

The Social Composition of Polish United Workers' Party Leadership

Marcin WROŃSKI, Olga ZAŁĘSKA

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Abstract: *In this article, the authors discuss the social standing of the members of central party bodies and regional leaders of the Polish United Workers Party. For this purpose, a database was created, including 1677 individuals holding 3148 offices. The communist elite was strongly positively selected on the basis of genealogical ties to the prewar social elite, as well as occupation and education. The central authorities of the PZPR were most “elite” during the Stalinist period, while their ties to the prewar elite weakened in the 1970s. Kinship ties between the democratic opposition leaders and the pre-war social elite were more pronounced than those observed among the communist party leadership.*

Keywords: *state socialism, social mobility, elite, genealogy, Polish People's Republic*

JEL: *N34, N44, P30*

The aim of this article is to examine the social origins of the ruling elite in Poland in the years 1948–1989.¹ Based on information presented in publications of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), we study the structure of occupation, education and gender within the leading party bodies – the Political Bureau and the Secretariat of the Central Committee, the Central Committee, the Central Auditing Commission, and the Central Control Commission. The study also covers the First Secretaries of the PZPR Voivodeship Committees. Using genealogical data, the degree of kinship between the party elite and the pre-war social elite is measured. This level is then compared with the degree of kinship between the opposition elite (the Workers' Defence Committee – KOR) and the pre-war elite. The primary aim of this study is to assess social mobility within the party elite, as well as to measure the extent to which, in the dimensions under analysis, the structure of the party authorities differed from that of Polish society. The career trajectories of PZPR officials are also analysed.

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Data sources

The primary source of data is the PZPR publication *Zjazdy, Posiedzenia Plenarne Komitetu Centralnego, Wladze Naczelne i Sekretarze Komitetów Wojewódzkich* [Congresses, Plenary Sessions of the Central Committee, Highest Authorities and Secretaries of the Voivodeship Committees], issued by the Central Archive of the PZPR Central Committee in 1983 (Ciempiel et al., 1983). Information on the authorities elected at the 10th Congress of the PZPR (1986) is drawn from a similar publication, *X Zjazd Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej 29 czerwca – 3 lipca 1986 r. Podstawowe dokumenty i materiały* [10th Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party, 29 June – 3 July 1986 – Basic Documents and Materials] (PZPR, 1986). It should be noted that the latter document contains no information on the education, occupation or party functions of the delegates. Therefore, we use it only as a supplementary source, focusing primarily on the presence or absence in the party authorities of individuals who had appeared in earlier periods. The publication which forms the basis of this article was intended for internal party use, which suggests that the information it contains was of no significant propagandistic value. In scholarly literature, such data are generally considered reliable (Żurowski, 2011, pp. 50–51).

According to the PZPR statute, the supreme authority of the Party was the congress, while between congresses the leading role was played by the Central Committee. In theory, congresses were to be held every four years, with their delegates freely nominating, and then electing in secret and democratic ballots, members and alternate members of the Central Committee, as well as the members of the Central Auditing Commission and the Central Control Commission. The Central Committee members then selected from among themselves the Political Bureau and the Secretariat (PZPR, 1959).

In practice, however, elections to the Central Committee were more of a plebiscite with the winners known in advance, and the significance of PZPR congresses for the actual governance of the country was largely symbolic. They were also rarely held at the time stipulated in the statute – they were brought forward or postponed depending on the current political situation. They thus served to make visible the changes that had already taken place behind the scenes. The Central Committee, which met in plenary sessions three or four times a year, likewise did not wield real power (Osęka, 2009, pp. 71–73). Decisions on changes in the country were taken primarily by the Political Bureau, the Secretariat, and selected party activists whose real standing was not reflected by their official positions (Szumiło, 2011, pp. 129–135).

Methodology

The database compiled for this study comprises 3,148 positions held by 1,677 individuals. The higher number of positions than individuals results from the fact that the

same person could perform various functions for more than one term (being re-elected at different Congresses). For each individual, the publication provided information on education and occupation. Based on occupational prestige scales developed in the 1970s, a prestige score was assigned to each occupation.

