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Is the Professionalisation of Civil Service in Local and Regional Government a Priority? Evidence from the Polish Case

Abstract

Objective: This paper aims to check if and to what extent the financial resources allocated for civil servants' training in self-government in Poland reflect both the priorities of the authorities and the specific nature of the tasks performed by them.

Research Design & Methods: The authors used two main research methods. The first one was a survey sent to the representative sample of local and regional authorities. The second one involved semi-structured interviews with randomly chosen permanent secretaries from local governments.

Findings: Based on the gathered data, it is clear that local and regional governments focus mainly on daily upgrading trainings and do not provide a long-term strategy on human resources development. Most popular trainings could be characterised as short-term executive courses focused on management and legal issues.

Implications / Recommendations: Local governments are recommended to change their approach to training civil servants in terms of both financial commitment and the long-term attitude to building the competence of their employees.

Contribution / Value Added: The paper presents an up-to-date outlook of civil servants' training policies in Poland. Based on this picture, it is possible to conduct discussion on how local and regional governments conduct human resources development strategies and provide recommendations to them.

Keywords: civil service training, the professionalisation of public administration, local government

Article classification: research paper

JEL classification: H11

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Introduction

In the light of the growing expectations of society and dynamic legislative changes, public institutions should place increasing emphasis on the professional development of their employees. Investments in human capital are becoming both a strategic element in building a qualitative advantage in the public sector and a valuable tool for delivering public services professionally. Moreover, civil servants and their organisations are creating public value and in this sense producing services that ‘add value’ to society at the local, regional, and national levels (Hood, 1998, p. 23). This issue is particularly valid in the context of the wide range of external challenges that the public administration sector has to address. In a situation of permanent and overlapping crises, commonly referred to as ‘polycrises’, it is essential to develop a public sector that can withstand these challenges, with competent and responsive civil servants. It seems to be more important than ever to build knowledge, skills, and attitude of employees working in the public sector in order to strengthen the administrative capacity to deal with critical situations. The multi-faced nature of current crises demands sometimes unconventional solutions, and those could be provided by properly trained and motivated civil servants.

This paper aims to check if and to what extent the financial resources allocated for civil servants’ training in self-government in Poland reflect both the priorities of the authorities and the specific nature of the tasks performed by them. Based on the conducted research, the authors sought to answer the following questions: what are the priorities of local and regional governments regarding the civil servants’ training?; what are the main areas of civil service development?; how much money is spent on the development of human resources?

Literature review

Public administration sciences traditionally pay a lot of attention to the role of civil servants’ competencies. From the theoretical perspective, two approaches have been particularly under constant investigation. The first one is a public administration curriculum that is a crucial tool to shape the competencies of the future public sector employees. Based on the current discussion, a lot of emphasis is being put on building student engagement through co-production curriculum (Elliott & Robson, 2021), underlining the role of public value (Ćwiklicki, 2020; Osborne, 2020), or creating a managerial toolbox that is needed to successfully implement public policies into reality (Wessels, 2020; O’Neil, 2022). There is also a growing interest among researchers to compare internationally how Master of Public Administration programmes have changed over the last years in the face of turbulent circumstances (Manoharan & Mirbel, 2018). Interestingly, the role of public administration education is being considered in the context of the backlash of democracy and its role in public trust (Guy, 2025). All of this critical thinking seems to be unavoidable in order to properly scrutinise and update the teaching of public administration.

The second perspective refers to the issue of upgrading or adjusting civil servants’ competencies to current challenges and is strongly related to administrative capacity. Public administration – as a machinery responsible for translating and implementing the political agenda into reality – relies on the individual capacities of civil servants themselves and as a group of people. This is why there is a broad understanding that public administration must constantly develop civil servants’ competencies to properly address the challenges of rapid change (Farazmand, 2009). Otherwise, there is a risk of creating circumstances in which civil servants lack the proper tools and skills to

successfully predict potential failures and choose the best responses when implementing public policies (Peters, 2015). In this context, training and executive courses seem to be an inevitable way to adjust public administration work to current challenges. Current research shows that, in the light of the lack of the predictability and importance of the relations between public bodies and stakeholders, soft skills are crucial (Kinsella & Waite, 2021; Şahin, 2024). Another important thing is to develop curiosity that encourages discussion and learning about others, as well as promotes a sense of community and mutual concern (Hatcher, 2019, p. 368). There is no doubt that uncertain times reinvigorate discussion about the teaching and learning of public administration. Relying on the previous way of thinking about the role of public administration in the political system and the tools that are needed is getting obsolete and demands a new approach (White et al., 2024; Kusumasari et al., 2024).

