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## **Social trust of youth in the shadow of the depopulation process**

### **Summary**

The article analyses selected results of an extensive study conducted as part of the ProEdUMW project – Scientific research in the service of local educational policy implemented in Ostrołęka by the Faculty of Education at the University of Warsaw. Two quantitative studies, conducted using the survey technique as part of the Ostrołęka educational observatory projects (covering the issues of teaching effectiveness, developing students’ social competences and equal educational opportunities in public primary schools in the city) and Democracy is OK! (strengthening the democratic culture of the school) were implemented in the 2021/22 school year. The first study was conducted in the eighth grades of all public primary schools in Ostrołęka, the second among students of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades of public secondary schools. The aim of the analyses of selected research problems was to acquire knowledge covering important issues for a city at risk of marginalisation and depopulation, such as: the attitude of young people to the city, their life plans, students’ trust in the institutions of the city and the state. Regardless of the positive attitude towards the city in which they study, young people do not plan to live there and leave it with very low levels of social capital. The aim of the entire ProEdUMW project was

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to support local educational policy, so the article ends with recommendations for school culture and practice that could help build young people's social trust.

**Keywords:** social trust, local educational policy, the Ostrołęka educational observatory projects, school culture and young people's social trust

## Introduction

Applied social research, focused on providing data that supports the development of scenarios for beneficial changes for the municipal authorities, must precisely take into account the broadest possible scope of the local context. The subject of this study is the analysis of a study conducted in a medium-sized city located in central Poland – Ostrołęka. This paper focuses on reflecting on the potential of young people as a driver of urban development, and considers the issue of the social capital with which they leave their home environment. The local context, being an important part of the analysis, appears particularly important in view of the expanding areas of small and medium-sized Polish cities threatened by depopulation and marginalisation, both social and economic. Despite these threats, these regions still remain the key environment for the socialisation and school education of children and youths.

## Social marginalisation of Ostrołęka

In Poland, the processes of depopulation and social marginalisation cover rural areas (for many years) and small, medium and large cities in most voivodships, and the scale of the phenomenon is growing (Szukalski, 2019). The main reasons are: low natural growth and internal and foreign migration caused by economic and social aspirations. The decreasing number of inhabitants, especially the outflow of young, working people, causes a decrease in the economic and social potential, which leads to the marginalisation of given areas. In 2019, there was a decrease in population in 295 poviats, and only in 84 there was an increase in population (out of 314 poviats and 66 cities with poviat rights).

As suggested by the report of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) (2019), Ostrołęka belongs to the group of cities threatened by depopulation and marginalisation (social and economic). Based on the data collected in the years 2008–2014, Ostrołęka was identified as a city of declining potential, only to change its ranking to a city at risk of marginalisation in the next report, covering 2014–2018. These positions in ranking depend on how many of the seven analysed risk indicators characterise the given city. These are:

1. Change in the registered population (2008–2014) in comparison to the average change in the country during the same period.
2. The forecast developed by Statistics Poland for the years 2018–2030 for the municipality, as compared to national average for the whole country (Statistics Poland's country-level forecast by 2035 was replaced by the more precise municipality-level forecast by 2030).
3. Change in the number of registered unemployed persons (2008–2014) in comparison to the average change in the country during the same period.
4. Change in the level of own income in the municipality's budget (2008–2014) in comparison to the average change in the country during the same period.
5. Change in the number of provided overnight stays (2004–2014) in comparison to the average change in the country during the same period.
6. Change in the number of registered business entities (2008–2014) in comparison to the average change in the country during the same period.
7. Change in the number of registered seats of the largest companies included in the 2000 List published by the *Rzeczpospolita* daily newspaper (2011–2014) in comparison to the average change in the country during the same period.

Five of the above mentioned risk factors apply to Ostrołęka: a decrease in the number of inhabitants, unfavourable demographic prognoses, the number of overnight stays provided, and both indicators of the number of business entities. Moreover, the actual scope of population decline is probably larger, because Statistics Poland does not take emigration into account. In Ostrołęka (next to such cities as Tarnów or Bytom) it can reach even 40–50% of the current numbers by 2050 (Śleszyński, 2018). As follows from Statistics Poland's data, in 2002 Ostrołęka had over 54 thousand inhabitants, and over a ten-year period their number dropped to slightly over 48 thousand. This is a decline by about 10%.

Similar data, although derived with the use of a slightly different methodology, are presented in the report of the Polish Economic Institute (PEI) of 2019 (Dębkowska et al., 2019). Over 700 small and over 200 of medium-sized cities, whose population accounts for about 40 percent of all Poles faces the risk of depopulation due to economic and demographic factors. A significant part of them requires new development strategies. Those cities are located primarily in central, eastern and southern Poland.

Negative demographic processes, such as depopulation, result from the outflow of young, ambitious and entrepreneurial people to other locations, which reduces not also the economic, but also the social potential. Low incomes of the population translate into declining own revenues for local governments, while the needs and aspirations of local communities are growing, especially those of young people who do not want to replicate the social life scenarios of previous generations.

Economic factors are forcing city authorities to “rationalise costs,” which often results in the liquidation of important social, cultural and administrative institutions (libraries, cinemas, community centres, schools, health and cultural centres, police stations or courts). This unfavourable picture can be compounded by the poor road or poor tourist offer, and in some cases climatic pollution.

The PAN report also points to a low level of social activity, admittedly characteristic of Polish society in general, but particularly unfavourable in small and medium-sized cities, where local communities could reduce the negative consequences of the city’s economic and administrative weakness.