For this purpose, the publication by Kazimierz Słomczyński and Grażyna Kacprowicz, *Skale zawodów* [Occupational Scales] (1979), was used, relying primarily on the scale prepared by experts (Annex A) (Słomczyński, & Kacprowicz, 1979, pp. 49–67). Due to the absence of certain occupations (for instance, the particularly frequent ‘economist’ among members of the PZPR Central Committee), these data were supplemented with a scale constructed according to a similar methodology contained in another book by Słomczyński, *Zróżnicowanie społeczno-zawodowe i jego korelaty* [Socio-occupational Differentiation and its Correlates] (Słomczyński, 1972). In addition, for occupations absent from the tables, a score corresponding to the most similar profession was assigned.

To measure kinship ties, the genealogy database created by Dr Minakowska – Wielka Genealogia (Wielcy.pl) – was used. Developed over two decades, this database comprises 1.2 million individuals and, according to the author’s declaration, covers the top one per cent of Polish society. It includes descendants of deputies to the Great Sejm, individuals listed in the *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary] and in *Czy wiesz kto to jest?* (the Polish ‘Who’s Who’) from 1938, as well as persons whose obituaries were published in the press before 1939. Subsequently, their relatives were added based on an algorithm similar to PageRank (Minakowski, 2018). This source has previously been used for research on social networks and social mobility (Wroński, & Minakowska, 2025a, 2025b; Minakowski, 2017; Minakowski, 2019).

An individual is considered related to the pre-war elite if they are connected by kinship (even distant) to a person whose biography was published in the *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary], to an individual featured in *Czy wiesz kto to jest?* [Who is Who] from 1938 (Łoza, 1938). There is some probability that, in the case of Polish communist families, links to former landed elites are underestimated due to the limitations of the database (certain family connections may not have been revealed, though no false connections are included).

Literature review

This study is situated within the broader literature on the recruitment of leadership in communist parties. As early as the 1950s, Milovan Djilas, in his book *Nowa klasa* [The New Class] (Djilas, 1957), observed that in communist countries the new elites quickly consolidated their position, becoming a genuine dominant class. They were the ones who profited from the change of system, while actual workers – the proletariat – served as figureheads (Djilas, 1957). The party nomenklatura consisted largely of members of the intelligentsia, who, on the one hand, did not constitute the ‘enemy

of the people' in the classical sense, and on the other, possessed the resources and skills necessary to govern the country. While in states of state socialism (with certain exceptions) private ownership of the means of production was prohibited, it was impossible to ban the private ownership of human capital. In the Stalinist USSR, the wealthiest individuals (at least according to income tax data) were writers, while in Warsaw during the era of Edward Gierek the highest payers of the property tax were members of the intelligentsia – professors, film directors, and artists (Wroński, 2023).

In the case of the USSR, the party elite developed into a separate social class capable of reproduction (Kryshtanovskaya, & White, 1996, pp. 713–715). Ivan Szelényi noted that while the intelligentsia played a dominant role in socialist societies, by the post-Stalinist period it was no longer a monolith (Szelényi, 1982, pp. 287–326). It had split into members of the nomenklatura, loyal employees of the state bureaucracy, and a class of educated professionals – increasingly dissatisfied with the political system and capable of undermining the position of the party leadership, eventually replacing it entirely (Szelényi, 1982, pp. 287–326)². Research on Soviet society cannot be directly applied to the Polish People's Republic, given the weaker position of the Polish party nomenklatura, which was simply part of the intelligentsia rather than, as in the USSR, a separate social class capable of reproduction (Zarycki, 2018, pp. 232–235; Zarycki, 2022).

Contrary to the universalist principles of Marxist ideology, the origins of members of communist parties and their electorates varied significantly depending on the country and historical period under consideration. Research conducted in the 1920s among the communist activists of Eastern and Southern European countries (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and Greece) showed that these were not individuals from the most excluded backgrounds. Of this group, 29.4% came from the working class, 21.4% from the peasantry, and 44.8% from middle-class backgrounds (Burks, 1961, pp. 19–25). Significant regional differences are visible. Among Bulgarian communists of that period, 43.6% could be classified as middle class, whereas among Greek communists only 3% fell into this category (Burks, 1961, pp. 34–37). More than half of Greek communists were peasants, but they did not belong to the rural poor; they typically owned a house, land, livestock, and even employed wage labourers. Activists also frequently moved from rural families into urban occupations (Burks, 1961, pp. 25–37).

