OLSZTYN ECONOMIC JOURNAL
2026, 21(2), 53–70
ISSN 1897-2721 e-ISSN 2083-4675 DOI: 10.31648/oej.12783

ORIGINAL PAPER

PUBLIC MANAGERS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT – DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE AND THE FINANCIAL POTENTIAL OF MUNICIPALITIES, USING THE EXAMPLE OF THE OLSZTYN COUNTY

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JEL Classification: H70, H72, R51.

Key words: public manager, municipal self-government, public management, local finance, Olsztyn County.

Abstract

The main objective of the study was to identify the demographic profile of municipality heads and mayors of Olsztyn County at the beginning of the 2024–2029 term of office and to assess the degree of variation in the financial condition of the local government units under their authority in the years 2020–2024. Using a case study strategy based on data from Statistics Poland and budget reports, changes in selected financial indicators were characterised, and the characteristics of the current leaders were exploratorily compared with the values of the indicators for 2024. Spearman's rank correlation analysis for age did not reveal statistically significant relationships in the analysed sample (n = 12). Comparisons by gender and education were descriptive in nature and do not provide a basis for inferring the absence or existence of relationships in the population. At the same time, persistent differences were observed between municipalities belonging to the Olsztyn Functional Urban Area and the remaining municipalities of the county. Due to the small sample size, the temporal inconsistency between the period covered by the financial data and the term of office of some of the leaders studied, as well as the nominal nature of the data, the results should be treated as preliminary and exploratory, without causal interpretation.

How to cite: Chorążewicz, A. J. (2026). Public Managers in Local Government – Demographic Profile and the Financial Potential of Municipalities, Using the Example of the Olsztyn County. *Olsztyn Economic Journal*, *21*(2), 53-70. https://doi.org/10.31648/oej.12783

MENEDŻER PUBLICZNY W SAMORZĄDZIE GMINNYM – PROFIL DEMOGRAFICZNY A POTENCJAŁ FINANSOWY GMIN NA PRZYKŁADZIE POWIATU OLSZTYŃSKIEGO

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Słowa kluczowe: menedżer publiczny, samorząd gminny, zarządzanie publiczne, finanse lokalne, powiat olsztyński.

Abstrakt

Głównym celem badań było rozpoznanie profilu demograficznego wójtów i burmistrzów powiatu olsztyńskiego na początku kadencji 2024–2029 oraz ocena stopnia zróżnicowania kondycji finansowej podległych im jednostek samorządu terytorialnego w latach 2020–2024. Wykorzystując strategię studium przypadku opartego na danych GUS i sprawozdaniach budżetowych, scharakteryzowano zmiany wybranych wskaźników finansowych oraz eksploracyjnie zestawiono cechy obecnych liderów z wartościami wskaźników za 2024 r. Analiza korelacji rang Spearmana dla wieku nie wykazała statystycznie istotnych współzależności w badanej próbie (n = 12). Porównania według płci i wykształcenia miały charakter opisowy i nie stanowią podstawy do wnioskowania o braku lub istnieniu zależności w populacji. Zaobserwowano jednocześnie utrzymujące się różnice między gminami należącymi do Miejskiego Obszaru Funkcjonalnego Olsztyna a pozostałymi gminami powiatu. Ze względu na małą próbę, niespójność czasową między okresem danych finansowych a kadencją części badanych liderów oraz nominalny charakter danych wyniki należy traktować jako wstępne i eksploracyjne, bez interpretacji przyczynowej.

Introduction

Municipal self-government is the foundation of the Polish public administration system. Since the systemic reform of 1990, the municipality has constituted the principal level of territorial division, responsible for a broad range of public tasks, from education and infrastructure, through social assistance, to municipal services and local development. A key role in shaping municipal policy is played by the executive authority -the municipality head, mayor or city mayor -elected directly since 2002, which strengthens its democratic mandate but also makes the office-holder personally accountable to the local community for the directions of the municipality's development. A person holding this position is a public manager in the full sense of the term, operating at the intersection of management, politics and law, responsible for managing financial, human and infrastructural resources, with their decisions directly affecting the quality of life of residents.

