messages. Boycotts can be communicated to millions of consumers worldwide in seconds. According to a new YouGov study [Harmston 2017], about 21% of consumers have reportedly boycotted a brand due to a scandal or negative press release. However, Koku [2012], which highlights the financial implications of internet-driven consumer boycotts, demonstrates that the market is almost unresponsive to such boycotts.

Boycotts are expressions of protest, primarily for ethical, social, economic, political, or environmental reasons. Regardless of their effectiveness, they are powerful public actions that can significantly harm a boycotted company, community, or country as a whole [Lee 2012].

Boycotts occur as expressions of protest, mainly for ethical, social, economic, political, or environmental reasons[4], regardless of their effective[5] or ineffective results[6], and are powerful public acts that can do real damage to a boycotted company, community, or country as a whole [Lee 2012].

There is a growing body of empirical evidence that consumers are changing their decisions as a result of strained political relations between countries, which negatively affect trade flows. Heilmann [2016] studies the impact of four different political tensions, measured as politically motivated boycotts, on trade and finds the negative effects of boycotts on trade flows, primarily impacting consumer goods. Empirical studies regarding the United States-France dispute over the Iraq War, analyzing sales of French wine in the United States, present varying results. Vannerson [2003] and Ashenfelter et al. [2007] find no boycott effect on sales after considering the seasonal effects of holidays and time trends, while Chavis and Leslie [2006] do. Moreover, Pandya and Venkatesan [2016] demonstrate that the market share of brands marketed as French, although not necessarily imported from France, has declined due to this tension. Analyzing the same political event, Davis and Meunier [2011] report no significant decline in the United States' imports of luxury goods associated with France. According to Clerides et al. [2015], the rise in anti-American sentiment caused by the Iraq War generated a statistically significant negative effect on the sales of United States goods in several Arab countries. Fouka and Voth [2013] find that Greek consumers reduced their purchases of German cars as a result of tense relations between governments during the debt crisis after 2010.

[4] The early boycotts were primarily triggered by high consumer prices or violations of labor and civil rights, while later ones shifted towards the protection of animal rights, as well as the rights of religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities, and environmental concerns.

[5] The most recent example of a successful boycott campaign arose from opposition to the Sultan of Brunei's decision to impose the death penalty on gay couples. In response, celebrities and Los Angeles officials have called for a boycott of the Sultan's hotels. As a result, the new criminal law in Brunei was abolished [Financial Times 2019].

[6] Even if boycotts do not lead to change, they bring attention to problems and can influence public opinion, as occurred in 1955 when a boycott arose from tensions over public buses in Montgomery, marking the beginning of the modern civil rights movement in the United States [Friedman 2002].

Interstate soft conflicts

In today's global economy, no country operates without interactions that span a continuum from normal relationships to tense trade disputes, paramilitary conflicts, and the most extreme cases of war. This study is motivated by the observation that the deterioration of relations between countries often stops short of the extreme outcome of violence or war; yet, lower-level tensions can adversely impact the economy. The transition from normal relations to tense ones is conceptualized here as an "interstate soft conflict" [Taralashvili 2024b].

Interstate soft conflict refers to a form of non-militarized tension between nation-states that arises in response to perceived political, social, or cultural grievances. These tensions manifest not through formal sanctions or military action, but through symbolic, reputational, or grassroots measures – including public protests, boycotts, diplomatic gestures, or organized civil resistance – and are increasingly seen as capable of influencing economic ties between countries.

These non-violent but politically charged tensions can exert significant influence on international economic activity, including migration and trade [Taralashvili 2024a, 2024b], and operate across three main levels: states, organizations, and individuals.

At the state level, governments may leverage migration and trade restrictions as tools for punishment, policy enforcement, or ideological resistance. For instance, China has used its economic power to respond to perceived diplomatic slights. Fuchs and Klann [2013] show that countries hosting the Dalai Lama – a figure associated with Tibetan independence – at a high diplomatic level subsequently experienced a drop in exports to China. Similarly, governments can retaliate against specific companies; a prominent example occurred in 2018 when Chinese authorities canceled Dolce & Gabbana's fashion event and triggered consumer backlash after the brand's advertising campaign was viewed as culturally offensive Bloomberg News [2018].

