

## Trust as an element of social capital – evidence from a survey of Polish and Spanish students

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**Abstract.** The main aim of the paper is to describe personal, public and occupation-related trust of Polish students. This aim is reflected in the paper's structure. The theoretical part explores key issues related to social capital and to trust as its crucial component. The empirical part offers an analysis of a survey conducted among Polish students and, additionally, for the purpose of comparison, also among their peers from Spain. Several key conclusions are formulated in the final section of the paper. They refer in particular to the differences in the areas of personal, public and occupation-related trust between the two analysed groups of students.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The issues related to social capital belong to the most popular problems addressed by authors in the context of institutional changes or their impact on economic growth. It has inspired the authors of this study to explore the problem of social capital and conduct a survey among students, i.e. a group which in the nearest future will have an impact on the socio-economic development in Poland. They should, therefore, be equipped with social capital which would enable them in the future to share the knowledge, skills and competence acquired during their studies in their networks and social context. Development of those networks is impossible without trust. This study uses additionally, for the purpose of comparison, results of a survey carried out in Spain. It should be emphasised that the Polish and Spanish societies have each generation-long experience inclining them to distrust others, such as memories from the civil war in Spain in the years 1936-1939, World War II, real socialism in the Polish People's Republic before 1989 or the Franco dictatorship before 1975 in Spain. These factors include also the challenges posed by the system transition or scandals among political elites. Apart from that, the level of trust among Spanish students is probably

also significantly affected by the financial and economic crisis at the turn of the 2010s, which further undermined the already weak trust in political elites. Naturally, both countries are also EU members, so they participate in the creation of a certain community of different nations, whose existence is strongly dependent on trust. It is of particular importance in the context of economic problems faced by some EU member states, which affect also the young, and the increasing anxiety and social tension fuelled by the influx of immigrants from Africa. The issue of trust among young people seems, therefore, particularly interesting in the context of personal, public and occupation-related trust. It has been assumed that creation of the social capital is founded on trust. The authors plans to conduct a similar survey in the final (third) year of studies to learn whether this entire period spent at the university, which provides opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills and competence, has had any impact on the students' attitudes related to social capital, including trust.

The aim of the study was to gather data so as to characterise Polish and Spanish students, and later compare and contrast their personal, public and occupation-related trust. This aim of the paper is reflected in its structure. Introduction is followed by a theoretical part which discusses social capital and trust as its crucial component. The next part of the paper describes the methodology employed for the purpose of the study. The empirical part offers an analysis of primary data. The data was collected in a survey conducted at the end of 2013 and in the first half of 2014 among bachelor's degree students of the 1<sup>st</sup> year studying at the Faculty of Economics and Management, University of Szczecin, Poland. Additionally, for the purpose of comparison, results of a similar survey among the students of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Vigo, Spain<sup>1</sup>, were used. The aim of the study imposed employment of purposive sampling. Respondents represented approx. 58% and 52% of all the 1<sup>st</sup> year students of each faculty, respectively. The data collected in the survey were statistically processed, and as a result the objective of the study was achieved. It should be emphasised that the findings and conclusions refer exclusively to the analysed group of students.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the literature on the subject, the term "social capital" was introduced in 1916 by L. J. Hanifan. He wanted to emphasise the role of fellowship, good will and sympathy in rural communities (Hanifan, 1916, quoted from: Conrad, 2007). It should be pointed out that there is no agreement among authors as to whether social capital should be considered as a resource owned by an individual or by an entire community. The first approach is associated mainly with P. Bourdieu, who defines social capital as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992). He thus considers social capital as a private rather than public good (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993). Bourdieu's concept of social capital puts the emphasis on conflicts and the power function (social relations that increase the ability of an actor to advance her/his interests). From the Bourdieuan perspective, social capital becomes a resource in the social struggles that are carried out in different social arenas or fields. For example, the problem of trust (which Bourdieu does not discuss much explicitly) can now be dealt with as a part of the symbolic struggle (or the absence of struggles) in society. Trust as a potential component of symbolic capital can be exploited in the practice of symbolic power and symbolic exchange (Siisiäinen, 2000). The second approach to the concept of social capital is associated with names such as R. Putnam,

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<sup>1</sup> The study was carried out by the academics from the Department of Macroeconomics, Faculty of Economics and Management, University of Szczecin, as part of the statutory research project financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education: Knowledge and social capital. Part I. Bridging type of social capital. Survey number: 503-2000-230-342

