

Transition, on Time – renewables acceleration areas in Poland

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Warsaw 2024



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Publication date

February 2024

Recommended quotation:

Bajczuk, R., Niewiata-Rej, M. and Śniegocki, A. (2024) "Zdążyć z transformacją – obszary przyspieszonego rozwoju OZE w Polsce" [Transition, on Time – renewables acceleration areas in Poland], Reform Institute, Warsaw.

Image on the cover: jchizhe/iStock

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1. Introduction

The Renewable Energy Directive introduced a new tool of ‘renewables acceleration areas’ in accordance with November 2023 amendment. EU Member States are required to designate these areas until February 2026 which should enable faster repowering of renewable energy sources (abbr. RES) installations. It is necessary to achieve the new EU energy and climate targets by 2030. Shortening the permitting procedures to a maximum of 12 months in renewables acceleration areas is aimed to be achieved primarily by simplifying and improving the efficiency of environmental procedures. Therefore, the designation process would be guided by the minimal environmental risk of the places. In addition to supporting the development of RES installations, the new provisions of the Directive allow for the inclusion of infrastructure areas for grid extension and energy storage.

The changes introduced in the directive are part of a broader package of European initiatives. Among others, an emergency regulation was introduced which allows for acceleration of RES investments during the transition period before the implementation of the Directive. Additionally, a technical support with the implementation procedures is provided by the European Commission to Member States, an exchange of knowledge between the countries is facilitated and reforms and investments are foreseen in the new REPowerEU chapter in the National Recovery Plan.

Accelerating procedures in the field of RES investments is particularly important for Poland as it encounters the challenge of an urgent transition of the power sector combined with the plan to electrify the entire economy. However, it may turn out to be impossible to implement the necessary changes due to their complexity. The assumptions of the Directive must be adjusted to the specific conditions of the Polish permitting system. This process is challenged by the focus of public opinion and prioritisation of public administration’s resources on the reform of the wind farm act, which is also necessary. The purpose of this publication is to present the opportunities and challenges of new European tools aimed at improvement of permitting in Poland. We hope that it will provide an incentive for a constructive dialog on their efficient and timely implementation.

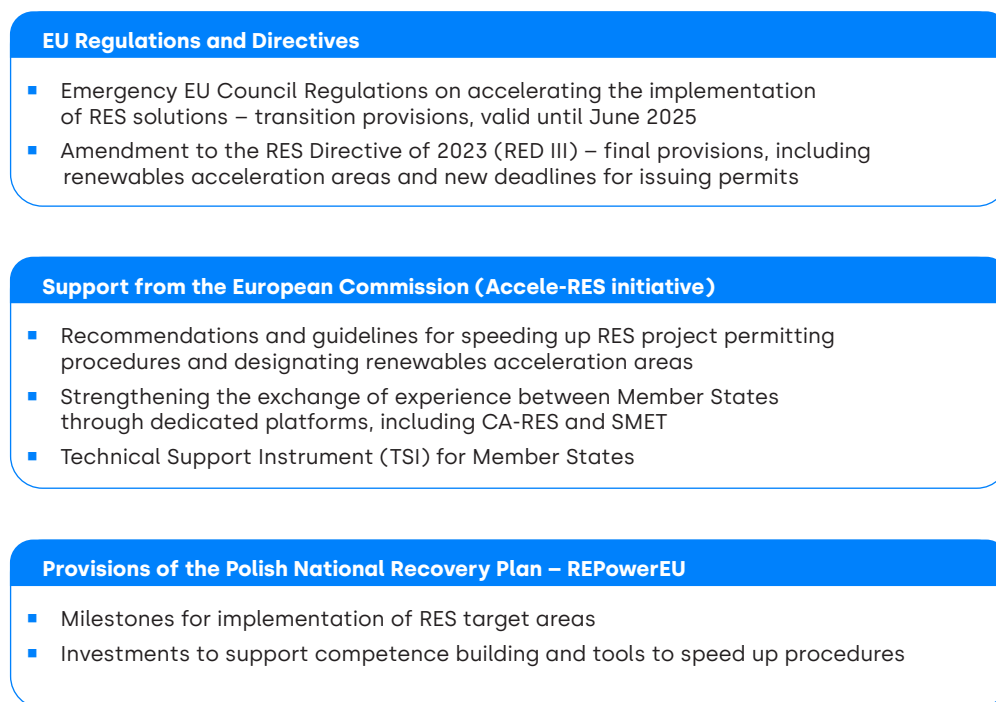
2. EU actions to accelerate RES investment procedures

