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## The City Under Pressure: How Do Local Elites Perceive the Challenges of Public Management?

### Abstract

*Objective:* The aim of the article is to assess and compare the perceptions of the most important socioeconomic challenges by the political elites of district towns in the Silesian Province.

*Research Design & Methods:* Based on surveys conducted among representatives of local governments, differences in the perception of issues such as unemployment, housing shortages, financial difficulties, the state of the natural environment, the decline of heavy industry, and challenges related to public management were analysed. Using the Kruskal-Wallis test and *post hoc* analysis, a statistically significant difference in the perception of these problems between cities was found.

*Findings:* The results suggest that these differences are due to the local historical, social, and economic conditions. Cities particularly affected by restructuring processes – such as Bytom, Świętochłowice, and Zabrze – feel the problems of unemployment and social exclusion more acutely, while more organisationally stable entities – such as Tychy and Bielsko-Biała – perceive management difficulties to a lesser extent. On the other hand, growing environmental awareness in some cities reflects changing local political priorities.

*Implications / Recommendations:* The findings of the study highlight the need for individualised urban development strategies and a flexible system of public support that takes into account the different needs and capabilities of individual local government units.

*Contribution / Value Added:* The article is part of a series of studies on public management and local development that emphasise the importance of elite participation in shaping effective responses to contemporary urban challenges.

*Keywords:* public management, political elites, cities with county rights, Silesian Province

*Article classification:* research article

*JEL classification:* H83, R58, D73, H70

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## Introduction

Contemporary cities face a number of socioeconomic challenges that require effective public management. Problems such as unemployment, housing shortages, the financial difficulties of local governments, environmental degradation, and the effects of the decline of heavy industry affect the quality of life of residents and the development of local communities. Local political elites play a key role in this context, as their decisions shape urban policy and set management priorities.

The aim of this article is to analyse how local political elites perceive the main socioeconomic problems of cities and to assess whether the perception of these problems differs across cities. The study used a diagnostic survey in which the respondents assessed the prevalence of selected problems. The results were statistically analysed using the Kruskal-Wallis test.

These considerations fit into the broader context of public management, which requires not only effective identification of problems, but also appropriate remedies. Understanding how local political elites perceive urban challenges can provide valuable insights for shaping public policy and urban development strategies in the future.

The Silesian region has been struggling with extremely complex socioeconomic problems for years due to its historical significance as a centre of heavy industry. The restructuring processes and changes in the global economy that began in the 1990s led to the closure of many industrial plants, resulting in increased unemployment, economic migration, and a deterioration in the financial situation of cities. At the same time, as one of the most important urban centres in Poland, Silesia faces challenges related to urban space management, environmental protection, and energy transition.

In this context, it is crucial to understand how local political elites perceive these challenges and prioritise them in the city management process. It is they who shape development strategies, make investment decisions, and implement social policy. The study analyses the perception of key urban issues by political elites in order to assess whether there are differences in their perceptions in various cities in the region.

Conducting this study is particularly important in the context of Silesia, as the region requires well-thought-out and effective public management policies. The economic and environmental transformation facing Silesian cities requires not only investment, but also conscious policy-planning and strategic decisions based on real social needs. The results of the study can provide valuable information for the development of urban policy and better adaptation of local government actions to the real challenges facing Silesian cities.

Research on the perception of socioeconomic problems by political elites is extremely important for several reasons. The most important ones include:

- a. Influence on policy-making.** Political elites play a key role in the management of cities and regions. They make decisions on public policy, investment, and reform. If they fail to recognise key problems or misinterpret them, they may make inappropriate decisions that do not respond to real social and economic needs.
- b. Setting urban policy priorities.** Different social groups may perceive the same issues in different ways. Politicians are often guided by their own experience, party interests, or voter expectations. By analysing their perceptions, it is possible to assess whether they are actually addressing the most important social challenges or focusing on secondary issues.
- c. Contributing to improving the effectiveness of city management.** Knowledge of how political elites perceive socioeconomic problems allows for the identification of possible discrepancies

between the reality and their assessment of the situation. This can lead to adjustments in city management strategies, better budget planning, and more appropriate policies.

