



## OPERATING SURPLUS AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN FINANCING LOCAL GOVERNMENT TASKS ON THE EXAMPLE OF MUNICIPALITIES OF THE MAŁOPOLSKIE VOIVODESHIP

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### Abstract

The operating surplus is a positive subtraction result of the revenue and current expenditures of a local government units. The level of operating surplus determines the scope and quality of task implementation, as well as investment and development opportunities of a local government unit. In periods of economic slowdown, the surplus can serve as a kind of buffer and guarantee for the continuous and effective functioning of a local government unit. The aim of the research was to assess the operating surplus and the ability to perform local government tasks based on the balance of current revenue and expenditure in the current economic conditions. The analysis was carried out on the example of the municipalities of the Małopolskie Voivodeship in Poland, and the research period covered the years 2014-2021. According to the conducted research, the most dynamic situation in the operating surplus development took place in urban municipalities. These municipalities maintained the highest average level of operating surplus, but it was characterized by large fluctuations, e.g. in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This may result from the fact of high budget revenues and the widest range of obligatory tasks, as well as from the sensitivity to economic changes of budget revenues that are significant in cities. As a consequence, the implementation of tasks in a continuous manner and at a constant level of quality in periods of downturn may be at risk in the case of these cities, and the lower level of operating surplus may force these local governments to incur liabilities.

## NADWYŻKA OPERACYJNA I JEJ ZNACZENIE W FINANSOWANIU ZADAŃ SAMORZĄDU TERYTORIALNEGO NA PRZYKŁADZIE GMIN WOJEWÓDZTWA MAŁOPOLSKIEGO

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Słowa kluczowe: polityka fiskalna, budżet gminy, dochody własne, nadwyżka operacyjna, zadania samorządu terytorialnego.

### Abstrakt

Nadwyżka operacyjna stanowi dodatnią różnicę między dochodami i wydatkami bieżącymi jednostki samorządu terytorialnego. Poziom nadwyżki operacyjnej determinuje zakres i jakość realizacji zadań, a także możliwości inwestycyjne oraz rozwojowe jednostki. W okresach spowolnienia gospodarczego nadwyżka może służyć jako swoisty bufor i gwarancja ciągłego i efektywnego funkcjonowania jednostki samorządu terytorialnego. Celem badań była ocena nadwyżki operacyjnej oraz możliwości realizacji zadań samorządu terytorialnego na podstawie salda dochodów i wydatków bieżących w aktualnych uwarunkowaniach gospodarczych. Analizy przeprowadzono na przykładzie gmin województwa małopolskiego, a okres badawczy obejmował lata 2014-2021. Jak wynika z przeprowadzonych badań, najbardziej dynamiczna sytuacja w kształtowaniu się nadwyżki operacyjnej wystąpiła w gminach miejskich. Gminy te utrzymywały najwyższy przeciętny poziom nadwyżki operacyjnej, charakteryzował się on jednak dużymi fluktuacjami, np. w 2020 r. w związku z pandemią COVID-19. Może to wynikać z wysokich dochodów budżetowych oraz z najszerszego zakresu zadań obligatoryjnych, a także z wrażliwości na zmiany koniunkturalne istotnych w miastach dochodów budżetowych. W konsekwencji realizacja zadań w sposób ciągły i na stałym poziomie jakości w okresach dekonjunktury może być w przypadku tych miast zagrożona, a niższy poziom nadwyżki operacyjnej może zmuszać te samorządy do zaciągania zobowiązań.

### Introduction

One of the basic principles of the local government system in Poland is the possibility of independent financial management. However, it depends on having stable sources of revenue (Kwaśny, 2019, p. 106). In Poland, they are subject to the regulations contained in the Act on the revenue of local government units (2003), but the Constitution itself (1997) indicates four groups of revenue of local government units (LGU's). These are own revenues, subsidies, subventions and foreign funds (Gornowicz & Wichowska, 2017, p. 63). These revenues are used to carry out the tasks assigned to LGU's, which determine the expenditure of the local government, and thus the quantity and quality of public services provided (Wichowska, 2022, p. 136, 137).

The basic classification of revenues, but also budgetary expenditure of local government units, due to their purpose, divides them into current (operational) and property. The first group of revenues and expenditures is characterized by their relationship with the current activity of the LGU. In this regard, the Act of Public Finance (2009) introduced the principle of balancing the operating budget of local government units. It is of fundamental importance for the functioning of local government in Poland, because it is associated with the possibility of local government tasks and the possibility of indebtedness of local government (Kwaśny, 2017, p. 230).

