
Managing the Leadership Crisis and Institutional Security in the Non-Governmental Sector in Poland

Submitted 23/04/25, 1st revision 05/05/25, 2nd revision 20/05/25, accepted 30/06/25

Tomasz Marek Grudniewski¹, Sławomir Żurawski², Julia Nowicka³,
Monika Ostrowska⁴, Marek Ciekanowski⁵, Anna Kacprzak⁶

Abstract:

Purpose: This article analyses the crisis of leadership and institutional security in the Polish NGO sector, focusing on structural factors that threaten the continuity of operations, management stability, and operational efficiency of social organisation.

Design/methodology/approach: The basis of the paper is a qualitative analysis of the data contained in the report "The Condition of NGOs 2024", supplemented by an interpretation from the perspective of institutional resilience theory, risk management and leadership succession, as well as an analysis of both domestic and foreign literature on the subject. The article adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, with elements of normative inference. The research problem formulated: To what extent does the leadership crisis affect the institutional security of NGOs in Poland, and what measures can increase their operational resilience? The research hypothesis assumes: The crisis of leadership in NGOs - manifested by lack of succession, burnout of leaders and staff stagnation - significantly reduces the institutional resilience of these entities, but it is possible to rebuild it by implementing strategies of management professionalisation, mentoring and cross-sectoral cooperation.

Findings: The analysis showed that the non-governmental sector in Poland is facing a serious human resources and strategic crisis, which limits its ability to adapt and sustain itself. Only a few organisations plan for succession, have financial reserves, and develop long-term development strategies. Nevertheless, there is a clear need and potential for reforms based on leadership development, knowledge management, and institutional partnership building.

Practical implications: The article's conclusions point to the need for the systematic introduction of succession programs, leadership training, employment stability in the NGO

¹John Paul II University in Biala Podlaska, ORCID: 0000-0003-3394-8992,
e-mail: gisbourne2@gmail.com;

²Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski University in Krakow, ORCID: 0000-0001-9527-3391,
e-mail: slawomir.zurawski@onet.pl;

³War Studies University, Poland, ORCID: 0000-0002-0778-0519
e-mail: j.nowicka@akademia.mil.pl;

⁴Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski University in Krakow, ORCID: 0000-0002-5056-2280
e-mail: m.ostrowska@onet.pl;

⁵University of Social Sciences in Łódź, Poland, ORCID: 0009-0009-1271-0652,
e-mail: marek@ciekanowski.pl;

⁶Warsaw Management University, Poland, ORCID: 0000-0002-8224-3895,
e-mail: kacprzakania@interia.eu;

sector, and closer cooperation with local governments and universities. These measures can significantly increase non-governmental organisations' operational resilience in growing socio-political uncertainty.

Originality/value: *The article brings new value to the discussion on managing social organisations by treating the leadership crisis as a real threat to institutional security. An integrated approach to management, leadership, and stability in the non-governmental sector is valuable for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers involved in developing civil society.*

Keywords: *Crisis management, leadership, security.*

JEL codes: *H12, M54.*

Paper type: *Research article.*

1. Introduction

The contemporary non-governmental sector in Poland faces challenges beyond the traditionally understood problems related to financing or recruiting volunteers. There is a growing need to analyse issues related to institutional security—the ability of organisations to maintain continuity of operations, stability of structures, and resilience to internal and external disruptions.

One of the most worrying phenomena affecting this ability is the growing leadership crisis, which manifests itself, among other things, in staff stagnation, lack of succession, and low attractiveness of management positions.

It can be seen that social organisations operate in an increasingly complex and dynamic environment. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, changes in models of social engagement, and the instability of funding sources are forcing organisations to make ongoing adjustments and engage in thoughtful and systematic reflection on their own operational sustainability (Schmidt, 2021).

Without developing a strategy to strengthen resilience, many organisations may become vulnerable to collapse due to single events, such as the departure of a leader, lack of funds, or disruption of team continuity (Ciekanowski *et al.*, 2024).

This article attempts to analyse this phenomenon in three dimensions: diagnosing the scale and sources of the leadership crisis, identifying factors that destabilise institutional security, and formulating corrective and strategic recommendations that can contribute to rebuilding the resilience of the non-governmental sector. From a systemic perspective, it is not only about the survival of organisations, but also about

their ability to operate stably and effectively for the benefit of civil society in conditions of permanent change.