- d. **Helping to diagnose obstacles to reform.** Sometimes socioeconomic problems are well known but are not addressed due to bureaucracy, the lack of resources, or political reluctance. Research on elite perceptions can help identify obstacles to effective reform and ways to overcome them.
- e. This type of research allows us to see **whether perceptions of problems differ depending on local conditions**, such as economic structure, demographics, or the level of development. This can lead to more tailored and effective development strategies for a particular city or region.
- f. **Strengthening public trust in government.** When the public sees that the authorities identify real problems and respond to them, their trust in public institutions increases. On the other hand, ignoring key issues can lead to public frustration, a rise in populism, and reluctance to participate in political life.
- g. **Help focus policy on long-term challenges.** Issues such as industrial restructuring, energy transition, and population ageing require long-term planning. If political elites focus primarily on short-term electoral goals, they may neglect issues that are critical to the future of the cities.

Research into how political elites perceive socioeconomic issues provides valuable information for both academics and policymakers. It helps to assess whether politicians are truly aware of key challenges and whether the strategies they adopt are appropriate to the situation. This, in turn, can lead to more effective urban policy and better city management. However, the most recent research on the political elites of Silesia was conducted in 1992 by Piotr Dobrowolski's team.<sup>1</sup>

## Silesia as a model of a just transition – challenges

As one of the last significant mining regions in the European Union, Silesia has a unique opportunity to become a model example of successful economic transformation. The region, which for decades has based its economy on coal, now has the opportunity to transition to a modern development model based on innovation and sustainable industry. To achieve this, a clear vision and bold strategic decisions are needed to ensure a just transition for residents (WWF Polska, n.d.).

Strategic documents for the Silesian Province, such as the Silesian Province Development Strategy “Silesia 2030 – Green Silesia” and the Action Plans for Regional Transformation, point to the difficult socioeconomic situation of the Silesian Province (Stowarzyszenie Gmin Górniczych w Polsce, 2020). Among the most significant problems identified are the strong depopulation processes in the province. According to forecasts by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), by 2050 the population of the Silesian Province will decrease by 18.8%, i.e. by 850,000 people compared to 2018 (Stowarzyszenie Gmin Górniczych w Polsce, 2020). Depopulation is associated with negative natural growth and negative net migration. Depopulation has been a characteristic feature of the region since its creation in 1999 (Stowarzyszenie Gmin Górniczych w Polsce, 2020). Over the course of a decade, the population has fallen by more than 140,000, and the forecasts for the coming years are even more worrying – by 2035, the region may lose almost 385,000 inhabitants, and by 2050 – more than 800,000 (Regional Centre for Social Policy of the Silesian Province, 2022). This process particularly affects cities such as Sosnowiec, Częstochowa, and Bytom, and is most visible in cities with county rights and urban municipalities (Regional Centre for Social

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<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the article does not include a section devoted to the current state of research in the context of Silesian political elites.

Policy of the Silesian Province, 2022). This process is further exacerbated by urban depopulation and suburbanisation.