Material and methods

The authors used two main research methods. The first one was a survey which consisted of three main questions: how much money has been spent on training?; how many people have participated in this?; how many people have participated in postgraduate studies? The second tool was a semi-structure interview with randomly chosen permanent secretaries from local government units (municipalities and counties), who shed more light on the current challenges in human resources management. The research took place between February and June 2024 and covered the period from 2019 to 2024.

The research was conducted on a representative sample at each of the self-government levels: municipality [Pol. *gmina*], county [Pol. *powiat*], and region. The chosen criterion was based on the number of inhabitants living in each unit. The research design relied on the official data provided by Statistics Poland, which presents the population split across the self-government units. In terms of municipalities, the authors randomly chose the number of units presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The number of municipalities chosen to research

The number of population	The total number	Research units
Up to 2,500	45	2
2,500–4,999	594	24
5,000–7,499	592	23
7,500–9,999	360	15
10,000–14,999	364	15
15,000–19,999	179	7
20,000–39,999	217	9
40,000–99,999	88	4
100,000–199,999	22	1
200,000–999,999	15	1
1000,000 and more	1	1

Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the number of counties, the same research strategy has been chosen, and it is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The number of counties chosen to research

The number of population	The total number	Research units
Below 50,000	80	8
50,000–74,999	93	10
75,000–99,999	62	6
100,000–149,999	53	5
150,000–199,999	19	2
200,000 and more	7	1

Source: Own elaboration.

The easiest situation was in the case of regional government, because there are only 16 units at this level. Thus, the authors decided to research all of them.

Results and discussion

Employee's training in self-government

Training courses covering a wide range of tasks and topics – both individual and group-based, classroom-based and online – are the most common form of education in local government units. Even the pandemic has not stopped this phenomenon, although it has caused several key changes to training.

According to the above data, only 4% of municipalities plan to spend an average amount of money on training, and out of those, only 6% reach this level of spending by the end of the year. A similar situation is observed at the county level, where only 4% plan to reach this level and 4% have done so. The situation is quite different at the regional government level: none of the units plans to spend an average amount, but up to 13% of them do so in practice. Although the average amount planned for municipalities (34,328 PLN) and counties (51,791 PLN) is quite comparable, there is a significant difference in relation to regional governments (611,085 PLN). This financial disparity suggests a notable difference in access to training for civil servants in local and regional governments.

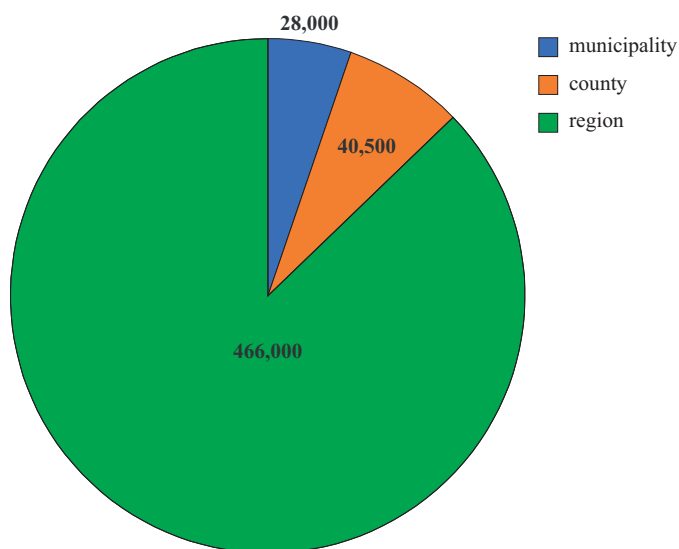
When analysing these figures, it is important to consider the diversity of local government units: the smallest municipality has fewer than 2,500 inhabitants (Krynica Morska), the smallest county has fewer than 50,000 inhabitants (the Sejny County), and the smallest region has fewer than 1,000,000 inhabitants (the Opolskie region). At the same time, the largest municipality is almost twice the size of the smallest region. Nevertheless, regions still spend nearly 20 times more than municipalities and about 12 times more than counties on improving the qualifications of their employees. This disproportion is less visible between counties and municipalities (approximately 1.5 times more). It is doubtful that this results in a greater demand for highly qualified staff in regional offices than in local ones. Nevertheless, further research is needed to understand why local government units (both municipalities and counties) spend significantly less money on training.

