

# TRUST AS A COMPONENT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL – COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS FROM POLAND, LITHUANIA AND SLOVAKIA

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## Abstract

The main aim of the article was to characterize and compare personal and public trust of students from Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia as a core component of social capital. Chosen issues considering social capital and trust as its constituent are presented in the theoretical part. The part has also become a foundation to the analysis of the survey outcomes conducted among students of Department of Economics and Management of University of Szczecin (n = 239), Faculty of Politics and Management Mykolo Romeris University in Vilnius (n = 113) as well as Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica (n = 153). Presented results, as a part of in-depth research study regarding social capital, led to arriving at a few valid conclusions. First and foremost students are quite careful as far as relations are concerned; on the other hand they claim that their closest surroundings are trustworthy. Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that closest bonds are strongly settled in their communities and cautiousness in dealing with other people primarily refers to strangers. What is more, students show a relatively greater lack of trust in people of other nations. In addition, among students there is a very low degree of trust in the state, regardless of its level. Worth mentioning is the fact that there are considerable differences in the students' trust in different occupational groups.

**Key words:** social capital, trust, students.

**Classification JEL:** Z13 – Economic Sociology; M12 – Personnel Management.

## 1. Introduction

The last economic crisis led to a significant devaluation of the trust of citizens both towards the market and the state. The market and the state, represented by various institutions and regulations, have failed (*Bojańczyk, 2013: 7*). This has led to global problems in the social sphere and in the relationships of market players. The low level of trust in society is reflected in the low level of social capital. It is this type of capital that determines the level of wellbeing and social ability in order to compete (*Orłowski, 2011: 14–15*). As Wieruszowska points out „... the lack of trust is a characteristic feature of modernity in society, and therefore a threatening factor for democracy“ (*2002: 74*).

*The aim of the article* is to characterize and compare the personal and public trust of students from Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia. The desire to conduct research in respect of trust on a group of students is due to the fact that they will significantly affect the social and economic development in their countries in the near future. It is important that their human potential (knowledge, skills and competences) built, among others, at universities, is effectively used in the future thanks to social capital. It was assumed that the foundation for building students' personal and professional relationships on a personal and professional basis is social capital, in particular trust. The article consists of several parts. At the outset the theoretical part discusses selected issues regarding social capital and trust. Subsequently the methodology of own research was presented. The third part of the article contains an analysis of empirical research carried out on a group of students from three universities: the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Management of the University of Szczecin (the last quarter of 2013), the Faculty of Politics and Management of Mykolo Romeris University in Vilnius (October 2014) Economics, Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica (November 2015). The presented research results form part of a wider study of social capital. The research used a method of targeted selection, resulting from the assumed

research objectives, i.e. the definition of social capital in many dimensions, including in the dimension of trust, among students of the first year of study. It should be emphasized that the formulated proposals refer to the studied groups of students.

## 2. Social capita, trust – selected issues

The first time the phrase '*social capital*' was used in 1916 was by Hanifan to emphasize the importance of community, goodwill and sympathy in rural local communities (*Hanifan, 1916: 130–138*, for: *Conrad, 2007: 1*). Over the next decades, a number of papers have been developed on this subject, showing various concepts, types or methods of measurement (*Szkudlarek, 2015: 472–482*). The definitions of social capital differ according to the views on what arises as a result of social networks. For some, access to resources and investment is key to achieving the expected return (*Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992; Portes, 1998; Lin, 2001*). For others the positive result of social capital is the ability of people to cooperate, communicate and to work collectively (*Woolcock, 1998; Putnam, 2000*). These two understandings of social capital are not mutually exclusive, as the result of increased trust, reciprocity and communication may be greater access to collective resources. One should therefore underline that social capital refers to „common sense, common values and goals, and a shared vision among community members or networks” (*King, 2004*).

