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## Depopulation as a Long-term Policy Problem: From Dilemmas to Strategies

### *Abstract*

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The scientific objective of this article is to analyse strategies for urban decision-makers to address the dilemmas of depopulation. The theoretical framework for the article is the typology of long-term policy problem-solving dilemmas by Pot et al. (2022).

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The authors answer the question of how public administration officials are responding to the challenge of regional depopulation, what dilemmas they face in the process, and whether patterns can be detected in their preferred solutions. To answer these questions, the authors rely on qualitative research findings – in-depth interviews (IDI) performed with mayors of Polish cities liable to depopulation and their direct subordinates.

**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** How policymakers navigate specific long-term challenges is contingent upon, inter alia, their resolution of the ensuing pivotal dilemmas.

**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The strategies followed by municipalities are strongly affected by contextual factors inclusive of the monetary scenario, the character

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of the metropolis and its hyperlinks with other city centres, the connection with the government, or even the management style represented by means of the mayor. An aggregate of 3 styles seems to predominate, i.e. making an investment in targets, the responsive, and the reactive ones.

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#### **CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Two challenges, which we call meta-dilemmas, are particularly relevant for local government in Poland: the meta-dilemma of defining the functions of local government and the dilemma of agency. Resolving them determines the decision of policy when dealing with strategic dilemmas.

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#### **KEYWORDS:**

depopulation; long-term policy problems; policy dilemmas;  
policy strategies

## INTRODUCTION

Long-term challenges to which organisations must currently respond include climate change, technological progress, education and skills, economic competitiveness, and poverty (Locke, 2013; Finnegan, 2022). These organisations also include public administration units established to carry out certain state functions, and, as a result, are to varying degrees vulnerable to the difficulties that confront the entire state or its individual regions (Bricker & Ibbitson, 2019). An example of such a challenge is the risk of depopulation, which, both at the national and local level, can lead to several negative consequences, such as the relocation of companies (Wiechmann & Pallagst, 2012); overdevelopment of residential and industrial infrastructure and increasing maintenance costs (Sobotka & Fürnkranz-Prskawetz, 2020); financial deterioration of the city (Carbonaro et al., 2018); weaker social relations and disintegration of the local community (Rybczyński & Linneman, 1999).

Poland's population is expected to fall by 12% (4.55 million people) by 2050, with cities accounting for 8% of the predicted population decrease by 2050 (CSO, 2014). In 64 medium-sized cities, a substantial depopulation concern has been identified. These are cities with a population of more than 20,000 that are not centres of voivodeships (provinces), as well as those with a population of 15,000 to 20,000

that are the seats of poviats (county authorities), where population decline will directly impair the functions of major administrative units (Śleszyński, 2016). Depopulation in Polish cities has notable social, economic, and environmental impacts. Socially, it leads to an ageing population and increased isolation, straining healthcare and social services. Economically, it reduces the labour force, increases unemployment, and lowers property values, shrinking the tax base and deterring investment, thus worsening economic decline and infrastructure deterioration. Environmentally, it results in urban decay and safety hazards but can reduce pollution and environmental footprints.

Specific dilemmas or tensions are highlighted about public policies aimed at solving long-term challenges (cf. Goetz, 2014; Pot et al., 2022), for example, a choice between responsive versus responsible democratic politics (Goetz, 2014), i.e. actions with quick effects vs. sustainable actions (pursued over a longer timeframe, considering the benefits and costs of a given intervention). An undeniable dilemma of policies in the first half of the 21st century is the orientation toward long-term or short-term outputs. The latter viewpoint, rooted in a mindset typical of New Public Management (NPM), focuses on achieving measurable results in a relatively short time (Gieske et al., 2020; Jelonek & Mazur, 2020).

The topic of the article is embedded in the scientific discourse on strategies to solve long-term dilemmas. The primary scientific aim is to examine the array of strategies available to urban policymakers for mitigating the challenges posed by depopulation. This investigation is anchored within the theoretical framework provided by the typology of long-term policy problem-solving dilemmas as outlined by Pot et al. (2022).