Table 3. Financial resources spent on training

Category		Municipalities		Counties		Regions	
		Plan of spending	The final level of spending	Plan of spending	The final level of spending	Plan of spending	The final level of spending
Average amount of money spend on trainings PLN*		34,328	27,958	51,791	40,440	611,085	466,459
1.	Self-government units which spend average amount of money (in percentage)	4	6	4	4	0	13
2.	Self-Government units which spend below the average amount of money (in percentage)	68,5	66	50	58	53	53,5
3.	Self-government units spending above the average amount of money (in percentage)	27,5	28	46	38	47	33,5

* Average level is based on declared average on spending between 45–55% of declaration

Source: Own elaboration.

**Figure 1.** Spending on training (average amounts in PLN)

Source: Own elaboration.

There is one more thing worth noting. A comparison of lines 2 and 3 in Table 3 reveals a clear asymmetry in the distribution of expenditures: the number of local government units with spending below the average is substantially higher than the number of units with spending above the average. This suggests that most local government units allocate relatively limited resources to improving the qualifications of local and regional government employees.

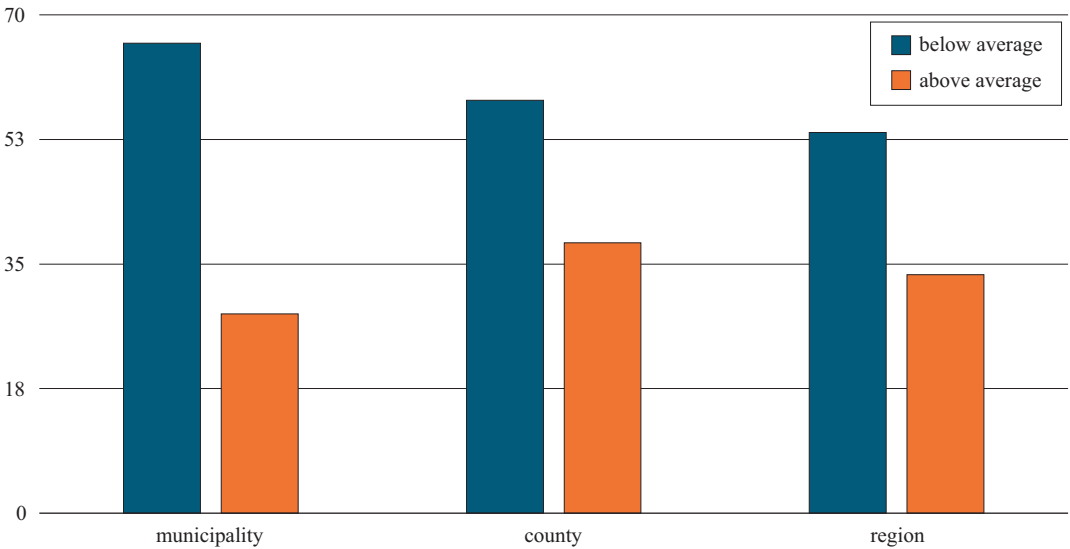


Figure 2. Ratio between local and regional units in terms of expenditure to the average*

*expenditure spent

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 4. The number of persons trained in individual local government units (in %)

Lp.		Municipalities	Counties	Regions
1.	Average number of trained persons	66,17	49,50	127,80
2.*	The lowest level of trained persons	21	11	30
3.*	The highest number of trained persons	158	84	162

* These numbers have been declared by local and regional units

Source: Own elaboration.

The highest rates indicate that employees are trained multiple times, in several training courses. The high level of participation is in regional offices, which are definitely leading the way in improving the qualifications of their employees. One of the regional government even reported that, counting the number of training days per person, it trained 660% of its employees each year, with a total of 1,404 employees (average for the five years surveyed), which amounts to nearly five training sessions per employee per year. Half of the training in this office is conducted online, which is probably the reason for such large-scale activities.

