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Article

Knowledge Management in the Practice of Economic and Social Activities of the West Pomeranian Local Government in the Field of Mitigating the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package was an effective tool of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship Self-Government Board that served to combat and counteract the socio-economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. This shows the importance of knowledge management in the practice of economic activities. The Anti-Crisis Package was prepared with a view to taking systemic, but also specific, actions aimed at saving and protecting the regional health service, entrepreneurs, labor market, but also using the existing social capital of non-governmental organizations in activities limiting the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. This example provides a case study of how practical solutions should be used to save the foundations of the economy. The West Pomeranian anti-crisis package has proven successful in the conditions of a global pandemic. The aim of the article is to identify effective solutions supporting the economy and society in crisis conditions such as the global pandemic. The presented results allow for appropriate knowledge management regarding anti-crisis programs that can be used in practice for all national economies affected by a specific type of crisis on a global scale.

Keywords: knowledge management; internal security; health care; West Pomeranian self-government; COVID-19; rescue entities; EU aid measures; public policy; economic development

1. Introduction

The implementation of tasks by the state is possible thanks to the activities of public administration at the central and local levels. In accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1997 and the provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, local self-government constitutes an integral part of the political system, initiated after democratic transformation in Poland. The main goal of local self-government authorities is to meet the needs of residents in terms of, among others, security, education, development, etc. [1]. In Poland, after the administrative reform, which entered into force on January 1, 1999, the local self-government is divided into three tiers. The first of these are municipalities, which are the smallest units, then counties (referred to as districts), which comprise several municipalities and 16 voivodeships [2].

The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in March 2020, had a global reach and threatened human and public health. Counteracting the pandemic by states had serious socio-economic effects, the scale and extent of which were significant for the global, EU, and Polish economies [3]. Right from the outbreak of the pandemic in Poland, the local self-government administration played an important role in combating its negative economic and social effects. The aim of the research in this work is to analyze the operations of the authorities of West Pomeranian self-government undertaken

during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to counteract its adverse effects in the economic and social dimension. The implementation of the research objective will be an important introduction to political science research, and in particular to security research in the regional aspect, as it constitutes a fundamental need. Thus, this issue should be addressed in a comprehensive manner and with insight into its entire complexity. The research question that will help in attaining the selected research objective is what actions were taken by the authorities of West Pomeranian to counteract the pandemic's effects and minimize risks associated with it in terms of health, economic and social aspects?

One of the methodological approaches used in the work will be factor analysis. In this research approach, political phenomena and facts are recognized as functions of many various factors (determinants, discriminants), and their explanation consists in determining determinants relevant from the point of view of the subject of the research in relation to the specific studied case, which was the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, statistical methods, also referred to as quantitative approach, will be used in the work as well as qualitative research, analysis of documents and secondary sources.

2. Literature Review – the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Socio-Economic Situation of Western Pomerania

Knowledge management is an intrinsic part of the managerial process and not a substitute for it. It is that part that is focused on managing intangible resources like knowledge, ideas, brands, and many other similar entities [4]. In this research, we present an example of knowledge management through ideas for economic and social programs that allow for eliminating crises caused by unusual causes, such as the global covid-19 pandemic. The article is a specific case study, the collection of which allows for the appropriate selection of solutions to the existing situations and conditions in order to optimally solve the socio-economic problems encountered in the turbulent global world.

In 2020, West Pomeranian self-government faced many socio-political challenges. In terms of social policy, these problems focused on demographic issues. This also gave rise to new challenges in the following areas: social service, health protection, and public safety. Demographic problems related to population aging require the implementation of tools that provide care for seniors and secure social benefits for this purpose [5]. In 2020, West Pomeranian consisted of 113 municipalities, which belonged to 21 counties, including 18 land counties and 3 city counties. The voivodeship covers an area of 22,905 km² (2 290 472 ha), which constitutes 7.3% of Poland's area. The population of West Pomeranian self-government, as of December 31, 2020, amounted to 1,688,047 and was lower than in 2019 by 8,146 people. The population density of West Pomeranian self-government was 74 people per km². It was the fourth lowest value in the country. The urban centers with the largest population in the region are Szczecin—398.3 thousand inhabitants, Koszalin 106.2 thousand, Stargard 67.6 thousand, Kołobrzeg 46.2 thousand, Świnoujście 40.9 thousand and Szczecinek 39.8 thousand. Over 2010–2020, the population of the above-mentioned cities and towns decreased [6].

The COVID-19 pandemic which broke out in March 2020 had a global dimension and was a threat to human health and life. It also brought serious socio-economic effects, the scale and extent of which was significant for the global, EU and Polish economies¹. On the basis of the available macro and microeconomic information, it may be concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic also had a negative impact on the situation of Western Pomerania. In 2020, West Pomerania ranked 11th in the

¹ The COVID-19 pandemic was a major shock to the global and EU economies. Regardless of the mitigation measures taken at EU and national level, the EU economy experienced record-breaking declines. The decline in GDP in the entire European Union in 2020 was – according to estimates – 6.4%. It is estimated that the level of Poland's GDP was in fact lower by 2.8% compared to 2019, considering an increase of 4.5% in 2019. Despite the fact that the recession in Poland is one of the shallowest in the EU, it is accompanied by a high debt jump - the public finance sector deficit in Poland in 2020 amounted to 6.9% of GDP (against 0.7% of GDP in 2019), and public debt reached 57.5% of GDP (considering 45.6% of GDP in 2019), marking its highest level in the modern history of Poland.