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH METHOD

This paper is based on the findings of qualitative research involving in-depth interviews with mayors of cities at risk of depopulation and their immediate subordinates (e.g. city treasurers and secretaries) conducted between February and September 2021. Based on the findings of the study titled *Delimitation of medium-sized cities*

*losing socioeconomic functions* (Śleszyński, 2016), 64 medium-sized cities in Poland were selected as being most vulnerable to depopulation. According to the assumptions adopted for this study, these were cities with a population of more than 20,000, which are not centres of voivodeships (provinces), and those with a population of 15,000 to 20,000, which are the centres of poviats, where depopulation was found to entail a significant loss of administrative functions (Śleszyński, 2016).

A total of 25 in-depth interviews were conducted with the representatives of these cities<sup>1</sup>. Among these, 21 were carried out in an optimal configuration, involving the mayor and a minimum of two subordinates. Two interviews included only subordinates, and two were conducted with the mayor alone. This structure was deemed ideal as it provided insights from two perspectives on the mayor's approach to resolving depopulation dilemmas: the decision-maker's viewpoint and that of his or her immediate subordinates. This dual perspective enhances the reliability of the obtained results.

The article aims to answer the following research question: How do the mayors of cities at risk of depopulation deal with a long-term policy problem (such as depopulation)? The question is further subdivided into the following subquestions: RQ1: What dilemmas do city officials face when addressing depopulation as a long-term policy problem? RQ2: Can any patterns be identified in the prevailing solutions to the dilemmas of depopulation? To answer these questions, the article relies on the findings of qualitative research – in-depth interviews (IDI) conducted with mayors of Polish cities at risk of depopulation and their direct subordinates (e.g. city treasurers and secretaries).

The main problem that emerged during the study was the recruitment of interviewees for the IDI, both mayors and their subordinates. The challenges identified at this stage were mainly related to issues such as a difficult period of the year related to the heavy reporting burden, accounting and planning work for municipalities, and the involvement of decision-makers in the search for solutions

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<sup>1</sup> The survey covered municipalities mainly from the south of Poland: Mielec, Rydułtowy, Starachowice, Chrzanów, Ciechanów, Wadowice, Jastrzębie Zdrój, Braniewo, Tarnowskie Góry, and Hajnówka.

minimising the negative effects of centrally introduced measures under the government's social and economic programme known as the Polish Deal. In other municipalities, both mayors and their subordinates expressed reservations about the interview topic, especially the expectation to comment on the behaviour of their immediate supervisor. These concerns, depending on the situation, were minimised using different strategies tailored to individual interviewees. In general, active or direct strategies involving person-to-person interactions were used: reassuring about the confidentiality of the research and anonymising the results; matching the moderators to the respondents' expectations regarding the timing and length of the interviews; emphasising the importance of the research for the local authorities' self-knowledge, etc. (cf. Bonisteel et al., 2021; Porter & Lanes, 2000). Furthermore, respondents were encouraged to engage in the study by the researchers, who relied on their extensive network of so-called gatekeepers (Thomas et al., 2007) and the snowball technique (cf. Noy, 2008).

Due to the pandemic, the interviews were conducted remotely using platforms such as Teams or Zoom while adhering to the IDI implementation criteria (cf. Brinkmann, 2013). The principal researchers and moderators, who were properly trained in the subject topic, conducted the interviews. Structured in this way, the surveys ensured several key benefits. They provided flexibility and accessibility, enabling participants from diverse geographic locations to engage without the constraints of physical presence. This approach also promoted cost and time efficiency by eliminating travel and logistic expenses associated with face-to-face interviews. Additionally, the method increased respondent anonymity and comfort, potentially leading to more candid responses. However, one significant challenge identified during the moderation of the interviews, which aligns with widely reported findings in the literature, was the loss of non-verbal cues (cf. de Villiers et al., 2022). This limitation occasionally impeded the comprehensive evaluation of respondents' statements, as the absence of body language and facial expressions restricted the depth of understanding and interpretation of the participants' responses.