The main areas of interest in terms of trainings

As has been shown, training is the most popular way of improving employees' qualifications in local and regional governments. However, the situation is quite different when it comes to postgraduate studies.

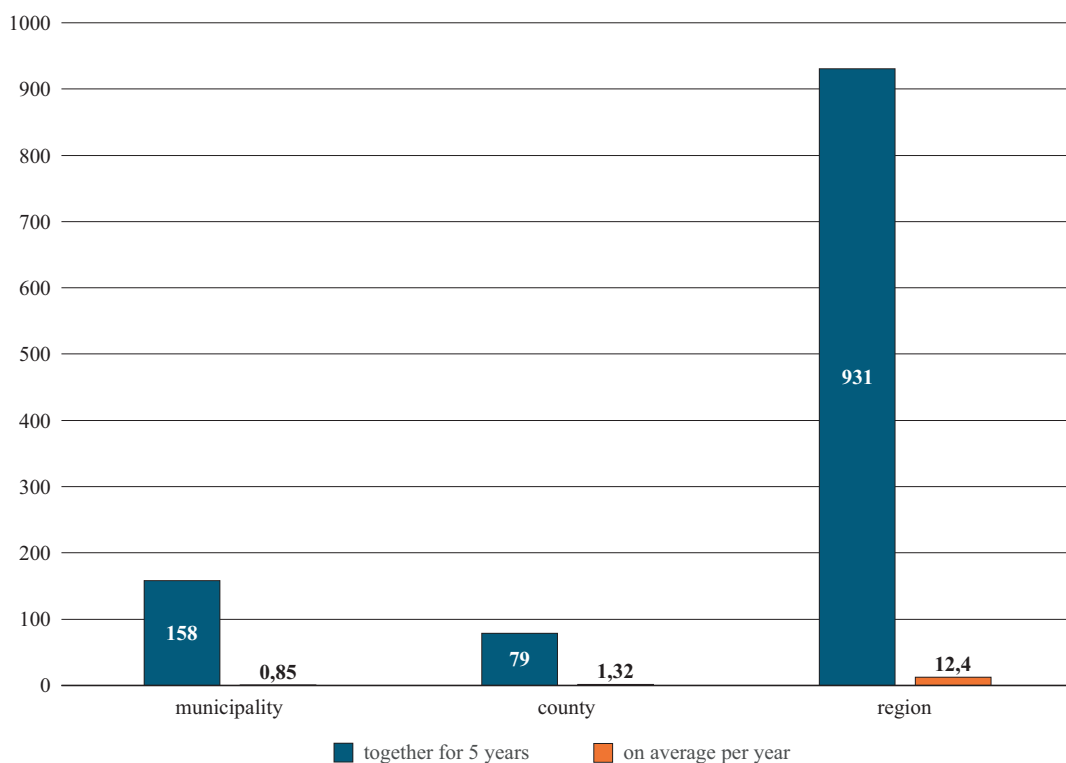


Figure 3. The number of civil servants participating in postgraduate studies

Sources: Own elaboration.

Postgraduate studies are not particularly popular among Polish local and regional government units. On average, each county finances just over one person (1.32 persons) in this form of further education. Among municipalities, the situation is even worse – less than one person (0.85) takes part in postgraduate studies. Among the municipal units taken into account during the survey, only 158 people from 36 units took part in this kind of education. Regarding the county level, there are 79 people from 12 county offices who have taken these courses. It is therefore not surprising that all the municipalities surveyed spent 432,708 PLN on postgraduate studies over the last five years, while the counties spent only 156,187 PLN. This gives an average expenditure of 12,020 PLN over 5 years for municipalities, i.e. nearly 2,404 PLN per person per year on average, and 15,619 PLN for counties, which gives nearly 3,124 PLN per person per year on average.

The situation is different in terms of regional governments. On average, each region finances the participation of over 12 people (12.4) in postgraduate studies. Fifteen provinces took advantage of this opportunity, with a total of 931 people studying. Of course, there were significant differences

between individual units, with the leader among regions financing postgraduate studies for 162 employees, while in the worst-case scenario there have been only 3 people sent to this type of studies. In total, the surveyed regions spent 3,855,134 PLN on improving qualifications at the highest level, which gives an average of 257,009 PLN over 5 years, i.e. 51,402 PLN per year per postgraduate student (4,283 PLN per person).