country in terms of average employment (similar to 2010), while being ranked 6th in terms of average gross salary in a company—just like the previous year (the highest average gross salary per company was also earned in Masovian, Lower Silesian and Pomeranian self-government). At the end of 2020, the number of registered unemployed in employment offices in the West Pomeranian self-government reached the value of 52,000 people and was higher than in the previous year by 24.5% [7]. The self-government unemployment rate (8.3%) compared to other voivodeships placed West Pomerania in the 12th position in 2020. This influenced the decision of the local self-government authorities' decision to reorient and modify West Pomeranian self-government activity. The main focus was reducing and minimizing the negative impact of the pandemic on the regional economy and the labor market, while simultaneously strengthening the health security of residents.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation in the labor market was a symptom of the deteriorating development indices of the provincial economy [8]. According to the data from the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy, the registered unemployment rate in Poland increased to 6.2% by the end of December 2020. In Western Pomerania, the unemployment rate was 8.3% and was 1.5 percentage points higher than at the end of 2019. The unemployment rate increased in all voivodeships, but it was the highest in West Pomerania. Fifty-two thousand people (registered unemployed) remained jobless in the voivodeship, which means an increase of over 8 thousand people compared to the end of 2019 [9]. Presenting solutions during crises as part of strategic economic management allows you to develop optimal strategies that will protect the economic stability of basic economic entities [10]. Presenting solutions during crises as part of strategic economic management allows you to develop optimal strategies that will protect the economic stability of basic economic entities. Case studies of this type allow for an appropriate classification of available solutions for knowledge management in practice [11,12].

A distinctive feature of West Pomeranian self-government is that it is a region heavily used for tourism, which corresponds to its attractiveness compared to the rest of the country. The restrictions and freezes introduced at the national level, often imposed overnight, affected the stability of smaller companies operating in the service sector and slowed down the development of tourism in Poland, and thus in West Pomeranian self-government. This primarily led to a decrease in the number of tourists visiting Western Pomerania. There was an almost 35% decrease in the number of people using accommodation services compared to 2019, which affected mainly the smallest service companies. The broadly understood tourism industry (hotels and health spas) was in the worst situation. In the coastal municipalities of the voivodeship approx. 80% of the local GDP is generated by the tourism sector. Most companies in coastal locations directly or indirectly operates in the tourism industry. In addition to accommodation facilities (including hotels, health spas, agritourism), restaurants, travel agencies, carriers, such companies operate as markets, shops, shopping centers, cultural and entertainment facilities, cosmetic and rehabilitation services. The scale of the negative impact of the pandemic and introduced restrictions on economic activity is illustrated by the decrease in the number of business entities in the voivodeship in 2020. The highest number of companies closed their activities in coastal municipalities—where tourism had been the dominant source of development until then. In 2020, in the Rewal and Mielno municipalities, 321 and 328 business entities were dissolved respectively, which is more than in Szczecin (loss of 301 entities). The negative impact of the pandemic on the economic condition of coastal municipalities is even more visible when the decrease in the number of business entities is compared to the number of inhabitants of a given municipality. For such an indicator, which is a measure of how the crisis is perceived by the inhabitants of a given municipality, the first 11 municipalities with the highest drop in the number of businesses are coastal municipalities, with the most dramatic situation occurring again in the Rewal and Mielno communes, where a decrease in the number of business entities per 1000 inhabitants was recorded, with values of 83 and 69, respectively. In the municipalities not located by the sea, this indicator is much more favourable [11,13].

In West Pomeranian self-government, the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the transport sector (in particular truck transport). The specificity of this industry is the result of the geographical location of the region, the proximity of the border with the

Federal Republic of Germany, and the location by the main transport routes (A6 motorway, S6 expressway, Świnoujście seaport). These factors cause transport bases, and logistics center providing international transport services, in particular from Western Europe, to be located in Western Pomerania. According to various sources, West Pomeranian companies carried out 50% fewer transport runs in 2020 than before the outbreak of the pandemic. These declining figures concern not only cargo transport. The companies providing passenger transport suffered even more (decrease to 90%), affecting not only those offering tourist transport. Many passenger carriers are already on the verge of bankruptcy – unlike in the case of cargo transport, where in some cases it is possible to adjust the operations to the changed situation, in passenger transport there are no such possibilities, or they are strongly limited [14].

Another sector in West Pomeranian self-government, which was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, is the industrial companies operating on international markets, in particular those cooperating with partners from Germany and the Scandinavian countries [15]. In this sector, there occurred a situation of resignation or discontinuation of orders, which was also linked to difficulties in logistics services for EU customers and the interruption of supply chains. This situation was caused by EU countries introducing restrictions on the movement of people across the EU's internal borders. This resulted in the resignation or limitation of the delivery of constructions and assemblies on EU markets, difficulties in the work of assembly teams abroad, and difficulties with transport to the countries where services were provided. A small group of companies used the prior thriving economy well. In this industry's regional context, the demand slump was clearly visible. The presented data show the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the regional economy of Western Pomerania in 2020, especially on regional specializations—the market of tourism and transport services as well as the sector of companies cooperating with entities from the European Union.

3. Results—the Use of the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package in the Fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was the greatest health challenge in the history of West Pomeranian self-government since its creation in 1998. At the beginning the most important task of the Executive Board of West Pomeranian self-government was to conduct a multidimensional analysis of the situation and implement measures allowing for an effective response to the threat to the health and life of the inhabitants of the region, as well as to minimize the economic crisis in Western Pomerania. On 12 March 2020, the West Pomeranian self-government Marshal appointed a Team for the coordination of measures related to the prevention and counteraction of COVID-19 in the area of competence of the local self-government of West Pomeranian self-government. The task of the team was to coordinate the work of the office, its subordinate units, and units supervised by it in the situation of an epidemiological crisis, as well as to report to the Voivodeship Executive Board on the situation and needs in this regard on an ongoing basis [16].