To improve the quality of the data obtained, it was believed that the mayor and his/her direct subordinates should be handled by the same interviewer. This allowed for a more effective comparison

of two perspectives: that of the decision maker and that of his/her superior. The interviews were transcribed, coded according to a pre-prepared codebook, and analysed using MaxQda based on CAQDAS (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis) principles.

## DEPOPULATION AS A LONG-TERM POLICY QUESTION

Long-term policy problems are defined as challenges that affect at least one generation, are characterised by a high level of uncertainty about both the prospects for their resolution and the consequences of action taken (unforeseeable alleviating or aggravating factors) (cf. Foxon et al., 2009). Long-term policy challenges extend beyond traditional public policy planning cycles (Boston, 2017; Bührs, 2012), usually cannot be solved within one to two legislative periods, and the actions taken for them usually have long-term effects and hence are less attractive from the vantage point of achieving the current policy goals (Lempert et al., 2009; Ferraro et al., 2015). At the same time, these problems raise serious societal issues that can be addressed with the help of public policy solutions, but over a longer period following the targeted intervention. Furthermore, these are issues that produce ambivalence among public actors: they are crucial for a region's well-being and quality of life, and they rank high on the public debate agenda; however, because they are difficult to address in the short term, they appear unappealing to decision-makers whose operational timeframes are constrained by election cycles. Depopulation is one of such issues.

Depopulation may have the characteristics of a long-term policy concern if all three of its defining features are met. It frequently affects several generations (gradual population shrinkage), any interventions to combat it are fraught with ambiguity as to their effectiveness, especially considering that a substantial proportion of them targets the quantitatively limited resource of potential residents (some interventions intended to attract new residents to a given area cause outbound migration from other regions). Depopulation is also a difficult problem to overcome within the confines of a single election cycle. Actions performed at a certain time may have consequences

only in the long run. As such, it has the traditional characteristics of a meta-problem, namely multidimensionality due to the multitude of causal elements and the plurality of individuals engaged in resolving the issue. (cf. Seidl & Werle, 2018; Trist, 1983).

Long-term policy issues can be perceived, defined, and communicated to audiences differently. For example, Pot et al. (2022) in their Dutch water authority study identified the following four meanings of the term: 1. as part of the external environment; 2. associated with a long-time horizon; 3. as long-term objectives; and 4. as future developments. In the first case, the problem is defined as a typical external factor, which entails treating the issue as a national rather than local trend, a certain supra-local factor that harms the functioning of a city or region. These problems are also often seen as issues which are very likely to occur in the future. The authors also point out that long-term policy problems tend to be treated as “autonomous developments,” or things that simply will happen regardless of any interventions designed to prevent or combat them.

When it comes to long-term policy issues, actors face several dilemmas. The typology of strategies to solve them proposed by the same authors was used in this study as a framework to categorise the findings of qualitative research conducted among Polish municipal leaders to the strategies used to address the problem of depopulation. According to Pot et al. (2022), how policymakers approach certain long-term problems depends, among other things, on how they resolve the following critical dilemmas.

### *Investing in the realization of objects or objectives*

This task entails determining how to best invest in long-term policy concerns, whether through physical (material) investment or through organisational and targeted changes, as well as leveraging opportunities from the external environment. In the former case, infrastructure efforts, the implementation of which is subordinated to addressing immediate concerns, are employed in practice to address long-term policy issues. In the latter, there is a non-organisational external initiative that can be exploited to achieve a long-term aim. Strategies intended to achieve objectives include emphasising long-term goals,

mapping all planned and anticipated long-term investments and activities, and seeking collaboration to align strategies with long-term thinking (Pot et al., 2022, p. 13).

*Adopting a stable or responsive approach*

In this case, the question is whether to devote consistent attention and funding to long-term problems during budget and election cycles or to remain sensitive to external impulses by attempting to solve long-term policy problems through inter-organisational agreements that are not always based on the organisation's budget. For example, using political venues to highlight long-term concerns or presenting long-term plans and tactics to the existing administration demonstrates a consistent approach. The responsive method is characterised by the differentiation between ambition levels (hierarchy of objectives) and the linking of actions to a particular and politically attractive long-term objective (Pot et al., 2022, p. 13).

