Educational activities of older people in Poland, Czechia and Slovakia

Magdalena Kowalska
Department of Statistics and Social Policy, University of Agriculture in Krakow, al. Mickiewicza 21, 31-120 Kraków, Poland, Email: magdalena.kowalska@urk.edu.pl, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2859-7676

Wioletta Knapik
Department of Statistics and Social Policy, University of Agriculture in Krakow, al. Mickiewicza 21, 31-120 Kraków, Poland, Email: wioletta.knapik@urk.edu.pl, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6044-5915

Lidia Luty
Department of Statistics and Social Policy, University of Agriculture in Krakow, al. Mickiewicza 21, 31-120 Kraków, Poland, Email: lidia.luty@urk.edu.pl, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8250-8331

Monika Zioło
Department of Statistics and Social Policy, University of Agriculture in Krakow, al. Mickiewicza 21, 31-120 Kraków, Poland, Email: monika.zioło@urk.edu.pl, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0884-4083

Abstract

Population ageing is just as important a modern phenomenon as it is global. However, the process is not uniform on a scale of continents and within Europe, with the latter exhibiting the most advanced and widespread population ageing. Nowhere is it as dynamic as in the former Eastern Bloc. It is true for Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia as well.

The researches involves pilot surveys in the three countries of interest. The part of the survey results discussed here covers the educational activity of the population aged 60 and over from rural areas. Rural areas were chosen for the study because, despite the abundance of learning opportunities for older people in Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia, rural areas have much less to offer in terms of education, also regarding seniors. Hence, it is necessary to identify the opinions and needs of the older rural population.

Participation of older people in any form of education is a critical component of active ageing. Importantly, learning is a way for older people to be active in society. The educational activity is not just a fun way to spend time for seniors, but it can help improve their social participation, fend off ageism, and enhance the social and cultural capital of
local communities. Still, for educational activity to play all these roles, a broad educational offer is needed fit for specific needs and capabilities of all groups of society, including rural seniors.

*Keywords:* education; seniors; ageing; educational activity

*JEL classification:* J11, J14, J19

---

1. Population ageing as a global problem

Ageing is one of the critical global processes that affect the entire world population. Although relatively not long ago, population ageing was considered a problem of developed countries only, it is now seen all over the world. The problem affects also those countries and regions that we associate with young populations. Note here that the demographic changes reflecting the ageing of the populations of the Global South are much more dynamic than in the Global North in addition to being a new and poorly investigated phenomenon (United Nations, 2020) (Knapik & Kowalska et al., 2022). The weight of population ageing today is evident from the fact that the process has been included as one of the four global demographic mega-trends along with population growth, international migration, and urbanisation. All these phenomena and processes are expected to permanently affect sustainable development (United Nations, 2019).

As population ageing is global, the increase in the absolute number and share of older people in the total population impacts virtually all countries. In 2019, there were about 703 million people aged 65 and over. Globally, the share of people aged 65 and over grew from 6 per cent in 1990 to about 10 per cent in 2022. It is expected to grow further still to reach about 16 per cent by 2050. It means that every sixth person in the world will be aged 65 or over; the number of older people will double to about 1.5 billion in 2050 (United Nations, 2022) (WHO, 2017). Moreover, forecasts indicate that the number of people aged 65 and over will be twice as large as the population of children aged 5 and under by 2050. Gender-related changes will also be significant. Today, virtually all older populations are dominated by women. Obviously, the primary reason for this is the longer life expectancy for women. Globally, women constituted 55.7 per cent of people aged 65 and over in 2022, while the share is forecast to decrease slightly by 2050 to 54.5 per cent (United Nations, 2022).