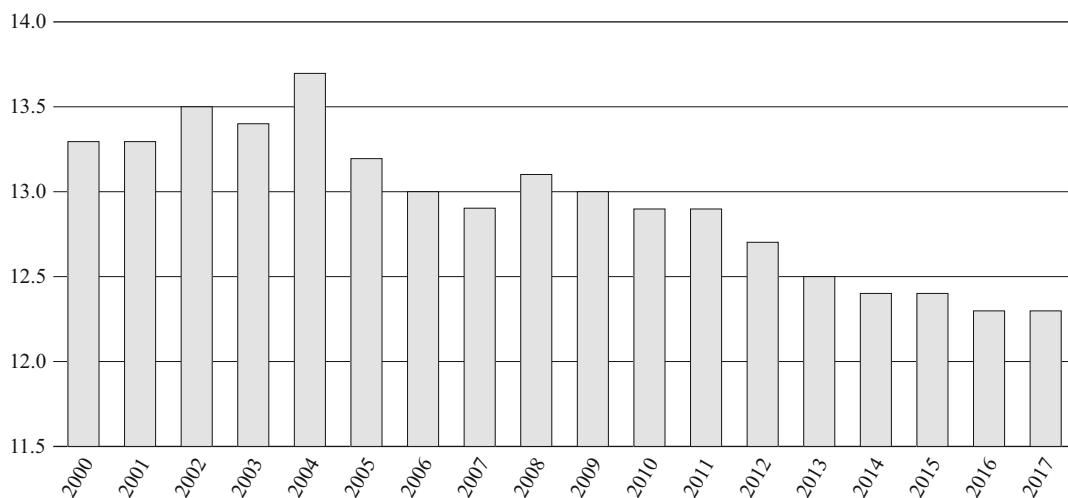
The ageing of the population poses a serious demographic challenge for the Silesian Province. For many years, there has been a decline in the number of people of pre-working and working age, accompanied by an increase in the number of older people.

A report by the Regional Centre for Social Policy of the Silesian Province shows that children and young people (aged 0–17) accounted for only 17.2% of the region’s population in 2020, which is below the national average. Although there was a slight increase in this group between 2017 and 2019, this was probably the result of pro-family programmes rather than a lasting change in the trend. It is projected that by 2035, the number of young people will continue to decline by more than 22% (Regional Centre for Social Policy of the Silesian Province, 2022).

Similarly, the working-age population has fallen by 12% over the last decade and is expected to fall by a further 5% by 2035. In contrast, the number of residents of post-working age is steadily increasing – by over 30% between 2010 and 2020 – and is expected to continue growing until 2035. This points to a deepening process of population ageing, which may pose a challenge for the regional labour market, health care system, and social policy in the future (Regional Centre for Social Policy of the Silesian Province, 2022).

Negative natural growth is one of the biggest challenges facing the Silesian Province. In 2020, the number of deaths will significantly exceed the number of births – the balance will be almost –22,000, which will give a rate of –4.86 per 1,000 inhabitants, which is worse than the national average (Regional Centre for Social Policy of the Silesian Province, 2022). There was a temporary improvement between 2005 and 2010. However, since then, the trend has reversed and the situation has deteriorated. Particularly worrying are the subregions of Sosnowiec, Częstochowa, and Katowice, where birth rates are the lowest. Cities with county rights perform worse than rural counties (Regional Centre for Social Policy of the Silesian Province, 2022).

A report prepared for the city of Ruda Śląska also points to the province’s declining share in gross domestic product (GDP).



**Figure 1.** Share of the Silesian Province’s GDP in the country’s GDP (%)

Source: Data from the Central Statistical Office; available at: [https://sggp.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/SLASKA-TRANSFORMACJA-D\\_druk.pdf](https://sggp.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/SLASKA-TRANSFORMACJA-D_druk.pdf) [accessed: 17.01.2024].

“The Silesian Province is also losing its advantage in terms of GDP per capita in relation to the national average (in 2004, GDP per capita in the region was over 11 percentage points higher than the national average, while in 2016 this advantage was only 3.6 percentage points). The difference between the Silesian Province and the Mazovian Province, the strongest in the country, is clearly increasing” (Zarząd Województwa Śląskiego, 2020). The decline in the region’s competitiveness is exacerbated by the unsatisfactory level of innovation in the economy. The development strategy recognises that this is due to the lack of cross-sectoral cooperation (business, science and education, the public sector) (Zarząd Województwa Śląskiego, 2020). The most recent Eurostat data indicates that the Silesian Province accounts for approximately 11.9% of Poland’s GDP. Another significant problem is the outflow of intellectual capital from the province.