Young people are driven to migrate from small and medium-sized cities to larger centres (or in some cases, villages) by high unemployment rates, lack of opportunities to fulfil their aspirations – economic and personal alike, including educational aspirations.

### Social trust

If the migration trend, regardless of its pace, becomes unavoidable, the young people leaving smaller cities are their “calling cards” and could be the hope for development for their new communities. One of the important elements of environmental socialisation, including school socialisation, is the building of social capital. It determines, among other things, young people’s social attitudes and the level of satisfaction from being a member of a particular community. The concept of social capital is defined differently. In this study, it will be understood in accordance with the approach of James Coleman and Robert Putnam, as a set of organisational and communicative features of society, where trust, norms and relationships that ensure cooperation and smooth operation play a key role (Putnam et al., 1993). The basic element of social capital analysed in this study is the trust in institutions and selected sources of knowledge.

Trust is one of the most essential components of social capital. It is also the subject of reflection and multifaceted research by scholars from many social science disciplines. In Poland, Piotr Sztompka is the authority who has studied this issue in depth. His simple definition of trust has been quoted many times (Sztompka, 2007). He defined trust as a wager made “on the uncertain future actions of other people.” Two types of cultures are distinguished repeatedly in scientific works – a culture of trust and a culture of distrust. Poland is rather a country of culture of distrust. This is due to a long history of imposing oppressive power, the absence of democracy, and the need for individual struggle for existence, which created many barriers to the development of a civil society that fosters a culture of trust. Anthony Giddens (1991) pointed out the essential characteristics of trust, defining

it as confidence, reliance on individuals or systems or institutions. According to him, passive trust, i.e. acceptance of authority, which is characteristic of traditional societies in post-industrial societies, is changing into active trust, which involves constant monitoring and evaluation of the integrity of individuals and institutions. Francis Fukuyama (1995) also associated trust with social capital. Trust builds the belief that other people (and institutions) who recognise similar norms and values will behave honestly and in solidarity.

So how do we build social trust? What conditions must be fulfilled for the young people to have a sense of connection with the place they come from? The answer to this question is very difficult. Numerous studies show diverse conditions, principles, bases for building a culture of trust in social, individual, organisational contexts. Let's begin from looking at the conditions for building social trust, formulated by Piotr Sztompka (2007). He opens the catalogue of such conditions by stating that normative consistency is the key here. A well-constructed law, devoid of internal contradictions, is conducive to building of an orderly and predictable social life. Additionally, normative consistency should be supported by the consequent observance of rules by individuals. These characteristics of society build individual and organisational trust. The second condition for building a culture of trust is the durability of social order. Sztompka states that the permanence of the state system, its institutions, organisations, structures gives a sense of stability to society, and thus builds a sense of security. Such conditions of social life are conducive to the display of trust, and most often this trust is reciprocated. The transparency of social organisation is equally important. Transparency of the actions of those in power, access to information on the functioning of the structures of social organisations, is a necessary condition for the emergence and development of a culture of trust. Knowledge of misguided decisions or unfavourable actions is better for social functioning than attempts at concealing it. It protects against the development of suspicion towards an institution whose principles of operation are not known. Another element of a culture of trust is what Sztompka calls familiarity. It refers to an individual's physical surroundings and the environment of action. Familiarity with the place where we live, the architecture, the landscape, but also the possibility of repetitive behaviour promotes a sense of security and mental stability. Sztompka mentions another condition, which supports the building a culture of trust: it is the responsibility of other people. The observance of rules and laws that regulate social life is subject to social control. Every individual can appeal to an institution, organisation or another entity that monitors the observance of applicable regulations if they suspect their rights are being breached. The certainty of existence of such a mechanism, and positive experiences with such mechanism, build social trust (Sztompka, 2007). The review of factors necessary to build the

culture of trust demonstrates that its fundamental element is the creation of conditions for the development of mental peace and emotional stability, based on a sense of community. Can the trust-building conditions, discussed above, be implemented at school? This is not a simple and clear-cut task. Many studies have attempted to clarify the complexity of building a culture of trust in an institution. Let's take a look at some of the results, treating the school as an institution that fulfils its designated tasks in society.

Finnish researchers, Johanna Kujala, Hanna Lehtima, Raminta Pecetami (2016), have analysed the role of trust and mistrust in an institution. Their study confirmed the complexity of the role trust plays in building an organisation's culture and showed that trust is a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon. It confirmed also the outcomes of many earlier studies that indicated the role of affective and cognitive factors for building a culture based on organisational unity and its fragmentation. The researchers established that affective trust combined with cognitive mistrust leads to organisational unity, whereas emotion-based trust and mistrust lead to organisational fragmentation. The researchers pointed also to the fact that organisational fragmentation can have positive aspects. It supports the expression of doubt and is conducive to honesty in communication, which can lead to positive changes in the institution.

Trust in institutions is linked by many researchers to interpersonal trust. If we get to know and trust someone, we are more likely to cooperate and share knowledge. Thus, interpersonal trust can be a basic condition for continuous knowledge sharing and building cooperation, both of which affect the development of organisations (von Krogh, Ichijo & Nonaka, 2000). American researchers Ji Hoon Song, Hong Min Kim and Judith A. Kolb (2009) have demonstrated that interpersonal trust can be the basis of organisational trust structure. It can build organisational-level behaviour based on trust. This happens through cooperation that enables learning.