F. Fukuyama or J. Coleman. R. Putnam defines social capital as “moral obligations and norms, social values (especially trust) and social networks (especially voluntary associations) which facilitate co-operation and mutually supportive relations in communities and nations” (Putnam, 1995). Mutual trust, which people show while cooperating, increases with the benefits they enjoy in their cooperation. This trust can also reach beyond these organisations thus reinforcing general social solidarity. R. Putnam distinguishes between bonding social capital and bridging social capital. The preceding is formed in communities (such as families and friends) where the bonds between members are inclusive. These communities strive to develop their own values or ideas and are pessimistic about implementing others. These bonds are favourable from the viewpoint of the group’s survival (Putnam, 2008). The bridging social capital, on the other hand, is formed in groups oriented outwards. They form outward looking ties characteristic of heterogeneous groups such as acquaintances, colleagues, neighbours. They are essential for “making progress” in the community (Putnam, 2008). F. Fukuyama argues that social capital is “the existence of a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permits cooperation among them” (Fukuyama, 1997). Social capital permits establishment of new human relationships, formation of groups, associations and institutions of the civil society operating spontaneously in the space between families and the state (Fukuyama, 1997, 2003, quoted from: Klimczuk, 2012). He also points to the level of trust among citizens of a country which determines the socio-economic development and ability to compete with other countries. What makes countries different is their “radius of trust” characteristic of certain circles of people. Research shows that more trust within a family leads to less trust beyond family circles and vice versa (Fukuyama, 2003). In J. Coleman’s concept, on the other hand, social capital is a by-product of a variety of individual actions – an unintentional phenomenon which can be seen through its functions and effects it has on people’s lives (Trutkowski, Mandes, 2005). He also emphasises the significance of trust in creating social capital as it improves the efficiency of human actions and facilitates the process of building communities (Coleman, 1990).

In the definitions and types of social capital shown above, trust is shown as one of its key components (or dimensions). It can be understood as a “rationalised calculation” (Coleman, 1990, Hardin, 2002, quoted from Growiec, 2009). P. Sztompka, in turn, defines trust as “the most precious type of social capital” (Sztompka, 2007). He perceives trust as a type of bet (belief and related action) made by an individual on the uncertain future behaviour of other people. Trust offers a feeling of predictability of partners’ behaviours. When creating the social capital through trust as its key component we can raise the efficiency of the society as trust strengthens the existing bonds and encourages development of new ones. High level of trust in a society may also translate into economic benefits through decreased transaction costs (Stańczyk, 2007). On the other hand, however, strong social bonds may incline towards conformism and rejection of new social phenomena and processes or innovative solutions. In this case loyalty to a community, e.g. family, proves more important than rational behaviour: group solidarity does not promote trusting “outsiders” – i.e. members of other social groups or societies (Putnam, 1995). Sztompka differentiates between as many as nine addressees of trust, classifying trust into the following types: personal, social, occupation-related, group, public, technological, consumption-related, system-related and anonymous. Distrust is the opposite of trust. It is also a bet, although a negative one; it is related to negative expectations for the future. Sztompka also defines a “zero point” – a neutral situation when there is no trust involved, also known as suspension of trust, when an individual refrains from showing either trust or distrust (Sztompka, 2007).

The issue of social trust in Poland has been addressed, among others, by the following studies and surveys: a study by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (*Zaufanie społeczne*, 2016) or periodical reports on the social diagnosis (*Diagnoza społeczna...*, Czapiński, Panek, 2014) or a study by the Central Statistical Office of Poland (*Wartość i zaufanie społeczne w Polsce w 2015 roku*, 2015). The first one reveals that the