After the Second World War, communist parties in the Soviet Union's satellite states acquired a mass character, and their leaders made particular efforts to recruit workers – previously not very numerous in agricultural countries. As a result, by 1947–1948 in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, the proportion of workers exceeded 50%. Farmers still dominated in Yugoslavia (49.4%), Bulgaria (43.8%), and Albania (66.9%). The Bulgarian party was the most 'bourgeois', with the middle class

² What actually happened in Poland.

accounting for 30.3% of its members; the middle class also made up over 20% of the party activist base in Yugoslavia and Poland (Burks, 1961, pp. 49–53). Of interest is the tendency of certain groups from various social classes – such as teachers, workers in specific sectors, farmers specialising in certain crops, students, and refugees – to join communist parties more frequently (Burks, 1961, pp. 54–60).

Adam Sarapata pointed to the change in the prestige of certain occupations in public perception compared to the interwar period. His research suggested that after the war there was upward mobility for peasants and the poorer segments of the working class, as well as an increase in the prestige of miners and unskilled workers, at the expense of workshop owners and shopkeepers. White-collar workers without higher education and skilled workers were evaluated at a similar level to before the war. The most highly regarded were professors, doctors, and engineers, and the least esteemed were unskilled workers and cleaners. In terms of job stability, doctors and professors ranked highest; in terms of income levels, ministers, shop owners, and lawyers held the top positions (Sarapata, 1965, pp. 141–186). The self-assessment of the prestige of given occupational groups corresponded to societal evaluations, and the proposed maximum earnings for various professions differed only slightly; however, actual wages often diverged from expectations (Sarapata, 1965, pp. 230–312).

Analysis of data from the POLPAN survey indicates that in the early years of the Polish People's Republic there was a significant increase in intergenerational educational mobility – the correlation between the education of children and that of their parents was significantly weaker for individuals born in 1946–1953 than before the war. However, once the new system stabilised, social mobility weakened (Wroński, 2024). Research also points to a decline in height inequality (a biological measure of living standards) among cohorts born after the Second World War compared to those born before it. Compression of the distribution occurred in the two decades following the war, but from the late 1960s onward a renewed divergence in height was observed (Wroński, 2023).

While the first decades of the Polish People's Republic brought an increase in social mobility, this process affected the very top elite only to a limited degree. Research on the kinship ties of individuals listed in the *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* indicates that mobility (at least within the very top elite) in 1961 was only slightly higher than in 1938. In 1938, 31% of individuals with an entry in the *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* had an ancestor also listed there; in 1961, the figure was 28%. In 1984, the proportion of individuals listed in the *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* with an ancestor also included fell to 17% (Wroński, & Minakowska, 2025a).

Career paths

The number of members of the PZPR central authorities displayed a steady upward trend, interrupted only by the 10th Congress in 1986. At the first congress in 1948, they

numbered 175. Over the following 15 years, the increase was slow, with 180 members in 1954 and 184 in 1959. Rapid growth began in the 1960s: in 1964, 214 individuals were elected to the central authorities, in 1971 the figure rose to 298, and in 1980 to as many as 402. At the 9th Congress, the party leadership reached 431 members. At the last congress included in the present study, a certain slimming down of the leadership took place – it was reduced to 358 individuals. The number of members of the party leadership is presented in Figure 1.