Considering the above, in the current discussion on the financial situation of local government in Poland, the issue of the difference between revenues and operating expenditure (operating surplus or deficit) is often raised. In November 2022, Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego published a report entitled "Sustainable development against the backdrop of investment challenges and the financial situation of Polish local governments". The presented research shows that most municipalities expect that in 2022 the operating surplus will be lower than in 2021. One of the reasons for this state of affairs, indicated by local governments, is the increase in current expenditure and lower revenues from participation in personal income tax. In the opinion of the municipalities, the increase in current expenditure will be largely related to the rising prices of energy and energy resources. The first quarterly budget reports from 2022 seem to confirm the opinions of budget practitioners. The problem of the amount of the operating surplus discussed in this article seems to be an important and current issue from the theoretical and practical point of view (Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego, 2022).

Therefore, this article aims to assess the operating surplus and the performance of local government tasks based on the balance of current revenue and expenditure in the current economic conditions. The analyzes were carried out on the example of the municipalities of the Małopolskie Voivodeship in Poland, and the research period covered the years 2014-2021, which was largely dictated by the years of implementation of the multiannual financial framework of the European Union. The article adopts the method of critical literature analysis and financial analysis of budgetary revenues and expenditures of municipalities in the Małopolskie voivodship. For this purpose, basic financial indicators based on the operating result of the budget and used for the financial assessment of local government units were used.

The article consists of several parts. The first part contains theoretical considerations on the concept of operating surplus in local government units and the theoretical significance of operating surplus in the implementation of the tasks of LGU's. The next part is empirical and is based on the analysis of the operational results of municipalities in the Małopolskie Voivodship during the research period. The article ends with a summary and conclusions.

## The Concept of Operating Surplus in the Budget of a Local Government Unit

The operational budget is a type of local government budget, which has been distinguished due to the distinction in it of current revenue and expenditure, i.e. those that are implemented in a period of less than one year. On the contrary, it can be said that this budget includes revenues and expenses that are not related to investment activity (Krzemińska, 2018b, p. 91). The result of this budget is the operating balance of the local government budget.

There is no legal definition of operating surplus in Polish law. It is assumed, however, that it is a positive subtraction result of the revenue and current expenditures. A negative result indicates an operating deficit. Pursuant to the Act of Public Finance (2009), current revenues are all revenues of local government units that are not property revenues. The latter group includes: subsidies and funds earmarked for investments, revenue from the sale of property and revenue from the transformation of perpetual usufruct right into ownership right. A similar definition was adopted by the legislator in the field of current expenditure – current expenditures included those that are not property expenditures. These include expenditures for investments and investment purchases, which include programs financed from foreign funds – including from the EU or EFTA, which are not refundable. In addition, they are also expenditures for the purchase and subscription of shares or stocks and making contributions to commercial law companies (Korolewska, 2022).

In the legal and financial literature, it is indicated that the operating result of the budget is of significant cognitive importance. It illustrates the financial situation by indicating to what extent local government units can cover current expenditures with their current revenues. It informs about the possibility of carrying out tasks, carrying out investments, as well as the possibility of repaying liabilities by a given LGU. It indicates the financial resources that are at the disposal of the LGU to finance investments or repay liabilities after making obligatory current expenditures, including repayment of debt servicing costs. Therefore, maintaining a high level of financial surplus is beneficial. The negative result of the operating budget indicates that the LGU is unable to finance its tasks, which exceed its capabilities. If the LGU wants to implement them, it must do so by incurring debt or selling its own assets (Kwaśny, 2018, p. 234; Krzemińska, 2018a, p. 63, 64).

The Act of Public Finance (2009) introduced the obligation to balance the budget in the operational part. It concerns both the planning phase and the implementation of the budget. However, Art. 242 also introduces the possibility of adjusting the current operating result through the operating surplus from previous years or free funds on the current account of the municipality (Maj-Waśniowska & Cycoń, 2012, p. 193). As Kowalska *et al.* (2018, p. 123), such

a regulation led to an increase in operating surpluses in local governments in recent years, but it was done through restrictions on the use of reliefs and exemptions in local taxes and fees.