The literature on public management has for years debated the extent to which the individual characteristics of public managers translate into the organisational outcomes of the institutions they manage. On the one hand, studies

indicate the significant role of leadership style, competences and managerial autonomy in shaping organisational effectiveness (Andersen *et al.*, 2021; Iddrisu & Mohammed, 2025; Saputra *et al.*, 2024). On the other hand, Boyne (2004) and Verhoest *et al.* (2010) emphasise that empirical evidence of direct cause--and-effect relationships remains limited, while the performance of public organisations is determined by a complex constellation of structural, institutional and environmental factors. At the level of municipal self-government, this issue assumes particular significance because the effectiveness of a municipality, measured by financial indicators, depends not only on the quality of management, but also on geographical location, economic structure, demographic conditions and the level of transfers from the central budget.

Alongside the issue of management effectiveness, an important research theme concerns representation in local government, particularly the gender, age and educational structure of individuals exercising executive authority. In the 2024–2029 term of office, women account for approximately 16% of municipality heads, mayors and city mayors in Poland, indicating the continuing predominance of men in municipal executive authorities (GUS, 2026). At the same time, the professionalisation of local government personnel can be observed, reflected in the high proportion of individuals with higher education. The question of whether demographic characteristics coexist with differences in the financial situation of municipalities remains open and requires a cautious research approach, particularly in analyses based on small samples.

An additional research context is the process of suburbanisation, which has intensified in Poland since the 1990s and may coexist with differences in the financial situation of municipalities located around large cities and more peripheral units. The inflow of population and economic activity into suburban areas may strengthen the local tax base; however, the financial situation of municipalities also depends, among other factors, on their economic and demographic structure, transfers from the state budget, tourism functions, and the scale and timing of investments. For this reason, spatial location is treated in this study as one of the interpretative contexts rather than as an independently confirmed cause of financial differentiation.

In light of the considerations outlined above, the aim of this study is to identify the demographic profile of municipality heads and mayors of the municipalities of Olsztyn County during the 2024–2029 term of office and to assess differences in the financial condition of municipalities in the years 2020–2024. This aim is pursued by answering three research questions: What is the demographic profile of the executive authorities of the municipalities of Olsztyn County, and how does it compare with nationwide data? How substantial is the variation in the financial condition of municipalities within a single county, measured by selected indicators of revenues, financial autonomy and investment activity? Can statistically significant relationships be identified in the analysed sample between the age of the current leaders and selected financial indicators for

2024, and what descriptive differences occur according to gender and education? The study is exploratory in nature. It does not assume that financial results from the years 2020–2024 can be attributed to individuals who only took office in 2024, nor does it involve causal inference.

Literature review

A public manager is a person who manages public-sector organisations and is responsible for ensuring the effective provision of public services, implementing government policies and representing the public interest (Behn, 1997; Guy & Meier, 2016; Hood, 2007). Operating at the intersection of management, politics and law, a public manager has a direct impact on citizens' quality of life and the functioning of state institutions (Berrones, 2004; DiIulio Jr, 1998). The scope of their responsibility includes ensuring access to public services and translating public policies into specific operational activities (Guy & Meier, 2016; Farrell, 2006). They are also responsible for compliance with the law and ethical standards and for representing public values in decision-making processes (Bertelli & Lynn, 2003; Du *et al.*, 2011; Demir, 2011).

Public-sector managers differ from their private-sector counterparts primarily in terms of the orientation of their activities. A public manager focuses on the public interest, whereas a private manager seeks to maximise profit (Behn, 1997; Dopson & Stewart, 1990). The accountability of a public manager is political, social and legal in nature and is subject to democratic oversight, whereas a private manager is primarily accountable to owners and the market (Andersen, 2010; Lau & Pavett, 1980). The operating environment of a public manager is also characterised by greater political pressure and a higher degree of formalisation (Behn, 1997; Dopson & Stewart, 1990).