2. The Essence of Leadership in an Organisation

The issue of leadership and research on people considered to be leaders has long been a subject of interest (Kopertyńska, 2015, p. 255). At the beginning of the 20th century, the so-called theory of great individuals was popular, which focused on social origin, inheritance of status, and innate personality traits that distinguished outstanding leaders (Avery, 2009, p. 95).

Leadership in an organisation is one of the key elements determining its functioning, development, and ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions. It is not limited to management or formal leadership roles. Still, it encompasses the overall influence of an individual or group of individuals on the organisation's members, their attitudes, commitment, way of acting, and pursuit of common goals. Leadership is a social process that goes beyond structure and procedures—it touches on interpersonal relationships, inspiration, motivation, and the building of organisational identity.

The concept of leadership has evolved with the development of organisational thought and management theory. Initially, the Great Man Theory dominated, according to which leadership was seen as an elite phenomenon, reserved for individuals endowed with special innate qualities, often resulting from their social position (Lee, 2018, p. 21).

In subsequent decades, research focused on identifying personality traits that predestinate a person for the role of leader, such as charisma, courage, determination, and emotional intelligence. Over time, however, this approach began to be supplemented by situational, interactive, and cultural factors, leading to the emergence of behavioural, situational, and transformational theories.

It is worth noting that scientists take different positions when distinguishing between a manager and a leader. Ł. Sułkowski divided these functions, pointing out their differences in social role elements such as goals, key tasks, group, employee engagement, and type of relationship. The differences between a manager and a leader are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Differences between the roles of a manager and a leader.

Social role element	Steering	Conduction
Goals	formal and informal coordination of The activities of a group of employees aimed at achieving organisational goals	influencing a social group by a leader to achieve common goals, the goals of the leader, or the goals of the group itself

Group	An organisation must have a formal structure.	a social group within which the process of power distribution took place
Key tasks	supervising employees, motivating employees, solving problems, communicating with employees and the environment	Creating a vision for change and development, motivating and inspiring people, communicating with employees and the environment
Relationship type	Manager – employees	leader – followers
Employee engagement	formal and informal professional life; emotional involvement on both sides at various levels (from none to strong)	private and professional life; strong emotional commitment on both sides

Source: L. Sulkowski, Role przywódcy i kierownika a wzory kierowania, Acta Uni Versitatis Lodzensis. Folia Sociologica, 29, 2001, s. 191.

The contemporary understanding of leadership is not limited to static models. Still, it assumes that an effective leader can flexibly adapt their management style to the specific nature of the organisation, team and challenges a particular situation poses. Leadership can, therefore, take various forms from autocratic to democratic to coaching and participatory. The effectiveness of each depends on the organisational context and the expectations and competencies of subordinates.

The essence of leadership in an organisation is the ability to exert influence in a way that motivates employees to go beyond the minimum required by their duties. An effective leader not only sets the direction and goals of action, but also creates an organisational culture, builds trust, promotes commitment and inspires self-improvement and innovation. In this sense, leadership becomes a vehicle for values, a source of team integration and a mechanism for shaping consistency of action within the organisation (Kruk, 2016, p. 413).

The ethical dimension of leadership cannot be overlooked either. Leaders perform not only an organisational function, but also a social and axiological one. Their attitudes, decisions and communication style significantly impact organisational behavioural standards (Zgoda, Nowakowska, and Nowakowska, 2017).

Ethical leadership assumes that power is used to achieve instrumental goals and is also a responsibility towards people and the environment. This means it is necessary to be guided by values such as justice, transparency, respect and social responsibility. The lack of such an approach can lead to erosion of trust, demotivation of the team and, in extreme cases, to an organisational crisis.

In organisational practice, leadership plays a role in strategic and operational contexts. At the strategic level, leaders are responsible for defining the vision,

shaping the mission, and initiating and overseeing change processes. At the operational level, their task is to manage teams, make tactical decisions, resolve conflicts, and respond to problems that arise in everyday work. Building relationships based on trust, interpersonal skills, persuasion, and mobilisation is essential in both cases.