The Team also analyzed the functioning of the units in terms of personnel resources (redundancies, diseases including COVID-19, provision of health care services, regional rail passenger transport, and Szczecin—Goleniów airport). The Team presented the Voivodeship Marshal with data on the human resources situation daily and weekly. Recommendations for the system of remote and rotational work, which was intended to minimize COVID-19 outbreaks in the Marshal's Office and organizational units of the West Pomeranian self-government, were developed as well. As part of the Team's operations, videoconferences of the Voivodeship Executive Board with the directors of the Office's organizational units and the management staff of entities participating in minimizing the effects of COVID-19 were held. The information activities included video conferences with the media, during which challenges, needs, and possibilities of support for the region were presented after being developed by the Voivodeship Self-Government [17].

The flexibility in the rules introduced by the European Commission for the use of Cohesion Policy funds and introducing the possibility of redirecting them to emergency assistance in combating the COVID-19 pandemic made it easier and more effective for the local government of the

Western Pomeranian self-government, which manages European Union funds at the regional level through the Regional Operational Programme of the Western Pomeranian self-government (ROP PV), to take supporting and complementary measures for the ongoing projects—at the government-level in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the socio-economic situation in Poland [18]. National legislation allowing for the expenditure of funds at the level of local self-governments was based on the provisions of the act on specific solutions related to the prevention, counteracting and eradicating COVID-19, other infectious diseases and crisis situations caused by them [19]. This also allowed for directing the funds from the Regional Operational Programme of the Western Pomeranian self-government to where they were urgently needed and where they could be used effectively and efficiently to fight the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life and health of the region's inhabitants and to save the regional economy of Western Pomerania.

The West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package was effective tool of the Western Pomeranian self-government Executive Board, used to eradicate and counteract the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The introduction of WAP was prepared with a view to undertaking systemic, but also point-based measures aimed to save and protect regional health care, entrepreneurs, the labour market, but also to use the existing social capital of non-governmental organizations involved in the measures reducing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic [20]. The areas of support under the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package consisted of four pillars:

1. Health care (hospitals, medical staff, research, science);
2. Entrepreneurs (financial assistance packages);
3. Social care (in particular, activities and projects of the Regional Centre for Social Policy (known as ROPS in Polish, henceforth referred to as RCSP) and the Voivodeship Labour Office (known as WUP in Polish, henceforth referred to as VLO) in Szczecin);
4. Non-governmental organisations (measures and projects of the VLO and the Voivodeship Marshal's Programme "Społecznik" (meaning "involved citizen")—special edition "Na RATUNEK" (meaning "to the rescue").



Figure 1. Support pillars under the West Pomeranian Support Packages (WAP). Source: Own study.

The implementation of the first measures under the program began at the turn of March and April 2020 in response to the first wave of the pandemic in Poland. Responding to the challenges resulting from the prolonged state of the epidemic, the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package supplied further aid packages throughout 2020. The implementation of the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package took place with the participation of both the resources of the voivodeship's local self-government and external funds, including, primarily, the funds from the ROP PV remaining at the

disposal of the Voivodeship Executive Board. The scale of involving the regional program funds allocated for this purpose in 2020 is estimated at over PLN 444 million [21]. Under the first pillar of WAP, the West Pomeranian health care package was launched first. Its measures focused primarily on strengthening healthcare institutions in West Pomerania. At that time, West Pomeranian self-government had 44 hospitals and almost 41 hospital beds per every 10,000 inhabitants. Making funds available in the scope of the first pillar of WAP allowed for taking strategic actions and taking into account the investment and equipment needs, as well as the diagnosis and prevention of COVID-19 [22]:

1. upgrading nearly 30 medical facilities (voivodeship, county, clinical and departmental hospitals) with the necessary equipment and personal protective equipment, e.g., life-support machines, cardiac monitors, pumps, CT scanners, beds, and the purchase of 4 new ambulances by the Voivodeship Emergency Ambulance Station—for about PLN 60 million;
2. launching the investment to construct a new building for isolation wards of the Provincial Hospital at Arkońska Street in Szczecin for PLN 68 million (85% of the investment co-funded by the EU), which will strengthen the resilience of the regional healthcare system to threats similar to the COVID-19 pandemic in the coming years;
3. allocating PLN 15 million for the launch of the West Pomeranian Programme of Monitoring and Prevention of the Coronavirus Epidemic, thanks to which over 50,000 inhabitants of Western Pomerania underwent screening tests for the presence of COVID-19;
4. involving West Pomeranian scientists in fighting the pandemic by preparing new technological solutions for use by the medical, rescue, and sanitary services as part of the Socially Responsible Protolab project—for almost PLN 9 million; in the first component of the project implemented in 2020, West Pomeranian universities could apply for grants for research teams in the amount of up to PLN 150,000 and for a 3 month period of research and development work.