The ethical dimension constitutes one of the foundations of the public manager's role. Public managers are expected to demonstrate a high level of professionalism, accountability and transparency in their actions (Kellough, 1999; Demir, 2011).

Public management has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades -from the bureaucratic model, through New Public Management (NPM), to the concept of New Public Governance (NPG) (Cáceres *et al.*, 2025; Rennison, 2007; Lorusso, 2021). The NPM model emphasised efficiency, measurability of results and managerial autonomy (Barzelay, 2005; Bissessar, 2023; Hughes, 2017), whereas NPG emphasises network-based collaboration, citizen participation and democratic values (Popęda & Hadasik, 2024; Anttiroiko, 2009). In practice, hybrid approaches combining elements of both models are increasingly used (Plotnikof, 2016; Liddle, 2017). Effective public management requires maintaining a balance between efficiency and democratic accountability (Pierre & Painter, 2010; Haque, 2013).

Effective public management requires a broad set of competences. Emotional intelligence plays a particularly important role, supporting social relationships, communication and the quality of public services (Lee, 2018; Kotze & Venter, 2011; Przybylska, 2016). Public managers operate in an environment characterised by complex challenges and barriers, which requires a high degree of adaptability and the ability to function under political pressure (Zapico-Goñi, 2017; McNutt & Ban, 2023; Bashkin *et al.*, 2022; Matjie, 2018).

Public managers exert a significant influence on organisational effectiveness and the quality of services provided. Managerial autonomy contributes to improved organisational performance (Andersen *et al.*, 2021; Bjørnholt *et al.*, 2022; Saputra *et al.*, 2024). Local organisational units with greater autonomy generally demonstrate better outcomes in terms of service quality and citizen satisfaction (Uster & Vinarski-Peretz, 2026; Song *et al.*, 2021; Zahra & Jadoon, 2016). Leadership style acts as a mediator in the relationship between managerial autonomy and organisational effectiveness (Iddrisu & Mohammed, 2025; Abera Timbula & Marvadi, 2024). Transformational leadership correlates with higher motivation, engagement and job satisfaction (Reis *et al.*, 2026; Ahmad *et al.*, 2015), while a customer-oriented organisational culture, supported by transformational leadership and employee empowerment, constitutes a key factor in the quality of public services (Bhattacharyya & Jha, 2014; Bruno, 2018; Wynen & Verhoest, 2015). Despite growing interest in this issue, empirical evidence of direct causal relationships between management practices and organisational outcomes remains limited, indicating the need for further interdisciplinary research (Boyne, 2004; Verhoest *et al.*, 2010; Leisink *et al.*, 2021).

Research methodology

The study was descriptive and comparative in nature and was conducted using the case study method. The choice of this method was dictated by the specific nature of the research problem. A case study, understood by Yin (2009) as an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, is particularly useful when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not fully evident and the researcher seeks an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms occurring within their natural institutional environment. In the present study, the subject of analysis is the relationship between the characteristics of local leaders and the financial condition of municipalities, a phenomenon that cannot easily be isolated from the territorial, economic and social context in which individual local government units operate. The case study method makes it possible to consider multiple variables and their interrelationships simultaneously within a specific, territorially bounded system, which is not provided by quantitative studies conducted on large but context-deprived samples. Furthermore, as emphasised by Flyvbjerg (2004)

and Creswell (2013), the case study plays an important role at the exploratory stage of research, when the aim is to generate hypotheses and identify trends requiring subsequent verification in larger populations – and this is precisely the nature of the present study.

The subject of the case study was Olsztyn County, comprising twelve municipalities with differing administrative status. An additional dimension of comparison was their functional location in relation to Olsztyn. Instead of an arbitrary division based solely on spatial proximity, membership in the Olsztyn Functional Urban Area (MOF Olsztyn) was adopted. The outer zone of the MOF includes: Barczewo, Dywity, Gietrzwałd, Jonkowo, Purda and Stawiguda. The remaining municipalities of the county Biskupiec, Dobre Miasto, Jeziorany, Kolno, Olsztynek and Świątki were treated as a comparison group outside the MOF. This classification is supported by the strategic documents of Olsztyn and Olsztyn County, which indicate strong functional, commuting and suburbanisation links among the municipalities of the MOF. The time scope of the financial analysis covered the years 2020–2024, whereas the demographic profile refers to individuals holding office at the beginning of the 2024–2029 term of office. These therefore constitute two partially different temporal frameworks, which was taken into account in the interpretation of the results.