Poles much more commonly advocate vigilance in contacts with other people (74%) than openness to others (23%). The belief that most people can be trusted is expressed in 2016 a little more frequently than in 2002-2006, but less commonly than in 2008 and 2010. Only a little over one-third of respondents (32%) declare trust in strangers encountered in various situations. The majority (47%) do not trust them. Poles trust their close families (98%) and distant relatives (88%). Only slightly smaller proportion of respondents declare trust in colleagues (81%) and neighbours (75%). However, while trust in parents, spouses and children is usually strong, corresponding attitude to distant relatives, colleagues, neighbours and friends is usually moderate. In the public life, the Poles mostly trust charities, e.g. the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity (85%), Caritas (83%) and the Polish Red Cross (79%). Institutions such as the army or the scouting association also enjoy social trust (79% and 73%, respectively). Approximately half of the Poles have trust in the public administration and little less – in the courts. Only one out of five Poles has trust in political parties. Similar results concerning trust have been published by the Central Statistical Office of Poland. According to the results of its survey, a vast majority of the Poles trust other people (78%). Mostly they trust people from their close environment: family (98%) and friends (93%). Strangers, on the other hand, enjoy much less trust (39%). In the public life, the institutions found to be trustworthy are: the fire service (94%), the emergency service (84%) and the army (72%). On the other hand, people have least trust in the parliament (25%) and the government (27%). According to the survey by the Central Statistical Office of Poland, local governments enjoy much more trust than the central government – the preceding are trusted by half of the society. The results published in *Diagnoza społeczna* indicate, in turn, that the general level of social trust in Poland in 2015, estimated at 15.1%, was much below the EU average (38.1%). It should be mentioned that the topic of trust in both countries analysed in this paper, Poland and Spain, is addressed, among others, in the European Social Survey<sup>2</sup>. It shows that the levels of trust in the two countries are similar and relatively low, much lower than those observed in Scandinavia, Switzerland, Ireland or the Netherlands. Distrust in relationships with other people significantly outweighs openness and trust.

Based on Sztompka's classification, the paper presents results of research into personal as well as public and occupation-related trust. The first one is addressed to specific people with whom we are in close relationships. It follows that this group includes mostly family, where trust is an element of intimate and close relationships, as well as friends, neighbours and colleagues. Public trust is addressed to public institutions and organisations understood as a structural framework within which actions and interactions take place, e.g. schools, the church, the government, the parliament or the police. Occupation-related trust, in turn, is addressed to specific social roles, occupations, offices or positions. These roles are of institutional character and people who behave according to the standards required in a given profession or norms of behaviour are worthy of our trust. When using the typology of social capital proposed by Putnam, these groups may be used to characterise the bonding social capital (inclusive bonds) and the bridging social capital (exclusive bonds).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Statistical research using a questionnaire survey was carried out among bachelor's degree students of the 1<sup>st</sup> year studying at the Faculty of Economics and Management, University of Szczecin, Poland, and the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Vigo, Spain<sup>3</sup>. There were two reasons

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>, retrieved: 14.07.2015.

<sup>3</sup> The survey was conducted within statutory research funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, entitled: Knowledge and social capital. Part I. Bridging type of social capital. Survey number: 503-2000-230-342.

behind the authors’ decision to conduct similar surveys in both faculties. Firstly, faculties (universities) from two EU member states were selected. Secondly, faculties of similar profile of studies were sought. The aim of the research imposed employment of purposive sampling, i.e. characterising the social capital, including trust, among the 1<sup>st</sup> year students . The sample comprised approx. 58% (n = 239) and 52% (n = 59) of all 1<sup>st</sup> year students at each faculty, for Poland and Spain, respectively. The survey was conducted in the academic year 2013/2014 in Poland and between 26 November and 4 December 2013 in Spain, during academic training abroad of the employees of the Department of Macroeconomics. The survey was based on a paper questionnaire consisting of two parts: demographics and a set of questions concerning social capital. The demographics, however, are not an element of analysis in this paper. The questions were developed according to a logical model proposed by the World Bank (Grootaert, Narayan, Jones, Woolcock, 2004). This part of the questionnaire consisted of 36 closed- and open-ended questions regarding social capital, without differentiation between its types (Milczarek et al, 2015). For the purpose of the analysis the author selected questions referring to personal, public and occupation-related trust essential for development of bonds as structural elements of the social capital. It should be emphasised that the findings and conclusions refer exclusively to the analysed group of students.

4. SURVEY STUDY

In line with the aim of this paper, individual, public and occupation-related trust of Polish and Spanish students will be first characterised, and then compared and contrasted. Fig. 1 shows the data concerning general trust in the students’ environment.