The European Union’s ambitions related to RES development have consistently increased, as has the pace of changes in the energy system. The target set in 2009 to achieve a 20% share of RES in overall energy consumption by 2020 was overachieved (22%). In turn, the 2030 target has been revised several times: from at least 27% proposed by the European Commission in 2014, through the 32% target formally adopted in 2018, which was the new EC proposal of 2021 under the Fit for 55 package (40%) and arriving with the 2022 REPowerEU plan (45%). The current, 42.5% RES target to be achieved by 2030 is legally binding with an ambition to reach 45% RES in the energy mix. European Commission assessment of December 2023 indicates that the current plans of the Member States will translate into an approx. 39% RES share in 2030¹, which significantly extends the targets from before the adoption of the Fit for 55 package. This is still below the new provisions of the Directive.

¹ EC (2023), [EU wide assessment of the draft updated National Energy and Climate Plans](#), COM (2023) 796 final.

Development of RES in the power sector combined with the progressive electrification of heating, transport and industry – the so-called green electrification – is a key element of the European energy transition. However, with the adoption of increasingly ambitious RES targets and the increasing attractiveness of investments in wind farms and photovoltaics, Member States have started to see a new challenge. Long procedures for obtaining all formal permits necessary to commence the construction of the RES installations and their connection to the grid (the so-called permitting) have become a bottleneck in the transition. For this reason, the European Union has taken a series of steps in recent years to allow Member States to speed up the permitting process.

Diagram 1. European Union action to speed up RES investment procedures



Source: Reform Institute

2.1 EU Regulations and Directives

The new RES Directive (RED II) adopted in 2018 introduced for the first time obligations for Member States to ensure rapid permitting procedures for investments in renewable sources. It contained quantitative targets in this respect: the maximum of 2 years for issuing permits for RES installations, was reduced to 1 year for installations below 150 kW. Unfortunately, the provisions of the Directive have proved insufficient. As indicated by data collected in 2021, most of the Member States did not meet the requirements of the Directive for solar energy at that time. In the case of investments in wind energy, none of them reached the 2-year target for issuing a decision (according to the study, in the case of Poland, the procedures took 2.5 years for photovoltaics and approx. 7 years for onshore wind farms)².

Considering the problems related to the time limits reduction for issuing the permits, the European Commission and representatives of the Member States analysis drew their attention, i.a., to the EU environmental protection directives, which obliged Member States to carry out time-consuming environmental procedures. Due to the need to reconcile environmental care and to accelerate energy transition investments, as well as the

² See the Ember report (2022) [Ready, Set, Go: Europe's race for wind and solar](#).

link to the wider revision of the Directive as part of the Fit for 55 package, the works on new “permitting” provisions in 2021–2023 were delayed.

In view of the fuel crisis in 2022, which increased pressure on the quick repowering of RES installations, the Council of the European Union decided to adopt an **emergency regulation (2022/2577)**. It allowed for accelerating the permitting during the **transition period, before the implementation of new solutions under the RES Directive**³. The provisions of the Regulation included i.a.:

- **Overriding public interest:** RES and the associated grid and energy storage investments are to be considered as investments of overriding public interest for **procedures under the EU Environmental Directives**.
- The time limit for issuing **permits for photovoltaic installations** on artificial structures such as buildings should not exceed **3 months**.
- time limit for issuing permits for **RES repowering projects should not exceed 3 months**.

Those provisions were initially planned to apply until June 2024. However, in December 2023, the Council decided to extend the validity of the solutions under the Regulation until June 2025.⁴

The **amendment to the RES Directive (RED III)** adopted after extensive negotiations, entered into force in November 2023. It contains **the final model for accelerating permitting**, which should be introduced by Member States by 2026. It also includes a new set of maximum time limits for procedures, comprising in particular the introduction of a new instrument – **renewables acceleration areas**, that will not require the implementation of time-consuming procedures at the level of individual investment projects. A detailed discussion of the new provisions of the Directive in this respect is presented in chapter 3.

2.2 Support actions implemented by the EC

In parallel to the legislative changes, the European Commission is providing support to Member States in the implementation of the new regulations⁵. Between 2020 and 2023, it financed the **“RES Simplify” project**, which identified challenges and good practices in RES procedures in the Member States⁶. Project findings supported works on amendments to the Directives and formulation of **recommendations on acceleration of permitting published by the Commission in 2022 as part of the REPowerEU plan**⁷. Member States may also use spatial data made available by the **Energy and Industry Geography Lab**⁸ tool developed by the EU Joint Research Centre (JRC).