## **The Role of Operating Surplus in the Implementation of Tasks of Local Government**

The stable financial situation of the LGU allows it to carry out its tasks in a continuous manner, which does not adversely affect its budget – especially on the financial liquidity and long-term solvency of the local government unit. The financial stability of local government units, and in particular the availability of financial resources, enables their effective allocation, and thus the distribution of public services adequate to the needs and the socio-economic development of the LGU. In this context, it is particularly important to maintain an appropriate amount of current financial resources, which in the event of disturbances from the external environment of the unit (especially from the market), will not result in the loss of the ability to perform the tasks of local government units at the current level and repayment of liabilities. As indicated by Surówka & Winiarz (2018, p. 458), the permanent adequacy of funds for the tasks performed is more important for local government units than financial independence. It can be concluded that the state of local government finances, including the level of operating surplus, will determine (Cyrbut & Gałęcka, 2020, p. 20; Wichowska & Ostrowska, 2018, p. 342; Wierzbicka *et al.*, 2021):

- current financing of own and commissioned tasks of LGU's;
- continuous and effective provision of public services by LGU's;
- regulating the liabilities of LGU's.

In accordance with the above, the operating surplus is of particular importance in the implementation of current tasks (current expenses), but in the long-term perspective it will also affect the development of the entity and investment capabilities. Maintaining high current revenues by LGUs is of key, but not the most important importance in assessing the situation of the unit. This must be done in relation to current expenditure. Local government units are differentiated in terms of internal conditions that will determine the level of current expenditure. Only their implementation (and including them in the balance of the operating budget) will make it possible to assess the financial condition and development and investment opportunities of local government units (see Wichowska & Lizińska, 2022). As indicated by Cyrbut & Gałęcka (2020, p. 23, 24), the operating surplus and its increase are a positive phenomenon and can be a starting point for strategic decisions.

As Dylewski (2017, p. 76) pointed out, the ability of LGUs to generate free funds on a permanent basis is of great importance in assessing the financial situation of local government units based on the operating surplus parameter.

This is due to the fact that these funds may be a source of financing new tasks of a current and property nature, and on the other hand may be a source of repayment of debt liabilities incurred to finance the former (free cash flow).

One of the most common uses of operating surplus is to cover operating costs. Most local governments use the operating surplus for current operations and for capital investments such as building renovations or new equipment. In this case, the operating surplus may turn out to be necessary as an own contribution when granting a loan or paying a commission or obtaining EU funds. Many local governments allocate part of the operating surplus, for example, to co-finance tasks in the field of education or public transport. The operating surplus may also be used for tasks in the field of municipal infrastructure and optional tasks in the field of social and cultural activities. Maintaining a high level of surplus can be particularly helpful during economic downturns when additional funds can help local governments overcome reduced local tax and levy revenues. Another way to use the operating surplus may be to control inflationary pressure in current operations (debt repayment, purchase of goods and services at an unchanged level). It allows for greater flexibility in the implementation of tasks and absorbing the negative effects of inflation (see Surówka & Winiarz, 2018, p. 458).

### **Operating Surplus in Municipalities of the Małopolskie Voivodeship and the Potential for Independent Implementation of Tasks**

There were 182 municipalities in the Małopolskie Voivodship in 2014-2021. Among them, there were 14 urban municipalities, 46 urban-rural municipalities and 122 rural municipalities. In the analyzed period, the number of municipalities that reached the current budget deficit was small. In 2014, there were 3 municipalities, in 2015 – 2, and in the years: 2016, 2019 and 2021, one municipality each. In the remaining years, there was no deficit in any of the municipalities. It can therefore be concluded that the municipalities of the Małopolskie Voivodship were characterized by maintaining an operating surplus, which should be clearly assessed positively. This is also confirmed by the fact that some municipalities planned a current deficit, but the implementation of revenues and implementation of current expenditures allowed for a positive budget result. The last two years of the research period are especially noteworthy, in which a deficit was planned in 16 and 30 municipalities, respectively, but ultimately only in 2021 a deficit was recorded in one municipality. Certainly, these results can be associated with the uncertain situation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, which hindered budget planning, as well as with the planned changes in the personal income tax. Detailed data on the number of local governments that achieved an operating surplus or deficit, broken down by plan and budget execution, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The number of municipalities in the Małopolskie Voivodeship according to the plan and the result of the operating budget in 2014-2021

Operating budget result	Number of local governments units achieving a given operating budget result in 2014-2021								Average
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
Planned deficit	11	9	6	9	14	7	16	30	12.75
Deficyt execution	3	2	1	0	0	1	0	1	1
Planned surplus	171	173	176	173	168	175	176	152	170.5
Surplus execution	179	180	181	182	182	181	182	181	181

Source: own elaboration based on Regional Accounting Chamber in Krakow data.