Institutional trust applies also to the culture of trust at school. Trust is the basis for the effectiveness of the school's work. Numerous research (e.g. Tshcannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998) show that this is an element of the teacher-student relationship. If a teacher can rely on students, fellow teachers and other school staff, they can concentrate on their duties at school. A study conducted in primary schools in Ankara by Cetin Erdogan (2016) shows that the person responsible for building culture of trust at school is the principal, who is responsible for communication of mission, understanding of the school's purposes and for ensuring good relations among employees of the school. Bad relations between the principal and the staff, characterised by prejudice, harm the culture of trust in the school. Thus, the condition for building a culture of trust is the fight against prejudice, which according to the author include social background, gender, age, disability, ethnicity,

religion, being a foreigner. It is also important for the principal and the staff to share common values. According to Wayne K. Hoy and Cesil G. Miskal (2008) (based on Erdogan, 2016), trusting relationships between participants in the education system determine the basis of a culture of trust in schools.

Trust is strongly related to the national culture of individuals. A focus on collectivism, and thus the existence of high-intensity internal social control, is associated with lower external trust. Strangers pose a threat to the community. Representatives of an individualistic culture, where in-group control is lower, are more open to outside contact and are inclined to place trust in strangers (Irwin & Berigan, 2013). This is an important information in the context of the increasing migration movements, and in particular with respect to the numerous group of war refugees from Ukraine, studying in Polish schools. It shows that locking oneself within the circle of one's own culture is not conducive to trust and community building.

The search for factors that foster a culture of trust at schools is a complicated task. It is also difficult to answer the question of elements that build culture of trust at the school level. Research conducted within the framework of the international Civic Education Study program in 1998–2003 demonstrated the complexity of the trust phenomenon and did not lead to an understanding of the genesis of political trust. The authors of the study only noted, on a macroscopic scale, that the relationship of trust is more significant in the community dimension – young people from lower status groups displayed relatively higher trust in institutions with clear socialisation tasks. Of the micro-social determinants tested, the freedom to speak one's mind at school and interpersonal trust are of some importance for building political trust (Dolata, Koseła, Wilkomirska & Zielińska, 2004).

Is the school infrastructure relevant to building trust? It probably is. Interestingly, Ali Erden (2007, based on Erdogan, 2016) argues that smaller schools have a better level of trust culture than big ones. Teachers believe that the size of the school is associated with the ability to pursue common goals and values. It also fosters a positive attitude among teachers to build a culture of trust. In small schools, students are more inclined to learn and be involved in the implementation of school tasks.

The Public Opinion Research Centre CBOS (Omyła-Rudzka, 2022) has been researching social trust in Poland for twenty years, and despite certain fluctuations, it remains on a constantly low level. Less than one-fifth of Polish respondents state that people can be trusted, and 77% believe that one should be very cautious in relations with other people. In general, as suggested by numerous studies, mistrust is expressed more strongly in the Polish society than attitudes based on openness and trust. Our society has also long been characterised by rather low levels of trust in state institutions and other social institutions. In international studies, such as

the European Social Survey, conducted since 2002, Poles are characterised by much lower social trust indicators than many other countries (especially Western ones) (Domański, 2018). This also applies to school students. The report *Youth in Democracy. Results of the ICCS 2022 International Civic Competence Survey* provides information on, among other things, the level of confidence of 14-year-olds in the agendas of social life. Young people declare their general level of trust in others at 36%. This is three percentage points less than the average in 20 countries participating in the study.

Threats associated with such low level of social capital are very serious. These include a lack of social cohesion and solidarity, a lack of motivation to cooperate with others, a lack of motivation for social involvement, a lack of openness to others, social divisions and other factors destructive to the functioning of society. This is stressed also by authors of the report *Poland 2030 – Development Challenges*, who have listed the increase of social capital among the ten crucial challenges, and indicated trust as the most important stimulus for the multi-annual development strategy of our country (Boni et al., 2009).

### Description of the study

The study was conducted as part of the broad research project ProEdUMW – Scientific research in the service of local education policy, carried out in Ostrołęka<sup>1</sup> by the Faculty of Education of University of Warsaw. The analysis covered selected data from two quantitative studies, conducted with the questionnaire technique as part of the projects, *Ostrołęckie obserwatorium oświatowe – the Ostrołęka Education Observatory* (which covers the issues of teaching effectiveness, the shaping of students' social competences and equality of educational chances in public primary schools in the city) and *Demokracja jest OK! (Democracy is OK!)* (strengthening the democratic culture of the school). The first study was among eighth graders of all public primary schools in Ostrołęka, the second one among students in the second, third and fourth grades of public secondary schools. Both took place in the 2021/22 school year, were voluntary and anonymous. All students were invited to participate in the survey (subject to legal guardian consent). The survey, using an online questionnaire, was conducted in school computer labs, under the supervision of the researchers (at the primary school) and accompanied by teachers. At the primary schools, the questionnaire was completed by 580 students (83% of the population). At secondary schools, a total of 2,421 students completed the questionnaire (61% of the population). 2,400 questionnaires were qualified for statistical analysis. The

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pedagog.uw.edu.pl/2021/05/27/proedumw-badania-naukowe-w-sluzbie-lokalnej-polityki-edukacyjnej/>

analysis did not include two vocational schools, as the number of questionnaires completed there was too small. The third vocational school completed only 22 questionnaires, which was too small a number to include this school in statistical analyses. Therefore, the analysis of results covers eight secondary schools from Ostrołęka (four general secondary schools and four technical secondary schools).

Both surveys were multi-faceted, covering a range of issues, relating to how students function in school. In primary schools, these included issues of student self-help or homework, and in secondary schools the level of democracy at the school. This paper covers their selected elements, such as students' attitudes toward the city where they study, plans for the future, trust in city authorities and institutions, including school and sources of knowledge.