In 2020, the health care policy was strongly determined by the epidemic situation in West Pomeranian self-government. The potential of the voivodeship's local government and health care institutions and external funding (mainly ROP PV funds) and external funding (mainly ROP PV funds) were used effectively. This resulted in providing support for health care institutions in terms of refitting them with equipment, disinfection measures, personal protection equipment, and devices for diagnosis and treatment in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. The fight against the pandemic required replenishing existing deficiencies, improving the conditions for the provision of health services, maintaining a stable medical rescue system, and developing healthcare e-counseling systems in an urgent manner. Decisions on urgent and often necessary investment projects were made. They included modernization, renovation, construction, and expansion of health care institutions' medical and technical infrastructure, as well as the purchase of medical equipment. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, measures concerning the organization and adaptation of the equipment of healthcare institutions to new requirements and needs were employed. Voivodeship local self-governments were the first in Poland to purchase life-saving equipment, disinfection measures, personal protective equipment, and additional devices for diagnosing and treating and devices for diagnosing and treating COVID-19 patients. In West Pomeranian self-government, a crisis package (with a large share of EU funds under ROP PV) was purchased for hospitals fighting the pandemic. Funds were allocated for buying CT scanners, life-support machines, ambulances, hospital beds, critical care beds, cardiac monitors, devices testing the coronavirus, tests, agents, oxygen therapy, and ECMO machines, without forgetting about the personnel. Many of these funds were allocated to healthcare institutions as special allowances for the salaries of the staff attending COVID-19 patients. PLN 70 million was spent on all healthcare institutions indicated by the National Health Fund in the region [12,23].

The "West Pomeranian Programme of Monitoring and Prevention of the SARS-CoV-2 Coronavirus Epidemic and COVID-19 Disease" was unique in Poland (the only regional one). Its preparation and implementation proceeded swiftly—as early as November 2020—and the research was carried out starting in April 2021. The study consisted in conducting serological and molecular tests of people of working age in order to increase their availability for COVID-19 testing and determine population immunity among the inhabitants of the voivodeship. By the end of 2020, the

test results indicated the detection of infection in almost 500 individuals. The survey was free for the residents of West Pomeranian self-government of working age—women aged 18 to 59 and men aged 18 to 64 (the year of birth was the determinant). Large employers, e.g., administration, uniformed services, higher education, and private employers often reported interest in participating in the survey. During the program implementation—on account of the financial possibilities and great interest from the inhabitants of West Pomeranian self-government- the number of tests was increased by more than 6 thousand. From November 2020 to the end of April 2021, serological tests were performed for 56,086 people. The tests were performed by five specialized hospitals: Independent Public Voivodeship Hospital in Szczecin, Independent Public Specialist Health Care Establishment “ZDROJE” in Szczecin, Voivodeship Hospital in Koszalin, Specialist Unit for Tuberculosis and Lung Diseases Syndrome in Koszalin, and Independent Public Health Care Establishments Complex in Gryfice. Moreover, in order to enable the residents of smaller towns to participate in the programme, hospitals organized many mobile testing points, including Myślibórz, Barlinek, Łobza, Gryfino, Pyrzyce or Kołobrzeg [20]. Furthermore, additional purchases were also made as a part of this project:

1. the purchase of personal protective equipment and disinfection agents necessary to ensure the epidemiological safety of the personnel participating in the tests and of patients with potential SARS-Cov-2 infection;
2. the purchase of medical equipment required by the health care institutions participating in the Programme to effectively combat COVID-19: respirators, intubation kits, separation tents and medical tents, transport isolation chambers, defibrillators with equipment, etc.;
3. retrofitting of 10 laboratories;
4. purchase of 4 devices for coronavirus assay [22,25]

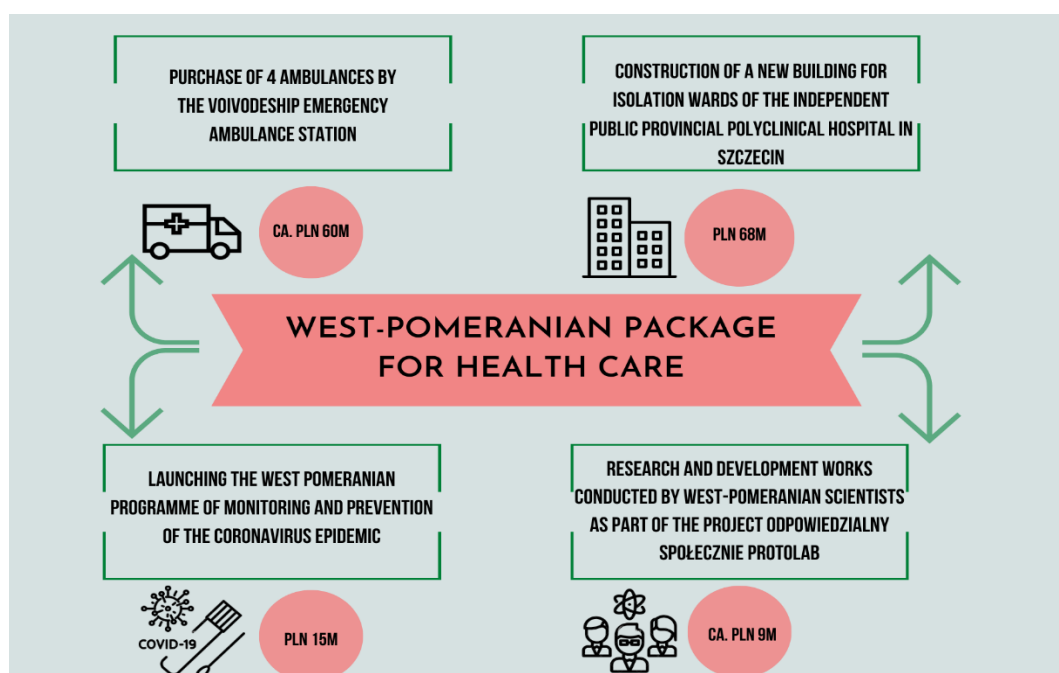


Figure 2. West Pomeranian package for health care. Source: Own study.

