FOREIGN EXPANSION STRATEGIES OF POLISH SMEs IN THE CONTEXT OF NEARSHORING AND SUPPLY CHAIN RECONFIGURATION

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Abstract. *This study examines the foreign expansion strategies of Polish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the context of nearshoring, supply chain reconfiguration, digitalisation and growing uncertainty in international trade. The main research problem concerns the forms and strategic orientations that can strengthen the ability of Polish SMEs to enter foreign markets and maintain a sustainable presence there. The research gap lies in the still insufficient integration of classical models of SME internationalisation with contemporary determinants of operational resilience, regional value chains, digital export readiness and institutional support. The aim of the article is therefore to identify the current determinants of foreign expansion strategies among Polish SMEs and to propose a* *practical model that links market selection, entry mode, operational preparation, digital readiness and support instruments. The study is based on a critical literature review, desk research and a synthesis of institutional data from PARP, Statistics Poland, the European Commission, the WTO and UNCTAD for the period 2024-2026. The analysis shows that export remains the most accessible and strategically relevant form of SME internationalisation; however, its role is changing. It is no longer only a channel for increasing sales, but also a mechanism for learning, risk diversification, strengthening customer relationships and participating in regional value chains. The findings also indicate a clear asymmetry in the internationalisation of Polish enterprises: firms are more frequently involved in international flows as importers than as active exporters. In this situation, nearshoring may create new opportunities for Polish SMEs, especially as suppliers, subcontractors and logistics partners for European companies seeking shorter and more reliable supply chains. At the same time, geographical proximity is not sufficient to ensure competitiveness. SMEs must develop operational reliability, quality assurance, contractual competences, digital communication and the ability to respond to regulatory and ESG requirements. The article contributes to the literature by combining traditional internationalisation theory with the contemporary logic of resilience and supply chain regionalisation. It also offers managerial implications by presenting a five-element recommendation model that may serve as a preliminary export-readiness audit for SMEs planning or developing foreign expansion.*

Keywords. *SMEs, internationalisation, export, foreign expansion, nearshoring.*

Introduction. The internationalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises remains one of the key development processes in the contemporary economy. In an environment marked by global competition, cost pressure, shorter product life cycles and the digitalisation of business relations, even enterprises with limited capital resources are increasingly required to make decisions that extend beyond the domestic market. Foreign expansion is no longer merely a strategy for increasing sales; it is also becoming an instrument for strengthening resilience, diversifying risk, acquiring knowledge and participating in international value chains.

The starting point for this study is the assumption that the foreign expansion of SMEs should be interpreted not only as a sales-related decision, but also as an element of growth strategy, resilience building and competitive advantage development. The literature emphasises that, because of their limited capital and organisational resources, SMEs most often begin internationalisation through less resource-intensive forms, especially export [5; 22; 24]. Today, this thesis must be complemented by factors that strongly shape strategic decisions: selective deglobalisation, geopolitics, digital sales channels, ESG pressure, energy costs and supply chain restructuring.

The aim of this study is to identify the current determinants of foreign expansion strategies among Polish SMEs and to show how classical forms of internationalisation - indirect export, direct export, cooperation, alliances and representative offices - should be interpreted in the context of 2024-2026. The research gap concerns the absence of a sufficiently integrated approach that combines traditional foreign market-entry decisions with the new requirements of resilience, digitalisation, nearshoring and the regionalisation of supply chains.

The research problem is formulated as follows: which forms and strategic orientations can currently strengthen the capacity of Polish SMEs to maintain a sustainable presence in foreign markets? This question is developed through three more specific issues: how the role of export is changing, what role nearshoring plays, and which elements should be included in a practical model for preparing an enterprise for foreign expansion. The original contribution of this study lies in synthesising these determinants and proposing a five-element recommendation model that may serve as a preliminary export-readiness audit for SMEs.

The study combines a diagnostic approach with a synthetic review of current institutional data and academic literature. This approach makes it possible to connect strategic management with an assessment of the current conditions under which Polish enterprises conduct international business.

1. Theoretical Foundations: Internationalisation and Entry Strategies

Enterprise internationalisation refers to the process of creating and developing links with foreign markets across various areas of activity, including sales, distribution, procurement, production, financing, marketing and after-sales service. In the classical approach, this process often follows a staged pattern: a firm begins with low-commitment activities, increases control over distribution channels, develops partner relationships and, in selected cases, undertakes capital investment [5; 24].