With the adoption of the new provisions of the RES Directive, the European Commission launched **the Accele-RES initiative** in 2023, which expands on and reinforces earlier actions. This initiative includes:

- updating recommendations on permitting to present **guidelines for determining renewables acceleration areas** – until April 2024,
- strengthening an exchange of experience on accelerating permitting between Member States through **dedicated forums**, including CA-RES (*Concerted Action on the Renewable Energy Sources Directive*) and SMET (Single Market Enforcement Taskforce), and further works by an expert group on the subject⁹,
- providing Member States with access to the EU-funded **Technical Support Instrument** (TSI), which may include assistance such as of, i.a., advisory services, research and analysis, training and exchange of experience¹⁰.

³ The text of Council Regulation 2022/2577 is available [here](#).

⁴ The text of Council Regulation 2024/223 in this regard is available [here](#).

⁵ A summary of EC actions is available [here](#).

⁶ The “ES Simplify” project report is available [here](#).

⁷ The EC recommendations of 2022 are available [here](#) with detailed [guidance](#).

⁸ Available online on the [Energy and Industry Geography Lab](#) website.

⁹ For more information, see [CA-RES](#), [SMET](#) and the [expert group](#).

¹⁰ More information on TSIs can be found [here](#).

In addition, the Grid Action Plan announced in 2023 by the European Commission informed about the preparation of guidance **for designating dedicated grid and storage infrastructure areas by mid-2025** (cf. chapter 3.3), which in accordance with RED III are to complement renewables acceleration areas.

Overall, Member States, including the Polish government, now have access to a wide range of EU actions supporting reforms to accelerate permitting. However, their effective use requires an initiative from national decision-makers, who should identify specific national barriers and knowledge gaps that can be filled in by cooperation at the European level.

2.3 Provisions of the Polish National Recovery Plan – REPowerEU

Accelerating RES investment permitting procedures is an important element of the new REPowerEU chapter, which was added to the Polish National Recovery Plan (NRP) at the end of 2023.¹¹ Provisions concerning this subject appear in the reforms, investments and milestones foreseen in the Plan. They largely replicate the RED III requirements, together with measures to support their effective implementation in Poland. At the same time, the NRP provisions directly indicate the necessity to take into account both onshore wind farms and photovoltaics when implementing the Directive.

¹¹ The text of the NRP after revision is available [here](#).

Reform G3.1.1 –streamlining the RES permitting procedures – is a key element of the REPowerEU permitting chapter. It contains as many as five detailed milestones. They are summarized in the table below. These actions are to support the achievement of 30 GW of installed capacity in onshore wind farms and photovoltaics by mid-2026.

Table 2. Milestones for the reform on the streamlining of the permitting procedures for RES in the Polish NRP

Milestone	Description	Date
G1L. Mapping of renewable energy potential for onshore wind and photovoltaic installations	Map of onshore wind energy and photovoltaics potential for the entire Poland, available in an easy-to-use format.	4thquarter of 2024
G2L. Accelerating permitting procedures	Implementation of legislative changes defining the legal framework for renewables acceleration areas , including: 1) entities responsible for the designation of the areas, 2) establishing rules for designation of the areas, 3) procedures applicable within the areas.	4thquarter of 2024
G3L. Digitalization of permitting procedures	Defining the technical specification of the digital platform covering all elements of the permitting procedures.	3rdquarter of 2024
G4L. Digitalization of permitting procedures	Tests of the pilot version of the digital platform.	4thquarter of 2025
G4L. Digitalization of permitting procedures	Implementation of the digital platform.	2nd quarter of 2026

Source: Reform Institute based on the NRP

Investment G1.1.4 of the NRP also provides for measures to support the implementation of reforms streamlining permitting and grid development. This investment includes the financing of:

- at least 106 new positions in the state administration responsible for the digitalization of the permitting and/or grid development planning process (G7G target),

- projects building competence for central administration and local governments implemented by at least 107 entities, of which at least **100 projects should focus on the permitting** for RES and distribution grids (G8G target),
- at least 10 projects implemented by NGOs, including at least **two projects focusing on the permitting for RES and distribution grids** (G9G target).

3. Renewables acceleration areas – implementation logic

In accordance with Article 15c of the revised RES Directive, “**By 21 February 2026**, Member States shall ensure that competent authorities adopt one or more plans designating (...) renewables **acceleration areas** for one or more types of renewable energy source.” This area may concern one or more types of installations for energy generation from RES.