The second pillar of the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package was comprehensive assistance for entrepreneurs—the Package for West Pomeranian business, which was mainly aimed at supporting the labor market, protecting workplaces, and maintaining the accounting liquidity of West Pomeranian companies. The forms of support prepared for entrepreneurs were adapted to the results of monitoring and analysis of the situation the data provided by the entrepreneurs themselves. This data indicated that in the case of the companies owned or controlled by the West Pomeranian self-government, the health resorts had sufficient funds to keep functioning for about two to three months, whereas the companies providing services to the tourism industry might survive for no more than four months. The scale of the problem at the regional level indicated the threat of insolvency

and possible bankruptcy of companies. The regional economy of Western Pomerania faced problems of the lack of rapid and favorable changes in regulations, which were within the competence of the government, e.g., ZUS (the Social Insurance Institution) contributions, but also problems with employing foreigners in the service and transport sectors. The main implementers of this WAP pillar were the Voivodeship Labour Office in Szczecin and the Regional Development Agencies in Szczecin and Koszalin [26].

Making funds available as part of the second WAP pillar allowed for conducting activities in areas such as the protection of workplaces. For this purpose, PLN 74 million was allocated—to subsidize payments to the employees of businesses and non-governmental organizations. In addition, PLN 100 million from the Regional Operational Program for West Pomeranian self-government was also allocated to the so-called working capital in West Pomeranian businesses. The aim was to maintain their financial liquidity during the pandemic conditions, partly through non-repayable grants (PLN 50 million) under the West Pomeranian Grant Package, partly through liquidity loans granted on very favorable terms under the Jeremie 2 Initiative (PLN 50 million), made available by financial intermediaries operating in the voivodeship. Another form of support for businesses, in the wake of the pandemic, was also the allocation of PLN 50 million for new investment competitions for entrepreneurs—at the end of 2020, a call for proposals was announced for industries matching the smart specializations of the region; from the end of December 2020 to the beginning of March 2021 applications were accepted for a competition intended for the tourism industry. In addition, in 2020, nearly PLN 40 million was allocated from the resources of the Voivodeship under the West Pomeranian Development Fund (managing funds within the framework of returned resources—financial instruments implemented from the funds of the ROP PV 2007-2013) to loans and liquidity sureties for entrepreneurs [24]. The authority managing the Regional Operational Programme—the Voivodeship Marshal's Office of West Pomeranian self-government also introduced the so-called flexibility package for beneficiaries of ROP PV. It was a form of assistance for the entities implementing projects, the implementation of which was hampered or threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Extension of deadlines, a procedure of consent for non-fulfillment of some indicators, or facilitation of issues related to the settlement of advances and repayment of loan installments were introduced.

An important element of the labor market and workplace protection was the measures undertaken by the Voivodeship Labour Office in Szczecin using the European Social Fund from April 2020 (launch of WAP) to July 2021. The extension of this entrepreneur support process was influenced by objective factors related to the occurrence of the subsequent waves of the pandemic in Poland at the turn of 2020 and 2021. In the case of procurement projects, the factor influencing the problems with the implementation of co-financed projects was the lack of goods, often highly specialized and difficult to access, as well as interrupted supply chains from countries outside the EU (mainly China). The funds under non-competitive projects of the County Labour Offices (CLO) were allocated to co-finance the costs of remuneration for the staff employed by entrepreneurs, self-employed persons, and non-governmental organizations. The co-financing of remuneration for employees was granted for a period not exceeding 3 months, and its amount depended on the recorded decrease in turnover. In accordance with the demand for funds reported by CLO, in the scope of measures related to counteracting the effects of COVID-19 in West Pomeranian self-government, a total of PLN 136,993,608.15 was assigned for this purpose as part of funds from the European Social Fund, including the amount of PLN 62,307,811.05 under the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development and PLN 74,685,797.10 under the ROP PV [25].