In the analysis of the operating surplus, apart from the fact of its occurrence, its level and trends in this area are also important. Figure 1 shows the average levels of the operating surplus in the municipalities of the Małopolskie Voivodeship, distinguishing their type in thous. PLN in subsequent years. Among the analyzed municipalities, the highest average operating surplus levels were recorded by urban municipalities. The average level of the surplus in these municipalities in 2014-2021 was PLN 35,047 thousand. In these municipalities in 2014-2019, the average level of operating surplus remained at a relatively stable level. Only in 2015 there was a significant decrease (by over PLN 11,500 thousand). But in 2019, the average level of the surplus returned to a comparable level from

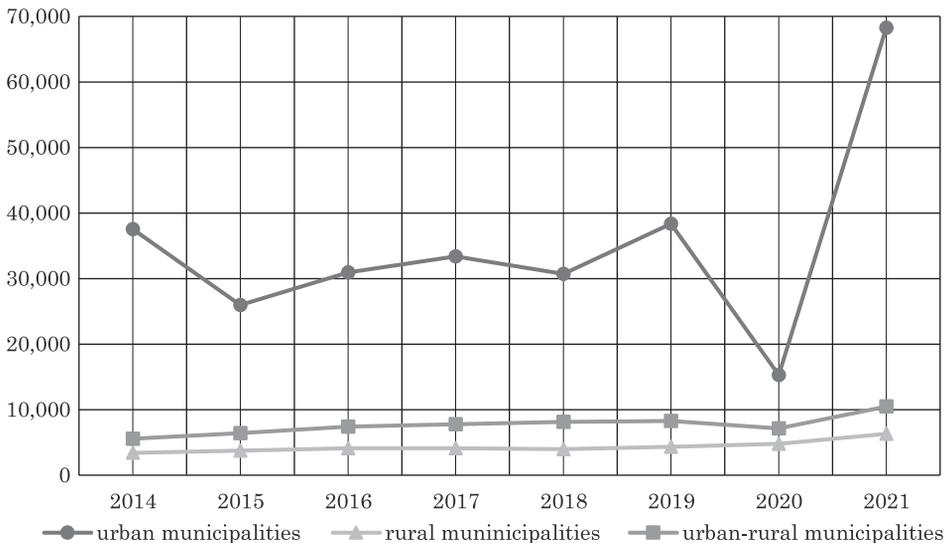


Fig. 1. The average level of the operating surplus by type of municipality in the municipalities of Małopolskie Voivodeship in 2014-2021 (PLN thousand)

Source: own elaboration based on Regional Accounting Chamber in Krakow data.

2014. After experiencing the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the operating surplus in 2020 was at the lowest average level in the entire research period (PLN 15,280 thousand). In 2021, municipal municipalities recorded a very large increase in the average level of operating surplus, which amounted to slightly more than PLN 68,275 thousand. The average level of the surplus in urban municipalities was influenced by the result of the operating budget of Kraków. Omitting it from the analyzes would mean that the average level of operating surplus in urban municipalities of the Małopolskie Voivodship would not exceed the level of this indicator from 2019.

The situation was different in the other two types of municipalities. In urban-rural municipalities of the Małopolskie Voivodship, a relatively stable average level of operating surplus was observed – it ranged from PLN 5,563,000 to PLN 10,465,000, and its average level for the research period amounted to PLN 7,646,000. In the case of these municipalities, 2020 was characterized by a slight decrease in the surplus (except for 2014 – it was the year with its lowest level). As in the case of urban municipalities, this situation can be associated with the financial consequences of combating the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the year 2021 brought an improvement in the situation.

The last group of analyzed municipalities are rural municipalities. In their case, no significant changes in the average level of operating surplus were observed. Its level fluctuated between PLN 3,406 and 6,309 thousand. The average level of operating surplus in rural municipalities in the analyzed period amounted to PLN 4,344 thousand. At the same time, it is a group of municipalities generating a lower level of surplus. In the case of this group of municipalities, it may be related to the specific and stable revenue structure of rural municipalities, which are less susceptible to the economic situation than in the case of urban or urban-rural municipalities. These municipalities did not experience a decrease in the surplus due to the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the indicators used to assess the financial situation of local government units used by the Ministry of Finance, several of them refer to the operating surplus. One of them is the share of the operating surplus in the total current revenue of local government units. This ratio determines the extent to which the entity could incur new liabilities in relation to its current revenue. The higher the value of this ratio, the greater the investment opportunities or the greater the possibility of increasing current expenditures. A negative value of the indicator indicates that the local government unit does not generate an operating surplus. The formation of the above the indicator in individual types of municipalities in the Małopolskie Voivodship is presented in Figure 2.