The provision aims to accelerate RES development and for Member States to achieve the RES target of National Energy and Climate Plans. The logic of this solution is that **instead of carrying out an environmental impact assessment for a single project, as it is currently, these actions can be carried out for the entire designated area and thus accelerate the process for individual installations.**

3.1 Mapping the potential for RES development

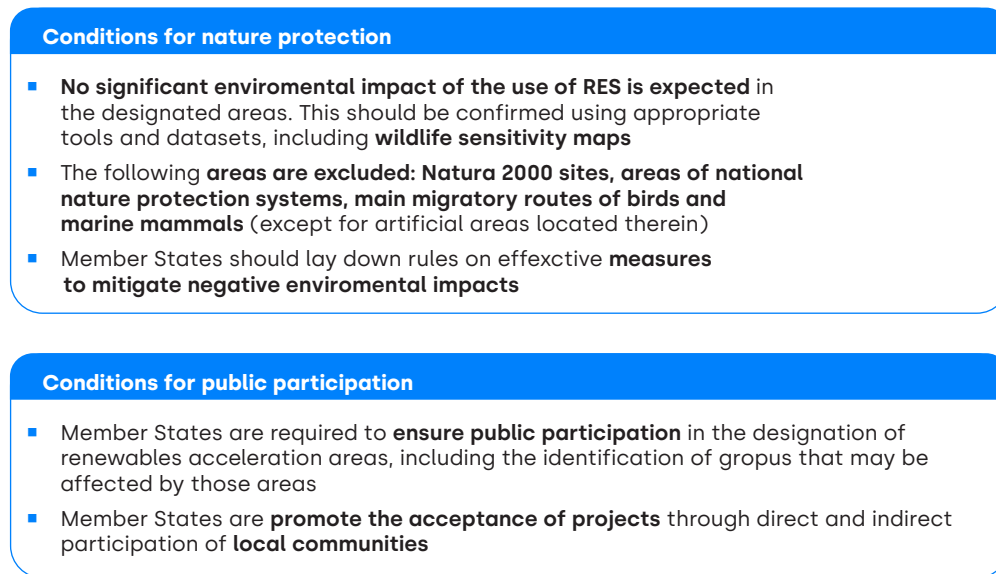
In accordance with the provisions of the Directive, the first step to identify renewables acceleration areas is to map the potential for renewable energy development throughout the country (Article 15b). “**By 21 May 2025**, Member States shall carry out a coordinated mapping for the deployment of renewable energy in their territory to identify the domestic potential and the available land surface (...) that are necessary for the installation of renewable energy plants and their related infrastructure, such as grid and storage facilities.” The mapping is to cover both onshore potential, geothermal waters and offshore areas. Moreover, the mapping shall take into account the possibility of construction or upgrade of the necessary grid and energy storage infrastructure. In the case of photovoltaics and onshore wind farms, the provisions of the Polish NRP introduce an additional time limit – **the end of 2024** (see chapter 2.3). This is one of the milestones of the Plan, which determines the disbursement of subsequent tranches of funds under the NRP.

3.2 Designation of renewables acceleration areas

The designation of renewables acceleration areas is another step that must be completed **by 21 February 2026**. As in the case of mapping the RES potential, the provisions of the NRP contain an additional milestone: the introduction of **statutory definitions of areas by the end of 2024**, which provides a little over a year for their practical implementation under the new national regulations.

In accordance with the provisions of the Directive, the renewables acceleration areas are to concern at least one type of RES, however, in the case of Poland, the NRP requires the designation of areas for at **least photovoltaics and onshore wind farms**. Member States may disregard biomass and hydropower plants. The areas shall be uniform. In accordance with the Directive, Member States are free to determine the size of areas, but should aim to “**ensure that the combined size of those areas is significant and that they contribute to the achievement of the objectives.**” The designation of renewables acceleration areas is at the same time subject to a number of conditions concerning nature protection and public participation.

Diagram 2. Conditions for nature protection and public participation to be met by renewables acceleration areas



Source: Reform Institute based on the RES Directive

The text of the Directive also indicates the types of areas that should be prioritized for the designation of renewables acceleration areas:

- rooftops and facades of buildings,
- transport infrastructure and its direct surrounding, parking areas,
- farms,
- industrial sites, mines,
- artificial inland water bodies,
- landfills, urban waste water treatment sites,
- degraded land not usable for agriculture.