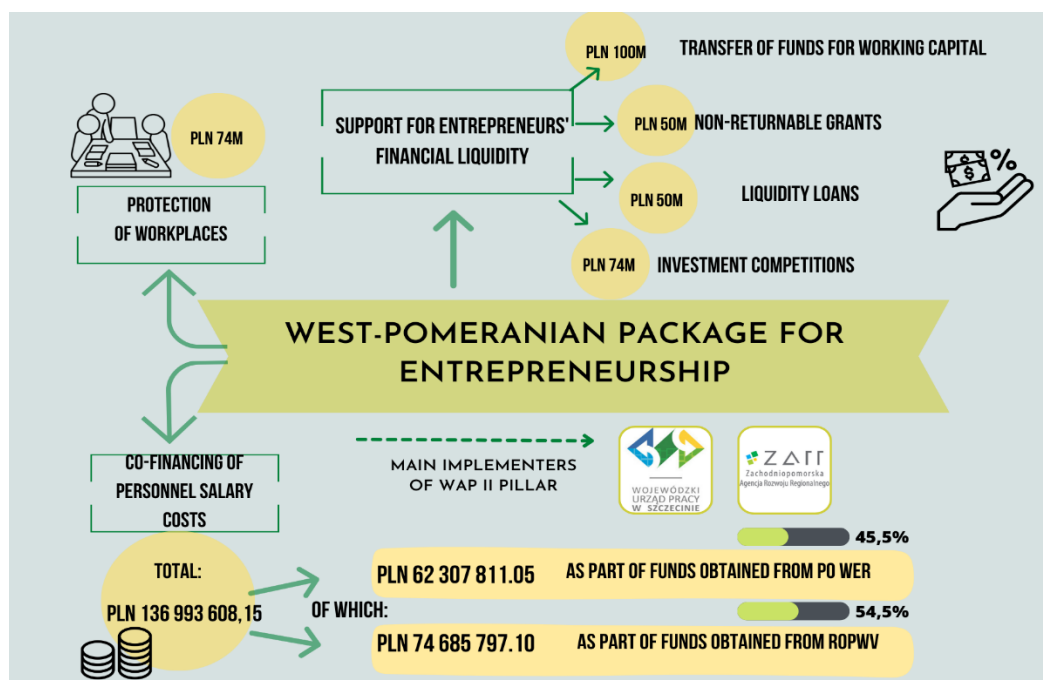


Figure 3. West Pomeranian package for entrepreneurs. Source: Own study.

The next, third pillar of the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package concerned social assistance during the COVID-19 outbreak implemented at the level of local self-governments (municipalities and counties) and the activity of third-sector organizations. In practice, the support area was implemented by the Voivodeship Labour Office in Szczecin and the Regional Centre for Social Policy, functioning at the Voivodeship Marshal's Office of West Pomeranian self-government and the Department of Social Cooperation of the Voivodeship Marshal's Office. It was a special support system under the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package for people and social groups at risk of exclusion as a result of the pandemic, which allowed for the use of already implemented projects and support instruments. RCSP encouraged the use of a mobile application developed for the "Dobre Wsparcie" (Good Support) program. This cooperation tool for non-governmental organizations allowed for improving the supply of medicines or food for the elderly, people with disabilities or persons living alone. The Regional Centre for Social Policy also carried out an action worth PLN 200,000 related to the support of single, disabled and elderly people in a difficult life situation, consisting in preparing and distributing at least 4,000 packages and providing psychologists on-call on-call duties [26].

Under the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development for 2014-2020, under Action 2.8 Development of social services provided in the local environment, financed from the state budget and EU funds, computers with software, audio-visual equipment, personal protective equipment, and disinfectants were purchased, and quarantine facilities for children staying at the Regional Care and Therapeutic Facility in Dębno were created. In the area of preventive mental health protection, as part of the counteracting COVID-19, a total amount of PLN 23,000 was donated to the public action "Motywacja dla zdrowia" i "Motywacja dla zdrowia 2" (Motivation for health and Motivation for health 2) addressed to people exposed to the impact of a stressor, which is pandemic, who experienced the so-called pandemic acute stress disorder. The project "Pomorze Zachodnie—Bezpieczna Edukacja" (West Pomerania—Safe Education) co-financed by the European Union was also implemented. The measures financed under the awarded grants included the costs of purchasing personal protective equipment, cleaning and disinfection equipment, as well as other expenses related to the fight against COVID-19, as required by law. The grant recipients were local self-government units. The funds allocated for social policy purposes amounted to over PLN 25 million. The largest group of beneficiaries of the programs were municipalities and counties in the voivodeship, which implemented activities in the area of preparing schools and other educational

institutions for functioning in epidemic conditions. The result of the actions undertaken by RCSP are recommendations regarding post-covid measures, which indicate two main areas of support: provision of psychological support for those in need during the COVID-19 pandemic and after its abatement and rehabilitation of people suffering from disease complications caused by COVID-19.

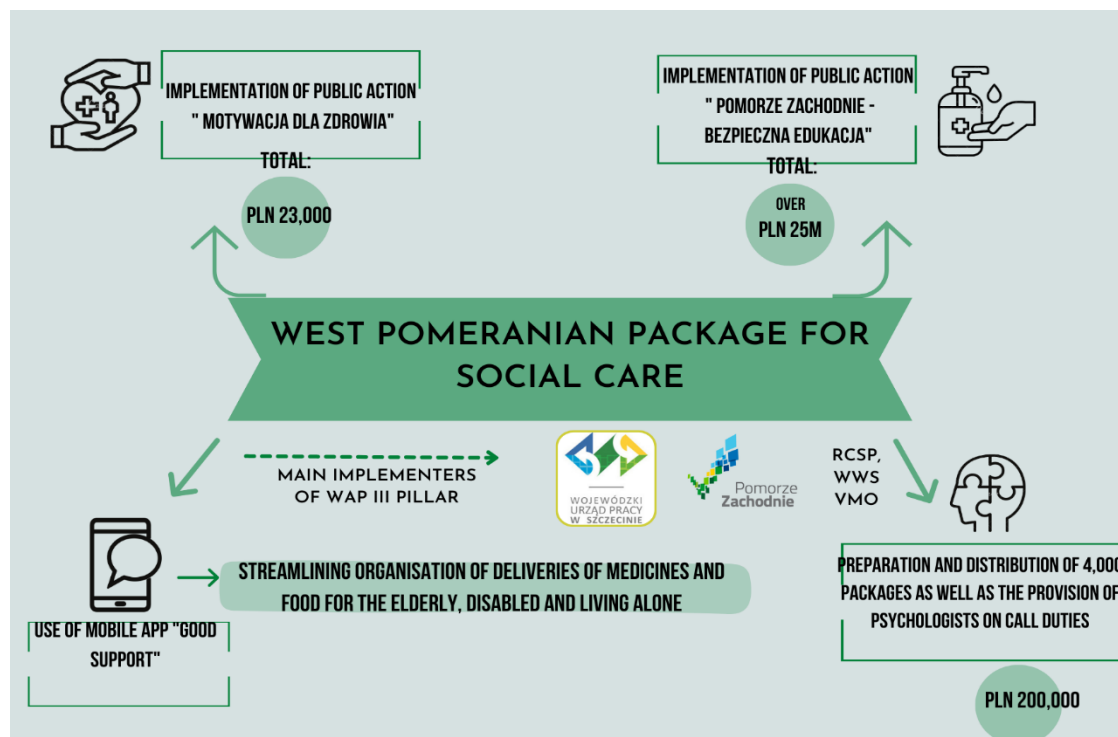


Figure 4. West Pomeranian package for social care. Source: Own study.