### **Attitude of the young people to the city where they study**

Attitude towards Ostrołęka and possible plans to continue living in the city may depend on their current place of residence and where young people would like to study and live in the future. 95% of primary school students would like to continue their education in schools based in Ostrołęka. By far the largest group plans to continue their education in general secondary schools – 59%, nearly 1/3 would like to continue their education in Ostrołęka's technical schools and just over 4% in vocational schools. This is a clear signal to the city – in what schools the students wish to study.

Ostrołęka is the capital of the district, and the location of the largest number of secondary schools in the region. Therefore, the secondary school students population is dominated by commuters from the surrounding area – nearly 2/3 of secondary school students do not live in Ostrołęka. Relatively more Ostrołęka residents study at (general) secondary schools.

Are the data favourable for the demographics of Ostrołęka? Do the years spent in schools in the city support the development of ties that would encourage the young people to remain in Ostrołęka and work for the city? An analysis of young people's educational and housing plans provides some answers to these questions. As shown in Figure 1, less than one-fifth of the eighth graders plan to live in Ostrołęka after completing their education. The largest group would like to move to another country, and slightly fewer to large cities. For the 15-year-olds, not only are small and medium-sized cities unattractive as planned places for adult life, but also Poland as a country. The authorities of the small and medium-sized cities facing risk of depopulation must therefore cope not only with the need to develop local strategies that would be attractive for the young people, but also with the resentment of the country as a whole, in terms of a desirable place to live. The demographic trend

indicates a steady decline in Poland's population as a result of low fertility rates and migration flows to large cities and other countries – it can be assumed that they are motivated not only by economic, but also by ideological factors.

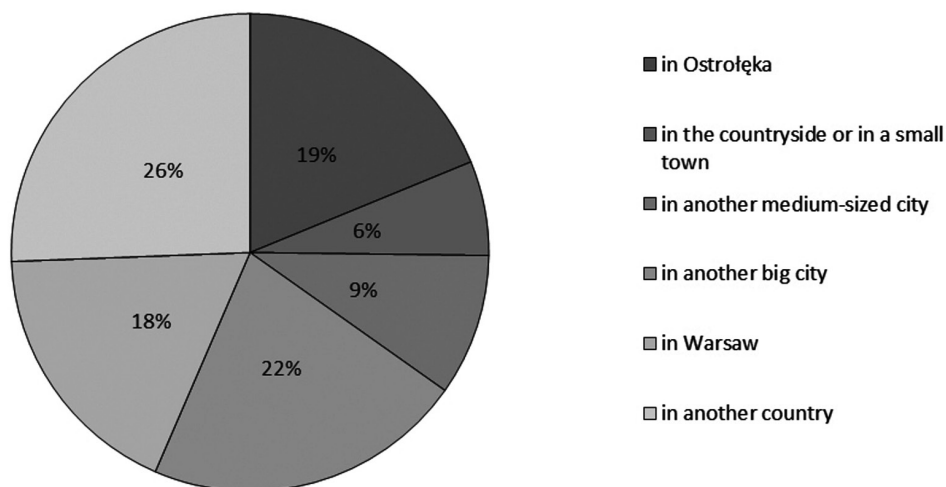


Figure 1. Residential plans of primary school students.

Does the different demographic composition of secondary school students change the picture of their residential plans? Does attending school in the city encourage young people to choose Ostrołęka as their future residence? Answers to these questions are illustrated in figures 2, 3 and 4. An interesting element is the much larger group of young people who would like to live in the countryside. Among the older young people, the number of those planning to live in Ostrołęka is also significantly lower – the drop exceeds 50%, more young people would like to move to big cities, but not to Warsaw. Still a very large proportion – 25% – would like to emigrate to another country.

Do the residential plans vary due to the current place of residence? The general tendency is such that residents of Ostrołęka indicate large cities and other countries as their future preferred place of residence more frequently, while residents of the neighbouring, smaller towns are significantly more inclined to choose the countryside and small towns. However, almost 30% from this group would like to lead their future lives in large cities, another several percent in Warsaw, and more than 20% in another country. More than 30% of the current residents of Ostrołęka would like to leave Poland. Only 10% of residents of neighbouring towns and 3% of those living in Ostrołęka would like to associate their future with Ostrołęka.

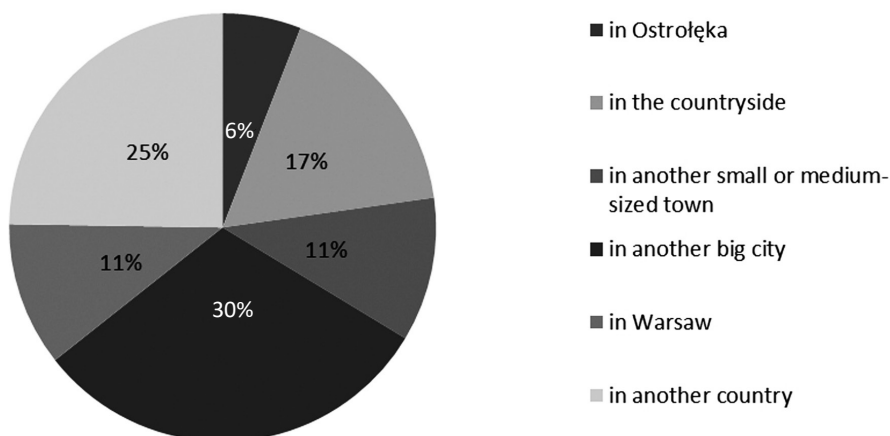


Figure 2. Residential plans of secondary school students.