At the same time, other areas can also be considered as renewables acceleration areas, provided that environmental requirements are met.

3.3 Designation of dedicated grid and storage infrastructure areas

Dedicated infrastructure areas for grid and storage projects may be designated if they are necessary to integrate renewable energy into the electricity system. The objective of such areas is to support and complement renewables acceleration areas, so both areas must be designated in parallel.

Similarly to renewables acceleration areas, dedicated infrastructure areas do not include Natura 2000 sites and areas designated under national protection schemes for nature and biodiversity conservation. However, there is an exception to this general principle. If there are no proportionate alternatives and when it is necessary to achieve the targets of renewable energy development, such infrastructure may be built on Natura 2000 sites. A prerequisite for the necessary grid and storage infrastructure is an environmental impact assessment, in accordance with the provisions of EU law, and the establishment of proportionate mitigation measures to avoid or reduce possible negative environmental

impacts. In justified circumstances, infrastructure projects located in dedicated infrastructure areas may be excluded from the environmental impact assessment, from the assessment of their effects on Natura 2000 sites and from the assessment of their impact on the protection of species.

3.4 Requirements for accelerating the permitting procedures for the construction of RES installations

The Directive defines permitting procedures as all administrative steps from the confirmation of the completeness of the application for the permit for the investment to the submission of the final decision (Article 16 section 1). The detailed requirements concerning the time limits for issuing permits are summarized in the table below.

Table 2. Key deadlines for issuing permits for investments in RES installations in the RED III Directive

	Renewables acceleration areas	Other areas
RES installations – baseline case	12 months	24 months
Offshore RES installations	24 months	36 months
<150 kW RES installations Related storage and grid connections Repowering of RES installations (more than 15% of additional capacity)	6 months	12 months
Repowering of RES installations (up to 15% of additional capacity)	3 months	
Solar energy equipment on artificial structures	3 months	
Solar power generating equipment <100 kW*	1 month	
Confirmation of completeness of the permit application	30 days	45 days
Maximum extension of permit issue due to extraordinary circumstances	6 months (3 months for <150 kW installations, storages, connections and repowering)	

*in justified cases, the threshold may be lowered to a maximum of 10.8 kW

Source: Reform Institute based on the RES Directive

The Directive also requires Member States to establish at least one contact point with which an applicant carrying out a RES investment may contact to submit the application for the building permit and permit for connection to the grid. The contact point shall guide the applicant through the administrative permit application procedure, including the steps relating to the protection of the environment. The introduction of such a point was included in the Act on Renewable Energy Sources amended in September 2023¹². From 21 November 2025 at the latest, all permitting procedures are to be conducted electronically. In addition, Member States shall ensure that administrative and judicial appeals relating to RES installation construction projects are subject to the most expeditious administrative and judicial procedure.