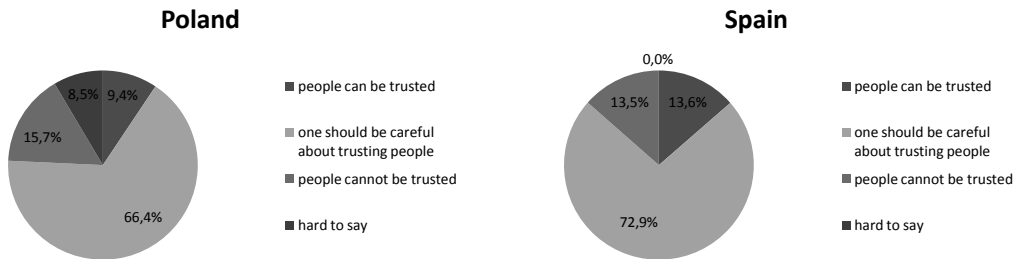
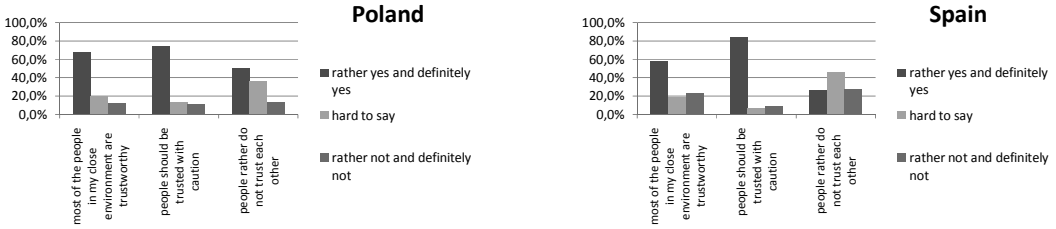


Fig. 1. General trust of Polish and Spanish students in their environments

Source: own study.

The results show that a vast majority of Polish students (66.4%) believe that one should be rather careful in relationships with other people. Nonetheless, only 15.7% believe that people cannot be trusted at all. Less than 10% (precisely 9.4%) of the students respond that people can be trusted. 8.5% students remain neutral in their opinions about trusting people in their environment. Spanish students, too, are generally rather careful about trusting people (72.9% respondents). The remainder is divided into two groups that firmly believe that people either can or cannot be trusted at all (13.6% and 13.5%, respectively). It follows that Spanish students more frequently declare trust in other people than their Polish peers, and less frequently declare lack thereof. Nonetheless, the two groups of students are generally rather cautious in their contacts with other people.

The research reveals that trust levels of Polish and Spanish students vary with the type of environment indicated (Fig. 2).

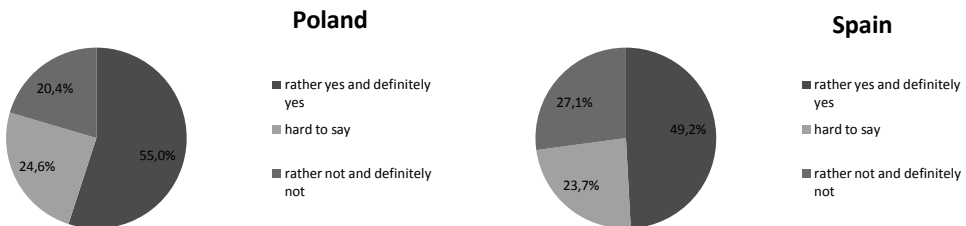


**Fig. 2.** Force of Polish and Spanish students' trust in or distrust of their environment

Source: own study.

Polish students generally find people in their close environment to be trustworthy – this is an opinion expressed by more than two thirds of students. Only 12.2% respondents think that their close environment cannot be trusted. On the other hand, a vast majority of them (74.3%) believe that one should be careful about trusting people. In general, they also believe that people rather do not trust each other; the ‘rather yes or definitely yes’ response was selected by half of the group, and only 13.1% do not agree with this statement. Spanish students also believe that people in their close environment are trustworthy – yet this response was selected by 57.6%, which is significantly less than in Poland. Furthermore, as many as 23.7% of Spanish students, nearly double the figure for Poland, do not agree with this opinion. Spanish students are more inclined than their Polish peers to trust people with caution. This response was found true by 84.5% students from Spain, i.e. 10 percentage points more than in the case of Polish students. A significantly lower share of Spanish students (as compared to their Polish peers) believes that people do not trust each other (26.3%). On the other hand, 28.1%, i.e. nearly twice as much as in Poland, believe the opposite.

Individual trust was evaluated in the context of the bridging social capital with a question regarding the students' ability to receive help from neighbours in looking after their flat during their absence (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Polish and Spanish students' ability to receive help from neighbours in looking after their flat during their absence

Source: own study.