For Bourdieu, social capital is the aggregate value of the present or potential resources of an individual that may result from a network of relationships (contacts, relations) with others and recognition (*Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001*). Putnam defines social capital as “the characteristics of social organizations such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate cooperation and coordination of community activities for the common benefits of the community” (*1995: 1*). The mutual trust people show during co-operation increases with the benefit of cooperation. It may also go beyond these organizations by strengthening general social solidarity. In turn, Fukuyama believes that social capital is “a set of informal values and ethical norms common to members of a particular group and enabling them to work together effectively” (*Fukuyama, 1997: 39*, for: *Kliczmuk, 2012: 70*). It also draws particular attention to the level of trust between the inhabitants of a given country, which affects social and economic development and the ability to compete with other states. What distinguishes states from one another is the ‘radius of trust’ that is created around specific environments. Research indicates that greater trust within the family determines its decline outside of it and vice versa (*Fukuyama, 2003: 169*). In Coleman’s concept, social capital is a by-product of many individual actions – an unintentional phenomenon that manifests itself through the functions it performs and the effects it exerts on people’s lives (*Trutkowski & Mandes, 2005: 56–59*). Also, he draws attention to the important role of trust in building social capital. It contributes to improving the well-being of people and facilitates the formation of a social community (*Coleman, 1990*).

The issue of trust is the subject of research in many scientific disciplines, which is the measurable effect of the multiple of its definitions. Most often its definitions reflect the desire to be sensitive to the needs of others based on positive experiences resulting from the actions or intentions of the other party (*Rousseau et al., 1998: 393–403*). According to Sztompka, trust is the „most valuable form of social capital” (*2007: 244*). It is a kind of establishment (belief and action based on it) undertaken by an individual on the on the subject of uncertain future actions of other people. Trust gives a sense of predictability to partner behavior. Sztompka shares trust in personal, social, positional, group, public, technological, consumer, systemic and anonymous. In opposition to trust is the lack of trust. It involves negative expectations about the future. He also pointed to the ‘zero point’ in the form of a neutral situation of distrust, also called suspending trust, when a man refrains from showing either trust or distrust. According to Penca (*Penca, 2011*, for: *Mahysa-Kaletka, 2015: 162*) „trust is the belief that the person we interact with has the proper qualifications, competencies, and is characterized by the integrity of character.” Giving someone

trust is tantamount to believing that the other party accepts and shares our view of the system of norms and values and that its attitudes, behaviors and actions will be beneficial to us. According to Wierzbński (2009: 26–27) “trust is a subtle assessment of the probability of the conviction that individual A in a particular situation agrees with the dependence of B – the person, the institution, the object, etc., with a relative sense determined by the probability of being safe even though the negative consequences are possible.” According to the definition of Zaheer et al. (1998: 141–159) trust is “expecting that one can depend on his/her obligations in a predictable manner and acting honestly in the face of various opportunities.” Taking into account the economic aspects it can be stated that trust is “the dependence of a person, group or company on a voluntarily accepted obligation towards another person, group or company – to recognize and protect the rights and interests of the joint venture and the economic exchange” (Paliszkiwicz, 2011: 409–418). Undoubtedly, trust is crucial for the ethical aspects of running a business. It affects human relations in the organization, and consequently also its functioning. Trust is an element that reinforces employee engagement in meeting organizational goals. Market players that trust each other can improve their performance. This in turn should transform into economic growth and prosperity.

Although the cited definitions of trust vary considerably, their interpersonal nature is particularly emphasized. Trust is accompanied by risk, which means that it involves fear for the integrity of both parties. Another attribute of trust is its voluntary nature, which means that one cannot force someone to trust (Szelągowska, 2012: 288). It is necessary to be aware that trust is something very fragile. It is possible to lose it very quickly by lying, concealing the truth, cheating, manipulation or theft. It is not possible to trust someone who works against another person or group of people, is cynical and uses intimidation. Such people should be extremely vigilant. Also, as Sztompka points out, (2007: 177) as a result of the existence of significant asymmetry between gaining and losing reputation and trust it is incomparably easier to lose more than once lost to regain.

As Krzymieniewska claims, the essence of social capital is the creation of ‘common good’ and its main function „... is to reduce uncertainty in social and economic life...” (2003). Thus, social capital reduces transaction costs and optimizes the use of resources in socio-economic life. Networks and connections (which occur in bridging social capital) will therefore be important because they give access to other resources which are accumulated in the network and promote social advancement (Słomczyński & Tomescu-Dubrow, 2005). In network there is also an exchange of information about whether you can trust other participants (Zakrzewska 2016). Networks are also setting up an economic activity, which means that every economic exchange is a social exchange (Woolcock, 1998). An effective exchange of information, i.e. one that will allow access to resources and reduce transaction costs, will not be possible without built-in trust. Trust is the willingness to act, based on the expectation that people and institutions will work for us in a positive way (Krzymieniewska, 2003).