*Taking a proactive or reactive stance towards the external environment*

The dilemma is whether to proactively target the long-term goals of the organisation and prioritise resources for long-term challenges or to reactively accept opportunities and ideas about long-term policy issues from outside. The reactive approach combines strategies such as co-investment in developing new technologies, leaving the primary responsibility for the long-term challenges with other organisations, co-development of joint long-term visions and plans, and using collaborative platforms to gain knowledge about the long-term outcomes. In contrast, the proactive approach consists of the following actions: seeking collaboration to achieve long-term objectives, setting criteria for external initiatives based on fit with long-term obligations, and emphasizing formal responsibilities towards the long term (Pot et al. 2022, p. 13).



## FROM STRATEGIC TO META DILEMMAS

To answer the research questions, the main dilemmas to be addressed as part of long-term policy problems were framed according to Pot et al. (2022) and further characterised based on the findings of the qualitative research.

To begin, it is important to note that identifying a single 'correct' response to any of the dilemmas is next to impossible. Conversely, long-term policy problems necessitate flexibility in action strategy selection and a combination of frequently divergent approaches, depending on the context and circumstances. The examples of qualitative research reveal the fact that frequently combination strategies are chosen, or certain circumstances tend to be associated with preferred solutions, therefore a range of common patterns can be identified. Examples of such circumstances are shown in Table 1 and discussed below.

It should be added that a municipality's choice of a particular strategy for solving the dilemma may have been influenced to some extent by the unfavourable legal provisions (i.e. declining local revenues), modifications to the funding model of municipalities causing their financial uncertainty, and an increase in the burden of spending on education. Financial issues and budgetary constraints arising from changes in national legislation appear to be one of the most crucial contextual aspects for understanding the adopted solutions to the difficulties. Apart from the deteriorating financial status of local governments, an equally discouraging factor preventing effective action is the emerging climate of centralisation of the state governance system. Given the associated high financial and political risks, the ensuing volatility and uncertainty pose a considerable obstacle to implementing any long-term initiatives (Jaworska-Dębska et al., 2019).

To a greater or lesser extent, almost all of the municipalities studied invested in objects. They usually involved infrastructure, housing (e.g. construction of rental flats, 'starter flats' for the young), and cultural, recreational, and sports facilities (to improve overall quality of life). In part, this phenomenon may be interpreted as an instrumental adaptation to the logic of distribution of European funds prevailing among territorial local government units, consisting in prioritising the implementation of investment tasks. On the one hand,

this is due to the genuine need to improve the quality and accessibility of technical infrastructure; on the other, material investment brings immediate popularity, moreover, spending European funds earmarked for investment is fairly simple.

These actions were pursued by both those who declared that did not believe that any efforts on their part could make a difference and those who felt partly in control of the situation. According to one interviewee, investing in facilities appeared to be the most natural course of action, given it was part of the municipality's institutional functions. Although this was not always associated with addressing the issue of a shrinking population, interviewees frequently recognised it as part of their policy's rationale. As a result, it appeared to be an ex-post reframing of the municipality's actions from "discharging public mandates" (improving the quality of life) to "conducting development policy" (by way of reducing depopulation).

Some municipalities favoured investing in objects, whereas others built a coherent vision for the achievement of long-term objectives, including infrastructure investment. Naturally, most municipalities found themselves between both extremes. Some of them attempted to structure the process of attracting new residents by planning long-term activities and investments, involving external partners both to jointly implement certain activities and to identify future goals and strategies for achieving them. Typically, in the case of such actors, the problem of depopulation was perceived as a multidimensional one and was directly related to the need to improve the quality of life of (current and future) residents. High-quality infrastructure investments included, among others, formulating development plans, designating new areas for housing development, bicycle paths, sports, recreational, and cultural (leisure) facilities. These activities were often carried out jointly with private entities or non-governmental organisations, rarely involving only the municipality itself.