The strategy also mentions the threats associated with uncontrolled spatial development, excessive expansion of investment areas at the expense of natural areas, and their use for residential and commercial purposes. The issue of land degradation and the need to counteract the effects of the destruction of post-industrial areas through reclamation and revitalisation also remains unresolved. One problem for the residents is the marginalisation of areas with poor transport infrastructure, which hinders their development (Zarząd Województwa Śląskiego, 2020).

The situation on the labour market remains relatively stable. In 2021, the unemployment rate in the region was 4.5%, which was better than the national average (Regional Centre for Social Policy of the Silesian Province, 2022). Nevertheless, almost half of the unemployed are facing long-term unemployment, which increases the risk of social exclusion and the need for social assistance. Unemployment was the third most common reason for applying for assistance in 2020, with over 22,000 families receiving assistance for this reason (Regional Centre for Social Policy of the Silesian Province, 2022).

### **Cities with county rights – the specificity of local government units**

The analysis of cities with county rights in the Silesian Province as a separate category of local government units is fully justified due to their specific administrative, economic, and social position in the structure of the region (Wierzbica, 2006). These cities, combining the functions of a municipality and a county, play a special role both as urban centres and as administrative units at the local level. However, their uniqueness stems not only from their administrative powers, but also from the challenges they face (Wierzbica, 2006). These cities function as both municipalities and counties, which entails a wider range of duties and responsibilities in areas such as secondary education, public transport, social care, and health care (Perz, 2023, pp. 78–88; Dylewski & Stasik, 2012, p. 52). This specificity requires a higher level of organisation and better resource management. Most cities with county rights in the Silesian region are industrial centres that have been the basis of the region’s economic development for decades (e.g. Katowice, Bytom, Ruda Śląska). Their economic potential, infrastructure, and central location continue to be of great importance for the functioning of the entire province. These cities have the largest number of inhabitants, including the elderly, the unemployed, and those at risk of social exclusion. They are also characterised by higher rates of depopulation, negative natural growth, and a deteriorating migration balance.

Demographic processes are much more intense in cities with county rights than in rural counties. Cities such as Bytom, Sosnowiec, and Świętochłowice are among the leaders in terms of population decline. These phenomena have serious consequences for the local labour market, education, and, in particular, health and social care.

Due to their dual role, the local governments of these cities must finance tasks that would otherwise be shared between two entities (the municipality and the county). This limits their budgetary flexibility and ability to invest in development (Dylewski & Stasik, 2012, p. 52). Recent studies do not question the role of county towns in the local government system, but they do highlight their growing inefficiency in performing public tasks, mainly due to excessive responsibilities, underfunding, legislative instability, and the lack of dialogue with the state administration (Cukier-Syguła, 2024). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the pre-existing disparities between large and small towns, exacerbating budgetary and organisational problems (see Gosek, 2023, pp. 71–88). The identified risks – including debt, dependence on external transfers, rising costs of public services, inefficient management, and demographic changes – destabilise the economic security of these entities. As key players in local development, municipalities with county rights urgently need to adapt their financing model and strengthen their management mechanisms in order to effectively perform their functions in a dynamically changing environment (Gosek, 2023, pp. 99–101).

Cities with county rights in the Silesian Province deserve detailed analysis as a separate category of local government units due to their administrative importance, complex social situation, and growing developmental challenges. Their uniqueness stems not only from their legal status, but above all from the real problems they face, which require different management tools than those used for other units. Taking these specific characteristics into account is key to developing effective regional and social policy strategies.

## Method

The subject of the study is the differences in the assessment of selected socioeconomic and management problems (unemployment, housing deficit, financial difficulties, environmental degradation, effects of the decline of heavy industry) in cities with county rights in the Silesian Province. The subjects of the study (a group of respondents) are representatives of the political elite – councillors and executive authorities – selected on the basis of positional criteria. The term ‘political elite’ should be interpreted as “a group of people with a limited, stable composition, exerting a significant influence on political life, whose members have the same or similar interests in terms of access to power and other political spheres, and social ties based on them” (Wróbel, 1995, p. 16). The aim of this article is to assess and compare the perceptions of the most important socioeconomic challenges (such as unemployment, housing shortage, financial difficulties, the state of the natural environment, the decline of heavy industry, and public management problems) by the political elites of county towns in the Silesian Province.