In total, over a period of five years, all local and regional units sent only 1,168 people to postgraduate studies. If one recalls that, according to data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS), in the 2021/2022 academic year, approximately 60,000 students were enrolled in postgraduate studies in the fields of business and administration, social sciences, law, information and communication technologies, and occupational health and safety (Statistics Poland, 2022), this means that local government officials accounted for approximately 0.39% of the entire group.

The main areas of postgraduate studies include: auditing and management control, human resources and finance, Internet marketing, spatial development, property valuation, data mining analysis and data mining in business, administration and management, new technology law, public management, data protection, budget accounting, air quality management, banking and finance, leadership and psychology, project management, legal applications, public procurement, human resources management, IT management, negotiation and mediation, public health, traffic engineering and transport planning, labour and social security law, finance, geodesy and cartography, municipal waste management, and others. MBA programmes with various specialisations constitute a separate group.

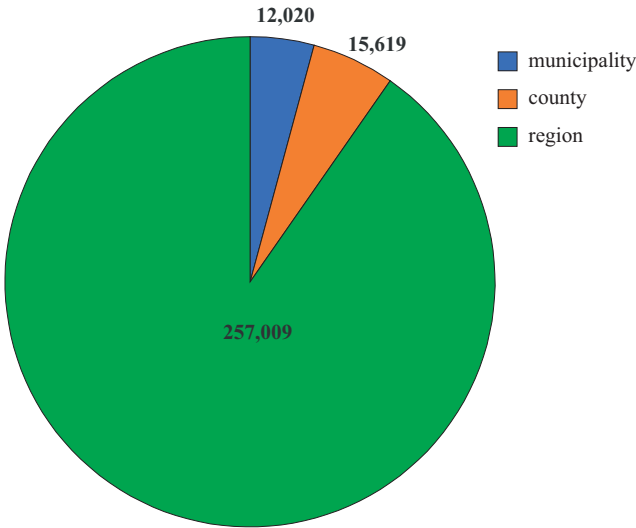


Figure 4. Average spending of local and regional government units on postgraduate studies over a period of 5 years (in PLN)

Source: Own elaboration.

This raises the question of why local governments (municipalities and counties) are hesitant to fund postgraduate studies for their employees. Regional governments evidently value this form of education and knowledge enhancement more highly than their local counterparts do. Another research question that remains to be explored is why there is a disparity between the two levels

of government and whether the educational expenditure of Polish local governments is effective. Furthermore, it would be interesting to understand to what extent the regional government has significantly greater access to EU funds than local governments.

Table 5. Types of training courses provided in the classroom-based form and online (in %)

L.p.		Municipalities		Counties		Regions	
		In classroom	Online	In classroom	Online	In classroom	Online
	Average number of training *	32	68	44	56	47	53
1.	The percentage of local and regional government units conducting the average number of training courses in the entire group	15,5	28	11	11	8	15
2.	The percentage of local and regional government units below the average (in %)	37,5	34,5	33	56	46	39
3.	The percentage of local and regional government units above the average (in %)	47	37,5	56	33	46	46

* The number is based on declare average on training between 45–55% of declaration

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 5 illustrates the statistical breakdown of classroom-based and online training courses as a proportion of the total number of training courses delivered. It should be noted that the small number of responses to this question is due to a lack of detailed knowledge about the training courses delivered by local government employees, particularly in municipalities and districts. This may result in the underestimation of the effectiveness and quality of services provided in the field of civil servant education. It is also noteworthy that the proportion of online training courses is relatively high, i.e. at 68% in municipalities, at 56% in districts, and at 53% in provinces. It should be noted, of course, that the survey covered a period of intensified efforts to combat the pandemic. However, when considered alongside the aforementioned lack of knowledge, this situation is cause for concern.

For this study, the topics covered by training courses conducted within local and regional government units were categorised into four groups: legal, organisational, financial, and miscellaneous. The obtained data allows us to present the following summary (Table 6).