The stage model does not fully explain the behaviour of firms operating in the digital economy, within network-based business relations and in rapidly globalising niche markets. Early-internationalising enterprises may operate internationally from the outset, particularly when they possess specialised knowledge, a niche product, technological competences or access to international networks [1; 12; 19]. For Polish SMEs, limited scale does not necessarily prevent expansion, but it requires an appropriate choice of market, partners and operating model.

The choice of entry mode into a foreign market may be understood as a decision concerning the relationship between control, risk, cost and the pace of organisational learning. Indirect export reduces risk and capital requirements, but limits contact with the final customer. Direct export increases control, but requires commercial, logistical and legal competences. Cooperation and strategic alliances make it possible to share risks and resources, whereas equity-based forms provide the highest level of control but require the greatest commitment [2].

For SMEs, the principle of strategic proportionality is particularly important. A firm should select its form of expansion not on the basis of prestige or formal advancement, but according to its ability to maintain quality, timeliness, financial liquidity and relationships with foreign customers. Export therefore remains the most important path of internationalisation, although its professionalisation requires analytical, digital, network-based and institutional support [1; 10; 15].

Table 1. Forms of Foreign Expansion of SMEs and Their Strategic Significance

Form of expansion	Level of control	Risk	Significance for SMEs
Indirect export	low	low	suitable initial stage with limited international experience
Direct export	medium	medium	enables customer relationships and brand recognition
Non-equity cooperation	medium	medium	enables sharing of costs, knowledge and distribution channels
Strategic alliance	medium/high	medium/high	strengthens position in the value chain and enables a joint offer
Foreign branch or investment	high	high	requires capital, but increases market and service control

Source: own elaboration based on [1; 2; 5; 10; 15; 22; 24].

The table shows that the optimal entry mode should not be equated with the highest possible level of control, but with the alignment of risk and commitment with the resources of the enterprise. For many SMEs, a rational path is a gradual transition from indirect export to direct export and network-based cooperation.

2. Materials and Methods

This study applies the desk research method, understood as a critical analysis of secondary sources and their synthesis with the theoretical literature on enterprise internationalisation. The analysis is not a survey-based empirical study; rather, it is a diagnostic and practice-oriented study. The procedure included three stages: identification of key theoretical approaches to SME internationalisation, analysis of current institutional data and synthesis of conclusions in the form of a decision-making model for enterprises.

The selection of sources was guided by the criteria of timeliness, comparability, institutional credibility and diagnostic usefulness. The analysis focuses primarily on data from 2024-2026, as this period best reflects contemporary operating conditions: logistical disruptions, cost pressure, geopolitical shifts, the digitalisation of B2B sales and the growing importance of supply chain resilience.

The analysis draws on the PARP 2026 report, Statistics Poland data on foreign trade and enterprise innovation, the European Commission report on SMEs 2024/2025, and WTO and UNCTAD studies on world trade, investment and value chains [3; 6; 7; 8; 20; 25; 26]. This made it possible to capture both the microeconomic dimension of enterprise-level decisions and the macroeconomic dimension of changing trade and investment flows. The scope of inference is diagnostic and practice-oriented; deeper verification of the proposed model would require complementary primary research among exporters and potential exporters.

Table 2. Current Data Sources Used in the Analysis

Source	Scope of information	Significance for the article
PARP 2026	number of firms, SME structure, exporters and importers	diagnosis of the SME sector and degree of internationalisation
Statistics Poland 2025/2026	foreign trade, innovation, non-financial enterprises	verification of the current macroeconomic context
European Commission 2025	SMEs in the EU, value added, employment	comparison of Poland with the European environment
WTO 2025	world trade forecasts and trade policy pressure	assessment of external conditions for expansion
UNCTAD 2025	FDI, reconfiguration of production and supply chains	interpretation of nearshoring and diversification

Source: own elaboration based on [3; 6; 7; 8; 9; 20; 25; 26].

The combination of sources reduces the risk of one-sided interpretation because it integrates national, European and global data. As a result, the study interprets internationalisation as a strategic decision shaped by the enterprise's position in the supply network, level of digitalisation, operational resilience and access to support instruments.

3. The Current Context of the SME Sector in Poland and the European Union

The importance of SMEs for the European economy remains fundamental. According to the European Commission, SMEs account for 99.8% of enterprises in the non-financial business economy of the European Union. In 2024, this sector recorded a slight decline in real value added, but at the same time an increase in employment, while forecasts for 2025 indicated a recovery in value-added dynamics and further employment growth [3]. SMEs therefore act as a stabiliser of the economy, while remaining highly sensitive to volatility in costs, demand and regulation.