Evidence from the survey shows that Polish students trust their neighbours. As seen in the questionnaires, more than half of them, when away, can count on their neighbours to help them look after their flat.

20.4% are of the opposite opinion. Spanish students also can count on their neighbours (49.2% believe that ‘rather yes and definitely yes’). On the other hand, a larger share of Spanish students than their Polish peers (27.1%) believe that they cannot count on such help. A similar share of students in both groups does not have an opinion.

From the viewpoint of building the social capital, it is also essential how the students are perceived by their environment. In other words, whether they are also regarded as trustworthy and can be counted on for help. It was assumed that the more people approached a student to ask for help, the more that student was perceived to be trustworthy by his or her environment, regardless of the type of the relationship (Fig. 4).

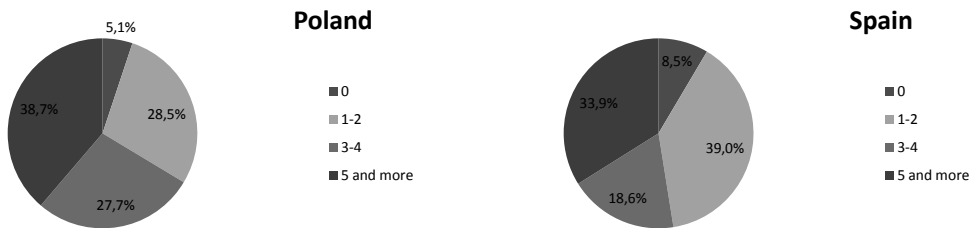


Fig. 4. Frequency of being asked for help among Polish and Spanish students

Source: own study.

The data presented in Fig. 4 shows that there is considerable diversity of the number of people who approached Polish and Spanish students asking for help within the last 12 months. In the case of the first group, it was mostly (38.7%) 5 people or more. Only 5% of Polish students were not asked for any help at all. Among Spanish students, on the other hand, there are fewer (33.9%) who were asked for help by 5 or more people within the last 12 months. Evidence shows that the largest share of students were asked for help by 1-2 people – 39.0%, which is approx. 10 percentage points more than in the case of Polish students. The percentage of students who were not asked for help at all is also small (at 8.5%), although slightly higher than in Poland.

The survey among Polish and Spanish students addresses also the issue of trust in relation to nationality (Fig. 5).

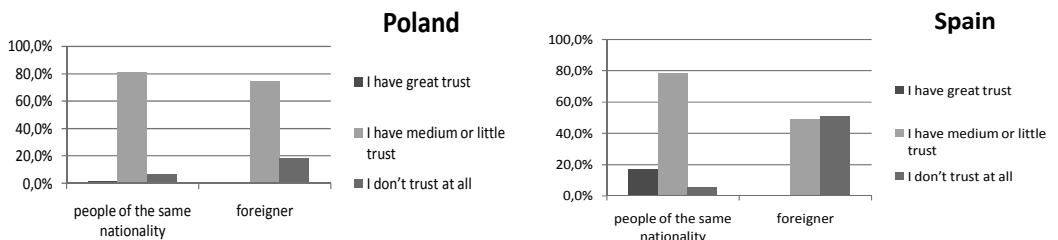
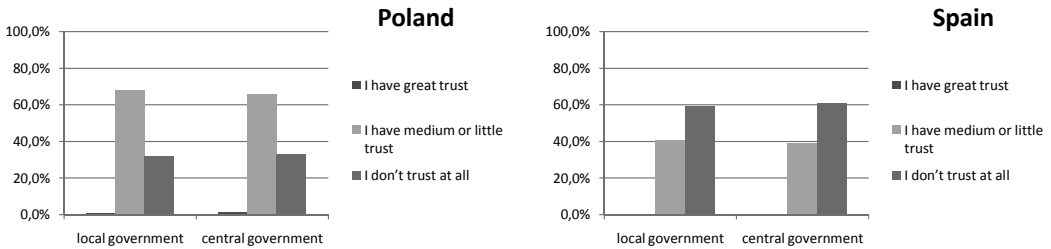


Fig. 5. Trust in people of the same nationality and foreigners among Polish and Spanish students

Source: own study.