As Arrow notes, “virtually every transaction contains an element of trust. It can be reasonably claimed that the economic backwardness of the world can be largely explained by a lack of mutual trust” (Krzymieniewska, 2003). Trust drives cooperation. The greater the level of trust within the community, the greater the probability of cooperation. In turn, cooperation increases trust. This constant accumulation of social capital is an essential element of positive feedback in civic societies and economies. It is therefore justified to focus on ways to build trust-based networks and generate phenomena that will change the behavior of the community in terms of social relations as well as economics – a way of managing resources (Zakrzewska, 2016). Taking into account research on trustworthiness, both in Poland and in Slovakia and in

Lithuania, confidence in others, expressed as an affirmative answer to the question “people can be trusted” oscillates around 20.0%–25.0%<sup>1</sup>.

### 3. Methodology

Using the classification of Sztompka, the paper presents the results of research concerning the personal and public trust of students from Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia. The first one is directed towards the closer and further surroundings: family, neighbors, strangers of the same or different nationalities. Public trust is addressed to the central government, self-government authorities, as well as representatives of selected professional groups.

Characterization and comparison of students’ trust in Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia has been made possible through statistical surveys using the questionnaire survey method. The research group consisted of first-year students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Management of the University of Szczecin (n = 239), Faculty of Politics and Management Mykolo Romeris University in Vilnius (n = 113) and Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica (n = 153). In all countries, the percentage of students taking part in the study was over 50%. The whole of the respondent groups consisted of people approximately 20 years old, mostly women (about 70%). The most of the respondents came from regions where there are universities in which they started studying (in Poland: West Pomeranian Voivodeship, in Lithuania: Vilnius County, and in Slovakia: Banska Bystrica/Žilina Region. In the statistical analysis, the measure of structure has been used.

The desire to make a comparison between the students of these countries was due to several reasons. Firstly, universities from the group of post-socialist countries were selected. Secondly, these states became members of the European Union in 2004. Thirdly, a department with a similar profile was selected. The research used the target selection method. This was due to the assumed research objectives, i.e. the characterization of social capital, including trust, among first-year students. The questionnaire survey was based on a paper questionnaire with metrics and social capital questions, including those relating to trust. The questionnaire was developed according to a scheme proposed by the World Bank (*Grootaert et al., 2004*). For the purposes of this study, questions have been selected to address the issues of personal and public trust.

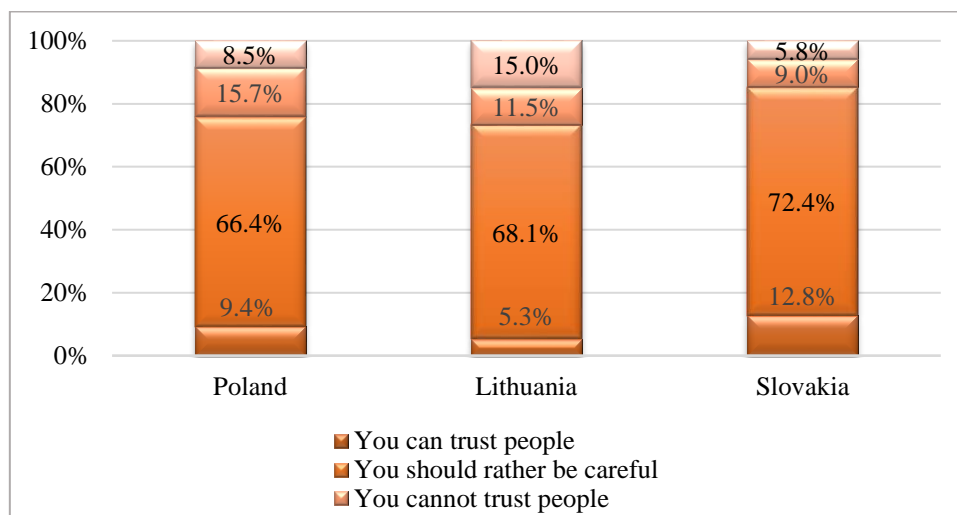


Figure 1. General trust of Polish, Lithuanian and Slovak students (own study)

<sup>1</sup> See: World Value Survey, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>; OECD Society at Glance, <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/>, or European Social Survey, <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>. The average level of the period 2008–2014.