In Poland, the structure of the enterprise sector is similar. The PARP 2026 report indicates that in 2024 there were 2.37 million active non-financial enterprises, of which 99.8% were SMEs. The largest group consisted of microenterprises: 97.2% of the enterprise population, or approximately 2.3 million entities. Small enterprises accounted for 2.0%, medium-sized enterprises for 0.6%, and large enterprises for 0.2% [20]. Such dominance of microenterprises has important implications for internationalisation: most entities operate with limited capital, limited staff specialisation and a relatively low capacity to absorb foreign-market risk.

This does not mean that expansion potential is absent. Small scale may support flexibility, specialisation and rapid adaptation of the offer. The main challenge is the transition from occasional export to a sustainable international strategy, which requires market recognition, quality control, financing of the delivery cycle, management of exchange-rate and contractual risk, and communication competences. Professional and managerial competences are also important, as expansion depends not only on financial resources but also on the alignment of employee qualifications with market requirements [13].

The data confirm that Poland has broad but highly dispersed internationalisation potential. The dominance of microenterprises means that instruments supporting expansion should be simple, modular and adapted to the limited organisational capacity of firms.

Table 3. Selected Indicators of the SME Sector in Poland and the EU

Indicator	Value	Strategic interpretation
Share of SMEs in EU enterprises	99.8%	SMEs constitute the basic structure of the European economy
Number of active enterprises in Poland in 2024	2.37 million	broad base of potential entities for expansion
Share of SMEs in the enterprise population in Poland	99.8%	export policy must be adapted to small-scale firms
Share of microenterprises in Poland	97.2%	main constraint is limited capital, time and competences
Number of microenterprises in Poland	approx. 2.3 million	internationalisation potential requires selection and support

Source: own elaboration based on [3; 20].

4. Current Indicators of the Internationalisation of Polish Enterprises

Current data confirm that internationalisation is not distributed evenly across the entire SME population. According to PARP, the number of goods exporters amounted to 107.2 thousand, representing 4.5% of enterprises, while the number of service exporters amounted to 18.4 thousand, or 0.8% of firms. Import activity was more widespread: 264.5 thousand enterprises imported goods, and 26.8 thousand imported services [20]. These data indicate that Polish firms are more frequently involved in international flows as buyers than as active sellers in foreign markets.

This asymmetry is strategically important. Import may serve as a learning stage, enabling firms to understand foreign markets, build supplier relationships and become familiar with quality standards. By itself, however, it does not create the same competitive advantage as active export sales. For SMEs, the key challenge is to move from passive participation in international flows to an active expansion strategy that includes market segmentation, a value proposition, pricing policy, customer service and risk management.

Macroeconomic data also show that Polish foreign trade remains significant, but sensitive to changes in the economic environment. In January-December 2025, goods exports amounted to PLN 1,553.5 billion, while imports amounted to PLN 1,579.7 billion, resulting in a negative balance of PLN 26.3 billion. Exports increased by 2.0% year on year, whereas imports increased by 3.9% [8]. In January 2026, exports reached PLN 120.6 billion, imports PLN 117.8 billion, and the balance was positive at PLN 2.8 billion, although both exports and imports were lower than a year earlier [9].

For SME strategy, the key issue is not only the level of trade turnover, but also the volatility of operating conditions. Enterprises should develop expansion scenarios that take into account declining demand, exchange-rate fluctuations, tariff changes, transport costs and delivery times. SME flexibility may become an advantage, but only when supported by management information and financial discipline.

Table 4. Current Measures of Enterprise Internationalisation in Poland

Measure	Value	Significance for SME strategy
Number of goods exporters	107.2 thousand	export is concentrated in a relatively small group of firms
Share of goods exporters	4.5%	most firms do not conduct active foreign sales
Number of service exporters	18.4 thousand	services have growth potential, but require digital competences
Number of goods importers	264.5 thousand	import is a broader form of contact with foreign markets
Share of goods importers	11.1%	supply chains are more internationalised than sales

Source: own elaboration based on [20].

The most important conclusion is the asymmetry of internationalisation: Polish enterprises participate in foreign markets more often as importers than as exporters. Development therefore requires a shift from purchasing-based international involvement to active sales and relationships with foreign customers.

Table 5. Polish Foreign Trade - Selected Data for 2025/2026

Period	Exports	Imports	Balance	Conclusion
January-December 2025	PLN 1,553.5 billion	PLN 1,579.7 billion	PLN -26.3 billion	imports grew faster than exports
2025/2024 dynamics	+2.0%	+3.9%	deterioration	competitive and cost pressure
January 2026	PLN 120.6 billion	PLN 117.8 billion	PLN +2.8 billion	short-term improvement
January 2026/2025 dynamics	-5.9%	-9.3%	positive balance	year-on-year decline in turnover

Source: own elaboration based on [8; 9].