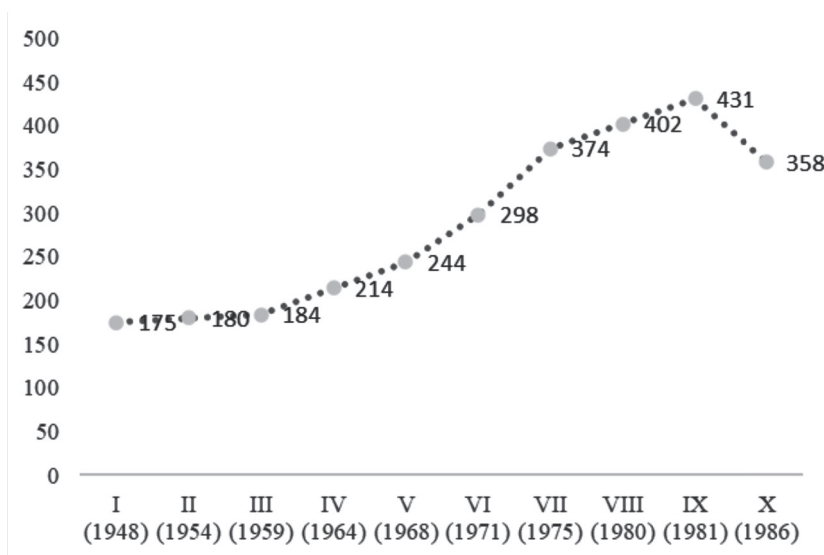


Figure 1. The number of party officials elected during the PZPR congresses.

Source: own estimation

Table 1 shows the number of terms served by individual members of the PZPR central authorities. On average, a member of the central authorities served 1.75 terms – 61% served for only one term, 22% for two terms, 8% for three terms, and 5% for four terms. Fewer than 5% of members served for five or more terms.

Table 1.

The tenure of party officials

Number of terms	Number of party members	Percentage
1	986	60.71%
2	353	21.74%
3	127	7.82%
4	81	4.99%
5	40	2.46%

6	18	1.11%
7	9	0.55%
8	9	0.55%
9	1	0.06%

Source: own estimation.

The Extraordinary 9th Congress was exceptional in terms of leadership selection, significantly rejuvenating the party leadership. Taken aback by the support gained by ‘Solidarity’, the party decided to hold democratic internal elections and attempt a ‘new opening’ (Roszkowski, 1992, pp. 372–373). At that time, a number of veterans were removed from power, including nine individuals who had served continuously in the leadership since 1948.

Voivodeship Committees

The careers of First Secretaries of the PZPR Voivodeship Committees require separate analysis. This group comprised 228 individuals who together held 289 voivodeship secretary positions. Among them, 45 individuals held the office more than once. In most cases, these individuals served in different voivodeships, though there were also instances of returning to a previous position in the same voivodeship. Formally, the Voivodeship Committees and their First Secretaries were equal to one another, but in practice there were significant differences in their standing. Particularly influential were the secretaries of the Warsaw Committee – located closest to the political and administrative centre of the country – and the Katowice Committee – covering the most industrialised region with the highest population density (Koryś et al., 2024, pp. 105–106).

Gender structure

The gender composition of the PZPR authorities is presented in Table 2. The proportion of women ranged from 5% among the authorities elected in 1968 to 16% among those elected in 1986. The percentage of women declined from the 1st Congress (11.5%) to the 5th Congress (4.5%), and then gradually increased. On average, women held less prominent party positions than men; for example, they were more often members of the Auditing Commission or the Party Control Commission, and less often of the Central Committee. Women began to sit on the most important party bodies – the Secretariat and the Political Bureau of the Central Committee – only in the 1980s, and even there they performed what historians consider to have been purely symbolic functions, intended to showcase the party’s egalitarianism (Szumiło, 2011, pp. 135–142).

Table 2.**Gender composition of party officials.**

Congress	1 st (1948)	2 nd (1954)	3 rd (1959)	4 th (1964)	5 th (1968)	6 th (1971)	7 th (1975)	8 th (1980)	9 th (1981)	10 th (1986)
M	88.57%	89.44%	94.57%	95.33%	95.49%	90.94%	90.64%	87.06%	90.72%	84.36%
F	11.43%	10.56%	5.43%	4.67%	4.51%	9.06%	9.36%	12.94%	9.28%	15.64%

Source: own estimation.

The decline in women's participation in the party authorities between 1948 and 1968 stands in stark contrast to the dynamic improvement in their average education levels over the same period (Zawistowska, 2015, pp. 168–190). Although women were generally absent from the PZPR leadership, their proportion was still markedly higher than in the political elite of the Second Polish Republic (Kondracka, 2017) – in the Sejm elected in 1938, no women held seats.

Educational structure

The educational structure of the party leadership is presented in Figure 2.