## Survey study

In accordance with the aim of the article, the characterization and comparison of personal trust followed by the public trust of Polish, Lithuanian and Slovak students is to be carried out at the beginning. Figure 1 shows general student trust data.

The results clearly show that students (regardless of nationality) are predominantly declaring their general caution in relations with other people. For students from Poland this percentage is 66.4%, students from Lithuania 68.1% and students from Slovakia 72.4%. A small percentage of students, regardless of nationality, express the opinion that people can be trusted. The questionnaire survey was based on a paper questionnaire with metrics and social capital questions, including those relating to trust. The belief that people cannot be trusted most often is declared by students from Poland (15.7%), then from Lithuania (11.5%) and least often by students from Slovakia (9.0%). The lack of trust in the statements is the least often declared by students from Slovakia (5.8%), then from Poland (8.5%) and most often by students from Lithuania.

The results of the study show that students clearly differentiate trust from their environment, as shown in Figure 2.

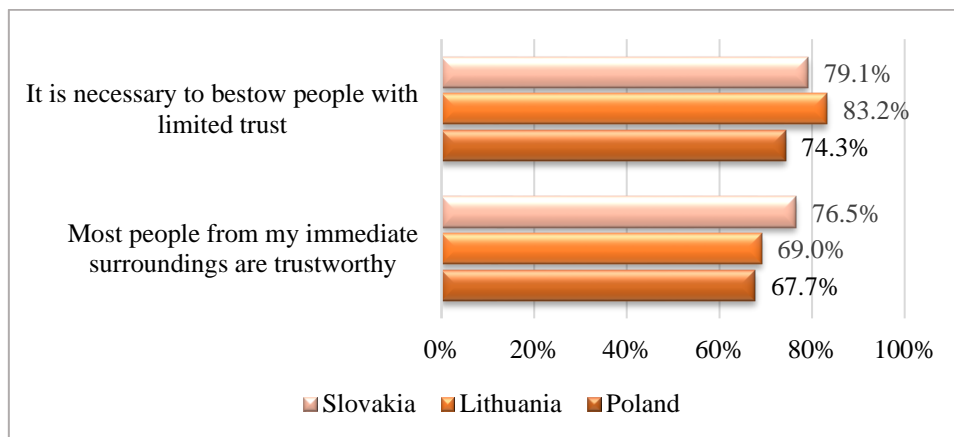


Figure 2. General trust and to the immediate environment of students from Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia (reply 'rather yes' and 'definitely no'), (own study)

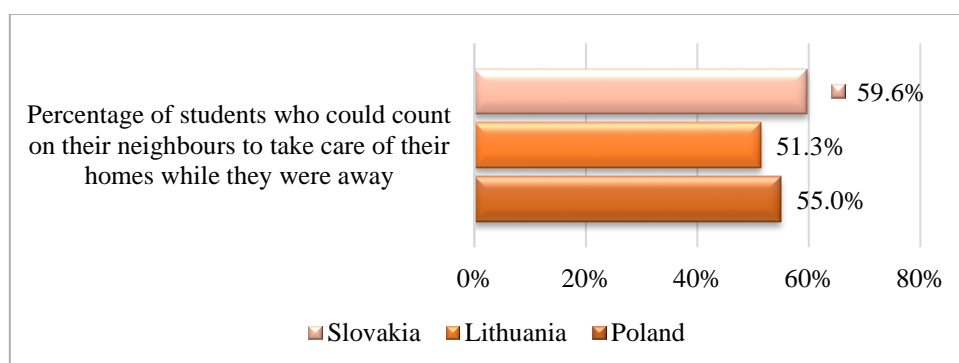


Figure 3. The ability of neighbors to take care of Polish, Lithuanian and Slovakian students in their absence (own study)

In the opinion of most Polish, Lithuanian and Slovak students, persons from their immediate surroundings is trustworthy. This is the opinion of over 67.7% of students from Poland, 69.0% of

students from Lithuania and 76.5% of students from Slovakia. On the other hand, most of the studied student groups believe that people should be trusted. This is expressed by 74.3% of Polish students, 83.2% of students from Lithuania and 79.1% of students from Slovakia. It can be assumed that this limited trust concerns people outside the immediate surroundings of students to persons who students do not know. Confirmation of this conclusion may be the results of research relating to the ability of students to receive neighborhood help assistance in their care during their absence (Figure 3).