Some interviewees mentioned collaboration with other municipalities aimed at obtaining funds for improving the quality of transportation to and from urban agglomerations, direct settlement incentives (e.g. crèche vouchers), tax exemptions, and efforts to improve the quality of education for children. Some municipalities have also implemented soft initiatives intended to improve their city's image (e.g. promotion of regional assets, raising its profile, emphasis on the

friendliness of the local administration), build social (local) identity and a sense of belonging to a given region, and develop a sense of empowerment among residents (e.g. through a civic budget). The multidimensionality of effective “investment in objectives” was noted by one interviewee:

Yes, we have succeeded in reversing this trend. There was a moment when the number of inhabitants went down. Local plans certainly accelerated the investment process. And the second thing is that we tried to emphasise all these assets. That is, the green city, the cycle paths. We built sports and recreational infrastructure together with the association. All this was written down somewhere in the strategy and was a certain range of activities. Not just one action, but a whole package. [...] The UNESCO title is also the final icing on the cake. Here, it gives such a multifaceted character that we have something with which to distinguish ourselves from others (IDI, Deputy Mayor).

As previously stated, the studied municipalities regard depopulation as a major issue that jeopardises their capacity to operate (not only due to declining revenues and increasing financial burdens, but also to the shrinking human capital potential in the region). Addressing this problem, however, is not directly codified in the legal provisions that the municipalities would be required to implement. Even though it undermines the feasibility of establishing a fully stable approach with a clear policy and a goal-oriented budget, it also mitigates the potential of conflict between the strengths and abilities of politics and bureaucracy as articulated by Peters (2001). As a result, the situation compels municipalities to choose a responsive approach in which the opinions and financial, human resources, as well as conceptual involvement of external players, must be considered. The municipalities’ orientation toward a responsive approach is also aided by their financial situation and budget constraints, which force actors to be more open to external opportunities, prioritise, and be flexible in terms of their timetable and strategies for achieving their set objectives. Flexibility can be demonstrated, for example, in the scenario where the prospect of funding activities from outside sources serves as a catalyst for refining the objectives and establishing the timescale for their completion as part of the strategy:

In March, we are supposed to approve a strategy for the development of our city, so the first question that was asked and we were asked was 'Are we going to include something specific in this strategy?' I am saying, precisely, that we have already worked out the assumptions for local development and it seems to me that this is really a milestone for the actions that we have set for ourselves. And what happens if we don't get the funds? If we don't, these activities will fit beautifully into our development strategy. And in small steps, we will not do it as quickly as we would if our project won the funding. But we will implement it in small steps (IDI, Mayor).

The adopted responsive-stable approach is to some extent related to the last dilemma, i.e. proactive vs. reactive stance towards the external environment. It is worth recalling that the former approach is associated with strategic planning (formalising objectives, seeking cooperation to achieve tasks, and subordinating external initiatives to these objectives) and responsibility for achieving long-term goals. The reactive approach, on the other hand, demands greater flexibility of action and sensitivity to external impulses, identification of 'windows of opportunity,' and taking advantage of them as they arise. The reactive approach manifests itself primarily in sharing responsibility in both the conceptual and investment spheres – in jointly developing long-term visions and plans and in co-investing in the development of new solutions and technologies to help reduce long-term policy problems. Interviews with representatives of municipalities experiencing depopulation revealed examples of reactivity in the formulation of goals and action plans that take advantage of opportunities provided by external sources. Such reactivity was also evident in attempts to reinterpret constraints as opportunities for local development. One such option involved repurposing areas damaged by mining into socially attractive spaces.