Data on the age, gender and education of municipality heads and mayors serving in the 2024–2029 term of office were obtained from the website of the National Electoral Commission (PKW) and from the Public Information Bulletins (BIP) of the municipalities. Financial data were derived from budget reports, while population data were obtained from the Local Data Bank of Statistics (GUS) Poland for the years 2020–2024. Monetary values were presented at current (nominal) prices; therefore, changes over time should not be equated with changes in the real financial capacity of municipalities. Table 1 presents five indicators used in the analysis: total revenues per capita, own-source revenues per capita, financial autonomy, investment expenditure per capita and the share of investment expenditure. The tabular section focused on the first four measures, while the share of investment expenditure was used additionally in the exploratory analysis of its correlation with the leader's age for 2024.

Table 1

Financial indicators used in the study

No.	Indicator	Calculation method
1.	Total revenue per capita	Total revenue / population
2.	Own revenue per capita	Own revenue / population
3.	Financial self-sufficiency	(Own revenue / total revenue) × 100%
4.	Capital expenditure per capita	Capital expenditure / population
5.	Share of capital expenditure	(Capital expenditure / total expenditure) × 100%

Source: own calculations.

Descriptive statistics were used for the data analysis. For the leader's age and selected financial indicators for 2024, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was applied. Due to the very small sample size (n = 12), the sample values were interpreted cautiously, and the lack of statistical significance was treated solely as an absence of grounds for identifying a relationship in the analysed sample, rather than as evidence of its non-existence. For gender and education, only descriptive comparisons of group means were presented. Given the extremely small and unequal group sizes (3 and 9 individuals, respectively), no inferential conclusions were formulated on the basis of these comparisons; their purpose is solely to describe the differences observed in the case study. Municipalities belonging to the outer zone of the Olsztyn Functional Urban Area (Barczewo, Dywity, Gietrzwałd, Jonkowo, Purda, Stawiguda) were compared separately with the remaining municipalities of the county. This comparison is descriptive in nature and does not allow the effect of suburbanisation to be isolated from other determinants of the financial situation.

The adopted methodology has limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the results. First and foremost, the small sample size (n = 12) limits the statistical power of the analysis and prevents the generalisation of conclusions. A key limitation is temporal inconsistency: the financial data cover the years 2020–2024, whereas the demographic profile concerns leaders serving in the 2024–2029 term of office. In some municipalities, these individuals were not responsible for decisions made in the years 2020–2023, and even the implementation of the 2024 budget was to a considerable extent determined by decisions and plans adopted earlier. For this reason, the five-year financial analysis serves to describe the financial condition and variation among the municipalities, rather than to assess the effects of the management of the current office-holders. Comparisons of leaders' characteristics with data for 2024 are exclusively exploratory in nature. In addition, the financial values are nominal and have not been adjusted for inflation, while the situation of municipalities may be affected by variables not included in the study, including economic and demographic structure, tourism, transfers from the state budget, availability of external funding, the investment cycle, local government experience and continuity in office.

Research findings

In the 2024–2029 term of office, the twelve municipalities of Olsztyn County were headed by five mayors of urban-rural municipalities (Barczewo, Biskupiec, Dobre Miasto, Jeziorany, Olsztynek) and seven municipality heads of rural municipalities (Dywity, Gietrzwałd, Jonkowo, Kolno, Purda, Stawiguda, Świątki). A detailed demographic profile of the local leaders is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Selected demographic characteristics of municipality heads and mayors in the Olsztyn County (2024–2029)