In the dynamically changing reality of modern organisations — in the era of globalisation, digitalisation, complex structures and dispersed teams — the essence of leadership becomes even more critical. It is no longer enough to have formal authority or technical competence.

It is necessary to develop so-called adaptive leadership, i.e., the ability to learn, respond to uncertainty, support creativity and be open to change. This approach promotes the development of a learning organisation that is resilient to disruption and ready for future challenges.

Leadership in an organisation is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Its essence is based on relationships, influence, responsibility, and the ability to integrate individuals' efforts around common goals. As a process and function, leadership remains one of the most essential elements shaping an organisation's effectiveness and sustainability, regardless of its size, industry, or legal form.

3. The Scale and Nature of the Leadership Crisis in Non-Governmental Organisations

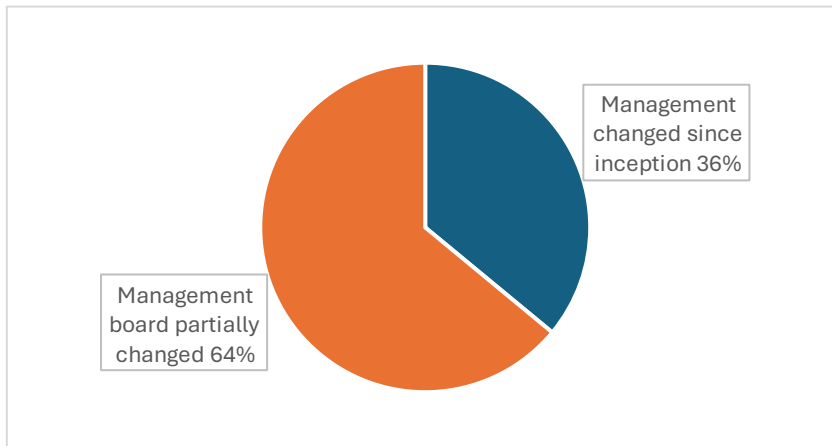
The leadership crisis in the non-governmental sector in Poland appears to be one of the most worrying trends threatening the stability and sustainability of the third sector. Based on data in the report 'The Condition of Non-Governmental Organisations 2024', its scale and structural sources can be identified.

The lack of successors on management boards, staff stagnation and the deepening burnout of leaders affect not only the operational efficiency of organisations, but also their institutional resilience in the face of social, political and economic challenges.

According to the report, 36% of organisations have had the entire management board remain the same since their establishment, and on average, 57% of the management boards have remained unchanged since their first term of office. Figure 1 presents the stagnation in the management boards of non-governmental organisations.

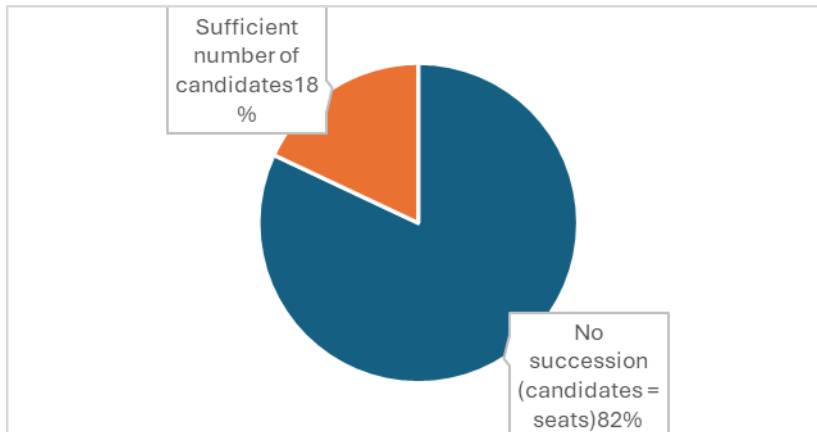
At the same time, in 82% of cases, the number of candidates for management boards does not exceed the number of available positions, which suggests a severe deficit in readiness to take on responsibility for managing the organisation. Figure 2 shows the lack of succession in management boards.

Figure 1. Stagnation in the management boards of non-governmental organisations in 2024.