Even though ageing is global and affects all continents, it is in Europe that the process is the most widespread and advanced. The first and second demographic transitions took place in Europe to shape the demographic landscape of modern societies. Admittedly,

---

1 The concept of the first demographic transition proposes that economic growth entails a shift from a high birth rate, mortality rate, and rate of natural increase to low values of the indicators. The second demographic transition involves fertility plummeting below replacement levels. At the core of the concept is to reflect how changes in the second half of the twentieth century caused demographic consequences (cf.: DJ van de Kaa D.J., R. Lesthaegher (1986), Bovolking: groei en Krimp. Twee demografischetanities, Deventer: Van Loghum Slaterus. ISBN: 9036800188).
Europe has had the lowest natural increase since the early twentieth century and is effectively the oldest continent in terms of demographics (Żołędowski, 2012). The situation is well illustrated by today’s age median for Europe, which was 42.5 in 2020; twice as large as for Africa. The difference is forecast to remain significant in the next decades (European Commission, 2021). Thus, population ageing is considered a long-term trend, which in Europe started several decades ago. Demographic transformations led to a situation where the percentage of the working-age population is dwindling and the share of seniors is growing (Eurostat, The share of elderly people continues to increase). Undoubtedly, the fact that life expectancy at birth grew significantly by 10 years for men and women alike over the last 50 years is of consequence here. It is evident from data that indicate that over one-fifth of the European population (about 21%) was aged 65 and over in 2022 (Eurostat, Population structure and ageing).

Europe is far from being uniform in terms of the ageing process, as are EU regions and countries. Interestingly, population ageing is the most dynamic in former Eastern Bloc countries today. Changes brought about by the second demographic transition followed different patterns and intensities in individual European countries in addition to their different starting points. In general, the processes originated from the most economically developed countries, mostly due to the phenomenon broadly referred to as the modernisation of society (Janiszewska, 2013). They date back to the 1950s in Northern Europe and the 1960s in Western Europe. The sociopolitical transformation in Central and Eastern European countries also significantly differentiated demographic trends in Europe. It affected Eastern Bloc countries, which were more at risk of depopulation than Western Europe due to lower development and wealth levels (Żołędowski, 2012). Particular emphasis needs to be put on the course of population ageing; its pace has been much faster in Central and Eastern European countries than in others in recent decades. Even though most of these countries have shares of older people below the European average and their populations can be considered as relatively ‘young’—especially compared to Western, Northern, and Southern Europe—ageing is still much faster there (Sowa-Kofta, 2020). The share of older people in the total population of Central and Eastern Europe is forecast to be lower than in many other countries, especially Southern Europe (such as Italy or Greece, where it will be the highest, about 25% in 2030). However, it will still be above the EU average in Poland or Czechia. The reasons are low fertility and emigration, primarily of young people (Raport ESPON, 2021) (European Commission, 2021).

1. Educational activity of older people in Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia

Undoubtedly, active ageing concepts include the educational activity of older people. It is one of the key types of activity in addition to professional, cultural, and recreational activities (Sowa-Kofta, 2020). Still, senior education should not be perceived in the context of typical school or university education. This type of education is aimed at stimulating seniors and sharing knowledge and information to help them participate in public life.

The significance of education for seniors is emphasized in the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030 (‘the Decade’). It is a global collaboration planned for a decade
to improve the lives of older people, their families, and the communities in which they live. One of the areas the Decade refers to is the education of older people: ‘ensuring that communities foster the abilities of older people, including in labour, education, housing, social protection, transport and technology’ (WHO, 2022, p. 2). EU efforts also consider the education of seniors an important part of their active lives. It is expressed in the Green Paper on Ageing. Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations (European Commission, 2021), which draws on the WHO’s Decade. The objectives of the Green Paper involve kindling a public debate on the ageing of European populations in the context of anticipating challenges and opportunities brought by the process and responding to imminent changes. One of the goals includes also lifelong learning considered ‘investing in people’s knowledge, skills and competencies throughout their lives – forms part of the response to the challenges of ageing’ (European Commission, 2021, p. 4). Importantly, learning is a way for older people to be active in society. It is also an underpinning for remaining active in the labour market, which is indispensable in the rapidly changing world, where professional career conditions are volatile. Moreover, education of seniors may be useful for delaying signs of early dementia or slowing down or even preventing age-related cognitive decline (European Commission, 2021) (Cronholm, 2021) (Kaplan, 2016).

Active learning–based approach is the point of reference for new national senior policies in Europe. They are intended to create conditions stimulating public participation, also through the education of older people (Sowa-Kofta, 2020). We will now characterise the educational activity of older people in three Central and Eastern European countries: Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia.