The volatility of trade data indicates that SME export strategy should include alternative courses of action for different scenarios. Monitoring transport costs, exchange rates, payment terms and regulatory changes becomes particularly important [14].

5. Nearshoring, Digitalisation and Resilience as New Determinants of Expansion

The contemporary foreign expansion of SMEs cannot be analysed solely through the classical lens of market selection. The configuration of value chains has become a central strategic issue. The pandemic, geopolitical tensions, the war in Ukraine, rising energy costs and state industrial policies have led enterprises to reassess the length, stability and vulnerability of their supply chains. UNCTAD emphasises that trade tensions, industrial policies and changing supply chain strategies affect investment decisions and production structures [25]. Similar conclusions emerge from the literature on global value chains and supply-network resilience, which stresses coordination, flexibility and rapid reconfiguration [4; 16].

In this context, nearshoring is becoming an important element of enterprise strategy. It does not represent a simple retreat from globalisation; rather, it involves shifting selected functions closer to target markets in order to reduce the risk of delays, improve quality control, lower logistics costs and shorten response times to orders. Pierzchlewski and Węgrzyn indicate that interest in nearshoring industrial production from China results from rising labour costs, geopolitical changes, the need to increase supply chain flexibility and pressure for sustainable development [23].

For Polish SMEs, nearshoring may represent both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity lies in becoming suppliers, subcontractors, logistics partners or specialised manufacturers for European firms seeking closer sources of supply. The challenge lies in meeting quality, timeliness, environmental and digital standards. Geographical proximity alone is insufficient if a firm lacks the capacity to process orders continuously, maintain data transparency and communicate in real time.

Nearshoring should therefore be understood in two directions. First, it may increase the sales opportunities of Polish SMEs by enabling them to become geographically closer suppliers for European customers. Second, it may function as a procurement strategy for SMEs themselves, based on shortening their own supply chains, reducing dependence on distant markets and building more stable relationships with regional partners.

Digitalisation is the second determinant. B2B platforms, e-commerce, CRM systems, marketing automation and data analytics reduce the barrier to initial entry into foreign markets. They do not eliminate the need for strategy; rather, they increase the importance of channel selection, reputation management, data security and after-sales support. In foreign expansion, digitalisation should support demand analysis, communication, logistics, payment processes, quality control and scaling under conditions of limited resources [10; 17; 18].

These determinants operate jointly rather than separately. Nearshoring without digitalisation and quality standards may remain an unused opportunity, whereas digitalisation without operational resilience does not guarantee a sustainable presence in foreign markets.

Table 6. New Determinants of SME Foreign Expansion

Determinant	Mechanism of influence	Managerial implication
Nearshoring	shortening supply chains and shifting production closer to the market	building an offer for European partners and customers
Digitalisation	reducing costs of communication, sales and market analysis	developing B2B, CRM, e-commerce and data analytics competences
Operational resilience	maintaining deliveries despite external shocks	diversifying suppliers, markets and logistics channels
ESG regulations	increasing environmental and reporting requirements	monitoring carbon footprint, certification and transparency
Trade policy	volatility of tariffs, sanctions and administrative barriers	legal monitoring and scenario-based planning

Source: own elaboration based on [4; 11; 16; 17; 23; 25; 26].

6. A Recommendation Model for SME Expansion Strategy

On the basis of the analysis conducted, a five-element recommendation model can be proposed for Polish SMEs planning or developing foreign expansion. The model does not replace a detailed enterprise strategy; rather, it organises the key decisions that should precede entry into a foreign market. Its value lies in combining market, operational, digital and institutional perspectives - areas that are often analysed separately in practice.

The first element is market selection. SMEs should assess not only the size of demand, but also administrative barriers, payment stability, logistics costs, business culture, technical requirements, competition and the possibility of after-sales service. For firms with limited resources, it may be more rational to enter a geographically closer but better-understood market than a formally larger market with high adaptation costs.

The second element is the choice of entry mode. Indirect export may be appropriate for firms beginning international activity, whereas direct export should be developed where the enterprise seeks to build its brand and relationships. Cooperation and alliances are particularly important in the context of nearshoring because they allow firms to join regional supply chains without immediately incurring the costs of equity investment.