For most of the years of the research period, the lowest average share of the surplus in current revenue was characteristic of urban municipalities. Only in 2019 and 2021 it was higher than the other groups of municipalities. Rural

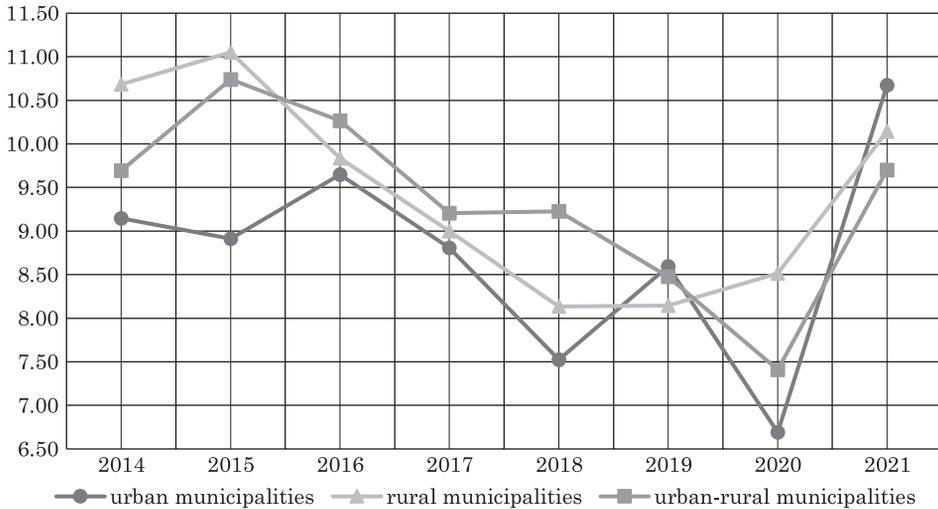


Fig. 2. Average share of the operating surplus in total current revenue by type of municipality in the municipalities of Małopolskie Voivodship in 2014-2021 [%]

Source: own elaboration based on Regional Accounting Chamber in Krakow data.

and urban-rural municipalities were characterized by a differentiated position in relation to the analyzed indicator. Initially, its highest level could be observed in rural municipalities (until 2015), then until 2018 – in urban-rural municipalities, and in 2020 – in rural municipalities. It can also be noted that in the analyzed period, the highest average share of the operating surplus in total current revenue was characteristic of urban-rural municipalities (9.44%), the average level – rural municipalities (9.34%), and the lowest – urban municipalities (8.75). When analyzing the average share of operating surplus in total operating revenues, the significant decrease recorded in 2020 in urban and urban-rural municipalities is noteworthy. The only municipalities that recorded an unknown increase in the indicator this year were rural municipalities. Therefore, the earlier conclusion can be confirmed that the group of these municipalities was the least affected by the effects of the pandemic, which did not reduce their budget surplus.

The last analyzed indicator is the level of operating surplus per municipal inhabitant. This indicator expresses how much potential available funds per inhabitant can be allocated to the implementation of tasks for the benefit of inhabitants. It also makes it possible to make the results realistic by the size of the population, which has a large impact on the level of revenue and expenditure of municipalities. The indicator, like the two previous ones, is stimulative. The evolution of the average level of the operating surplus per capita of individual types of municipalities in the Małopolskie Voivodship in 2014-2021 in PLN is presented in Figure 3.