Municipality	Position	Age (2024)	Gender	Education
Barczewo	mayor	38	male	higher
Biskupiec	mayor	41	male	higher
Dobre Miasto	mayor	58	female	higher
Dywity*	municipality head	42	female	secondary
Gietrzwałd	municipality head	61	male	higher
Jeziorany	mayor	40	male	secondary
Jonkowo	municipality head	41	male	higher
Kolno	municipality head	50	male	secondary
Olsztynek	mayor	37	male	higher
Purda	municipality head	56	female	higher
Stawiguda	municipality head	50	male	higher
Świątki	municipality head	43	male	higher

* In the municipality of Dywity, there was a change in the position of municipality head following the death of the previous municipality head, a 46-year-old man with a higher education. Following a by-election, the post was taken up by a 42-year-old woman with a secondary education.

Source: own analysis based on data from the PKW (2026) and the BIP (2026).

Among those serving as municipal executive authorities, men constituted a clear majority -nine out of twelve, corresponding to 75.0% of all respondents. Women held office in three municipalities: Dobre Miasto (mayor), Dywity (municipality head) and Purda (municipality head), accounting for 25.0% of all leaders. This proportion is higher than the nationwide share of women among municipality heads, mayors and city mayors in the 2024–2029 term of office, which amounted to approximately 16%. The average age of the leaders at the beginning of the term of office was 46.4 years, ranging from 37 to 61 years. The clear majority of leaders – nine out of twelve (75.0%) – had higher education, while three had secondary education.

The analysis of the financial condition of the municipalities of Olsztyn County was conducted on the basis of budget data for the years 2020–2024. This period primarily covers the 2018–2024 term of office and cannot be interpreted as a period of management by all the leaders characterised for the 2024–2029 term of office. The five-year data were therefore used to describe the dynamics and persistence of financial differences among the municipalities, rather than to attribute the results to specific current office-holders.

The average level of total revenues per capita in the municipalities of Olsztyn County increased from PLN 6,458 in 2020 to PLN 8,001 in 2024, representing a nominal increase of 23.9%. However, this growth was not uniform – following an increase in the years 2020–2022, there was a marked decline in 2023 (to PLN 6,477), followed by a recovery in 2024. Differences between municipalities

Table 3

Total per capita income of municipalities in the Olsztyn County in 2020–2024 (PLN)

Municipality	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Growth rate (%)
Barczewo	5,705	5,904	5,869	5,515	6,571	+15.2
Biskupiec	6,022	6,992	6,613	6,254	7,060	+17.2
Dobre Miasto	5,102	5,505	5,925	5,332	6,654	+30.4
Dywity	6,379	6,632	7,192	6,224	8,030	+25.9
Gietrzwałd	8,650	8,546	8,276	6,502	9,298	+7.5
Jeziorany	6,284	7,986	8,987	7,289	9,426	+50.0
Jonkowo	7,461	6,112	6,319	5,864	6,805	–8.8
Kolno	6,024	8,455	7,885	6,355	9,265	+53.8
Olsztynek	5,362	5,868	5,731	5,632	6,933	+29.3
Purda	6,976	7,236	7,348	7,076	8,517	+22.1
Stawiguda	7,066	7,867	7,504	7,787	9,685	+37.1
Świątki	6,470	7,272	8,464	7,898	7,765	+20.0
Average	6,458	7,031	7,176	6,477	8,001	+23.9

Source: own analysis based on data from the GUS (2024).

persisted throughout the entire period, although the scale of growth varied considerably: from –8.8% in the case of Jonkowo municipality to +53.8% in Kolno municipality.