The results presented in Table 6 are clear and do not warrant any specific comments. The only interesting points include the high percentage of responses in the “Other” category and the low scores for the “Legal” category. It means that civil servants are more eager to participate in more specific trainings rather than those which provide more general knowledge about public administration.

Table 6. The list of training topics by percentage

Group of training	Municipalities	Counties	Regions
Legal	13	19	15
Organisational	25,5	23	25
Financial	22	20	17
Other	39,5	38	43

Source: Own elaboration.

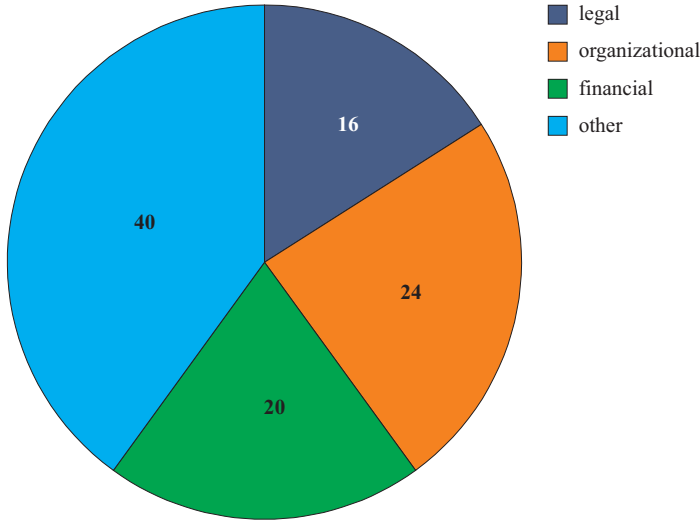


Figure 5. The percentage share of training topic groups in local and regional government units in total

Source: Own elaboration.

Each of the groups of training covers a wide range of courses. In terms of legal trainings, there are those related to dynamically changing legal regulations covering a vast variety of tasks performed by local governments: local government law, administrative law, labour law, construction law, environmental protection law, access to public information, public procurement, public finance law, real estate law, spatial planning law, education law, water law, law concerning foreigners, housing law, commercial companies law, etc., as well as a training in the field of issuing administrative decisions. Interestingly, in the municipalities declaring that they had conducted trainings in the broadly understood legal field, nearly 23% of the trainings concerned the Code of Administrative Procedure – 58% in counties and 50% in regional government. In terms of specific legal issues – which in practice means updating knowledge and skills in this area – the proportions were as follows: 36% in municipalities, 75% in counties, and 75% in regions. If one recalls that the group of legal training courses was the least frequently chosen by local and regional government units (in municipalities they accounted for 13%, in counties – 19%, and in regions – 15% of all training courses), the pillars of the legality of local and regional government units’ activities caused a lot of concern. It is worth recalling here that legality is the only criterion

for supervising local government (Article 171 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland), and public authorities act on the basis of and within the limits of the law (Article 7).

In terms of organisational training, there are courses which cover office and archiving procedures, personal data protection, correspondence, interpersonal communication, auditing, controlling, quality management, interpersonal relations, cooperation with non-governmental organisations, the organisation of the education system, managing public registers, e-delivery, and, last but not least, human resources management. In this group, three things should be highlighted. Human resources management was the subject of trainings in less than 22% of municipalities which declared that they conduct training in the organisational area, with similar declarations made by 44% of counties and nearly 29% of regions. Considering the importance of the quality of civil servants and their preparation in the area of organisational training in general, as well as taking into account the basis for the effectiveness of any training, the figures presented (especially in municipalities) can hardly be considered high. It is also surprising that only 30% of municipalities send permanent secretaries to training courses, as they are usually responsible for the personnel policy of local and regional offices. Even more surprising is the fact that permanent secretaries do not participate in any kind of training courses, studies, or workshops.

A very similar situation occurs in the context of management control. Despite the fact that the Public Finance Act obliges local and regional governments to conduct and improve the system of quality management as well as the qualifications of civil servants, nearly 20% do not obey this obligation. Moreover, only 44% of county offices declare that they perform civil servants' training in this area. Municipalities and regions do not conduct this kind of training at all.

It turns out that although organisational training courses constitute the second largest group of training courses, a detailed analysis of their subject matter does not confirm a focus on the most important issues.