Source: based on: *The Condition of Non-Governmental Organisations 2024*, Klon/Jawor Association, Warsaw 2025.

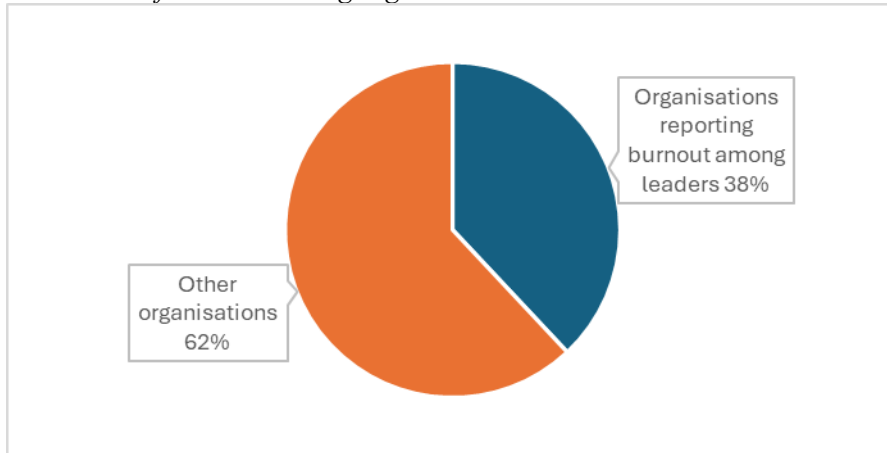
Figure 2. Lack of succession in the management boards of non-governmental organisations in 2024.



Source: Based on *The Condition of Non-Governmental Organisations 2024*, Klon/Jawor Association, Warsaw 2025.

Such high staff stagnation in management boards risks losing adaptability, innovation, and continuity of operations. In addition, 38% of organisations report burnout among their leaders, which, combined with a lack of succession, indicates structural overload among those managing organisations. The scale of burnout among organisational leaders is shown in Figure 3.

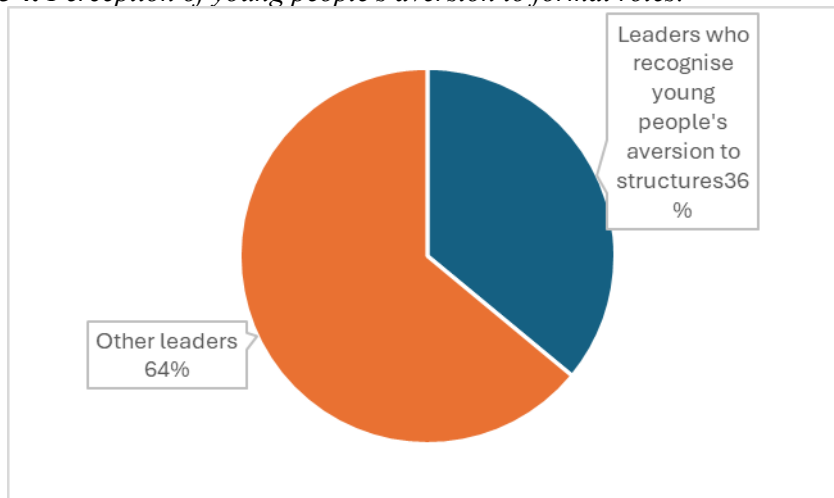
Figure 3. Scale of burnout among organisational leaders in 2024.



Source: Based on *Kondycja organizacji pozarządowych 2024 (The Condition of Non-Governmental Organisations 2024)*, Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor, Warsaw 2025.

This phenomenon is exacerbated by socio-generational change. The younger generation (Generation Z and millennials), increasingly involved in social activities, prefers flexible, ad hoc forms of participation – e.g., charity campaigns, project volunteering – rather than permanent structural involvement. As many as 36% of leaders note young people's reluctance to make formal commitments within management structures. The changing model of social engagement necessitates adapting NGO management systems to more flexible and inclusive forms of action. The perception of reluctance towards formal formations is presented in Figure 4.