From the point of view of building mutual trust, it is also important for students to perceive students from their surroundings, e.g. when they need to ask for help. In this case, it was assumed that the more people who asked for help, the more trust they arouse in their surroundings (Figure 4).

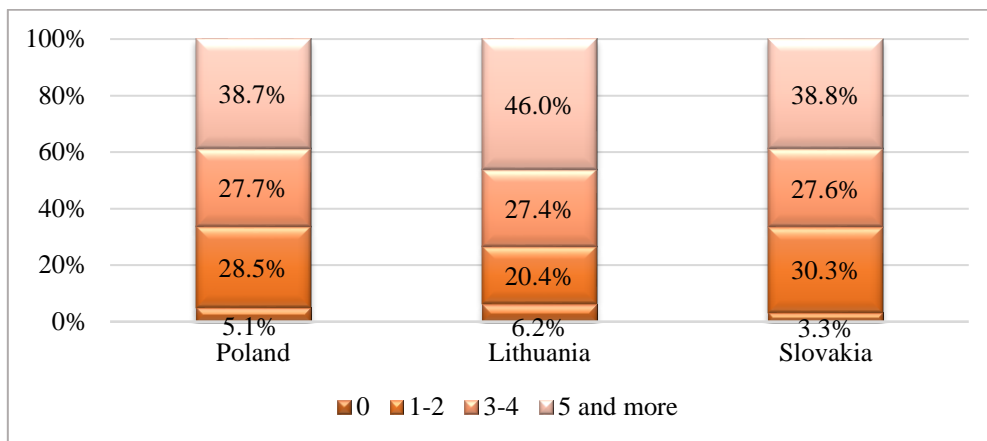


Figure 4. Frequency of referring to Polish, Lithuanian and Slovak students for help (own study)

The data presented in Figure 4 indicate that there is a large variation in the number of people who ask students for help (within 12 months of the study). However, it should be noted that in most cases it is 5 or more people. For students from Poland this percentage is 38.7%, from Lithuania 46.0% and from Slovakia 38.8%. It is worth noting that the smallest proportion of these students is, regardless of nationality, to which no one is asking for any kind of help. This percentage does not exceed a few percent in some of the studied groups of students (Poland 5.1%, Lithuania 6.2% and Slovakia 3.3%).

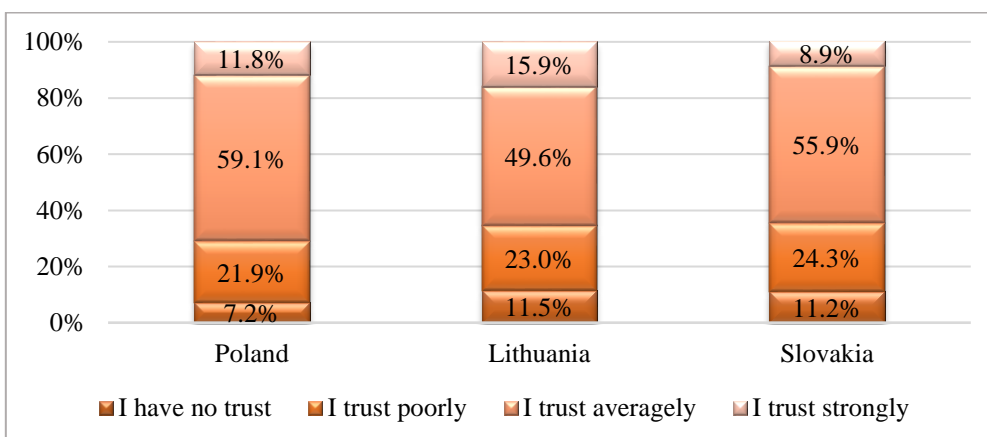


Figure 5. Trust of Polish, Lithuanian and Slovak students to people of the same nationality (own study)