The third element is operational preparation. A firm should assess whether it can maintain timeliness, quality, financial liquidity and communication with foreign customers. In foreign expansion, the cost of error is usually higher than in the domestic market because it may include loss of credibility, transport costs, exchange-rate risk and potential legal disputes.

The fourth element is digital readiness. This includes not only a website in a foreign language, but also a professional presentation of the offer, a structured product-data catalogue, rapid contact options, relationship management systems, information security and opinion monitoring. The fifth element is institutional support, including export-promotion instruments, advisory services, trade-fair programmes, market information and contact networks. Such support does not replace strategy, but it may reduce the cost of initial entry and limit the risk of incorrect decisions.

Table 7. Recommendation Model of SME Expansion Strategy

Stage	Key question	Expected result
1. Market selection	Is the market attractive and serviceable?	market aligned with the firm's resources
2. Entry mode	What level of control and risk is acceptable?	selection of export, cooperation or partnership
3. Operational preparation	Can the firm maintain quality, deadlines and liquidity?	realistic delivery and customer-service plan
4. Digital readiness	Is the firm credible and accessible digitally?	consistent B2B presence and efficient communication
5. Institutional support	How can information and entry costs be reduced?	use of programmes, trade fairs and networks

Source: own elaboration.

The model is sequential in structure, but in practice it requires feedback loops. A negative assessment of operational or digital readiness should lead to a revision of the selected market, entry mode or pace of expansion.

7. Discussion

A comparison of theoretical insights and current data leads to the conclusion that export remains the most important and most accessible form of SME internationalisation; however, it should not be treated as a simple form of expansion. Contemporary export requires far greater professionalisation than in the previous decade, because foreign competition increasingly takes place at the level of network relationships, organisational capabilities and operational efficiency [1; 11; 15]. It includes data analysis, management of digital channels, certification, logistics, multilingual service and transaction security.

Current data confirm that export remains a fundamental, yet still selective, form of SME internationalisation. Only a small percentage of enterprises actively sell goods abroad [20]. The principal strategic problem is therefore not merely the choice between indirect export, direct export and cooperative forms, but the need to increase the number of firms capable of a systematic and professional presence in foreign markets. In practice, this requires the development of analytical, logistical, digital, financial and contractual competences.

The new role of nearshoring lies in its potential to increase the importance of SMEs as participants in regional production and supply networks. Poland, as a country located close to the main markets of the European Union, may benefit from the shortening of value chains. This benefit, however, depends on whether enterprises are able to meet standards that were previously required mainly from large suppliers: predictability, quality, timeliness, regulatory compliance and data transparency.

From the perspective of economic policy, support for SME expansion should move away from general export promotion towards export-readiness diagnosis, contractual advisory services, certification support, digitalisation of sales, the creation of export consortia and the linking of firms with European supply chains. From a managerial perspective, five actions should precede expansion: market assessment, selection of entry mode, operational audit, preparation of a digital B2B offer and protection against payment, logistics and legal risks [11; 21; 22]. The competences of managers and employees responsible for international contacts are particularly important, as a mismatch between competences and market needs may limit a firm's ability to serve foreign partners professionally [13; 14].

8. Conclusions

First, the contemporary foreign expansion of Polish SMEs takes place in an environment of greater uncertainty, cost pressure and stronger dependence on the quality of supply chains. The analysis of current data from 2024-2026 indicates that any assessment of internationalisation strategies must take into account digitalisation, operational resilience, ESG, geopolitics and nearshoring.

Second, export remains the basic form of SME internationalisation, but its strategic content has expanded. It is no longer solely a way to increase sales, but also an instrument of learning, risk diversification, brand strengthening and participation in value chains. The greatest challenge remains the transition from incidental export to a sustainable presence in foreign markets.

Third, nearshoring may create new opportunities for Polish SMEs, especially in manufacturing, business services, logistics and specialised industrial niches. Taking advantage of this opportunity requires operational, digital and quality-related competences, as well as the ability to cooperate within network-based arrangements.

Fourth, the recommended SME expansion strategy should cover five interconnected areas: market selection, entry mode, operational preparation, digital readiness and institutional support. Only such an approach makes it possible to link development ambitions with the real resources of the enterprise and to reduce the risk of entering a market that the firm is unable to serve in terms of quality, finance or logistics.

Further research should include a nationwide survey of exporting enterprises and potential exporters, with a separate module on nearshoring, digitalisation, regulatory barriers, expansion financing and supply chain resilience. This would make it possible to identify support needs more precisely and to assess which competences most strongly increase the likelihood of maintaining a sustainable presence in foreign markets.

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