The last, fourth pillar of the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package was intended to support non-governmental organizations operating in the field of security and rescue. The support for non-governmental entities involved in the fight against COVID-19 was provided through targeted grants, as well as the Marshal's Programme "Społecznik" (Involved Citizen), under which a special edition of "Na RATUNEK" (To the rescue) was launched. Additional financial support for entities performing rescue tasks and participating in reducing the effects of COVID-19 was implemented by the VLO in Szczecin. The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented implementation difficulties for non-governmental organizations as implementers of public tasks and local government entities awarding grants. The beneficiaries of public grants had to operate in unfamiliar conditions and often modify their current methods of handling matters, looking for solutions to operate effectively during COVID-19. The voivodeship self-government and local authorities with the cooperation of public services often supported these activities organisationally and financially, e.g., through aid actions, online training, and measures to provide psychological support. All the parties demonstrated a flexible approach, an ability to cooperate, and a concern for the common good. As reality has shown, it was thanks to local NGOs such as volunteer fire brigades, housewives' clubs, associations, and foundations, as well as grassroots initiatives by residents and volunteers, that was possible to respond to the needs on an ongoing basis and carry out actions in a safe manner [27].

Finding solutions and cooperation were mainly possible thanks to the so-called Anti-Crisis Shield 1.0 provisions. (Act of 2 March 2020 on special solutions related to the prevention, counteracting, and combating of COVID-19, other infectious diseases, and emergencies caused by them and certain other acts), and the Shield 2.0. (Act of 16 April 2020 on special support instruments in connection with the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus—the currently applicable act) [19]. The coronavirus pandemic forced taking steps that allowed certain tasks to be carried out, such as: postponing the deadline for implementing an action, changing the way an action is carried out to an online or hybrid formula, implementing an action in a modified scope, cooperation conducted in

other modes [28]. The Voivodeship Marshal's Office of West Pomeranian self-government launched funding in the amount of PLN 200,000 for the task of purchasing personal protective equipment as well as cleaning and hygiene products necessary for the Volunteer Fire Brigade (known as OSP in Polish, henceforth referred to as VFB) to provide direct assistance to people remaining in their homes or centers due to quarantine on account of the risk of COVID-19 infection and other tasks performed by VFB units as part of counteracting the spread of the disease.

In the summer of 2020, a special call for proposals was announced under the title of Program Społecznik "Na Ratunek" (Involved Citizen "To the rescue") with a total amount of support in the amount of PLN 280,000.00 As many as 276 applications with non-governmental organizations were submitted, of which 70 were qualified for co-financing. As part of this program, 15 West Pomeranian NGOs with a rescue profile—VFB units—received support from the local government of West Pomeranian self-government. The aim was to ensure the best protection of the inhabitants of the voivodeship against the threats related to Covid-19. This included information activities, psychological support, conducting a webinar on safe behaviors during the time of the pandemic, but also conducting disinfection of public spaces such as bus stops, playgrounds and civic buildings. The Department of Social Cooperation of the Voivodeship Marshal's Office of West Pomeranian self-government allocated the amount of PLN 80,000 for two tasks, which consisted in supplying personal protective equipment and disinfectants to organizations cooperating with volunteers at the regional level.

Voivodeship Labour Office in Szczecin as part of the European Social Fund in OSI VII. Action 7.7 Implementation of early detection and rehabilitation programs for children with disabilities and at risk of disability, and to take action related to the fight against and prevention of COVID-19, conducted extraordinary calls for proposals directed to rescue institutions of a regional nature which actively participated in the fight against COVID-19. Under this action, seven extraordinary calls were announced. 62 projects were selected for funding, for a total amount of PLN 93,836,195.54 (as of July 2021) [19]. The entity to which the extraordinary call for proposals was addressed was the Association of Voluntary Fire Brigades of West Pomeranian self-government. The allocation of funds amounted to PLN 2 million with the implementation of the action set for the period of February—December 2020. As part of the signed agreement, the equipment first went to the 104 VFB units which had been designated to fight COVID-19. This action had a voivodship-wide character and provided vigorous support to voluntary services within the framework of the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package [29]. The following equipment was purchased as part of the project:

- breathing apparatuses,
- powered backpack sprayers,
- ozone generator,
- inflatable tents,
- power generators.

Inflatable tents and power generators were used to set up field sampling points or emergency rooms. The purchased equipment and upgraded equipment for direct protection and disinfection were handed over to volunteer fire brigade units in West Pomeranian Voivodeship by the end of December 2020. Support was provided to 192 VFB units in West Pomeranian self-government.