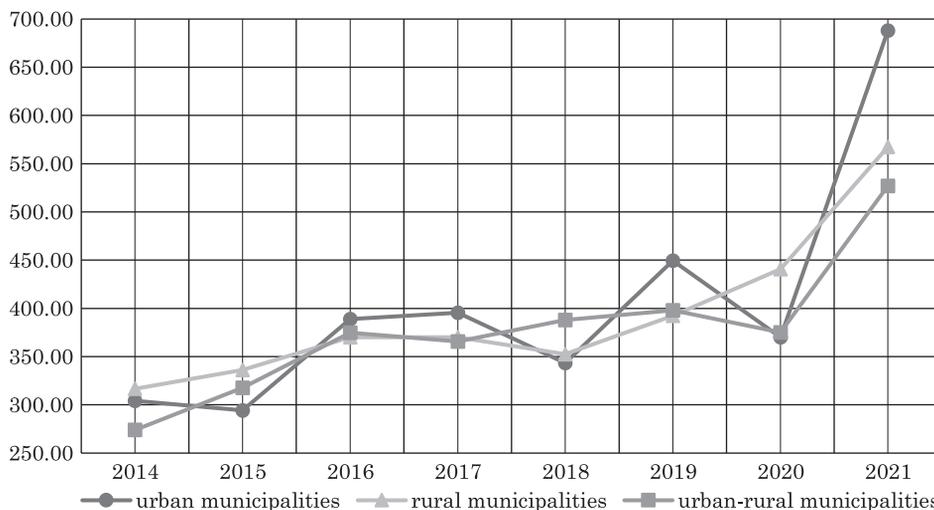


Fig. 3. Average level of operating surplus per capita by type of municipality in municipalities of Małopolskie Voivodship in 2014-2021 [PLN]

Source: own elaboration based on Regional Accounting Chamber in Krakow data.

As it results from the data presented in Fig. 3, the development of the average level of the operating surplus per capita in particular types of municipalities in the Małopolskie Voivodship has similar tendencies. The relatively highest average level of the analyzed indicator was maintained in urban municipalities and amounted to PLN 404. However, in other groups of municipalities, it was not significantly lower – in rural municipalities it amounted to PLN 393, and in urban-rural municipalities – PLN 377. As in the case of the previously analyzed indicator, the average level of operating surplus per capita deteriorated in 2020 in urban and urban-rural municipalities. Its further growth was observed in rural municipalities. This proves that the indicated municipalities are more susceptible to changes in revenue and expenditures during periods of social or economic crises, and that the ability to carry out tasks with the available funds decreases. It is also noteworthy that 2021 was characterized by a significant increase in the operating surplus in all types of municipalities.

## Conclusions

As the review of the literature shows, the operating surplus is of great importance in the implementation of local government units' tasks – both current and investment ones. It may also affect the ability of LGUs to incur liabilities and to maintain long-term socio-economic development. In periods of economic slowdown, it can serve as a kind of buffer and guarantee for the continuous and

effective functioning of a local government unit. Its analysis may be of particular importance in periods of economic downturn, as it is the first litmus test of their financial situation. The state of the operating budget may prove to be a more important message for making financial decisions, e.g. about incurring liabilities, than the financial independence indicator. Particular importance of this indicator can be observed in urban municipalities.

According to the conducted research, the most dynamic situation in the development of the operating surplus in the municipalities of the Małopolskie Voivodship in 2014-2021 characterized urban municipalities. These municipalities maintained the highest average level of operating surplus compared to other municipalities and the highest average level of operating surplus per capita. However, when analyzing the average shares of the operating surplus in current revenue, it can be concluded that these municipalities were characterized by the lowest level (except for 2019 and 2021). This may be due to the fact that these municipalities perform a large range of tasks and may conduct a tax policy on a wider scale in terms of reliefs, exemptions or redemptions – in contrast to other municipalities. In addition, this fact may be related to the high sensitivity to economic changes of the budget revenues that are important in cities. As a consequence, the implementation of tasks in a continuous manner and at a constant level of quality in periods of economic downturn may be at risk. A lower level of operating surplus may force these local governments to incur liabilities.

The lowest and, at the same time, the most stable levels of the operating surplus in the municipalities of the Małopolskie Voivodship were characteristic of rural municipalities. These municipalities did not experience a significant deterioration of their financial situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by the average level of indicators: the share of operating surplus in current revenue and the average level of operating surplus per capita. In the first year of the pandemic, these indicators were at the highest level in these municipalities. Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the scope of tasks performed by rural municipalities is not susceptible to changes in the external environment, and thus to social and economic crises. This is due to the fact that the group of these municipalities is characterized by the smallest range of sentences and the most stable tax base compared to other groups of municipalities.

Urban-rural municipalities were also characterized by a relatively stable situation in terms of the analyzed indicators. They were characterized by higher levels than rural municipalities and slightly higher fluctuations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It can therefore be concluded that the financial situation of urban-rural municipalities is more susceptible to external factors than in the case of rural municipalities. In their case, as in urban municipalities, it may be necessary to supply debt funds to budgets in periods of economic downturn in order to carry out tasks at an unchanged level.

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