The Polish senior policy is regulated with Social Policy for Older People 2030. SAFETY – PARTICIPATION – SOLIDARITY drawn up by the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy (MRPiPS, 2018). It pertains to all aspects of the life of older people, both independent and non-independent. One of the areas devoted to the general older population is ‘VII. Activities for education for old age (care and medical staff), until old age (entire population), through old age (from the youngest generation), and in old age (older people)’. These are achieved through:

- improving educational opportunities for older people,
- development and promotion of care professions and improvement of their competencies,
- development of informal education (radio, television, Internet, audiobooks),
- promoting new technology education (MRPiPS, 2018, p. 56).

Poland has two popular forms of senior education. These are Universities of the Third Age (U3As) and senior clubs. The first U3As were established in Poland in the 1970s (first in Warsaw, then in Wroclaw and Opole). Today, most U3As can be found in towns and cities, mainly up to 50,000 residents, where nearly half of them are situated. Villages are the most underrepresented with only 10% of U3As (Universities of the Third Age). There are 640 U3As in Poland today with about 115,000 participants (84 per cent of whom are women) (U3A). Only about 21% of U3As are part of universities. Most of them are operated by community centres or independent associations (Universities of the Third Age). From the perspective of over forty years of U3As in Poland, there is an unambiguous
trend for regular growth, which reflects seniors' interest (Nowicka & Kopinec, 2020) (Konieczna-Woźniak & Fabiś, 2019).

The other very popular form of education (and more) in Poland are senior clubs. They are the best accessible and usually free stimulation effort for older people.

They appeared first in the 1960s: ‘senior clubs are institutions for the normalization of activities by combating the feeling of loneliness, isolation and redundancy functions. In addition, they support the intellectual and creative capabilities of older people’ (Kacprowska, 2019, p. 82). They are hotspots of social activity mobilisation, culture participation, and educational stimulation. Senior clubs ‘influence the change of personality and behavior of older people, allow to find a satisfactory model of life in old age’ (Kacprowska, 2019, p. 83) The network of senior clubs and day care centres is now financed through the ‘Senior+’ Multiannual Programme for 2021–2025 aimed at improving the financial standing of existing facilities and creating new ones (National Report, 2021, p. 4).

In Slovakia, senior policy efforts are coordinated by the Council of the Government of the Slovak Republic on the Rights of Seniors and the Adaptation of Public Policies to the Population Ageing Process. It coordinates and controls activities to regulate the rights of seniors and eliminate adverse effects of population ageing. The National Programme of Active Ageing for 2021–2030 is part of the country’s senior policy (NPAS, 2021). Its support for active ageing includes priority ‘Lifelong promotion of human resources’ with two goals for senior education: Goal 3: ‘Education for older people to improve their employability or job preservation, while accepting key trends of the Fourth Industrial Revolution’ and Goal 5: ‘Non-formal lifelong learning for older people as a tool for promoting social inclusion and intergenerational coherence’ (NPAS, 2021).

Also in Slovakia, Universities of the Third Age are among the most popular forms of education for seniors. They date back to the times of Czechoslovakia, when they were held by the Czechoslovakian Red Cross and the Socialist Academy. Their number grew significantly only after 1989. Today, they are found in all 20 major cities. They offer opportunities to improve one’s knowledge and maintain interpersonal relationships (Nowicka & Kopinec, 2020) (Kaščáková & Martinkovičová, 2019).

Another form of education for seniors in Slovakia are Academies of the Third Age. They come in two flavours: either similar to U3As (similar course cycles over years) or as individual or short-term cycles of lectures, language courses, discussion clubs, or social skill training courses. The Academy offers diverse types of interesting and relevant topics that might be of interest to older people (Čornaničová) (Nowicka & Kopinec, 2020).

Senior clubs are very popular in Slovakia. Just as in Poland, they are considered the most common hubs of social life for older people there. They are controlled by two large organisations, the Union of Pensioners of the Slovak Republic and the Association of Christian Senior Citizens. Senior clubs offer abundant opportunities in terms of education, culture, recreation, etc.