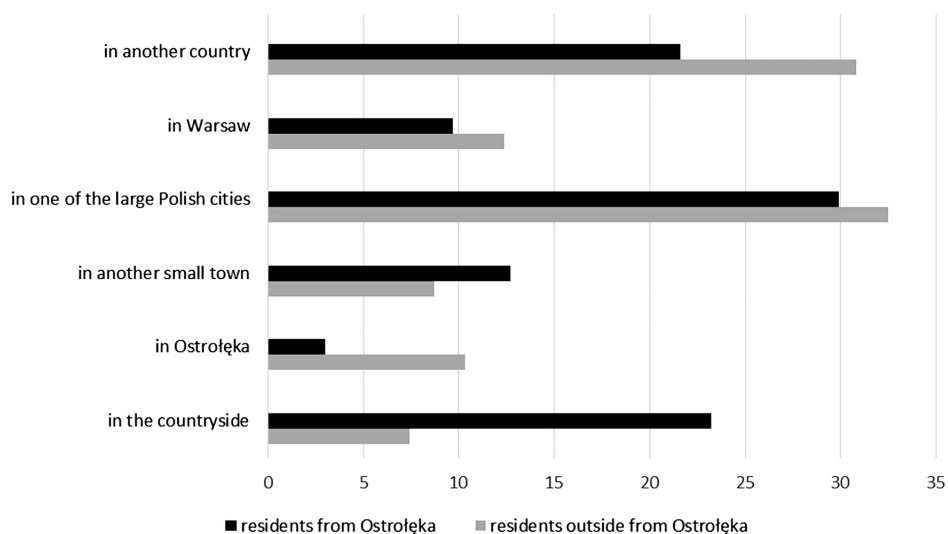


Figure 3. Current place of residence and the residential plans of secondary school students.

The residential plans of older youths also vary by the type of secondary school they attend. Students of technical secondary schools have varied plans, groups of twenty-something percent, similar in sizes, choose either the countryside or a big city. One-fifth of respondents would like to live in another country. Less than 10% of future graduates of technical secondary schools would like to remain in Ostrołęka. By no means can the city count on (general) secondary school students.

Nearly 35% of them choose to live in a big city. If we add those who would like to move to Warsaw, this means that almost half of them would like to associate their future with large urban centres that offer broader and more varied employment opportunities, as well as usually higher earnings. The advantages of cultural and commercial infrastructure are also an important factor.

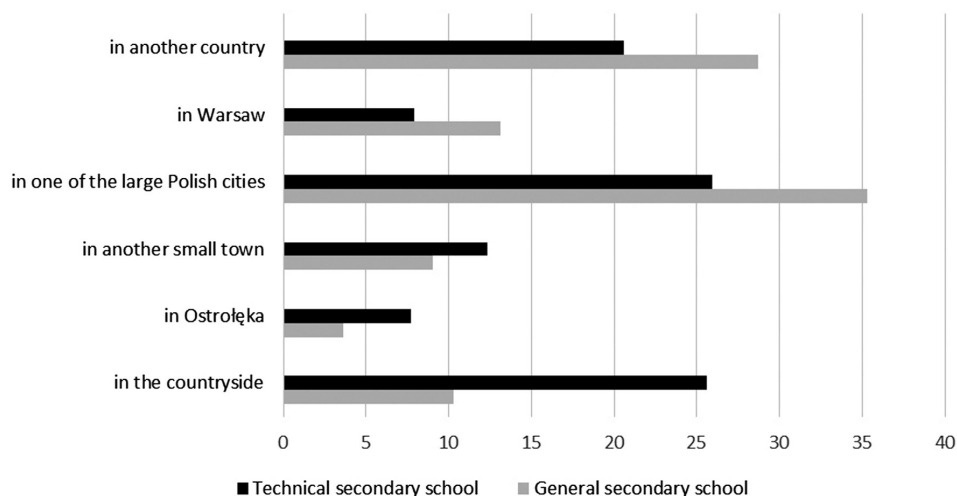


Figure 4. Residential plans of students by type of secondary school.

The data clearly suggest that students of the Ostrołęka secondary schools will not reduce the depopulation trend of the city, will not prevent its marginalisation, and are unlikely to ensure social development and economic growth. Less than 6% of all surveyed are considering living in Ostrołęka, with the largest number of people from a vocational school. Taking into account the educational plans of the younger group, the situation will strengthen this trend in the coming years.

Educational plans of older youth are also not conducive to staying in Ostrołęka. Most of them plan to leave the city after completing secondary education. Almost 70% of (general) secondary school students want to study at Polish universities, of that number one-fourth plans to combine studies and work. Less than 10% of future secondary school graduates plan to continue their education in Ostrołęka. Almost 40% of technical secondary school students also plan to study at universities, of that number about half plans to combine studies and work. From this group of students, one-fifth would like to start work.

The Association of Polish cities has been carrying out two flagship projects on a nationwide scale: “Local Development Program” and “Advisory Support Centre”.

The first one is dedicated for small and medium-sized cities, the second – for marginalised areas. Diagnostic research is conducted as part of these projects. Their results show that the reason for the depopulation of smaller and medium-sized centres is the lack of attractive job offers, entrepreneurial opportunities and the need to go to big cities in order to study at better universities. Dreams of a future job, preferably in a foreign company, are also important. The young people also need constant communication with the world, and do not want to close themselves in local, closed environments (Kaczmarek, 2021).