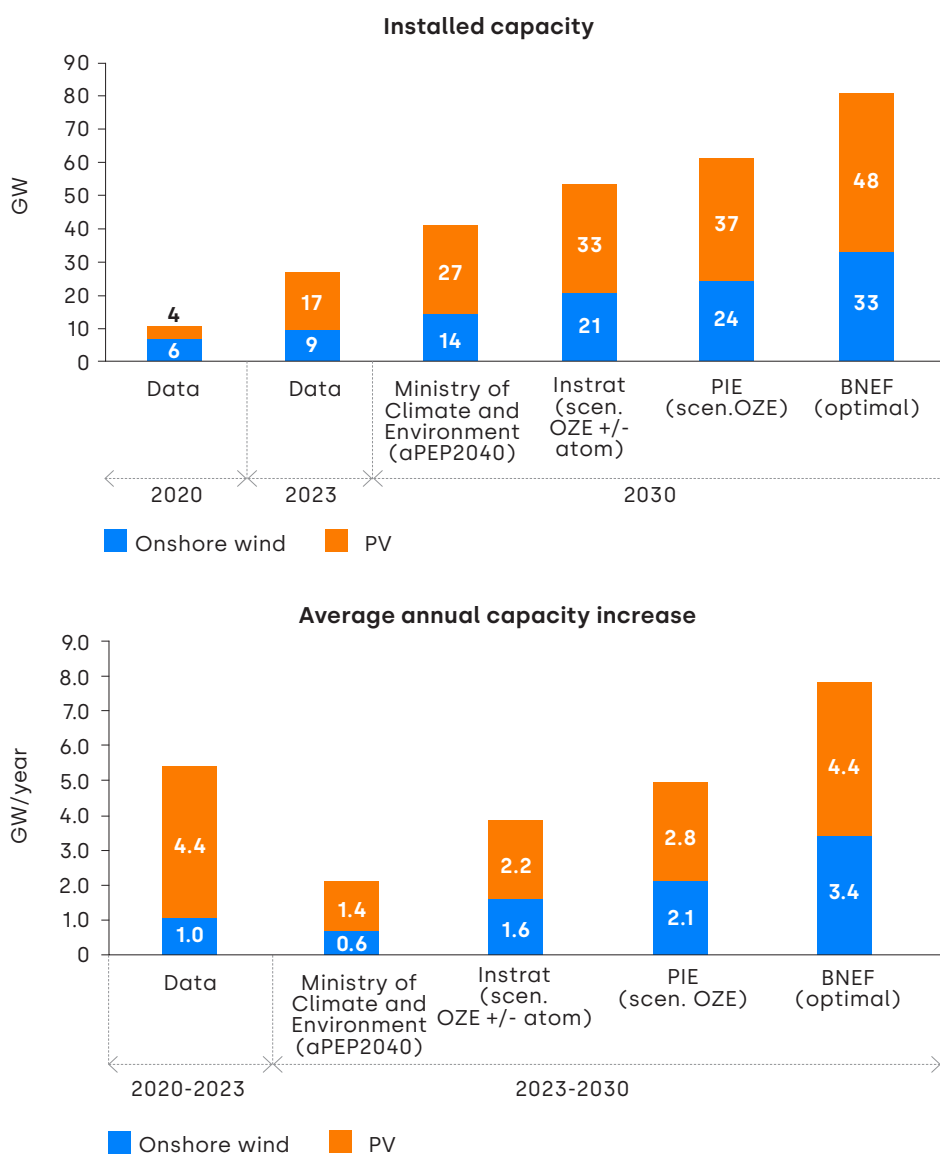
¹² More information on the amendment to the Act is available [here](#).

The RES Directive also introduces provisions on overriding public interest (Article 16f). As part of the procedure for granting the building permits and permits for grid connection of RES installations and the related transmission and storage infrastructure, they should be treated as investments of overriding public interest in balancing legal interests on issues relating to EU environmental directives (Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC, Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC, Birds Directive 2009/147/EC). This provision is to remain in force until the Member State has achieved climate neutrality.

4. New tools to accelerate RES investments and Polish energy challenges

The extensive provisions of the amended RES Directive and the revised Polish NRP on accelerating permitting, together with an ambitious implementation schedule, raise questions about their validity in the Polish context: is the required effort of the central administration justified in the Polish context? Considering the problem from the perspective of cost-effective transition paths of the Polish power sector and the barriers they face makes it possible to answer this question positively. **Poland needs an efficient implementation of renewables acceleration areas if we are to avoid costly delays in the energy transition.**

Chart 1. Installed capacity increase scenarios for onshore wind farms and photovoltaics in Poland by 2030.



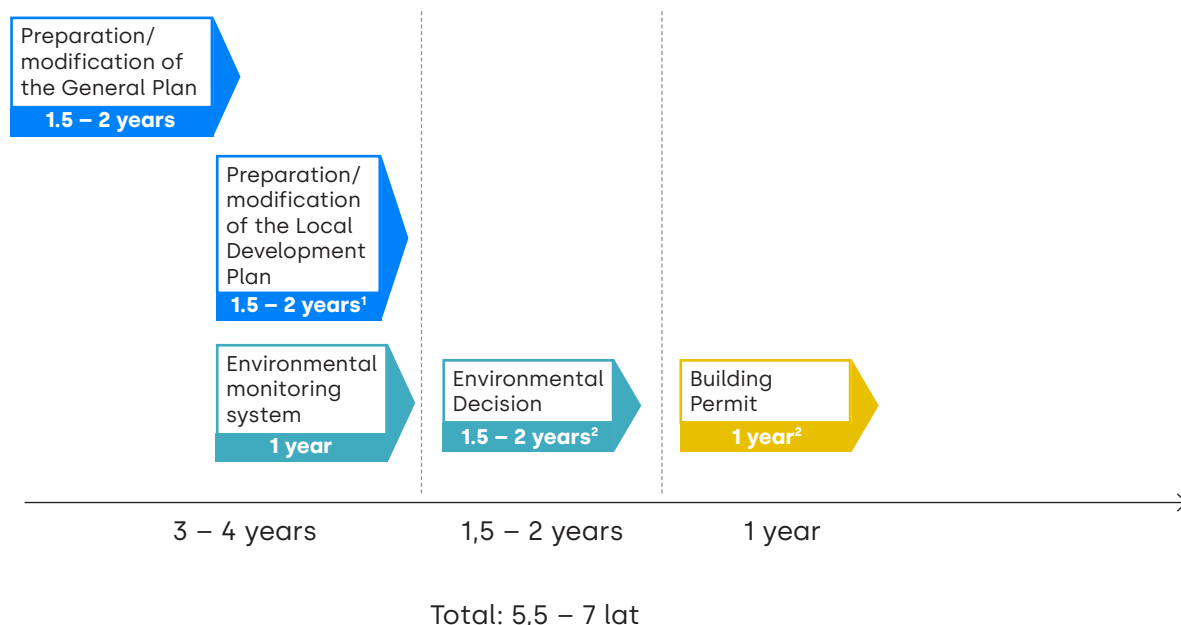
Source: Study of the Reform Institute based on the Ministry of Climate and Environment (2023), BNEF (2023), PIE (2023), Instrat (2023)