In Czechia, the state policy for population ageing and seniors is included in the ‘Strategy for Preparation For Population Ageing for 2021–2025’ (MINISTERSTVO PRÁCE A
The document contains senior education guidelines. One of the actions relevant to ageing is Action 8: 'Lifelong learning, labour market, and active ageing'.

Senior education in Czechia is based on Universities of the Third Age. They follow the French model, which is closely linked to the traditional university. All U3As have been organised in the Association of Universities of the Third Age (AU3V) since 1993. Today, there are about 40 U3As at universities in Czechia (Göttlichová, 2019). Czech seniors grow increasingly interested in the project. In 2012 there were 30,000 senior students, while in 2020, 50,000 (Nováková & Lorenzová, 2020). U3As in Czechia offer courses lasting one to six semesters. Any fees paid by senior students are nominal because U3A is not a commercial imitative. The functions of Czech U3As are similar to those mentioned above for Slovakia and Poland, but according to M. Šerák (2015) (Nováková & Lorenzová, 2020, p. 72), ‘as retirement age increases and the participation of older workers in the labor market increases, it may be necessary to redefine the content and focus of senior education, which will no longer be seen as non-professional and hobby. U3A may have to redefine their mission over time and create other educational offers for seniors’.

Moreover, Czechia has Universities of the Fourth Age, an educational scheme for seniors living in care homes. As long as their mental and physical condition allows, they can participate in classes. Courses involve groups of up to 10 students facilitated by experts in various fields. The lectures concern a variety of topics, from a healthy lifestyle, current socio-economic developments, to computer use, etc. Lifestyle diseases are also a popular topic. Furthermore, U4A is an opportunity for care home residents to learn new facts and skills related to managing their diseases, how to use the healthcare system optimally, or how to cooperate with social workers (Svobodova & Pavelkova, 2020). Yet another senior education opportunity in Czechia is senior clubs, considered the most common organisation of seniors. They focus on education, but sports or computer classes are not uncommon (Seniors Club).

2. Material and methods

The research involves pilot surveys in Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia conducted in 2020 and 2021. Respondents consented to participate in the survey. They were informed that the survey is anonymous. They did not provide any personal information. The project was coordinated by researchers from three universities in Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia. University of Agriculture in Krakow (Poland), Mendel University in Brno (Czech Republic), and Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra (Slovakia). The survey was conducted among a purposive sample of people aged 60 and over during meetings with seniors in rural local communities. The objective of the meetings was for the seniors to assess the senior policy implementation by local governments. The survey population were 402 persons aged 60 and over (145 in Czechia, 145 in Poland, and 113 in Slovakia) resident in Lesser Poland Voivodeship (województwo małopolskie, Poland), South Moravian Region (Jihomoravský kraj, Czechia), and Nitra Region (Nitranský kraj, Slovakia). The results presented here are pilot in nature as part of a concept of a broader project to assess senior policies implemented in rural areas by local authorities in Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia. The part of the survey results discussed here covers the educational
activity of the population aged 60 and over from rural areas through quantitative analyses.

3. Educational activity of seniors in rural Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia

The pilot study focuses on education as one of the four domains of social development. The survey questions concerned the activity of older people in the educational domain, their motivation, amounts of money spent monthly on cultural, educational, and developmental activities, and barriers hindering access to education.

Table 1: Survey population structure in Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia [%]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specification</th>
<th>Czechia</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Slovakia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>62.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>37.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>60–70</td>
<td>71–80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>67.4</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>single, divorced, widow/er</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>67.4</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>basic vocational</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working in retirement</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own elaboration based on the results

The survey involved 402 people aged 60 and over (145 in Czechia, 145 in Poland, and 113 in Slovakia). Women constituted from 57% in Poland to 80% in Czechia. The largest age group in Czechia was 71–80 years, while in Poland and Slovakia 60–70 years. Most respondents in all countries were married. In Czechia, most respondents had post-secondary education (33.8%), and in Poland and Slovakia, secondary (38.9% and 38.1%, respectively). Most of the respondents did not work at the time of the survey (Table 1).
The main reason for engaging in educational activities by Czech seniors was to maintain mental fitness (71%) and to meet peers (53.1%) (Fig. 1). In Poland, the motivation was much more varied. Fitness was pursued by 48.6% of the Polish respondents, but 39.6% sought contact with peers, and 37.5% believed learning to be a good way to spend free time. Respondents in Slovakia wanted to spend their free time (56.6%), participated in courses for pleasure (54.9%), to improve fitness (53.1%), and to meet other seniors (44.2%).