From the perspective of municipal financial autonomy, own-source revenues per capita are considerably more important. Their development over the analysed period is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Per capita own revenue of municipalities in Olsztyn County in 2020–2024 (PLN)

Municipality	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Growth rate (%)
Barczewo	2,352	2,484	2,726	2,860	3,369	+43.2
Biskupiec	2,556	3,512	3,323	3,617	3,459	+35.3
Dobre Miasto	2,008	2,414	2,600	2,473	2,976	+48.2
Dywity	3,233	3,476	4,156	3,633	4,634	+43.3
Gietrzwałd	5,180	3,733	5,072	3,989	4,732	–8.6
Jeziorany	2,736	4,074	4,741	3,583	2,879	+5.2
Jonkowo	2,991	2,970	3,246	3,056	3,929	+31.4
Kolno	2,092	1,825	3,274	2,409	2,967	+41.8
Olsztynek	2,582	3,006	3,004	3,358	4,033	+56.2
Purda	3,265	2,837	3,803	3,785	4,425	+35.5
Stawiguda	4,473	4,831	5,053	5,623	6,550	+46.4
Świątki	1,846	2,065	3,020	2,451	2,946	+59.6
Average	2,943	3,102	3,668	3,403	3,908	+32.8

Source: own analysis based on data from the GUS (2024).

Average nominal own-source revenues per capita increased by 32.8% over the analysed period, from PLN 2,943 to PLN 3,908. Most municipalities recorded a nominal increase, with the highest growth rates observed in Świątki (+59.6%), Olsztynek (+56.2%) and Dobre Miasto (+48.2%). Gietrzwałd was the only municipality to record a decline in the 2024/2020 comparison (–8.6%), with considerable variability in the indicator between years. The leading position was not constant: in 2020, the highest own-source revenues per capita were recorded in Gietrzwałd (PLN 5,180), whereas in the years 2021–2024 the highest values were achieved by Stawiguda. Differences between municipalities persisted throughout the entire period; however, the nominal nature of the data requires caution when interpreting the dynamics in terms of a real improvement in the financial situation.

The financial autonomy ratio, understood as the ratio of own-source revenues to total revenues, evolved differently across the analysed period, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Financial self-sufficiency of municipalities in Olsztyn County in 2020–2024 (%)

Municipality	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Δ pp
Barczewo	41.2	42.1	46.4	51.9	51.3	+10.1
Biskupiec	42.4	50.2	50.3	57.8	49.0	+6.6
Dobre Miasto	39.4	43.9	43.9	46.4	44.7	+5.3
Dywity	50.7	52.4	57.8	58.4	57.7	+7.0
Gietrzwałd	59.9	43.7	61.3	61.3	50.9	–9.0
Jeziorany	43.5	51.0	52.8	49.2	30.5	–13.0
Jonkowo	40.1	48.6	51.4	52.1	57.7	+17.6
Kolno	34.7	21.6	41.5	37.9	32.0	–2.7
Olsztynek	48.2	51.2	52.4	59.6	58.2	+10.0
Purda	46.8	39.2	51.8	53.5	52.0	+5.2
Stawiguda	63.3	61.4	67.3	72.2	67.6	+4.3
Świątki	28.5	28.4	35.7	31.0	37.9	+9.4
Average	44.9	44.5	51.0	52.6	49.1	+4.2

Source: own analysis based on data from the GUS (2024).

The average financial autonomy of the municipalities in the county increased from 44.9% in 2020 to 52.6% in 2023, before declining to 49.1% in 2024. The range between municipalities remained substantial. Stawiguda recorded the highest values of this indicator over the analysed period. Jonkowo recorded an increase of 17.6 percentage points, whereas Jeziorany recorded a decrease of 13.0 percentage points. On the basis of the data presented, however, these changes cannot be unequivocally attributed to specific causes; they may reflect the combined effects of changes in own-source revenues, transfers, economic and demographic conditions, and other budgetary factors.

An important dimension of the financial analysis is the investment activity of municipalities, the dynamics of which over the analysed period are illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6

Per capita investment expenditure of municipalities in the Olsztyn County in 2020–2024 (PLN)

Municipality	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Growth rate (%)
Barczewo	968	827	827	869	785	–18.9
Biskupiec	527	1,290	767	1,451	847	+60.7
Dobre Miasto	157	148	319	799	586	+273.2
Dywity	921	1,326	2,382	936	2,446	+165.6
Gietrzwałd	1,715	1,672	2,599	3,005	3,584	+109.0
Jeziorany	941	1,984	3,073	1,733	2,410	+156.1
Jonkowo	1,901	863	976	1,059	1,697	–10.7
Kolno	1,156	421	1,327	1,490	2,266	+96.0
Olsztynek	347	707	440	310	1,563	+350.4
Purda	1,456	1,141	1,746	1,724	2,985	+105.0
Stawiguda	2,160	2,192	2,693	2,229	2,602	+20.5
Świątki	923	539	1,185	2,137	1,528	+65.5
Average	1,097	1,092	1,528	1,479	1,942	+77.0

Source: own analysis based on data from the GUS (2024).