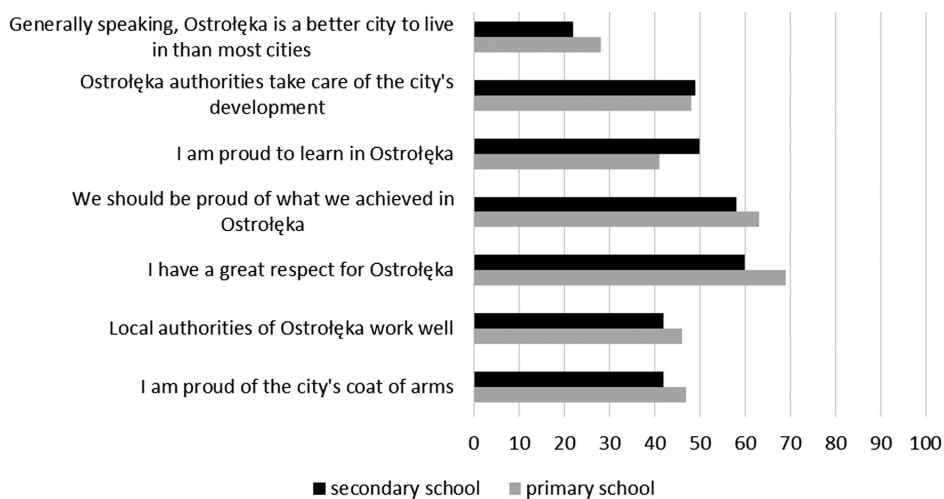


Figure 5. Attitude towards Ostrołęka – sum of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses.

Does the fact that the life plans of the majority of Ostrołęka’s youth indicate they would like to live outside the city where they currently study mean a negative attitude toward the city itself? The answer to this question is complex. The local patriotism scale was used in the study<sup>2</sup>. Students from both groups responded on a four-point scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree) to a pool of statements. The percentage of respondents agreeing with each statement is illustrated in the chart above. The young respondents, especially from primary schools, declared great respect for the city and pride in its achievements. Half of the older students also take pride in the fact that this is where they study. Nearly half of the young people also believe that Ostrołęka’s authorities care about its

<sup>2</sup> After checking the parametric properties for the local survey, the analyses were performed with the use of scale from the 2009 International Civic and Citizenship Study of 15-year-olds.

development, and a few percent less that they work well. One could say that the effectiveness of actions is rated a little lower than intentions or efforts. More than 40 percent of young people also display symbolic patriotism by emphasising the importance of the city's coat of arms. These opinions, however flattering, do not imply a positive view on Ostrołęka as a better city to live in than others. Such far-reaching local patriotism is shown by only less than 25% of students (including only 16% of secondary school students).

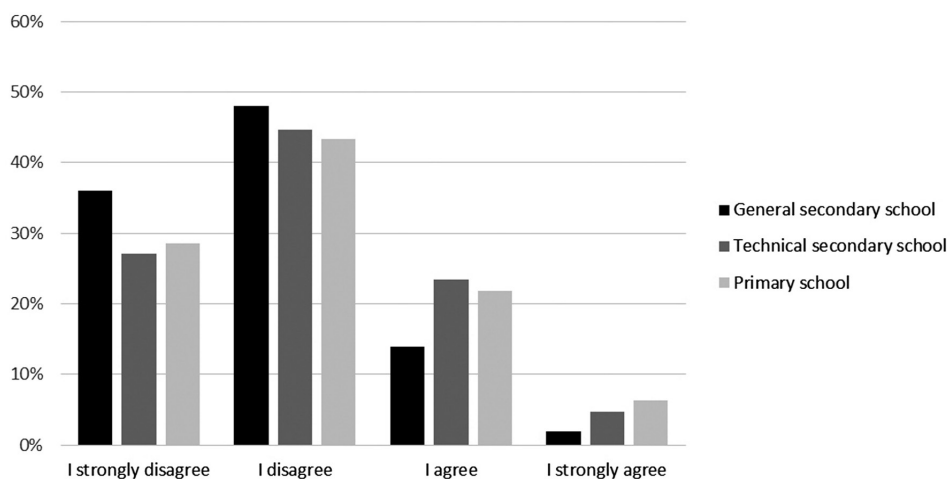


Figure 6. Ostrołęka is a better place to live than other cities.

An important element of attitude towards one's local environment is the trust in local authorities. The level of trust in various institutions was also covered under our study.<sup>3</sup> About one-fifth of all students declare they trust the local authorities. This is a rather small group, especially if we take into account that they place larger trust in the courts and the police, which used to be disliked, as well as in the European Parliament. This proportion is also significantly smaller than in the representative group of all Poles (aged 15+) in the 2022 CBOS study, where 63% of respondents declared their trust in local authorities. Can some consolation be taken from the fact that central authorities are trusted even less than the local ones? The government and political parties, as well as the Polish parliament, are trusted by less than 10% of secondary school students and a few percentage points more in primary school. These numbers are also much smaller than in the CBOS study, referred to above (the government – 32% of trust, the parliament – 23%, political

<sup>3</sup> The question had a slightly different format between primary and secondary schools. At the primary schools, it covered more institutions and sources of knowledge.

parties – 18%). These differences appear significant, however, such comparisons have to be viewed with caution, with the awareness of methodology differences between referenced studies, mainly in terms of sampling and such an important characteristic as age. What is striking, however, is the catastrophically low level of trust in government institutions declared by young people.

In general, according to a 2021 OECD international study, people in various countries trust local authorities, police and courts more than central authorities (Poland did not participate). In Ostrołęka, secondary school students are less trusting than the younger primary school students. This is due to their more extensive experience and probably more developed criticism. Even taking into account the criticism and rejection of establishment, typical for adolescence, the results show a deepening crisis of trust in the state among youth groups. The young people are much less trusting than the adults who raise them.