This article presents the results of an empirical study conducted using the diagnostic survey method (Pilch & Bauman, 2010), with the use of an auditorium survey and an electronic survey (in the case of some respondents). The research tool was an original survey questionnaire.

The author conducted a survey among the political elites of 19 cities with county rights in the Silesian Province, which were elected in the 2018 elections, namely: Bielsko-Biała, Bytom, Chorzów, Częstochowa, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Gliwice, Jastrzębie-Zdrój, Jaworzno, Katowice, Mysłowice, Piekary Śląskie, Ruda Śląska, Rybnik, Siemianowice Śląskie, Sosnowiec, Świętochłowice, Tychy, Zabrze, and Żory.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is the most recent study of the Silesian political elite conducted after 30 years.

The study lasted four months, from October 2019 to January 2020.<sup>3</sup> Guided by the criterion of elitism and a deliberate selection of samples in specific cities, the author conducted a survey among councillors of cities with county rights, using a self-administered questionnaire. A total of 262 councillors took part in the study, some of whom refused to answer sensitive questions, which affects the variable number  $n$ . The study was conducted separately for each group and for each city, in the presence of the author. During the city council meetings attended by the author, the councillors completed the questionnaires within the time limit and in the manner specified by the council chair. Councillors from Katowice, Jastrzębie-Zdrój, and Jaworzno took part in an electronic survey. Representatives of the executive authorities were contacted individually by the author.

Due to the anonymous nature of the study, the survey technique was proposed to increase the willingness to participate in the study. The research sample was distinguished by the criterion of position, which included district councillors. The timeframe covers the political elite of cities with district rights, elected in the 2018 elections.

The study was conducted on the assumption that the elite consists of individuals holding well-defined positions in the formal power structure. To ensure maximum reliability, a pilot study had been conducted on a randomly selected sample before the actual study was carried out. The pilot study was used to check the accuracy of the questionnaire, set the date of the study, and gain insight into the possible responses of the respondents to the research question. After completing the study, the author carried out the technical procedure of coding the questionnaires and created her own database for further statistical analysis. The data was processed using the Kruskal-Wallis test, which allows for the identification of differences in ratings between individual cities.

## Results

In order to check whether the perception of economic problems in cities by local political elites differs across cities, a series of Kruskal-Wallis tests were conducted (Table 1).

The data in Table 1 present the answers to the question included in the survey questionnaire, namely: What do you consider to be the most important economic problems of the city? Please mark the severity of the problem with a cross on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means a low level of severity and 5 means a high level of severity. The respondents marked the severity of the problem in their city on a scale of 1 to 5 for the following categories:

- unemployment,
- social problems,
- housing shortage,
- city management,
- the state of the environment,
- financial problems of the city,
- the decline of heavy industry.

During the analysis, the researcher's working hypotheses were adopted:

*H0: Cities do not differ in terms of the political elite's perception of contemporary economic issues.*

*H1: Cities differ in terms of the perception of contemporary economic issues by political elites.*

**Table 1.** A comparison of the perception of the main economic issues of cities by local political elites in individual cities