Average nominal investment expenditure per capita increased by 77.0% over the analysed period, from PLN 1,097 to PLN 1,942. The dynamics varied considerably and should be interpreted taking into account inflation and the low-base effect. The leading position changed over time: in 2020–2021, the highest investment expenditure per capita was recorded by Stawiguda, in 2022 by Jeziorany, and in 2023–2024 by Gietrzwałd. Large fluctuations in the indicator across individual municipalities are consistent with the cyclical nature of local government investment and may depend, among other factors, on project schedules and the availability of external funding.

The analysis of own-source revenues per capita, divided between municipalities belonging to the outer zone of the Olsztyn Functional Urban Area and the remaining municipalities of the county, reveals persistent differences between the two groups (Tab. 7).

Municipalities belonging to the Olsztyn Functional Urban Area maintained higher average own-source revenues per capita throughout the entire analysed period, although the scale of the difference fluctuated – from 20.3% in 2021 to 55.5% in 2020 and 43.5% in 2024. This result is consistent with the expectation that stronger functional links with Olsztyn may coexist with a more favourable revenue base. However, the comparison between the two groups is descriptive in nature and does not allow the conclusion that suburbanisation is the cause

of the observed differences. The analysis did not control, among other factors, for economic and demographic structure, tourism functions, budget transfers or the individual investment cycles of municipalities.

Table 7

Average own-source revenue per capita in municipalities of the Olsztyn Functional Urban Area and the remaining municipalities of Olsztyn County in 2020–2024 (PLN)

Group of municipalities	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Olsztyn Functional Urban Area	3,582	3,388	4,010	3,824	4,607
Remaining municipalities of the county	2,303	2,816	3,327	2,982	3,210
Difference (%)	55.5	20.3	20.5	28.2	43.5

Source: own analysis based on data from the GUS (2024).

A separate, exploratory strand of the analysis involved comparing the demographic characteristics of leaders serving in the 2024–2029 term of office with the municipalities' financial indicators for 2024. Spearman's rank correlation did not reveal statistically significant relationships between the leader's age and own-source revenues per capita ($\rho = 0.281$; $p = 0.377$), financial autonomy ($\rho = -0.146$; $p = 0.651$), or the share of investment expenditure ($\rho = 0.421$; $p = 0.173$). Given $n = 12$, these results do not constitute evidence of the absence of a relationship. Comparisons by gender and education were exclusively descriptive: own-source revenues per capita averaged PLN 4,012 in municipalities headed by women, compared with PLN 3,874 in municipalities headed by men, while financial autonomy amounted to 51.5% and 48.3%, respectively. Average values also differed between education groups, but given the very small group sizes, these differences should not be assigned inferential significance. Moreover, 2024 was a year of transition between terms of office; therefore, the indicator values cannot be treated as the result solely of the actions of the new authorities.

In summary, the five-year analysis indicates persistent financial differences among the municipalities of Olsztyn County, including higher average own-source revenues per capita in the group of municipalities belonging to the Olsztyn Functional Urban Area. At the same time, no statistically significant relationships were identified in the analysed sample between the leader's age and selected financial indicators for 2024. These results cannot be interpreted as evidence that the characteristics or competences of those in management positions are irrelevant, nor as confirmation of a causal effect of spatial location.