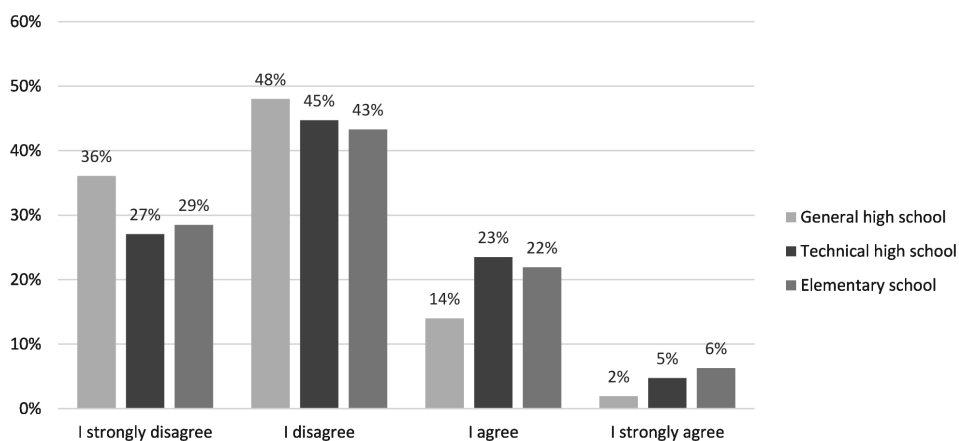


Figure 7. Trust in institutions in primary and secondary schools (responses “to a large extent” and “fully”).

Question regarding social trust, asked in primary schools, covered more institutions, including ones close to the students, such as the school or social media. Here too the level of trust turns out to be low. Data are presented in Figure 8. Scientists are the most trusted group – nearly 70% of responses, and the military comes second, at 60%. The latter institution is the only one that has been rated as trustworthy by the majority of Poles for many decades. However the percentage of those who declare trust in the military is systematically declining. Other institutions are trusted by less than half of the respondents. The already-cited *Youth in Democracy* report shows that only 36% of 14-year-olds in Poland

trust local authorities. The average in all countries surveyed is 62%. Trust in the government and the parliament is declared by one-fourth of respondents, while in other countries this result is usually two times higher.

Polish students' confidence in school is alarming. In Ostrołęka, only one-third of eighth-graders trust teachers, and one-fourth trust school as an institution. In the ICCS study, only 45% of respondents declared trust in school, as compared to 61% average in all countries surveyed. In Poland, trust in school is the lowest among all countries surveyed (Wasilewska, 2023). This result is difficult to interpret, and its reasons are complex. However, it is necessary to change the students' attitude towards the place where they spend most of their educational time is necessary.

Another worrying phenomenon is the 40% of young people who trust social media (while only one-fourth trust the traditional media). This result is similar to the one from the ICCS study. 14-year-olds declare trust in social media at the level of 48%, which is higher by 9 percentage points than the average in that study. Only teenagers from Bulgaria trust the social media more. Critical thinking with respect to this source of information, commonly used by young people should become one of the goals of school socialisation, unfortunately media education does not have a significant position in the core curriculum. Can such results be satisfactory for the teachers? It appears that these findings are worth thinking over.

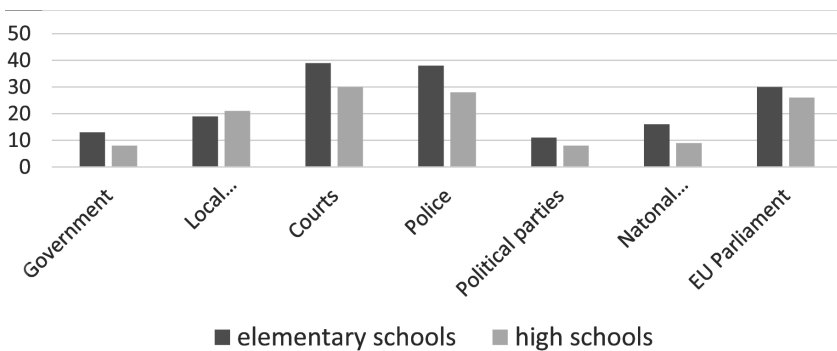


Figure 8. Trust in institutions and sources of knowledge in primary schools.

What emerges from the research described above is a picture of young people from a medium-sized city, most of whom will seek their place to live somewhere else – in large Polish cities, and a not inconsiderable number of them outside Poland. Despite their still young age, they are already very distrustful of many institutions that, regardless of their will, exert a significant impact on their lives. It is not difficult to draw the conclusion that the pauperisation of local governments, which deepened in recent years, and therefore the threatened development of

the social and economic spheres of many cities such as Ostrołęka is exacerbating the already strong migration trend. The catastrophically low level of trust in state institutions leads to devastation of civic attitudes, and is an important driver of emigration to other countries, alongside material needs.

The school is an institution operating in certain specific social reality. Its autonomy is increasingly constrained. However, building social capital, developing civic attitudes, including critical loyalty with constructive intentions, is a very important goal of education. The result of the survey of eighth-graders indicating that only one third of the respondents trust their teachers, and barely one quarter of the students trusts the school as an institution means that the performance of the school's educational function is at risk. Without trust, the interaction of education does not take place. Democracy is the factor supporting trust, which has been proven by numerous research, including the European Social Survey, already cited in this paper. The school can be a certain oasis of democracy, even in a country that prefers more authoritarian than democratic rule. Trust is also of crucial importance for the student as an individual, who nowadays is frequently lost in the rapidly evolving reality, dependent on the constant censure of adults with traditionally assigned educational functions on the one hand, and the criticism and manipulation of peers (and various influencers) on social networks on the other. Trust in family and in relatives is at a relatively satisfactory level – what can be done to make teachers and school deserve the trust of students? Many teachers would probably think that it's worth reversing this question – what should be the behaviour of students to promote teachers' trust in them. Let's assume that trust is a relationship that both parties build, and both are responsible for it. Only according to the role of the institution, it is the teachers who lead it. Therefore, it is worth to begin by referring to the rules of a democratic community. What to pay attention to when building a culture of trust at school?