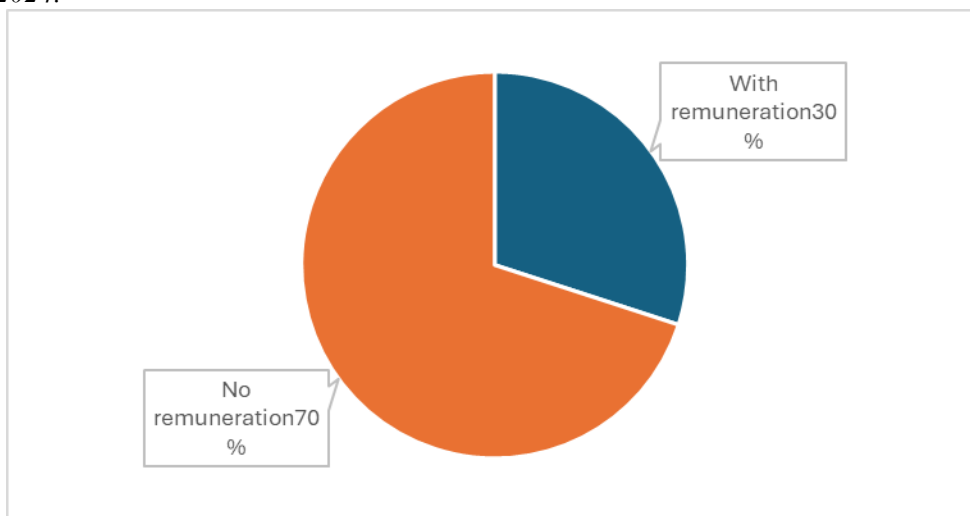
Figure 4. Perception of young people's aversion to formal roles.



Source: based on *The Condition of Non-Governmental Organisations 2024*, Klon/Jawor Association, Warsaw 2025.

Notably, 70% of board members do not receive any remuneration, and performing their duties involves a significant organisational, emotional and time burden. This directly affects the low attractiveness of the role of leader and discourages people from applying. The remuneration of board members is presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. *Remuneration of board members in non-governmental organisations in 2024.*



Source: *Based on The Condition of Non-Governmental Organisations 2024, Klon/Jawor Association, Warsaw 2025.*

The effects of the leadership crisis are therefore systemic and affect not only individual organisations but also the condition of the entire civil sector. They include:

- limited capacity for long-term planning,
- risk of decision-making paralysis in the event of a leader's departure,
- a decline in trust in the organisation in the eyes of partners and grantors,
- operational instability and loss of institutional competence.

The inability to engage in strategic planning and uncertainty about the future of the management team undermine the organisation's external credibility in the eyes of donors, local governments, and institutional partners. This, in turn, translates into difficulties in obtaining funding, limited access to cooperation networks, and declining interest among new members and volunteers in participating in the organisation's activities.

The consequences of this phenomenon are hazardous in the context of growing civilisational challenges – such as the war in Ukraine, climate change, disinformation and migration crises – which require organisations not only to be highly flexible and efficient, but above all to have stable management structures

capable of making responsible decisions in conditions of uncertainty. Without a real strategy to counteract this crisis and investment in developing new leaders and succession mechanisms, the non-governmental sector may gradually lose its ability to partner in the state's social security system effectively. Therefore, it is necessary to move towards institutional solutions, which will be further analysed in the next part of the article.

4. Institutional Security Management in Unstable Conditions and Building the Resilience of Social Organisations

Institutional security in the non-governmental sector can be understood as an organisation's ability to continue to carry out its mission and activities despite internal and external threats, such as staffing, financial, political or social crises. In the context of the analysed report 'The Condition of Non-Governmental Organisations 2024', a picture emerges of a sector in which cumulative operational and structural risks systematically undermine this ability.

One of the key threats to the continuity of an organisation's operations is the lack of a succession strategy and high leadership turnover. The leadership crisis described in the previous section of this article directly translates into a weakening of institutional security, especially in small organisations that do not have extensive human resources or reserve resources.

In such organisations, the departure of a single leader, who often simultaneously acts as manager, fundraiser and coordinator of activities, can result in a complete suspension of operations. The lack of contingency plans, formal procedures for transferring responsibilities and management competences among other organisation members exacerbates this risk.