City	Unemployment	Social problems	Housing shortage	City management	State of the environment	The city's financial problems	Decline of heavy industry
Bielsko-Biała	1.00	1.75	2.50	1.75	4.50	2.13	1.63
Bytom	3.82	3.82	4.09	2.86	3.73	4.43	4.32
Chorzów	2.33	3.44	3.33	2.44	3.22	3.56	3.89
Częstochowa	2.11	3.16	4.10	3.11	3.40	4.35	4.05
Dąbrowa Górnicza	1.95	2.68	3.42	2.68	3.74	2.21	2.89
Gliwice	1.63	2.60	2.89	2.75	2.63	2.38	2.50
Jastrzębie-Zdrój	1.80	3.00	4.70	3.40	3.40	3.20	3.40
Jaworzno	1.17	2.67	1.67	3.14	3.86	2.67	2.67
Katowice	1.69	2.15	2.54	2.08	3.15	1.92	2.31
Mysłowice	2.00	3.25	3.92	3.67	3.58	4.67	4.00
Piekary Śląskie	2.38	2.81	3.38	2.81	3.62	3.86	4.05
Ruda Śląska	1.50	2.93	3.43	2.79	3.43	3.21	3.71
Rybnik	1.83	2.67	3.25	3.67	4.33	4.33	3.92
Siemianowice Śląskie	1.91	2.64	3.45	1.91	3.73	3.36	3.09
Sosnowiec	1.80	2.80	3.20	2.40	3.20	2.55	4.10
Świętochłowice	2.94	4.17	4.37	3.06	3.94	4.21	3.94
Tychy	1.33	2.00	2.33	2.00	3.00	1.50	1.50
Zabrze	2.50	3.38	3.50	3.79	4.31	3.92	3.62
Zory	1.53	2.27	2.80	2.50	3.80	3.33	2.64
Kruskal-Wallis	84.12	75.99	77.82	33.99	36.70	117.96	90.55
p-value	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0126	0.0057	0.0000	0.0000

Source: Own study.

The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between cities in terms of each type of economic problem. *Post hoc* tests showed that unemployment is most acutely felt by the authorities in Bytom, Świętochłowice, and Zabrze. In turn, the authorities in Bytom and Chorzów are most concerned about social problems. The authorities of Częstochowa, Jastrzębie Zdrój, and Świętochłowice consider the housing shortage to be the most serious problem. The elites of Siemianowice Śląskie, Bielsko-Biała, and Tychy consider city management to be the least of their problems. The state of the natural environment is the main concern of city council representatives in Bielsko-Biała, Rybnik, and Zabrze. The city's financial problems are most keenly felt by the political elites in Bytom and Mysłowice. The decline of heavy industry is most strongly emphasised by the elites in Sosnowiec, Częstochowa, and Bytom.

## Discussion

The observed diversity in the perception of socioeconomic problems by local elites in district towns in Silesia seems to be deeply rooted in the historical, social, and structural conditions of individual centres. The strong perception of the problem of unemployment in Bytom, Świętochłowice, and Zabrze has its roots in the long-term restructuring processes that have affected these cities particularly painfully. The closure of industrial plants, mines, and steelworks led not only to a high level of unemployment, but also to a number of negative social phenomena, such as poverty, social exclusion, and economic migration, which explains why social problems are so acute there. These conclusions are consistent with the literature showing the variant trajectories of post-coal cities (from “shrinking” to attempts at reindustrialisation) and the persistence of the social costs of transformation in centres that are heavily dependent on mining (Dragan & Zdyrko, 2023; Jonek-Kowalska, 2024).

The indication of a housing deficit by the authorities of Częstochowa, Jastrzębie-Zdrój, and Świętochłowice can result from the mismatch between the structure of housing resources and the current needs in terms of both quantity and quality. Rising property prices, low levels of investment in new housing, and the deterioration of municipal housing stock all make the housing issue increasingly pressing, especially in cities that do not have sufficient resources to address it systematically. From the perspective of local government finances, the fiscal filter is important here; income instability (e.g. changes in income regimes, income from property and land) limits investment opportunities and hinders long-term housing programmes (Piszczek, 2024; Trojanek et al., 2024). In addition, the “education gap” raised in the literature can displace development expenditure, including housing (Wojarska, 2024).