The data presented in **Fig. 5** shows that a vast majority of Polish students have medium or little trust in both people of the same nationality and foreigners. It should be pointed out that there are considerably more students who do not trust foreigners (18.1%) than there are those who do not trust people of the same nationality (7.2%). Spanish students also tend to have medium or little trust in people of the same nationality or foreigners. The visible difference is that many more of them (16.9%) have great trust in people of the same nationality than it is observed for their peers in Poland. On the other hand, as many as 50.8% do not trust foreigners at all, which is a much higher figure than that for Poland.

Another characteristic essential to development of the social capital is public trust (**Fig. 6**).

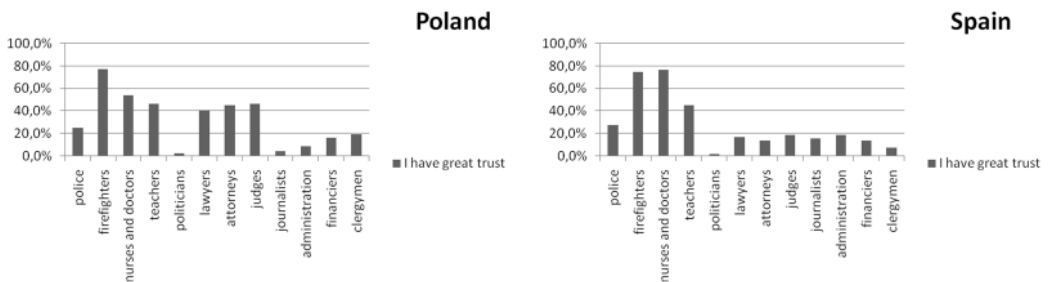


**Fig. 6.** Polish and Spanish students’ trust in the local and central government

Source: own study.

With reference to these results, it should be pointed out that Polish students have medium or little trust in the authorities, whether on the local or central level (approx. 2/3 of respondents selected this answer). Furthermore, nearly one third declare they do not trust the authorities at all. It proves a generally very low level of trust in the state as such. Spanish students also have medium or little trust in both central and local government (75% of responses). Considerably fewer students in Spain than in Poland (one out of five), however, do not trust the authorities at all. Similarly to Poland, there are very few Spanish students who have great trust in the authorities.

The final part of the empirical data analysis concerns trust in relation to occupation (**Fig. 7**).



**Fig. 7.** Occupation-related trust of Polish and Spanish students

Source: own study.



The groups of Polish and Spanish students are significantly diverse in terms of occupation-related trust. The results show that they have great trust in firefighters, nurses and teachers. Apart from those professions, Polish students, unlike their Spanish peers, also trust lawyers, attorneys and judges. There is considerable difference between the two groups in terms of trust in clergymen. In Poland they are trusted by 19.4% of students, whereas in Spain – only by approx. 7%. The survey results provide evidence that Polish students have very little trust in politicians (2.1%) and journalists (3.8%). In Spain it is politicians who are the group which enjoys the least trust (1.7%).

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### Conclusion

Given the plethora of definitions of the social capital, it should be noted that trust, next to networks and social norms, is its key component. Trust is a key value affecting the unity of a group, be it on the level of a family, organisation or community. It is crucial to socio-economic growth.

Evidence from a survey conducted among Polish students from the Faculty of Economics and Management, University of Szczecin, related to personal trust reveals that they are rather cautious in relationships with other people. It may be assumed, however, that this philosophy of limited trust characteristic of Polish students refers mostly to the group of “foreigners”. Relationships with close environment and neighbours are generally based on trust. The students perceive themselves as trustworthy and as people who can be asked for help. This limited trust among Polish students in their relationships with other people is generally unrelated to the nationality, yet distrust shown towards foreigners is considerably greater. According to the results, the group of students under survey shows a very low level of trust in public institutions. It refers both to the central and local government, which is a clear indication of certain depreciation of the state as such in the eyes of the younger members of the society. The group of students under survey is diverse in terms of occupation-related trust. The results show that they have great trust in firefighters, nurses and teachers, and very little trust in politicians and journalists. This survey is consistent with the results of the survey carried out by the Public Opinion Research Center in Poland (CBOS), surveys by the Central Statistical Office of Poland or periodical reports *Diagnoza społeczna*. They reveal that the Poles have great trust in people from their environment, particularly close family members, and much lower in other people. Apart from that, the survey shows also considerable differences among the Poles in terms of social trust. Unfortunately, the general level of trust is considerably lower than the EU average.