Another critical factor destabilising the functioning of non-governmental organisations is their poor financial condition (Ochyra-Żurawska and Ciekanowski, 2017). The report's data shows that only 35% of organisations have any financial reserves, which means that the vast majority operate on a 'project-by-project' basis, without a buffer for unforeseen expenses or delays in funding. This situation makes organisations extremely vulnerable to external shocks, such as changes in subsidy policy, economic crises or a sudden outflow of donors.

The report also shows that public funds remain the sector's primary revenue source (44%). However, their share is declining, and organisations increasingly turn to donations from individuals and companies (26%). Such diversification, while potentially positive, entails new risks: greater unpredictability and income fluctuation, especially in smaller organisations without specialised fundraising teams. The lack of a steady income stream limits the ability to plan for the long term and invest in organisational development.

In this context, strategic planning and knowledge management are critical to increasing institutional resilience. Unfortunately, according to the report data, only 45% of organisations with a budget of over PLN 1 million have a development strategy, and among the remaining entities, this percentage is even lower.

This means that most organisations operate reactively, without a clearly defined vision of the future or plans in case of changes in external conditions. There is also a lack of systematic practices for gathering and transferring knowledge within the organisation, contributing to its volatility in the event of staff turnover.

As a result, the institutional security of many non-governmental organisations is fragile and dependent on random factors rather than conscious risk management and business continuity planning. This article will identify corrective measures and systemic reforms that could increase the social sector's resilience to disruption.

In the face of a deepening leadership crisis and limited institutional security, effective strategies to strengthen the resilience of non-governmental organisations are necessary. These measures should aim to ensure the continuity of their functioning and create conditions for sustainable development in an increasingly complex and unstable socio-political environment.

One of the priorities is implementing systemic succession and mentoring policies to allow for the smooth transfer of knowledge, experience and responsibility to new leaders. The lack of succession strategies, noticeable even in organisations with many years of experience, results in personnel bottlenecks and stalls institutional development. Mentoring programmes, which enable young members to gain management skills in practice, can serve as a bridge between the outgoing leadership and the new generation of social activists.

The second pillar of rebuilding the operational capacity of the third sector is the professionalisation of management. Investment in the development of managerial staff is essential, both through training in leadership and strategic management and systemic support for recruiting qualified managers.

The transition from a work model based solely on social engagement to more institutionalised forms of employment can increase organisations' operational efficiency and reduce burnout. However, professionalisation should not mean abandoning the mission-driven nature of activities, but instead providing a stable organisational foundation for it.

Another key area is building an organisational culture based on shared values, participation and a vision for development. A shared organisational identity promotes greater member engagement, better internal communication and more stable interpersonal relationships. The long-term functioning of an organisation requires the cultivation of consistent ethical and programmatic foundations that will

serve as a reference point for future leaders and team members. This approach also counteracts the sector's fragmentation and supports integration processes within the broader community of civil society organisations.

Cross-sector partnerships are also essential, especially with local government units, umbrella organisations and the academic community. In these alliances, the sources of lasting institutional support, knowledge transfer and the promotion of good management practices can be found. As key local partners, local governments can support organisations financially and in terms of infrastructure and expertise (Ochyra-Żurawska, Nowicka, and Ciekanowski, 2019, p. 230).

Umbrella organisations can act as competence centres and leadership incubators. At the same time, the scientific community can provide analytical tools and participate in evaluating and designing strategies for the development of the sector.

The search for sources of effective leadership leads to the conclusion that it should be based on practices that enable the development of highly qualified, motivated and trusted employees working in teams (Gadomska-Lila, 2018, p. 54). An effective leader ensures compliance with standards and procedures and builds a work environment in which safety becomes an integral part of the organisation's daily activities (Ciekanowski *et al.*, 2025, p. 590).

In the long term, building organisational resilience must become the foundation of strategic management in the non-governmental sector. Institutional security – the ability to survive, adapt and continue operations in a changing and unpredictable environment – determines the effectiveness of social interventions and public trust in civil society organisations.

Strengthening this resilience requires synergy between professional management, leadership renewal, building an organisational community and creating a stable ecosystem of cross-sector cooperation. Only then will non-governmental organisations be able to fulfil their role as real and lasting partners of the state in the social security system.