On the other hand, the low level of problems related to city management reported by the elites of Siemianowice Śląskie, Bielsko-Biała, and Tychy can result from a greater organisational and administrative stability of these units as well as the relatively lower social and financial pressures they are subject to. This may also reflect the effectiveness of local management strategies or a higher level of institutional competence. In the light of research on local leadership after the reforms of the end of the previous decade, these differences can be interpreted as the result of different styles of governance and the degree of professionalisation of the administrative support (Swianiewicz, 2024). Furthermore, the literature on the digitalisation of administration emphasises that where there is a favourable climate for innovation and basic data governance, “management” difficulties are perceived as less acute and implementations (e.g. AI) become realistically possible (Sienkiewicz-Matyjurek, 2023).

Concerns about the state of the natural environment – expressed by representatives of Bielsko-Biała, Rybnik, and Zabrze – point to the growing environmental awareness of local authorities, especially in cities that have experienced the effects of industrialisation intensively. On the one hand, this is a positive sign that climate issues are increasingly being recognised, but on the other hand, it indicates persistent infrastructure deficits in the field of environmental protection. This increase in the importance of environmental issues corresponds well with the debate on “multiple just transitions” in Poland – different groups of actors set different hierarchies of goals, which translates into local priorities and implementation tensions (Tarasova, 2024). In regions affected by the transition away from coal, environmental issues are intertwined with social and economic problems, reinforcing the expectations of municipal authorities (Dragan & Zdyrko, 2023; Jonek-Kowalska, 2024).

The most acute financial problems in Bytom and Mysłowice are likely to be a consequence of these cities’ limited revenue potential and the accumulation of expenditure on their own and commissioned tasks, which, combined with a lack of adequate transfers, leads to chronic difficulties in maintaining financial liquidity. The literature indicates that in 2018–2023, local governments experienced systemic shocks and regulatory changes affecting revenues, and these risks overlapped with local structural challenges (Piszczek, 2024). In addition, the reform and practice of perpetual usufruct and land policy affect the stability of revenue streams, which in large cities can result in significant volatility of revenues (Trojanek et al., 2024). Finally, the costs of educational tasks – which are relatively rigid – generate pressure on other policy areas, limiting financial manoeuvring room (Wojarska, 2024).

Finally, the emphasis placed by the elites of Sosnowiec, Częstochowa, and Bytom on the decline of heavy industry reflects the continuing influence of economic heritage on the identity of these cities, as well as their limited capacity for structural transformation and transition to new models of economic development. This result is consistent with the approach to transformation trajectories: some centres – even with a similar starting point – follow different paths (depending on resources, institutions, and leadership), which differentiates both the perception of problems and the actual priorities of local policies (Dragan & Zdyrko, 2023; Tarasova, 2024; Jonek-Kowalska, 2024).

The above results clearly show that the problems of individual county towns are very diverse and require individually-tailored solutions in terms of both central policy and local management strategies. This points to the need for a more differentiated approach to systemic support and the development of instruments that take into account the historical, social, and economic specificity of each town. According to the literature, these differences may be further moderated by the style and quality of local leadership (Swianiewicz, 2024) and by the administration’s ability to organise data governance and innovation, including the implementation of digital technologies (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2023). Fiscal conditions and the structure of revenue streams – including land policy – remain either a limiting or an enabling factor in scaling solutions (Piszczek, 2024; Trojanek et al., 2024).

The study described above was completed in 2020, but the directions indicated by the elites at that time (social problems in post-coal cities, fiscal sensitivity, the growing importance of the environment, and the need to modernise management) were reflected in the trends described in works published after 2020. Firstly, diagnoses of post-coal trajectories and the dilemmas of a “just transition” (Tarasova, 2024; Dragan & Zdyrko, 2023; Jonek-Kowalska, 2024) confirm that many cities are incorporating environmental and social components into their strategies. Secondly, studies of local government finances (Piszczek, 2024; Trojanek et al., 2024; Wojarska, 2024)

describe the changes and tensions that forced budget adjustments and the selection of priorities. Thirdly, the theme of digitalisation and data management (Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2023) indicates that organisational preparation and leadership influenced the implementation of tools to improve administrative efficiency. Taken together, this suggests that the problems identified in 2020 largely translated into strategic directions and implementation measures after 2020, although the scale and pace of these changes varies between cities.