Table 1. The intensity of strategies for solving key dilemmas related to depopulation as a long-term policy challenge typically adopted by the studied municipalities (actions involving a specific kind of solution: ++ numerous actions, + a few actions, – no actions, +/- actions in both a given and opposite direction)

| Municipality number | Investing in objects | Investing in objectives | Stable           | Responsive       | Proactive        | Reactive         |
|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| G2                  | +                    | ++                      | +                | ++               | +                | ++               |
| G4                  | +                    | ++                      | +                | ++               | +                | ++               |
| G6                  | +/-                  | –                       | Unsolved dilemma | Unsolved dilemma | Unsolved dilemma | Unsolved dilemma |
| G7                  | +                    | ++                      | +                | ++               | +                | ++               |
| G8                  | +/-                  | +/-                     | ++               | +                | ++               | +                |
| G9                  | ++                   | +                       | +                | ++               | ++               | ++               |
| G10                 | ++                   | ++                      | +                | ++               | +                | ++               |

Source: own study.

However, these are not the only dilemmas faced by municipal authorities in Poland. Two other challenges, which we call meta-dilemmas, are particularly important for them: the meta-dilemma of defining local government functions, and the agency dilemma. The prefix meta- is used to emphasise that this dilemma is distinct from the others, and its resolution may influence the choice of a solution to the previously outlined fundamental problems.

The meta-dilemma of defining local government functions in the context of depopulation is typically handled by choosing between an emphasis on contracted tasks or development policies and reflects the underlying issue of the state's territorial and functional organisation. In this context, two mutually contradictory perspectives emerge: one sees local government as a geographical community of citizens with a high degree of autonomy, while the other perceives it as an exponent of the state's functional organisation subject to the quality of public service provision. The state becomes an omnipresent organisation under the latter approach, monopolising development resources while also bearing responsibility for resolving socio-economic problems that arise in territorial systems.

The above-mentioned questions are indirectly related to the agency dilemma, the solution to which consists in determining the possibilities

(or lack thereof) for the local government to effectively solve a given problem. We deliberately call it a dilemma, because the choice of strategy to solve it not only results from objective premises but is also deeply rooted in the personal beliefs of the interviewees. At the same time, it inevitably gravitates toward specific answers to the fundamental issues of depopulation. As previously said there appears to be a scale of agency ranging from absolute disbelief in the ability of local governments to deal with depopulation to enormous optimism in this regard. The most common sentiments, which might be labelled as limited optimism and limited pessimism, are found in the middle.

In general, identifying a clear pattern in the relationships between the strategies to solve these three dilemmas remains a challenge. Municipal policies are influenced by the characteristics of the long-term problem of depopulation, the context in which they have operated in recent years, and, possibly as a hypothesis for future research, the leadership style demonstrated by the community leader. A mixture of three solutions appears to predominate: investment in objectives, responsiveness, and reactivity (G2, G4, and G7). G10 also shows a similar approach, with a clear preference for responsive and reactive solutions, but no obvious preference for investing in objectives over investing in objects. The solution patterns of G6 and G8 municipalities are worth exploring in more detail – their uniqueness rests in the declared limited belief in the municipality's ability to solve a particular problem. In the case of these two communities, local leaders expressly admit that depopulation is a natural impediment to development, but they see no opportunity or point in taking steps to address it. In G6, the mayor directly points to the central government as the party expected to play an active role in halting human resource shrinkage, but he declares no efforts to address the problem at hand. The representatives of G8 report a limited belief in the possibility of fully solving the problem (partial disbelief), but still declare willingness to do something about it, partly based on the principle "because it is the right thing to do, and it is expected of us." Two solutions predominate in this case: stable and proactive (activities are planned from own resources and, included in the strategy) with limited investment both in objects and objectives.

G9 proved to be the least typical, preferring to invest in objects while also choosing responsive and both proactive and reactive

behaviours. Such an unconventional array of solutions may also be attributed to the city's specificity, which is part of an agglomeration and currently is a mining monoculture, exploiting the labour market potential of the other neighbouring cities (as part of a strategy to overcome being a monoculture). At the same time, the leader sees him/herself and the municipal management as being accountable for addressing the problem by implementing a strategy that views constraints as opportunities to promote the municipality's development.

### CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Depopulation, as a long-term policy problem, evokes ambivalent attitudes among politicians. They recognise its importance, but at the same time are aware that it cannot be solved quickly. The short political cycles discourage them from attempts to actively solve it (cf. Bührs, 2012; Boston, 2017). Undoubtedly, New Public Management reinforces such an attitude, which places a premium on actions that enable visible results to be achieved in the short term (cf. Höglund et al., 2018; Gieske et al., 2020; Jelonek & Mazur, 2020).

The key question posed in this paper was how public administration responds to a long-term policy problem, specifically how mayors of cities at risk of depopulation deal with this challenge. Understanding the responses to this question requires a grasp of the context in which Polish cities function. They are battling an uncertain legal and financial condition as well as rising costs of education, their anxiety being compounded by the increasing centralisation of the state governance regime. Given the substantial financial and political risks, the ensuing instability and unpredictability make long-term actions difficult. It should be emphasised that aspects of investment in objects were found in all municipalities. A small percentage of them developed a clear vision to achieve long-term goals, such as infrastructure investments. Most municipalities chose a solution that lay somewhere between the first and second scenarios. The apparent emphasis on investment in objects may be viewed as an instrumental adaptation to the logic of allocating European funds by prioritising the implementation of investment tasks. It is also linked to the popular acceptance of infrastructure investments and the ease with which

funds designated for this purpose can be spent. This strategy, in part, reflects the principles of rational choice institutionalism, which analyses the behaviour of individuals capable of rationally calculating and optimising decisions that lead to the most effective and efficient ways of attaining their goals (cf. Olson, 1971; Peters, 2005).

In Poland, municipalities do not have a clear legislative mandate to combat depopulation. To some extent, this hinders their ability to adopt a fully stable approach with well-defined policies, objectives, and funds for their implementation. This seemingly negative scenario, however, has the beneficial effect of driving municipalities to adopt a responsive approach, in which it becomes vital to consider both the ideas and participation of external actors. The responsiveness is also influenced by their financial condition and budgetary constraints, which compel them to be more open to collaboration with external parties. Both proactive and reactive responses to the external environment were noticed in the studied cities. While the former is more prevalent in planning efforts, the latter tends to dominate in action. What is significant, however, the level of consistency between the two is not always high.

It is difficult to clearly identify dominant patterns of solutions to depopulation dilemmas. The strategies adopted by individual municipalities in this regard are strongly affected by contextual factors such as the financial situation, the nature of the city and its links with other urban centres, the relationship with the government, or even the leadership style represented by the mayor. However, in general, a combination of three approaches seems to predominate, i.e. investing in objectives, the responsive, and the reactive ones.

The article highlights three issues that may inspire a more in-depth examination of the problem of depopulation in the context of long-term challenges. The first theme concerns the reality conjured up as a result of investment. Investment in infrastructure development is considered as a reasonable response to population shrinkage by both local officials who believe in the municipality's ability to combat depopulation and those who do not. This has two possible outcomes. The first is the belief that investment is the most effective strategy for combating depopulation, whereas the other one perceives it through the prism of increasing maintenance expenses, which can exacerbate the municipality's financial problems. In such



a setting, tools originally designed to combat depopulation appear to aggravate the situation. The second issue concerns the rationale behind the selection of main patterns of anti-depopulation measures. Our research shows the importance of contextual elements in the selection of depopulation techniques, such as the type of leadership. Further exploration of this thread, in our opinion, has the potential to considerably broaden the capacity for the scientific study of this topic.

The final issue to consider involves the so-called meta-challenges in the analysis of dilemma-solving strategies for long-term policy problems, that is, dilemmas whose resolution dictates the orientation of responses to specific challenges. In the context of the depopulation problem, one example of a meta-challenge is the approach to establishing the extent of agency of local decision-makers. This refers to the initial belief (or lack thereof) in the feasibility of taking effective action on a long-term challenge, which determines the resolution of the dilemmas outlined by Pot et al. (2022). The previous remark implies that an analysis of anti-depopulation strategies should be incorporated into a larger study framework and debate with a focus on questions concerning the local government's position and agency in the modern state.

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