5. Conclusions

To summarise the analysis, it should be noted that the institutional security of non-governmental organisations in Poland is currently under strain, resulting from internal and external factors. Particularly evident is the leadership crisis, which manifests in personnel stagnation, a lack of succession mechanisms and the low attractiveness of management positions.

These problems are exacerbated by the financial instability of many organisations, their dependence on irregular funding sources, and the lack of reserves to survive

crises. As a result, many NGOs operate in conditions of great uncertainty, without sufficient tools for long-term planning and ensuring continuity of operations.

At the same time, there is a noticeable potential for change and adaptation in the social sector. A growing awareness of the need for professionalisation, strengthening of leadership and the search for sustainable forms of cross-sectoral cooperation indicates this.

Building organisational resilience should be based on the implementation of succession policies, investment in the development of leadership skills, the promotion of stable employment models and the shaping of an organisational culture based on shared values and responsibility. In the long term, these measures can significantly increase the credibility and effectiveness of non-governmental organisations, strengthening their role as a pillar of civil society and a partner of public institutions in achieving social goals.

Institutional security is not merely a technical aspect of management but forms the basis for the sustainability and effectiveness of non-governmental organisations' missions. In conditions of dynamic change and multidimensional crises, ensuring this stability requires a conscious, long-term approach based on the integration of competences, resources, and responsibility across the entire social sector.

References:

- Avery, G.C. 2009. *Przywództwo w organizacji. Paradygmaty i studia przypadków*, Warszawa.
- Ciekanowski, Z., Żurawski, S., Wysokinska, A., Kacprzak, A. 2025. The Role of a Leader in Shaping the Safety Culture of an Organisation. *European Research Studies Journal*, Volume XXVIII, Issue 1.
- Ciekanowski, Z., Gruchelski, M., Nowicka, J., Zdunek, M., Żurawski, S. 2024. Risk Management and Organisational Resistance to Threats. *European Research Studies Journal*, Volume XXVII, Issue 1.
- Lee, K.C.S. 2018. The Great Man and Trait Theory of Leadership. In: *Mastering Theories of Educational Leadership and Management*, Adams, D. (eds.), University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur.
- Gadomska-Lila, K. 2018. *Przywództwo w organizacjach wiedzochłonnych. Edukacja Ekonomistów i Menedżerów*, vol. 47, Issue 1.
- Kopertyńska, M.W. 2015. *Przywództwo w organizacji czynnikiem sukcesu*. Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis. *Przegląd Prawa i Administracji*.
- Kondycja organizacji pozarządowych. 2024. Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor. Warszawa.
- Kruk, M. 2016. *Przywództwo w organizacji a jej innowacyjność*, nr 3, 2016.
- Ochyra-Żurawska, K., Ciekanowski, Z. 2017. Organizacje pozarządowe w tworzeniu bezpieczeństwa społecznego, *Przegląd Naukowo-Metodyczny. Edukacja dla Bezpieczeństwa*, 10, nr 4.
- Ochyra-Żurawska, K., Nowicka, J., Ciekanowski, Z. 2019. Ochrona porządku i bezpieczeństwa publicznego jako zadanie samorządu lokalnego, *Przegląd Naukowo-Metodyczny. Edukacja dla Bezpieczeństwa*, nr 1(42).

- Schmidt, J. 2021. Wyzwania przywódcze w organizacjach pozarządowych w kontekście pandemii COVID-19. *Zarządzanie Zasobami Ludzkimi*, Vol 143, Issue 6.
- Sułkowski Ł. 2001. Role przywódcy i kierownika a wzory kierowania. *Acta Uni Versitatis Lodzensis, Folia Sociologica*, 29.
- Ustawa z dnia 24 kwietnia 2003 r. o działalności pożytku publicznego i o wolontariacie. Dz. U. 2003 Nr 96 poz. 873.
- Ustawa z dnia 7 kwietnia 1989 r. Prawo o stowarzyszeniach. Dz.U. 1989 nr 20 poz. 104.
- Zgoda, Z., Nowakowska, A., Nowakowska, L. 2017. Etyczny wymiar przywództwa w organizacji. *Studies & Proceedings of Polish Association for Knowledge Management*, Issue 85.