Confirmation of the above thesis can be found in the list of results of several scenario analyses for the Polish power sector, which were published last year:

- scenario prepared by the Ministry of Climate and Environment as part of the works on the revision of PEP2040 (aPEP2040 scenario)¹³,
- scenarios of ambitious RES development (with and without nuclear power – the same as in the perspective to 2030) prepared by the Instrat Foundation (RES +/- atom scenarios)¹⁴,
- RES scenario prepared by the Polish Economic Institute (RES scenario)¹⁵,
- cost-optimal scenario assuming no non-cost constraints for RES development (relating to permitting or grid development) prepared by BloombergNEF (optimal scenario)¹⁶.

The key difference between the above scenarios in 2030 is the pace of repowering of the onshore solar and wind energy sectors. The least ambitious scenario in this respect is the scenario of the Ministry of Climate and Environment, which assumes that slightly more than 40 GW of capacity will be achieved using these technologies by the end of the decade. In turn, the studies of Instrat and PIE think tanks indicate that scenarios assuming 30–50% more capacity in the photovoltaics and onshore energy sector are more cost-effective than the scenario of the Ministry. Importantly, both organizations assume that there are limitations as to the maximum pace of RES installation repowering. As the results of BloombergNEF analyses show, without factors such as long-term procedures or network constraints, the cost-optimal scenario achieves twice as high installed capacity of two key RES technologies than aPEP2040. In other words, it is **the non-cost barriers – including lengthy permitting procedures – that delay the cost-effective changes in the power sector for Poland.**

Diagram 3. Estimated time necessary to obtain permits for onshore wind farm investment in Poland



Notes: 1) ordinary procedure, 2) unless an appeal is lodged against the decision

Source: PWEA study based on PWEA data, Reform Institute, Urban Consulting

¹³ Ministry of Climate and Environment (2023), [Scenario 3. For pre-consultation of the NECP/PEP2040 revision.](#)

¹⁴ Kubiczek, P., Smoleń, M., Żelisko, W. (2023). *Polska prawie bezemisyjna. Cztery scenariusze transformacji energetycznej do 2040 r.* [Poland approaching carbon neutrality. Four scenarios for the Polish energy transition by 2040]. [Instrat Policy Paper 06/2023.](#)

¹⁵ Miniszewski, M., Pilszyk, M. (2023) *Scenariusze polskiego miks energetycznego 2040* [Scenarios of the Polish energy mix 2040], [Policy Paper No. 4](#), Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw.

¹⁶ BloombergNEF (2023), [Poland Power Transition Outlook 2023.](#)

The scale and nature of the permitting challenges in the RES sector are shown in PWEA estimates for wind energy. The combination of lengthy procedures relating to spatial planning, environmental assessments at the level of individual projects and limited possibilities of parallel implementation of individual procedures translate into a total period of permitting lasting up to 7 years. In other words, **a wind project started today from scratch may not be operational until the end of the decade**. In addition, increasing problems with connecting new installations to the grid should be added. The introduction of renewables acceleration areas and related infrastructure has the potential to directly (environmental decisions) or indirectly (facilitating spatial planning, faster grid investments allowing for connection of subsequent RES installations), reduce this period and build a much larger number of cost-competitive installations as early as in 2030.

