The everyday lives of rural residents and the economic activities they carry out increasingly depend on specialisation and cooperation, mobility, remote communication, access to information and services via internet. The remoteness of rural areas from the centres is becoming gradually less relevant as a condition for development. Where such a barrier is significant, it is being overcome more easily by individual transport. Nonetheless, spatial relationships are becoming more complex and independent of spatial unit boundaries. A functional approach is therefore needed to understand rural diversity, where different places play various roles in the complex mechanism of regional development. So, **can even the best description of administrative divisions properly explain the spatial differentiation of contemporary rural areas?** Does the number of jobs or the number of museum visitors in a municipality reflect the actual opportunities of the inhabitants? This problem cannot be reduced to standardising the size of spatial units. As far back as the end of the 20th century it has been considered a need to take into account urban sprawl, the specialisation of the agglomeration's subunits, its common labour market and the coordination of activities within. Hence the proposal of Functional Urban Area (FUA). **Now it is time for the rural areas (FRA)**. Due to the distance, socio-economic processes here depend all the more strongly on functional links, which are even more dispersed and multidimensional. Thus, a change in approach is needed here as well. Rather than taking the simplistic view that the existing spatial units are relatively homogeneous, it should be acknowledged that the real socio-economic regions consist just of internal diversification and cohesive linkages. And the challenge is not so much to compare as to identify them.

The project refers to the current discussion on the method of determining FRAs in Europe. **The aim is to confront the current methodology for their delimitation with the attainment of intended objectives of division, in the light of empirical data**. A comprehensive view is deemed necessary in order to use the concept for a scientific purposes. The project has **3 components: theoretical, methodological and cognitive**. **The first one** will answer the question: What is FRA and what is its place in the context of present theoretical knowledge? The notions of the function of place, functional region or regionalisation are all not new. The problem of the effect that adopted spatial units exert on the study results is noticed for almost 100 years. **FRA** needs to be defined, how does it it address these and other conceptualisations. It will make possible to determine the properties that the division should have. Their heterogeneity makes it unlikely that all criteria can be met. The spatial units should meet formal expectations, be comparable to each other and new to the units of existing subdivisions. On the other hand, the substantive criteria, matching with the actual links, are crucial. **In the first stage of the second component**, we will develop **a method of comprehensive assessment of the level of objectives achievement**, including a list of criteria and indicators to determine the fulfilment degree. For example, in formal terms, the size of units is important, but their shape compactness and transboundary nature are desirable as well. In particular, there is a need to expand the assessment in substantive terms. The current proposal only allows indirect conclusions to be drawn about the actual internal ties within FRAs. It is based on the travel time and the number of inhabitants of a locality. The question should therefore be asked whether it allows the determined units to be called "functional" or only "with the potential for functional cohesion"? The project will therefore propose substantive criteria to assess actual cohesion. Both objectively measurable flows of people within FRA, but also the subjective perspective of rural residents will be taken into account. The criteria will therefore combine quantitative methods (descriptive statistics, geostatistics, including centrography, gravity models, surveys, data scraping) and qualitative methods (participatory observation, in-depth interviews). Finally, the proposed method will include how to combine multiple indicators into one comprehensive assessment. **In the second stage**, an **optimal variant of the methodology for determining FRAs** will be seeked. The general structure of the current proposal of the methodology will be accepted, in order to contribute to the ongoing discussion. However, it will be modified for the 7 parameters that have been identified as questionable. The option with the highest score in the comprehensive assessment will be considered optimal. Lastly, **the cognitive component** focuses directly on the Polish case. **Its initial stage**, however, is aimed at identifying **international context**. The project involves cooperation with 5 reputable foreign researchers specialising in various aspects of rural functions, in different parts of Europe (Czech Republic, Croatia, Finland, the Netherlands and Spain). Each partner will consult on the project's assumptions and arrange study visit to a specific FRA in that country. As a result, it will be possible to better plan **the second stage**, i.e. the case studies in Poland, which will involve a thorough analysis of 14 areas with different locational conditions and FRA boundaries depending on the adopted parameters. These studies will be based on a review of literature, maps, internet sources, but also on participatory observation and other social studies. The identified **drivers determining the role of a locality as a local centre and the extent of FRA** are of cognitive value by themselves. However, they will also be used in the project to optimise the methodology. **In the third stage**, GIS tools will allow **the optimised methodology for determining FRA in Poland** to be implemented. The cartographic presentation of the results will provide insight into a new aspect of rural diversity. New knowledge is provided by comparing different spatial units, but especially by their boundaries alone.