The study also aimed to compare students' trust in people of the same nationality (Figure 5) and to foreigners (Figure 6). The data presented in these Figures indicate that only a small percentage of students, regardless of nationality, strongly or very strongly trust both people of the same nationality and foreigners. The declarations of students of average or low trust are predominantly dominated. It is worth noting that the percentage of those students, regardless of their nationality, is higher than those of the same nationality who do not trust foreigners. (Poland: 18.1% vs. 7.2%, Lithuania: 21.2% vs. 11.5%, Slovakia: 32.0% vs. 11.2%).

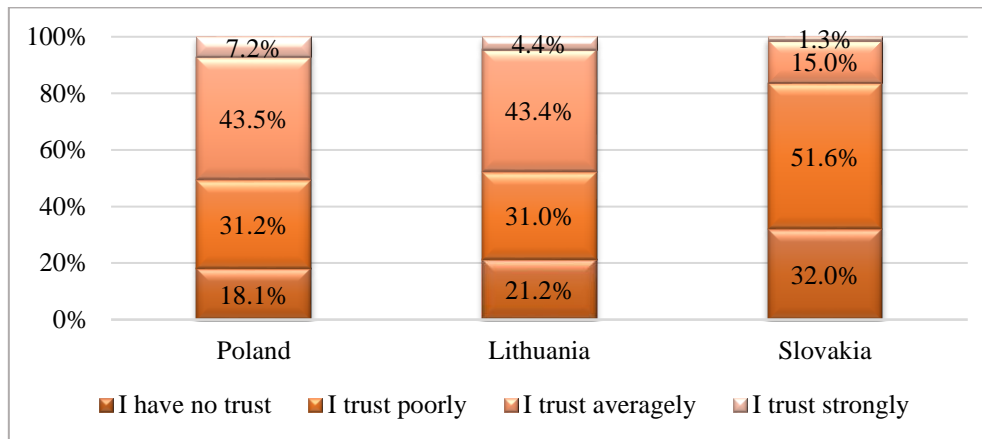


Figure 6. Trust of Polish, Lithuanian and Slovak students towards foreigners (own study)

In accordance with the specific purpose of the article, the results of the research referring to the trust of the Polish public Lithuanian and Slovakian students will also be presented. Figure 7 shows the results of research on student trust in central authorities and Figure 8 on local authorities.

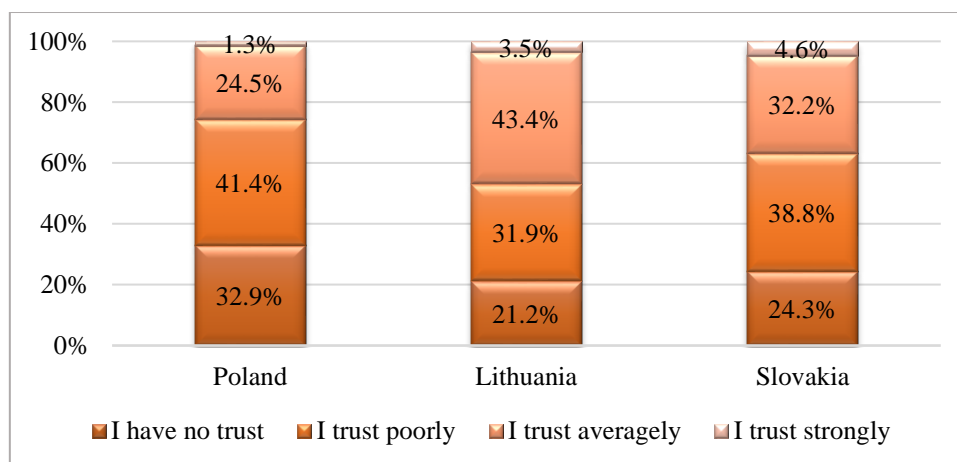


Figure 7. Trust in the central authorities of Polish, Lithuanian and Slovak students (own study)

First and foremost, it is important to draw attention to the fact that a small proportion of these students, irrespective of their nationality who strongly or very strongly trust central and local government. The opinions of students with low or medium level of trust are overwhelming. Given the negative attitude, it can be stated that the highest percentage of students from Poland do not trust either their central authority (32.9%) or the local government (31.2%). For comparison, in the case of Lithuanian students, the lack of trust in central authorities is declared by 21.2% and to

local authorities by 22.1% of students. In the case of students from Slovakia, this amounts to 24.3% and 22.4%.