In terms of finance, there are a wide range of courses, such as issues related to finance, accounting, as well as subsidies, public procurement, EU funds, local taxes and charges, public finance regulations, budget implementation and reporting, debt collection, cash management, employee services, and village funds.

However, there is no surprise in the main direction of financial training. Nearly 80% of municipalities declaring that they conduct training in the financial area focus on training related to taxes and fees. For municipalities, taxes, especially local taxes, can be one of the elements of building their position and financial independence or autonomy. Although counties and regions do not have this tool at their disposal, the issue of taxes and charges is also an important subject of training there: 69% of counties and 50% of regions train their employees in this area. There is less interest in the EU funds. Nearly 63% of financial training courses organised in regions cover this issue. Local governments, on the other hand, do not organise such trainings, which may be one of the factors hindering these entities from accessing external funds. There is a certain lack of logic here, especially in municipalities: on the one hand, there is a focus on revenue (taxes and charges), and on the other, there is a lack of obvious activity in seeking to better prepare employees to use the EU funds.

The biggest group covers both very technical and narrow issues: support for IT systems dedicated to various subject areas, cybersecurity, the GDPR, energy, geodesy, security management (including crisis management and civil defence), training for disabled persons (e.g. employees), the protection of classified information, public transport, e-administration, health and safety,

cooperation with volunteer fire brigades, road management, traffic organisation, urban management, promotion, foreign language courses.

It is, of course, more difficult to provide an equally clear description of the fourth thematic group of training courses, referred to as “other”. On the one hand, they constitute the most numerous subgroup (39.5% of municipalities, 38% of counties, and 43% of regions), but on the other hand, their diversity and wide range of topics makes it difficult to identify any regularities. There are two prominent issues at this point. The first one is based on historical experience. On 25 May 2018, the European Parliament Regulation on the protection of personal data came into force – Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing the Directive 95/46/EC (GDPR). Local government units have always had problems with the correct interpretation and application of these regulations. This is why this issue has been a subject of training courses in 26% of municipalities, 19% of counties, and 25% of regions, and was classified as “other” in the years 2019–2023. This can also mean that those who are responsible for training themes do not fully recognise the circumstances in which local and regional governments operate.

The situation looks slightly better when looking to the future. Undoubtedly, this area includes the issues of cybersecurity and the digitalisation of local and regional offices. This is why 26% of municipalities, 38% of counties, and as many as 63% of regions have organised training in this area, which should be considered a positive result. However, there is still much to be done on the part of local and regional governments. The threat to the national cybersecurity system (National Cybersecurity System, 2025) will quickly point to the right direction for the development of training and, consequently, the qualifications of civil servants.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is clear that the structure and topics of training courses organised by local and regional government units reflect both their priorities and areas requiring improvement. The insufficient frequency of training courses on law, human resources, and the use of the EU funds may translate into limited opportunities for the development and effective use of available tools by local governments. On the other hand, the strong emphasis on tax and financial issues confirms the local authorities’ desire to strengthen budgetary autonomy and the effective management of public funds. In the light of dynamic legislative changes as well as growing social expectations and challenges related to digitisation and security, it is worth striving to extend training offers to areas that currently remain on the margins. Only the comprehensive and regular improvement of the qualifications of local government officials will ensure high quality in the performance of public tasks and contribute to the efficiency and transparency of local administration.

Surprisingly, little attention is paid to training directly related to local and regional security, despite the ongoing polycrisis. This area only comes into focus in relation to cyber threats, which are merely one element of local and regional resilience. Civil servants have not participated in any training courses or postgraduate studies devoted to crises, such as crisis management or crisis communication. This is particularly surprising given that ‘crisis’ is not only a buzzword that frequently occurs in public debate, but also a real threat that demands knowledge and skills in order to address this challenge. Increasing the number of investments in critical infrastructure

alone is not enough to ensure safety at the local and regional levels. This suggests that, without action from the central government, it is highly unlikely that a substantial change will occur.

According to the conducted research, it is apparent that local and regional governments adopt two different training approaches. Local units, such as municipalities and counties, spend much more money and focus primarily on short-term training. In contrast, regional governments offer more accessible and comprehensive educational opportunities for civil servants. This difference is significant and could lead to a competence gap between local and regional governments.

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Data Availability Statement

All data will be available and shared upon request.