The monthly amount spent on cultural or educational activities in all the countries did not exceed 15 euros.
Figure 2. Percentage of responses to the question: What forms of educational activities do you use most often?

Source: own elaboration based on the results

When asked about their preferred activity, the respondents most often chose participation in outings, trips allowing for sightseeing, and visiting interesting places. The largest group of them came from Czechia (62.8%). This option was also chosen by 42% of respondents in Poland and 39.8% in Slovakia (Fig. 2). More than half of the respondents from Czechia (50.3%) willingly participated in events for seniors, such as senior days. Polish respondents were also interested in lectures held at community centres (50.7%). Language and computer courses were the least popular.
Figure 3. Percentage of responses to the question: What do you think makes access to cultural and educational services the most difficult for seniors?

Source: own elaboration based on the results

Many seniors declared poor health (Fig. 3) as the most important barrier to cultural events or other activities. This answer was given by 45.5% of the respondents in Czechia, 50.7% in Poland, and 47.8% in Slovakia. Another severe issue limiting their access to cultural events was money. It was a problem for 55.8% of respondents from Slovakia, 46.5% from Poland, and 36.6% from Czechia.

Most respondents in Czechia (62.8%) and Poland (50.7%) believed the educational and cultural opportunities for seniors to be sufficiently attractive. Seniors in Slovakia were of a different opinion; nearly half of them considered the offer unsuitable for seniors.

4. Conclusions

Being demographically diversified, European countries and regions vary in terms of population ageing. Former Eastern Bloc states are undoubtedly worthy of our attention in terms of the demographic problems at hand, especially ageing. They are currently undergoing—and according to forecast will be undergoing in the future—the most dynamic ageing processes. The same applies to the countries investigated here, Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia.

The pilot study concerned the educational activity of the oldest age groups in the three countries. The study involved seniors from selected regions of rural Poland, Czechia, and
Slovakia. As demonstrated here, all three countries offer relatively abundant opportunities for the educational activity. Still, the educational offer is much worse in rural areas regardless of the target age group. Hence, it is necessary to identify the opinions and needs of the older rural population.

The educational activity is not just a fun way to spend time for seniors, but it can help improve their social participation, fend off ageism, and enhance the social and cultural capital of local communities. Importantly, education is one of the critical determinants of the quality of life regardless of age. Still, for educational activity to play all these roles, a broad educational offer is needed fit for specific needs and capabilities of all groups of society, including rural seniors. It will surely aid with more satisfactory old age and support active ageing even more from the systemic point of view.

References

- Göttlichová M. (2019) “University of the Third Age - university studies don't have to be only for the young”, *Education and New Developments* 2019, p. 309-311.


• MINISTERSTVO PRÁCE A SOCIÁLNÍCH VĚCÍ ČR, „STRATEGICKÝ RÁMEC PŘÍPRAVY NA STÁRNUTÍ SPOLEČNOSTI 2021–2025“. Available at: https://www.mpsv.cz/documents/20142/372809/Strategick%C3%BD+r%C5%9Cme+p%C5%99%C3%ADpravy+na+st%C3%A1rmut%C3%AD+spole%4%8Dnosti_2021-2025.pdf/ebefaa4-b010-6a72-e3b2-81e0fd5fcbd6


• National Report – POLAND Information on the actions taken for the benefit of elderly people as part of the fourth review and appraisal cycle of the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and its Regional Implementation Strategy (MIPAA/RIS) 2017 – 2021. Warszawa.


• Nowicka A. and Kopinec P. (2020) "Education of elderly people on the example of students of the third age universities in Poland and Slovakia“. ROCZNIK LUBUSKI Tom 46, cz. 1, 2020, p. 121-134.


U3A. Website. Available at: https://senior.gov.pl/katalog_dobrych_praktyk/strona/14


Universities of the Third Age. Available at: https://senior.gov.pl/katalog_dobrych_praktyk/strona/14