The educational profile of the party authorities elected at the 1st Congress of the PZPR (1948) is of particular interest – 3% of its members had no education, 21% had only primary education, while as many as 42% had higher education, with a further 9% having incomplete higher education. On the one hand, this was the leadership with the highest proportion of the least educated members; on the other hand, it was only after the 4th Congress (1964) that a similar share of highly educated members was reached again. The differences in the proportion of members with higher education between the 1st Congress and the 2nd (39%) and 3rd (41%) Congresses were relatively small. From the 1960s onwards, a clear improvement in the education of the central authorities is observable. The proportion with higher education reached 50% in 1964 and exceeded 60% in the 1970s. The share with primary education fell from around 20% in the 1940s and 1950s to around 15% in the 1960s and early 1970s, and then to below 10% among the authorities elected in the second half of the 1970s and later. There was also a marked decline in the share of those with 'incomplete' levels of education. The average educational level shows a steady upward trend, except for the authorities elected at the 9th Congress in 1981, whose members were clearly less educated than in 1975 – their average education level placed them between those of the 1959 and 1964 congresses.

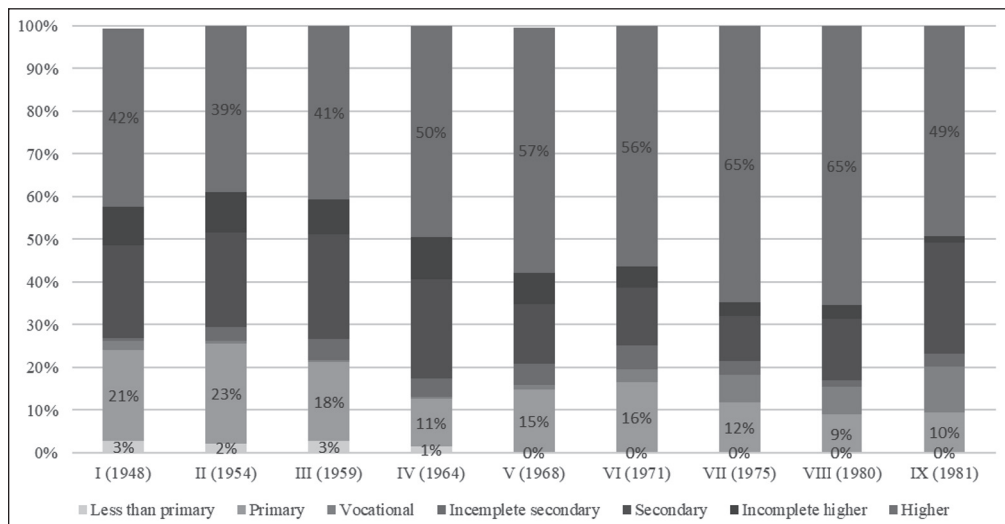


Figure 2. Education of party officials

Source: own estimation.

The educational level of the party leadership was markedly higher than that of society as a whole. In the generation elected at the 1st Congress, around 1.5% of the population had higher education, and only around 5% had secondary education. In the 1960s, among fifty-year-olds (the typical age of members of the highest party bodies), around 2.5% had higher education and around 9% secondary education. In the generation of PZPR leaders of the 1980s – those born in the 1930s – around 8.5% of the population had completed higher education (Wroński, 2024, pp. 317–339). If the difference in education levels between the PZPR leadership and society is taken as a measure of ‘elitism’, then the authorities elected at the 1st Congress were undoubtedly the most elite, while those elected in 1981 were the closest to the general population.

Occupational prestige

Table 3 presents the average occupational prestige and the standard deviation. As with education, it can be seen that the members of the authorities elected at the 1st Congress generally held occupations with higher prestige than those of the authorities elected at the next two congresses. The prestige level of the occupations of members of the central authorities then increased during the 1960s and 1970s. This trend was halted in 1981, when the Extraordinary 9th Congress of the PZPR elected individuals with less prestigious occupations.

Table 3.**Occupation prestige of the party officials.**

Cong-ress	1 st (1948)	2 nd (1954)	3 rd (1959)	4 th (1964)	5 th (1968)	6 th (1971)	7 th (1975)	8 th (1980)	9 th (1981)
Average	61.15	59.10	61.06	64.09	66.65	66.00	68.37	70.26	63.78
Standard deviation	23.53	24.69	24.74	25.11	24.63	25.40	23.84	21.67	22.64

Source: own estimation.