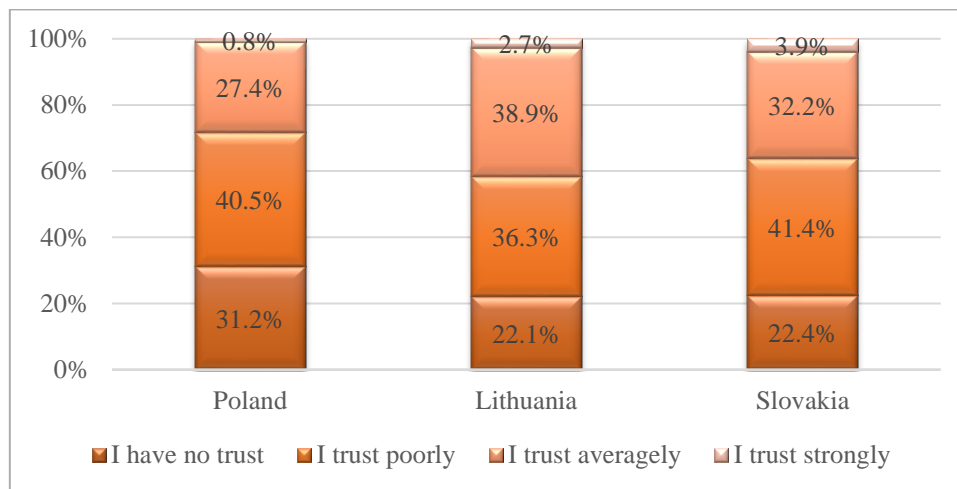


Figure 8. Trust in local authorities of Polish, Lithuanian and Slovak students (own study)

The research was also aimed at identifying public trust in relation to selected professional groups. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Lack of trust in individual occupational groups by students from Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia (own study)

Specification	Poland	Lithuania	Slovakia
Police officers	14.3%	4.4%	7.9%
Firefighters	1.7%	1.8%	0.0%
Nurses and doctors	3.4%	2.7%	2.6%
Teachers	3.8%	0.9%	2.0%
Politicians	<b>49.8%</b>	<b>25.7%</b>	<b>48.0%</b>
Lawyers	5.9%	8.8%	6.6%
Attorneys	6.0%	7.1%	7.8%
Judges	7.2%	9.7%	16.3%
Journalists	<b>35.9%</b>	<b>35.4%</b>	<b>47.7%</b>
Officials	20.1%	7.1%	8.6%
Financiers	15.9%	10.6%	10.0%
Clerics	<b>23.2%</b>	<b>30.1%</b>	<b>22.2%</b>

Regardless of nationality, students first and foremost do not trust their politicians, journalists and clergy. It is worth noting that in the case of students from Poland and Slovakia nearly half of them do not trust politicians, in the case of students from Lithuania it is a quarter. Students from Lithuania do not trust journalists and clerics more than politicians. Regardless of the nationality of the students, the lack of trust in the smallest amounts is declared in respect of firefighters, nurses, doctors and teachers.

The last part of the analysis outlined, using Fukuyama terminology, the 'circle of trust' of students. In addition, students from different countries have been classified, taking into account the criterion of trust. For this purpose, the student's trust in the value of the polygon vertices is shown in Figure 9.



The clearly asymmetric circle of students' trust is the result of differentiation of the student approach to the issue of trust. Students show great trust in their immediate surroundings, including their neighbors. In addition, students evaluate themselves as worthy of trust. On the other hand, students point to the need to be cautious in interpersonal relations regardless of nationality and low public trust, regardless of the level of authority. When classifying students from different countries, taking into account the criterion of trust it can be stated that the highest level is shown by students in Lithuania, followed by students in Slovakia and the lowest level is in Poland.