At the organizational level, companies, NGOs, and trade unions may contribute to soft conflicts by protesting or publicly rejecting the practices of a company or country. In 2008, for example, Nokia's decision to relocate production from Germany to Romania resulted in organized demonstrations by German unions [Westall 2008]. Similarly, in 1995, Danish retailers boycotted French products in response to France's controversial nuclear tests in the South Pacific [Bentzen and Smith 2001].

At the individual level, consumers often act based on their political beliefs or sentiments by avoiding products from disputed countries or companies. These actions can have substantial economic consequences. Chavis and Leslie [2006] demonstrate that tensions between the United States and France over the 2003 Iraq invasion led to a measurable decline in the United States' sales of French wine. Similarly, Cambodian civil society groups organized a boycott against Tate & Lyle Sugars in 2010 over alleged land seizures and human rights violations [Le Coz 2013].

Interstate soft conflict does not cause conflict by itself, but allows different parties to exhibit contradictory, conflicting behavior if each party attempts to act unacceptably. While the underlying causes of interstate soft conflict may relate to those of conflict and can precede conflict (if tensions escalate sufficiently), it is not always synonymous with conflict and does not consistently align with cooperation. Although they fall short of war or formal diplomatic sanctions, their impact on trade flows, migration policies, and economic relations can be profound.

Despite their potentially significant consequences, interstate soft conflicts are not intended to escalate into militarized disputes or institutional sanctions. Instead, they function as unconventional policy instruments, often as effective as tariffs, embargoes, or travel restrictions in influencing political or commercial outcomes.

In summary, interstate soft conflicts share several defining features:

- They involve multiple actors, including governments, civil society groups, and individual consumers, and can manifest through actions such as diplomatic statements, public campaigns, renegotiation of agreements, or organized boycotts.
- They are triggered by a broad array of causes, including political, ideological, historical, environmental, or ethical factors, which create reputational or normative friction.

- These tensions operate through three primary channels: state-led responses, organizational advocacy, and individual or collective consumer behavior.
- Their purpose is typically to exert pressure, signal disapproval, or prompt behavioral change in the targeted country or entity.
- While non-violent and unofficial, they function as soft instruments of influence, often bypassing formal diplomatic or legal mechanisms.

AIM AND METHODS

The primary objective of this paper is to reassess the nature of international trade costs by expanding the analytical framework beyond conventional economic barriers to include unconventional, non-institutionalized factors, in particular, the role of interstate soft conflicts. By conceptualizing and systematically examining these unconventional tensions, the study aims to demonstrate how such conflicts, although non-violent and unofficial, can generate significant frictions that may influence bilateral trade flows.

To achieve this objective, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach supported by systematic data collection. The case selection process begins with comprehensive keyword searches using major search engines, including Google, Bing, Yahoo, and Baidu [Avila 2017]. The searches target media reports, online journals, academic publications, and working papers that contain the keywords "boycott", "tension", "dispute", and "conflict" in their headlines or body text.

The time frame is limited to the period from 2000 to 2020, selected for practical reasons of data availability and coverage. While no specific assumptions are made about this period being exceptional, it is assumed to reflect typical patterns of interstate soft conflicts in the recent period.

Once potential cases are identified, a logic-based filtering method is applied to assess their relevance. This screening process evaluates the motivation behind the conflict, the timing of the event, and the nature of the actions taken.

Only those cases involving interstate tensions, i.e., between two or more states, are included in the final dataset. Purely domestic or intrastate conflicts are excluded from consideration.[7]

RESULTS

As a result, numerous cases were identified and subsequently narrowed down to those occurring at the interstate level. The refined dataset comprises 20 cases of interstate soft conflict that align with a definition, each mapped to 194 dyadic country pairs. These cases are briefly summarized in Table 1, which includes the countries involved, the year of occurrence, the nature of the conflict, and its underlying reason.