## Conclusions

The aim of this article was to show how the political elites of county towns in the Silesian Province perceive the most important socioeconomic challenges. The survey, supplemented by statistical analysis, identified significant differences in the assessment of issues such as unemployment, housing shortage, financial difficulties, the state of the natural environment, the decline of heavy industry, and challenges related to public management. The results indicate that local conditions – historical, social, and economic – significantly determine the scale of the perception of individual problems. Cities particularly affected by restructuring – such as Bytom, Świętochłowice, and Zabrze – place greater emphasis on unemployment and social exclusion, while more organisationally-stable entities, such as Tychy and Bielsko-Biała, are less aware of management-related problems. At the same time, there is a noticeable increase in the importance of environmental issues in some centres, which reflects changing local political priorities. The results confirm the need to individualise development strategies and create flexible public support mechanisms tailored to the diverse needs of individual cities.

Due to the completion of the empirical study in 2020, it is not possible at this stage to say unequivocally whether the problems identified at that time have already translated into specific initiatives in the strategies of the studied Silesian cities. The results should therefore be treated as a diagnosis of the perceptions of local elites at a given moment. However, an analysis of literature published after 2020 indicates that similar challenges – related to a just transition, local government finances, and public management – have become the subject of discussion and action in many Polish cities (Dragan & Zdyrko, 2023; Jonek-Kowalska, 2024; Tarasova, 2024; Piszczek, 2024; Trojanek et al., 2024; Wojarska, 2024; Swianiewicz, 2024; Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2023). This means that the problems diagnosed in 2020 in the county towns of the Silesian Province are in line with broader trends observed in the literature, although a confirmation of their translation into specific initiatives would require separate supplementary research. It is worth noting that after 2020, many cities in the Silesian Province adopted new development strategies (including Bytom, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Gliwice, Katowice, Mysłowice, Piekary Śląskie, Rybnik, Tychy, and Żory), which clearly address the problems diagnosed in the study, such as the effects of heavy industry restructuring, housing shortages, fiscal challenges, and the growing importance of environmental issues. These documents emphasise both measures to mitigate the social effects of the transition and the need for investment in housing and green infrastructure. At the same time, there are visible differences in the pace and scale of implementation – some cities (e.g. Sosnowiec) still rely on older strategies, while others have incorporated new priorities into comprehensive development plans. This indicates that the problems identified in 2020 were largely reflected in strategic policies after 2020, although the process of their implementation remains varied between different centres.

The example of Zabrze clearly illustrates how accurate the 2018 assessments of local elites were, who already at that time perceived city management as a key challenge. In the 2024 local

elections, Małgorzata Mańka-Szulik's presidency, which had lasted since 2006, came to an end, and Agnieszka Rupniewska, supported by the Civic Coalition, became the new mayor. However, just one year later, the residents dismissed her in an unprecedented referendum – over 27,000 people voted in favour of her dismissal, and the turnout exceeded the statutory threshold of  $\frac{3}{5}$  of the voters from the previous elections, which is extremely rare in large cities (PAP, Onet 2025). In accordance with the Local Referendum Act, this resulted in the expiry of her mandate and the appointment of a person to perform the duties of mayor by the local president Ewa Weber. Subsequently, in August 2025, a by-election was held, which was won by Kamil Żbikowski, who defeated his opponent by a margin of only 106 votes.

Such a concentrated sequence of events – the change of the president after several years, the dismissal of the new president in a referendum a year later, and the holding of early elections – is an exceptional occurrence in Polish local government practice. It shows that the management problem, previously identified in research, has become a real source of political tension and social mobilisation, which has led to one of the few successful attempts in recent years to dismiss a mayor of a county-level city.

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### **Data Availability Statement**

All data will be available and shared upon request.

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