In this study, the results of a survey among Spanish students are also used for the purpose of comparison. Spanish students are also cautious in their relationships with the environment. According to their responses, it can be also concluded that they have less trust in their close environment and neighbours than their Polish peers. Moreover, they are less frequently asked for help than Polish students. It is also noteworthy to observe that approx. half of Spanish students declare lack of trust in foreigners. The study has also revealed a very low level of trust in public institutions. Just like in the case of their Polish peers, also here high levels of trust were reported for firefighters, nurses and teachers. The differences between students from both countries can be seen in the levels of trust in law-related professions and clergymen – they are trusted by Polish students, but hardly so by Spanish students. Politicians are a group which enjoys equally low levels of trust

in both groups of students. It should be emphasised, however, that the results of the European Social Survey reveal a generally low level of trust social trust in the two countries.

It may be, therefore, stated that there are certain barriers to trust observed among Polish and Spanish students which can have a negative impact on the process of forming social capital. In general, it can be stated that there is no great difference between students of both countries in terms of the “radius of trust” in their communities. The surveys provide evidence consistent with the findings of F. Fukuyama that the greater trust in the family, the lower it is outside the family. Yet, social capital, including trust, is the way to ensure efficient collaboration and easier development of social community in the future, as observed e.g. by F. Fukuyama or J. Coleman. The students’ attitudes should be assessed as negative particularly in the context of the bridging social capital, which – according to R.D. Putnam – is essential to progress in a given society or community.

The data analysis presented in the paper as well as conclusions based on the analysis require, naturally, further study. For this reason, the authors plans to conduct the same survey among bachelor’s degree students in their final (third) year. As a result, it will be possible to find out whether their social capital, including trust, has evolved during the entire period of studies. Having those answers, it will be possible to relate them to the findings by R.D. Putnam who argues that collaboration and benefits enjoyed by people have a positive impact on trust. There is no doubt that this trust will determine students’ future behaviours in their everyday lives, in their communities. It seems necessary to conduct comparative studies for various EU member states, particularly to notice any differences between the “old” and “new” member states. It seems significant in the context of the existing socio-economic challenges, as well as serious challenges related to the influx of immigrants from Africa. The lack of trust, particularly in relations with the broader environment, is a barrier to forming exclusive bonds, which may affect the unity and socio-economic stability of the European Union.

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**SURVEY QUESTIONS:**

**Fig. 1.**

Choose one of the following statements. Do you think, that:

- a) people can be trusted
- b) one should be careful about trusting people
- c) people cannot be trusted
- d) hard to say

**Fig. 2.**

Do you agree with the following statement:

	1. definitely not 2. rather not 3. hard to say 4. rather yes 5. definitely yes				
most of the people in my close environment are trustworthy	1	2	3	4	5
people should be trusted with caution	1	2	3	4	5
people rather do not trust each other	1	2	3	4	5

**Fig. 3**

If you had to leave for a few days, could you count on your neighbors to look after your flat (choose only one answer)

- a) definitely yes
- b) rather yes
- c) hard to say
- d) rather not
- e) definitely not

**Fig. 4**

How many people turned to you for any kind of help in the past 12 months? (choose only one answer)

- a) 0
- b) 1 – 2
- c) 3 – 4
- d) 5 and more

**Fig. 5 and Fig. 6**

Jak dużym zaufaniem obdarza Pan/Pani następujące osoby? Do you trust the following people?

	1. I don't trust them at all 2. I have a little trust in them 3. I have medium trust in them 4. I trust them 5. I have great trust in them				
A. people of the same nationality	1	2	3	4	5
B. foreigner	1	2	3	4	5
C. local government	1	2	3	4	5
D. central government	1	2	3	4	5

**Fig. 7**

Jak dużym zaufaniem obdarza Pan/Pani osoby wykonujące następujące zawody? Do you trust people representing these professions?

	1. I don't trust them at all	2. I have a little trust in them	3. I have medium trust in them	4. I trust them	5. I have great trust in them
A. police	1	2	3	4	5
B. firefighters	1	2	3	4	5
C. nurses and doctors	1	2	3	4	5
D. teachers	1	2	3	4	5
E. politicians	1	2	3	4	5
F. lawyers	1	2	3	4	5
G. judges	1	2	3	4	5
I. journalists	1	2	3	4	5
J. administration	1	2	3	4	5
K. financiers	1	2	3	4	5
L. clergymen	1	2	3	4	5