The 20 cases were classified into two broad types:

- Indirect soft conflicts (13 cases): Targeting countries as a whole, often sparked by political, military, diplomatic, or cultural events, along with decisions made by governments that are deemed unacceptable by other countries, ethnic and racial minority organizations, animal and environmental protection groups, as well as consumers. Public sentiment and civil activism – especially from consumers, NGOs, or interest groups – translate into protests, boycotts, or refusals to engage with the country in question. Such unconventional pressure may lead to widespread protests against the country in question, resulting in a refusal to engage with it.
- Direct soft conflicts (7 cases): Targeting specific companies whose actions, policies, or public messaging are perceived as violating political, environmental, or social norms by senior government officials, various associations or trade unions that advocate for human, animal, or minority rights, as well as individual or collective consumers. In such cases,

[7] For instance, campaigns like #GrabYourWallet against Ivanka Trump's brand, which ultimately led to the closure of the company [Hyland 2016]; the organization Freedom for Animals' initiative named 'Sea Lies,' which urged people to boycott all Merlin Entertainment brands due to their mistreatment of captive animals, especially whales, in their aquariums [Freedom for Animals 2014]; or the United States Campaign for Safe Cosmetics' (CSC) boycott of Johnson & Johnson [News Digital 2011] due to the company's use of harmful chemicals in their baby shampoo were excluded because they do not reflect intergovernmental or country-to-country tensions.

the backlash often materializes through organized protests, consumer boycotts, or institutional condemnation.

The most frequent underlying causes were:
- Political tensions (4 cases);
- Human rights violations (4 cases);
- Environmental or animal rights concerns (3 cases);
- Territorial disputes (2 cases);
- Cultural discrimination or racism (3 cases);
- Religious sensitivity (1 case);
- Economic/nationalist backlash (2 cases);
- Diplomatic trust issues (1 case).

These motivations often reflect broader ideological divides and were typically triggered by diplomatic decisions, media campaigns, or corporate misconduct.

Soft conflicts operate through multiple channels: state-led (e.g., diplomatic retaliation), organizational-led (e.g., NGO boycotts), and consumer-led (e.g., social media backlash). Countries like China, the U.S., and European nations feature prominently as both sources and targets, with China as an initiator (5 cases) and target (6 cases), reflecting its central role in recent geopolitical friction. The U.S. and European countries appear both as sources and targets, often due to value-based activism (e.g., human rights, animal testing).

Though these soft conflicts do not involve formal trade sanctions, they often result in reputational damage, consumer boycotts, and disrupted exports. Several empirical studies [Clerides et al. 2015, Heilmann 2016, Taralashvili 2024b] confirm their negative impact on trade flows. These findings highlight the unconventional yet potent role of soft conflicts in shaping international trade dynamics. Their frequency and variety emphasize the need to incorporate such conflicts into broader understandings of trade costs and global economic interactions.

Table 1. List of interstate soft conflicts

No[a]	From	Towards	Year	Case	Reason	Summary
1	United Kingdom	France	2000	L'Oreal Still Tests on Animals	animal rights	Naturewatch launched a boycott due to L'Oréal's use of ingredients tested on animals [Naturewatch Foundation 2000].
2	United Kingdom	United States	2001	Stop Esso Campaign	environmental	Greenpeace and activists protested ExxonMobil's environmental practices [Greenpeace 2001].
3	United States	France	2002	Tension Over Iraq War	political	France's opposition to the Iraq invasion led to the United States consumer boycotts of French products [Vannerson 2003].
4	Arab World[b]	United States	2002	Tension Over Iraq War	political	Arab consumers boycotted the United States goods due to opposition to the Iraq War [Clerides et al. 2015].
5	Columbia	United States	2003	Killer Coke	human rights	Coca-Cola was accused of paramilitary--linked violence against workers in Colombia [Brodzinsky 2003].
6	Spain	China	2004	The Spaniards Against "Made in China"	economic/cultural	Shoe workers protested Chinese imports and immigration, citing unfair competition [Pingree 2004].
7	Muslim Countries[c]	Denmark	2006	Muhammad Cartoon Crisis	religious	Publication of Prophet Muhammad cartoons led to widespread boycotts of Danish goods [Heilmann, 2016].
8	Ireland	Japan	2007	Save the Whales	environmental/ /animal rights	Protest against Japanese whaling resulted in a consumer boycott of Japanese products [Irish Examiner 2007].
9	Canada	Saudi Arabia	2007	Diplomatic Spat	political	Canada's criticism of the Saudi justice system led to tensions and calls for economic retaliation [CBS 2008].
10	Germany	Finland	2008	Germans Boycott Nokia	economic/ /human rights	Nokia's plant closure in Germany triggered a nationalist consumer backlash [Westall 2008].