The second rescue body with a regional scope to be supported under the ESF emergency funding for COVID-19 prevention was the Water Volunteer Rescue Service of West Pomeranian self-government. The allocation in this call amounted to PLN 1.5 million. The signed agreement envisaged the following measures:

- the purchase and distribution of personal protective equipment and kits, in particular to local authorities operating guarded bathing waters;
- the purchase of cleaning and disinfection products for bathing areas;
- the purchase of the necessary equipment for water rescue directly related to the fight against COVID-19, i.e.: personal protective equipment, disinfectants, disposable and reusable suits, screens, protective umbrellas, trailers for transporting victims, non-contact thermometers or other devices for measuring body temperature, etc.

It was assumed that the project would be completed in December 2020, but due to problems with the availability of specialized equipment, its implementation was extended to 2021. The project was aimed at increasing the level of safety in bathing areas in West Pomeranian self-government and enabling a proper response in connection with COVID-19 and broadly understood prevention in this scope [30]. Support was provided to 119 bathing sites managed by local self-governments and cooperating water rescue institutions, including in particular, Volunteer Water Rescue Service (VWRS) units in West Pomeranian self-government [22]. The actions of West Pomeranian self-government in 2020 led to the European Commission agreeing to secure financing for COVID-19 diagnostic equipment, healthcare products used in hospitals and the medical rescue system, and equipment for personal protection equipment as well as to maintain cleanliness and disinfection, in the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package. The materials and equipment purchased under the West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package were also transferred to a large extent to NGOs and local self-governments involved in aiding the inhabitants of the region during the outbreak of COVID-19.

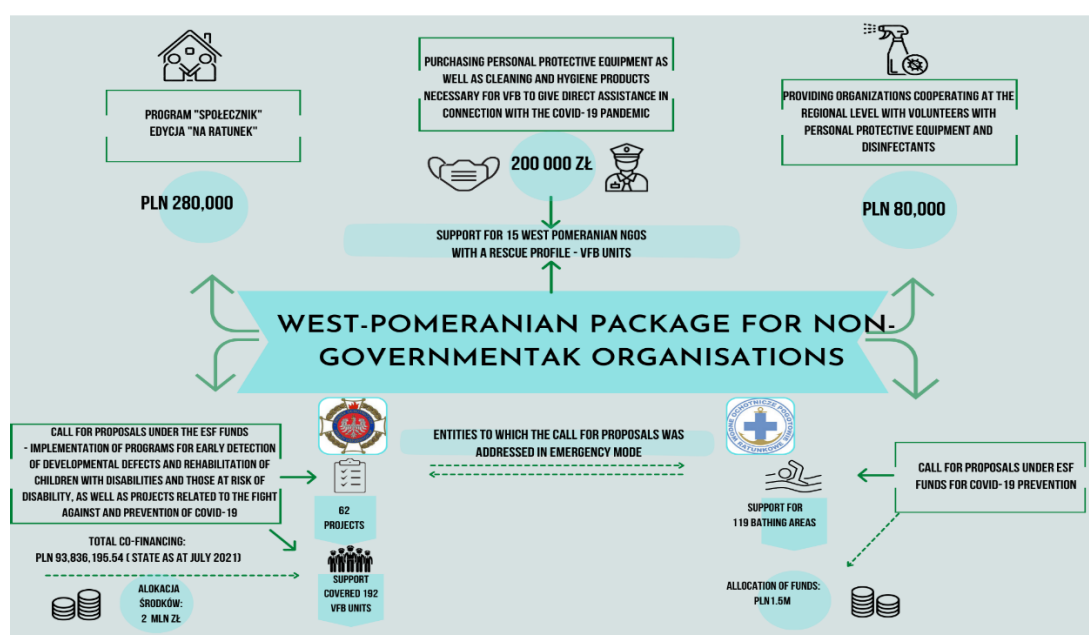


Figure 5. West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package for NGOs. Source: Own study.

4. Discussion & Conclusions

Despite the deterioration of the economic situation of West Pomeranian self-government during the COVID-19 pandemic, the local self-government authorities took a number of measures to counteract its negative effects, taking into account the regional specificities and needs of the inhabitants of West Pomeranian self-government. The high level of civic engagement on the part of West Pomerania's inhabitants was an important social element in counteracting the effects of COVID-19. In West Pomeranian self-government, there are seven thousand non-governmental organizations operating (associations, foundations, federations, sports associations, social cooperatives, social enterprises, non-profit companies) which actively participated in assistance and applied for funds under the anti-crisis package.

The support intended for the fight with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, launched under WAP, from the Regional Operational Programme of the Western Pomeranian self-government funds, supported 150 businesses under financial instruments, a total of 300 grants were implemented and 1,468 agreements were signed within the West Pomeranian Grant Package. In addition, as part of this program, life-saving equipment was purchased for the region, incl. 50 respirators, 4 fully equipped ambulances, additional 7,678 hospital beds were created for COVID-19 patients. The value of the funds allocated to the purchase of personal protection equipment amounted to a total of PLN 3,5 10,

338. An amount of PLN 8,452,274 was allocated to the purchase of tests for diagnosing COVID-19. In addition, 25 laboratories were equipped, and hospitals received support.

The designed and implemented West Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package turned out to be an effective tool of West Pomeranian self-government in the fight against COVID-19. The funds spent under the Western Pomeranian Anti-Crisis Package prove that it was the main and most important tool of the local self-government in fighting the pandemic, as evidenced by the implementation effects in the form of increased healthcare potential in the region, protected businesses and workplaces, etc. Its implementation in 2021 was continued in other areas of support, e.g., in the field of additional salary for hospital and ambulance staff or providing psychological support for students of West Pomeranian schools.

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