Kinship ties to the pre-war elite

Individuals are classified as connected to the pre-war elite if one of their relatives – even a distant one – was included in any edition of the *Polish Biographical Dictionary* or *Who is who* (1938). The share of such individuals is presented in Table 4. Among members of the bodies elected at the 1st Congress of the PZPR, as many as 23% can be considered linked to the pre-war elite. This proportion gradually fell to 14% among the leadership elected in 1964, followed by a sharp drop to 9% in 1968, and a continued decline to 4% in 1980. Among those elected in 1981, only 1% can be regarded as connected to the pre-war elite. The decline in the share of individuals tied to the pre-war elite reflects the increase in social mobility during the first two decades of the Polish People’s Republic.

The downward trend in the share of members from pre-war elites occurred much more slowly in the Political Bureau and the Party Secretariat, where in 1948 it stood at 35%, in 1964 at 38%, in 1968 at 33%, and still at 14% in 1980. Only after the ‘revolution’ in the party apparatus in 1981 did the figure drop to under 4%. Differences in the recorded rate of elite ties between a ‘rank-and-file’ Central Committee member and those in the top leadership may partly reflect the greater public visibility of the latter, which facilitates a more complete mapping of their family connections in the genealogical database used.

Table 4.**The kinship ties to the prewar elite.**

Congresses	1 st (1948)	2 nd (1954)	3 rd (1959)	4 th (1964)	5 th (1968)	6 th (1971)	7 th (1975)	8 th (1980)	9 th (1981)
Percentage of individuals with ties to the pre-war elite	23.43%	20.00%	15.76%	14.02%	8.61%	6.04%	4.81%	3.98%	1.16%

Source: own estimation.

In terms of social background, the leadership elected at the First Congress emerges as the most “elite,” and that elected in 1981 as the most “popular” in origin. At the

same time, the PZPR leadership was far less connected to the pre-war elite than the leadership of the democratic opposition. According to the adopted criteria, as many as 52% of KOR members could be considered descendants of the pre-war elite (92% of them had higher education, and the average occupational prestige score was 82.86/100). This comparison confirms earlier findings by Maria Minakowska, who argued that the political leadership of Solidarność represented the 'last gasp' of the landed gentry elite. In the Senate elected in 1989, the share of landed elite descendants was similar to that in the last pre-war Sejm (Minakowski, n.d.).

Conclusions

The Polish United Workers' Party was not, at least at its highest levels, a workers' party in character. Throughout the existence of the Polish People's Republic, the education level of PZPR members increased in line with the general educational advancement of the population, consistently exceeding the national average from the first to the last party congress. The party leadership was composed predominantly of members of the intelligentsia, although its profile evolved over time. The prestige of the occupations held by members of the central leadership grew steadily, with the most pronounced rise occurring in the 1960s and 1970s. This trend reversed only during the Extraordinary 9th Congress of the PZPR.

The class origins of PZPR members and their ties to the pre-war elite underwent significant changes. Analysis indicates that access to positions of power in the Polish People's Republic became more egalitarian over time. The early Stalinist elite often came from noble backgrounds and had connections to the pre-war establishment. It was only with a generational turnover in the party leadership that the influence of groups privileged before the Second World War visibly declined. This shift was made possible by educational opportunities in the Polish People's Republic, which enabled individuals from working-class and peasant families to advance. The highest-ranking party positions continued to be dominated by the intelligentsia, but the scale of social mobility ensured that, over time, this was increasingly an intelligentsia of upward social mobility. Nevertheless, the transformation occurred more slowly within the top leadership, which remained elite in terms of social background, education, and occupational prestige.

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Correspondence address:

Marcin Wroński – Assistant Professor, PhD

SGH Warsaw School of Economics

Collegium of World Economy

Al. Niepodległości 162

02-554, Warszawa, Poland

E-mail: mwronsk@sgh.waw.pl

SCOPUS: 57218584582

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3146-601X>

(Marcin Wroński is corresponding author)

Olga Załęska – Research fellow, MSc.

SGH Warsaw School of Economics

Collegium of World Economy

Al. Niepodległości 162

02-554, Warszawa, Poland

E-mail: mwronsk@sgh.waw.pl

SCOPUS:59400601200

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3349-5807>