Table 1. List of interstate soft conflicts (cont.)

No[a]	From	Towards	Year	Case	Reason	Summary
11	China	Norway	2010	Nobel Peace Prize Dispute	diplomatic trust	China suspended diplomatic meetings after Norway awarded dissident Liu Xiaobo the Peace Prize [Watts and Weaver 2010].
12	Greece	Germany	2010	Greek Debt Crisis and Memories	political/historical	Austerity measures sparked anti-German sentiment and led to a decline in German car sales in Greece [Fouka and Voth 2013].
13	China	Philippines	2010	Manila Hostage Crisis	human rights	A botched hostage rescue led to a Chinese boycott of Philippine tourism [BBC 2010].
14	Cambodia	United Kingdom	2010	Cambodian Blood Sugar!	human rights	Activists boycotted Tate & Lyle over land grabs and abuses in Cambodia [Le Coz 2013].
15	Philippines	China	2011	Boycott "Made in China"	territorial	The Philippine governor called for a boycott amid Spratly Islands tensions [Arguelles 2012].
16	China	Japan	2012	Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Conflict	territorial	The island dispute triggered Chinese anti-Japanese protests and product boycotts [Heilmann 2016].
17	China	Maldives	2013	Cup Noodles Crisis	cultural discrimination	Chinese tourists protested discriminatory hotel policies, calling for a boycott [Global Times 2013].
18	China	Japan	2017	Visit to Taiwan	political	A Japanese official's visit to Taiwan drew Chinese protests and diplomatic criticism [Jingxi 2017].
19	Mexico	U.S.	2017	Water or Beer?	environmental justice	Locals protested Constellation Brands for exploiting drinking water supplies [CB 2018].
20	China	Italy	2018	Dolce & Gabbana Under Fire	racism	Racist ad campaign led to event cancellations and widespread consumer backlash in China [Bloomberg News 2018].

[a]Cases highlighted in grey are related to direct interstate soft conflicts.

[b]Officially, there are 22 countries in the Arab world: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/arab-countries/).

[c]The treatment group for the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis includes 69 countries where the Muslim population exceeds a 15% threshold, based on data from Pew Research (https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/muslim-population-by-country). This threshold was selected to identify the top tier of Muslim-majority nations most likely to be engaged in or impacted by the tension. The global distribution of Muslim populations is highly uneven; 50% of countries have Muslim populations below 5.7%, while 75% fall below 57.7%. Using a 15% cut-off captures the top 30% of this distribution, allowing for a more targeted and meaningful analysis. A full list of countries included in the treatment group is available upon request.

Note: Summaries are paraphrased from primary sources cited in the References. All cases were identified through keyword-based searches, as described in the Aim and Methods section. Full case descriptions are available upon request.

Source: Author's work based on Taralashvili [2024a, 2024b].

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the growing importance of unconventional trade barriers – specifically, interstate soft conflicts – in shaping international trade patterns. Unlike traditional trade costs such as tariffs, soft conflicts emerge from ideological, diplomatic, or ethical tensions between states and civil societies. These frictions, though informal and non-institutional, often lead to real economic consequences such as reputational damage, consumer boycotts, and disrupted trade flows.

The classification developed – distinguishing between direct and indirect soft conflicts – offers a novel framework for understanding the different actors and channels through which these tensions manifest. Indirect conflicts, often triggered by political or diplomatic events, illustrate how widespread civil society reactions can pressure states economically, even without formal sanctions. In contrast, direct conflicts target firms and brands, often mobilizing reputational risks via consumer activism, civil organizations, or institutional censure.

These insights align with and expand earlier studies linking diplomatic tensions to trade decline [Clerides et al. 2015, Heilmann 2016] by offering a conceptual framework to explain how and why such disruptions occur. In doing so, the study contributes a more granular, typological approach that distinguishes between state-level and firm-level tension, and between motivations rooted in politics, ethics, territory, or identity. This adds nuance to the debate on how non-economic variables influence trade relationships.

