

The contemporary regularities of socio-economic development tend to increase the divergence level. This highlights the low effectiveness of current regional policy measures and confirms the existence of barriers for achieving socially acceptable disparities in the level of life and living conditions. Therefore, the challenge is to determine them and to take actions which will have an effective impact on regional development factors. Nowadays, the set of the most important factors consists of: human capital, social capital, material capital (natural capital & infrastructure), financial capital and innovations. These factors are characterized by the continuous change in their scope, the manner of interpretation, the mechanism of influence and they significantly differ in space in accordance with the concept of territorial capital.

The aim of the analysis is to determine the level of regional and subregional development in Poland, and to identify the factors shaping the current state of spatial socio-economic disparities. It is assumed that these disparities are in some way linked to the relict boundaries referring to the partitions of Poland in the 18th century. On the other hand, spatial differences can be dependent on the paths of development established within the centrally planned economy during the communist period. And finally, the present socio-economic disparities in Poland are to a great extent the result of different trajectories of the transition after 1989. All of the mentioned determinants of spatial disparities (relict boundaries, path dependence, trajectories of transition) can affect the level of socio-economic development in each of the analyzed territories in various ways. It may be a singular impact of one of the determinants or a compilation of the synergistic influence of two or three determinants.

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The identified distribution of development differences in Poland indicates a major role of historical determinants shaping the socio-economic development level and changeability of its factors. Poland can be still divided into less developed regions of the former Russian partition, transitory regions of the former Austrian partition and better developed regions of the former German partition which is connected to the relic boundaries. The differences in question are more visible at the subregional level which emphasises its elementary importance for the current analysis of the condition of, changes in and factors behind differences in development processes in Poland.

Development differences in the Polish economic space result from the variable interactions of development factors. They are not identical at different spatial levels. It emphasises the elementary importance of territorial capital in the present formation of regularities of development processes in regions (the development of a region is the development product of its diversified territories). Factors also differ according to the development level which is easily noticed in Poland's subregional pattern indicating specific regularities in development processes of particular classes/territories.

The establishment of historical determinants of development differences in the Polish economic space is based on the partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, 1795) which led to the loss of independence in the years 1795-1918 and long-term, huge differences in the factors behind socio-economic processes.

The development that occurred under the socialist system and centrally planned economy and within the new borders established at the conferences in Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam (1945-1989), in spite of taken measures, did not reduce development differences; quite the reverse, it contributed to the creation of new patterns widening them: the nationalization of agriculture in the recovered territories of western and northern Poland, new resource hubs, rapid industrialization of new regional capitals and single subregional centres (1975-1998), stagnation in peripheral areas especially in eastern and southern Poland.

The transformation and modernization period (after 1989) led to the verification of the economic situation and increased the polarization of development processes in Poland clearly determined by the firmly rooted historical determinants affecting the level and development factors. Consequently, the strongest areas comprise agglomerations, resource areas and single subregional centres with large, successful economic entities, and the weakest areas consist of peripheries, first of all agricultural ones and those without the economic base, mainly in eastern and southern Poland.