### **A common system of goals and values, and common responsibility**

Place emphasis on what unites teachers and students, break the barricade that divides these two groups, do not underscore differences in status. Opt for cooperation, not for competition. Convince the students that learning is in their best interest, that they are responsible for their own education. This is fostered by active learning methods, by offering students opportunities to choose content, materials, forms of education, as well as by verifying their knowledge. Similarly, instead of behavioural control by teachers only, it is worth creating mechanisms for developing self-control and peer control, even if this is more difficult and less effective.

## **Credibility as the main pillar of trust**

### **Clear, honest intentions, transparency of standards and rules, similar definitions of situations**

Honesty is the key for credibility, but it is frequently conditioned, especially in the students, by fear of sanctions. Teachers' trustworthiness is assessed by the sincerity and positivity of their intentions. If a student says of a teacher that he/she is "picking on me", or "wants to get at me," whether this assessment is right or wrong, there is no trust relationship. It is very important for the teachers to communicate their intentions and adapt the form of their execution to the needs of students, sometimes even individual needs. The students frequently complain that teachers break the rules, even internal school codes. An often-repeated example are stressful forms of testing the students' knowledge. The breaching of the rule that students can only have one class test daily, or bypassing that rule by applying other forms of knowledge testing on the same day, undermines the trust in teachers. When the same situations are defined in various ways and the young people see this as unfair, the credibility drops and trust becomes impossible.

### **Predictable behaviours, clarity and equality of criteria and consequences**

Credibility, and therefore trust, is built through predictability that offers a sense of security. In our study, we have defined trust according to Sztompka (2007), as "a wager made on the basis of conviction that institutions are predictable and behave in a specific, expected manner." The rules of behaviour for all school actors and the consequences of not following them must be clear and respected. The surveyed secondary school students pointed out that such matters as dress code rules are different for students and teachers (this was in the section of open-ended questions regarding desirable changes at schools). This also applies to the expression of emotions or the right to disparage or even insult a student's knowledge.

### **Personality, character (image)**

The level of trust is affected also by personality traits, both those tied to one's social role and the individual character traits. Traits that inspire confidence include sincerity, kindness, balance, patience, reasonableness, a degree of forbearance and a sense of humour. The ability to understand emotions is also important, even if some ways of expressing emotions cannot be permitted at schools. However, a display of warmth and the calming of negative emotions significantly increases

trust. Discretion is also an important feature – its violation usually results in loss of security and exposure to negative reactions, which permanently ruins trust. It is also advisable to avoid constant critical (sadly, very human) evaluation of appearance, behaviour and narratives – both in public in the classroom and in the “privacy” of the teacher’s room.

### **Professional competences**

The teachers’ profession is an extremely difficult one. This is because it requires meeting the expectations of both social (expectations of various groups of people) and institutional roles. As a rule, the subject knowledge of teachers is rated quite well. The view on their teaching competence is worse, and educational competence is seen as the weakest. Similar conclusions can be drawn from research analysed in the present paper. In the students’ opinions, teachers often “do not teach, do not explain – only require.” There are many known factors that can give rise to such an assessment and would not meet with the understanding of students – such as the extensive curriculum. However, it is worth spending more time patiently explaining more difficult issues and less time testing knowledge. Another common complaint is also the failure to understand young people, their needs or views. Do adults complain about not being understood by the young people? This does not occur frequently, as adults expect obedience, not understanding. Democratic rules and trust are not possible without an acceptance of difference (not only based on age), diversity of needs, beliefs, world views, without giving the diversity the right to exist, without forgoing negative judgments and discrimination.

### **Competences of the principal: good, competent management of a school**

The principal is the person responsible for organising all aspects of the school’s operation. Good management is based on legislative transparency on the level of school and class. It encompasses trust-based cooperation with teachers, parents and students. A competent principal is open to the needs of all parties participating in the teaching process, and fulfils their needs as far as possible. He or she builds a friendly atmosphere at the school, supports students’ initiatives, accepts entrepreneurship, courage and resourcefulness in implementing ideas to enrich school life. Supports all manifestations of democratisation of school life. First and foremost, the principal is open and friendly in contacts with students and teachers and realises his or her responsibility for building a culture of trust at school.

## Parents at school

Inclusion of parents in the fulfilment of the school's tasks and in the building of culture of trust is an extremely difficult task. Provisions in the documents that govern the educational process have made little difference in the attitude of students' parents toward school. They certainly have not made them participants in actual decisions on what children learn and under what conditions. Rather, parents are more or less involved in the process of supporting the school in organising the cultural life of children. Undoubtedly, they are important as co-creators of the school climate. But do parents participate in the school life? Research conducted in Ostrołęka's secondary schools demonstrated that parents are rather unwilling to participate in the organisation of school life of their children. They appear at school only when summoned by the teachers, and even in such situations they frequently avoid contact. The teachers do not perceive them as partners in the education and upbringing of their children. This is a sad truth, but school should not give up on building the culture of trust in contacts with parents, realising the importance of their role in the life and education of their children.

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