The findings also carry implications for international business, trade policy, and diplomacy. As global consumers become increasingly politicized and companies become more vulnerable to public backlash, economic actors must navigate a more complex landscape of reputational risk and cultural sensitivity. This shift highlights the need for policymakers and economists to account for non-material sources of trade resistance.

Nonetheless, this study is not without limitations. The case selection, while systematic, is not exhaustive, and media-based sourcing may introduce bias toward highly publicized events. Future research could explore larger datasets, examine the duration and intensity of trade impacts, or investigate how soft conflicts interact with formal diplomatic strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study reassesses the landscape of international trade costs by introducing the concept of interstate soft conflicts – non-violent, politically, or socially motivated tensions that disrupt trade through informal, non-institutionalized channels. By analyzing 20 selected cases from 2000 to 2020, it demonstrates that both direct and indirect soft conflicts can function as de facto trade barriers, despite lacking formal sanctioning power.

The findings highlight how reputational dynamics, cultural friction, and civil activism can materially affect trade flows, particularly in the global economy, where companies and consumers are increasingly politicized and interconnected. Recent studies [Taralashvili 2024a, 2024b] further reinforce this perspective, showing that such tensions have measurable and lasting negative effects on bilateral trade and even migration patterns.

As the global trade system becomes more influenced by value-based conflicts, diplomatic disputes, and reputational politics, understanding the mechanisms and consequences of soft conflicts becomes essential. This paper refers to these dynamics as part of a broader class of unconventional trade barriers, building on – but extending beyond – existing work on informal trade costs and frictions. Future research should build on this typology presented here to quantify its economic impact, explore causal channels, and inform policy responses that mitigate the trade-disruptive effects of unconventional tensions.

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PONOWNA OCENA KOSZTÓW HANDLU MIĘDZYNARODOWEGO: ROLA BARIER KONWENCJONALNYCH I NIEKONWENCJONALNYCH

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem badania jest ponowna ocena charakteru kosztów handlu międzynarodowego poprzez analizę barier zarówno konwencjonalnych (np. taryf celnych, kosztów transportu), jak i niekonwencjonalnych (np. uwarunkowań kulturowych, instytucjonalnych oraz konfliktów). Szczególną uwagę poświęcono konceptualizacji między państwowych konfliktów miękkich – niewiążących się z przemocą, nieformalnych napięć między krajami, które mogą zakłócać handel bez odwoływania się do formalnych sankcji czy działań militarnych. Artykuł rozwija wcześniej wprowadzoną przez autorkę koncepcję „międzypaństwowego konfliktu miękkiego" w szerszych ramach oporu wobec handlu i nieformalnych nacisków ekonomicznych. **Metody:** Zastosowano jakościowe studium przypadku w celu identyfikacji 20 przypadków międzypaństwowych konfliktów miękkich w latach 2000–2020. Przypadki zebrano poprzez systematyczne wyszukiwania słów kluczowych w mediach i źródłach publicznych, a następnie sklasyfikowano według rodzaju konfliktu (bezpośredni lub pośredni), zaangażowanych aktorów (państwo, organizacja, jednostka) oraz charakteru podejmowanych działań (np. bojkoty, protesty, retorsje dyplomatyczne). **Wyniki:** Analiza wykazała, że konflikty miękkie między państwami, mimo iż mają charakter nieformalny i pozainstytucjonalny, mogą pełnić funkcję faktycznych barier handlowych. Wynikają one z różnic politycznych, etycznych i kulturowych, a często prowadzą do strat wizerunkowych, ograniczenia wymiany handlowej oraz zmian w zachowaniach konsumentów. Konflikty te działają wielokanałowo – inicjowane przez państwa, organizacje lub konsumentów – i odzwierciedlają szersze podziały geopolityczne oraz ideologiczne. **Wnioski:** W epoce malejącego znaczenia formalnych barier handlowych nieformalne napięcia stają się coraz bardziej istotnym źródłem tarć w handlu. Ujęcie międzypaństwowych konfliktów miękkich jako elementu krajobrazu kosztów handlu jest do zrozumienia współczesnych wzorców wymiany oraz opracowania różnych rodzajów polityki odpornej na zakłócenia instytucjonalne, a także nieformalne.

Słowa kluczowe: koszt handlu międzynarodowego, bariera konwencjonalna, bariera niekonwencjonalna, międzypaństwowy konflikt miękki

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