The implementation of renewables acceleration areas can also be seen as **a complementary reform to the amendments to the Wind Farm Act** announced by the government in the first half of 2024. Identifying areas where RES investments do not pose significant environmental risks can be a method to systematically reconcile the need to accelerate procedures blocking viable investments and citizens' expectations concerning effective protection of the environment and landscape. The insufficient inclusion of this thread in the proposals for amendments to the Wind Farm Act submitted at the end of 2023 was one of the key sources of controversy that ultimately blocked the adoption of the draft.

It is therefore worth looking at renewable energy acceleration areas not as a formal requirement of the EU directive, but as a **legal instrument that the European Union provides to the Member States to facilitate the energy transition**, while at the same time supporting States in designating these areas, both through mapping tools and direct technical assistance resources.

Poland also has an opportunity to **benefit from the experience of other Member States**, which are struggling with lengthy procedures delaying RES investments. Germany is a good example: despite a long-standing consensus on the need to develop renewable energy, long environmental decision-making procedures and the development of grid infrastructure remain a challenge. The German State is constantly supporting energy transition through public and information campaigns but is also implementing national reforms that can speed up investment procedures. In November 2023, during consultations of the Federal Government with the Lands, the adoption of a package to accelerate infrastructure investments, including energy investments (the so-called Deutschland-Pakt) was approved. This is to be achieved by simplifying and accelerating building permit-granting procedures and environmental assessments, as well as digitalizing the process.¹⁷

¹⁷ More information on the adopted package can be found on the website of the [Federal Government of Germany](#).

5. Summary and recommendations

The basis for a cost-effective energy transition in Poland by 2030 is a quick repowering of RES installations. In addition to outdated principles of managing the development of power grids, long-term procedures for issuing permits for RES investments and related infrastructure investments are a key non-cost barrier that currently blocks the use of the full potential of wind energy and photovoltaics in Poland.

RED III provisions and the REPowerEU chapter in the Polish NRP address this challenge. They provide the Polish government with a new tool – renewables acceleration areas, which should be effectively implemented within the next two years. Key steps in this re-

spect should be completed by the end of 2024: mapping the RES potential for all of Poland and establishing a legal framework for the areas.

Taking into account the great importance of the upcoming changes for the energy transition, we present the following directional recommendations in the field of implementation of renewables acceleration areas in Poland:

- **Start as soon as possible.** The schedule established by RED III and the NRP for the implementation of the provisions on renewables acceleration areas and their practical implementation into national law is very ambitious. Nevertheless, some Member States, such as Germany and the Netherlands, are already implementing reforms to speed up RES investment procedures. Poland should implement renewables acceleration areas as soon as possible to enable accelerating investments in new RES capacities.
- **Use the available support from the European Commission and within the NRP.** The Polish Government, like other Member States, is provided with substantive support by the European Commission, which created a series of tools to support the efficient implementation of the reform. These include the exchange of experience between the States and tools for aggregating useful data, as well as direct technical support to governments implementing reforms. Complementary measures in support of public administration, local governments and civil society are also available within the NRP and should be used in a manner consistent with the reform vision developed by the Polish government.
- **Implement renewables acceleration areas in a manner consistent with changes in electricity grid development management and spatial planning improvements.** The implementation of renewables acceleration areas will not remove all non-cost barriers to investments in renewable sources, as they result from diverse decision-making processes. However, this reform may indirectly facilitate changes in other areas, such as streamlining grid extension or spatial planning at a local level. The NRP provisions which contain requirements for ensuring consistency of parallel changes in the indicated areas may be helpful, e.g. by linking digital permitting tools and grid development planning.
- **Maintain a continuous dialog with the public and industries involved in energy transition.** The experience of Poland and other Member States shows that insufficient consultation of changes to facilitate infrastructure investments may result in increased social resistance and the abandonment or delay of reforms, which in turn translates into investment uncertainty in the industry and slows down RES development. At the same time, however, it is important to take into account the needs of an increasing group of consumers reporting demand for low-carbon, cost-competitive energy. Extensive dialog with diverse stakeholder groups increases the likelihood of developing solutions that will be accepted by all parties.
- **Implement reforms with a view to a post-2030 perspective, including achieving climate neutrality by 2050.** The new provisions of the RES Directive and the NRP focus on enabling quick repowering of installations in the coming years, which will enable the achievement of energy and climate objectives in 2030. At the same time, however, the planned actions (potential mapping, digitalization of procedures, designation of renewables acceleration areas) may facilitate the continuation of quick changes in the power sector also in subsequent years, which will be necessary to achieve climate neutrality by the middle of the century.