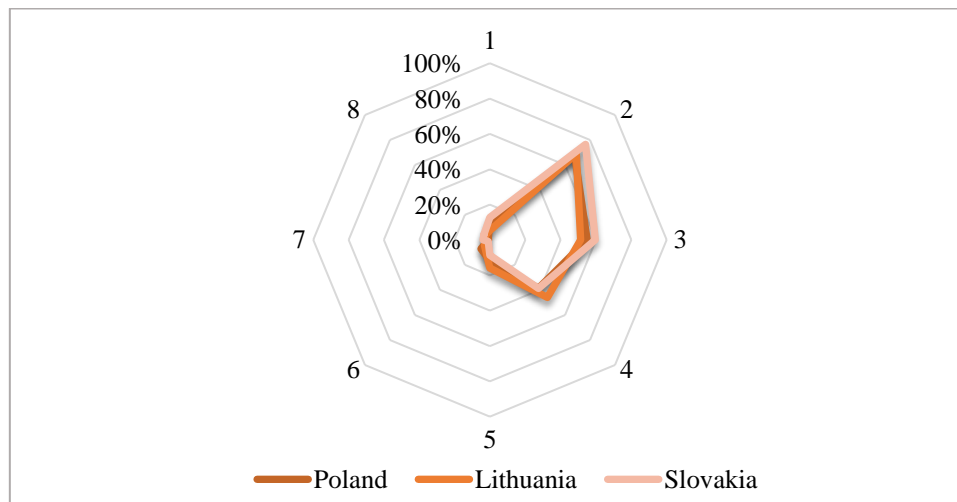


Figure 9. 'Circle of trust' students from Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia (own study)

Where:

- 1 – The percentage of students indicating that people can be trusted,
- 2 – The percentage of students pointing out that rather yes or decisively yes that most people from their immediate surroundings are trustworthy
- 3 – The percentage of students indicating that they would or would not have been able to count on their neighbors in the scope of care in their absence,
- 4 – The percentage of students to whom 5 or more people requested any type of assistance within 12 months
- 5 – The percentage of students who strongly or very strongly trust people of the same nationality,
- 6 – The percentage of students who strongly or very strongly trust foreigners,
- 7 – The percentage of students who strongly and strongly trust central authority,
- 8 – The percentage of students who strongly and very strongly trust local government.

#### 4. Conclusion

Trust, as the most desirable component of social capital, essentially builds interpersonal relations on many of its planes. Trust is always seen in terms of positive expectations towards the other side and provides one with a sense of security in the conditions of risk or uncertainty.

The research has provided the opportunity to characterize and compare the personal and public trust of students from three countries. Research results in terms of personal trust indicate that students are more cautious in their relationships with other people. At the same time, most of them believe that their immediate surroundings are trustworthy and caution in dealing with other people is primarily about strangers. It is important to emphasize that total distrust of foreigners is clearly higher than that of people of the same nationality. The results also show that students have a very low level of public trust in both the central and the local government. The results also show that students have a very low level of public trust in both the central and the local government. Importantly, in terms of personal and public trust, there were no significant differences between the groups of students participating in the study.

In conclusion, it can be stated that there are barriers opening up to others among young people. Rather, they come from the assumption that anyone outside the family circle, at most neighbors, is not worthy of trust. Undoubtedly, this attitude of students may in the future complicate the collaboration and *co-operation of activities at the professional level*. Therefore their human potential (knowledge, skills and competences) built up, among others, at universities may not be fully exploited. Limited student trust also applies to state institutions, regardless of level. This may be due to the fact that it is often associated in a negative way (e.g. corruption). The lack of trust in the state can lead to social unrest, demonstrations and the decline of the authority of the state in the eyes of a young person. Student trust circles outlined for the study groups confirm the diversity of student approaches to trust. However, when classifying students from different countries, taking into account the criterion of trust, one can conclude that the highest level is shown by students in Lithuania, Slovakia and Poland.

This rather pessimistic picture of students from Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia in the context of the issue of trust can be confirmed in conviction and in view of playing an important role in society, the social and economic development in these countries may face significant barriers. It seems that it is also necessary to conduct research that will identify the reasons for such a rather distrustful student attitude. Could it be due to bad personal experiences or simply distrust being the result of attitudes built in a society in which students operate.

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