Discussion

No statistically significant relationships were identified in the analysed sample between the age of municipality heads and mayors and selected financial indicators for 2024. Comparisons by gender and education were descriptive in nature. With n = 12, the lack of statistical significance cannot be interpreted as evidence of the absence of a relationship in the broader population. In addition, the temporal inconsistency between the five-year period of financial data and the term of office of some of the leaders precludes attributing the results from 2020–2023 to the current office-holders. In this respect, the results are consistent with the call for caution present in the literature concerning the complex determinants of the performance of public organisations (Boyne, 2004; Verhoest *et al.*, 2010).

The predominance of men among municipal leaders (75%) is consistent with the overall pattern of gender representation in Polish local government, although the proportion of women in the analysed group (25%) is higher than the nationwide figure for the 2024–2029 term of office, which amounts to approximately 16%. Differences in the mean financial indicators between gender and education groups should be treated as descriptive only. On the basis of such a small sample, it is not possible to determine whether these characteristics are associated with the financial performance of municipalities.

A clear result of the study is the variation in the financial situation of municipalities according to their functional location. Municipalities belonging to the Olsztyn Functional Urban Area recorded higher average own-source revenues per capita than the remaining municipalities of the county, and this difference persisted throughout the years 2020–2024. This observation is consistent with suburbanisation processes and the strong functional links described in the strategic documents of the Functional Urban Area and Olsztyn County. However, it does not constitute evidence of a causal effect of suburbanisation. Financial condition may simultaneously be influenced by the tax base, economic and demographic structure, tourism, central government transfers, the availability of external funding and the investment cycle. The territorial context should therefore be treated as an important dimension of interpretation, but not as the sole determinant.

The results of the study do not allow an assessment of the importance of leadership style, emotional intelligence, adaptive competences or the ability to build partnerships, as these variables were not measured. The literature indicates, however, that they may constitute an important direction for future research on the role of the public manager (Lee, 2018; Kotze & Venter, 2011; Iddrisu & Mohammed, 2025; Giedraitytė & Smaliukienė, 2024). Future research projects should therefore take into account local government experience, continuity in office, leadership style and behavioural competences. In addition, it is appropriate to consider inter-municipal cooperation and the role of the county in infrastructure projects, while recognising that municipalities and counties

perform different public tasks and have different funding structures; therefore, their financial indicators should not be compared directly.

In summary, the study provides a description of financial differences among the municipalities of Olsztyn County and indicates persistent differences between municipalities belonging to the Olsztyn Functional Urban Area and the remaining units. It does not, however, provide a basis for determining whether the demographic characteristics of the leaders studied affect the financial condition of municipalities. Limitations relating to the sample, chronology and scope of variables require the results to be treated as exploratory. Future research should include a larger number of units, complete local government terms of office and variables describing experience, continuity of leadership and managerial competences.

Summary and conclusions

The aim of this study was to identify the demographic profile of municipality heads and mayors of the municipalities of Olsztyn County during the 2024–2029 term of office and to assess differences in the financial condition of municipalities in the years 2020–2024, with particular emphasis on an exploratory comparison of the characteristics of the current leaders with selected financial indicators for 2024. The analysis was conducted using the case study method for twelve municipalities, based on budget data, data from the Local Data Bank of Statistics Poland and publicly available information on the characteristics of the leaders. Due to the temporal inconsistency between the period covered by the financial data and the term of office of some of the office-holders studied, the financial results for the years 2020–2024 were treated primarily as characteristics of the municipalities rather than as the effects of the actions of individuals holding office during the 2024–2029 term.

The analysis made it possible to formulate several conclusions. First, in the analysed group, men accounted for 75% of the leaders, while individuals with higher education accounted for 75%; the proportion of women (25%) was higher than the nationwide level of approximately 16% for the 2024–2029 term of office. Second, the municipalities of the county displayed considerable variation in financial indicators. Third, municipalities belonging to the Olsztyn Functional Urban Area recorded higher average own-source revenues per capita throughout the entire period than the remaining municipalities of the county; this difference is consistent with the suburbanisation context but does not demonstrate its causal effect. Fourth, no statistically significant relationships were identified in the analysed sample between the leader's age and selected indicators for 2024; however, with n = 12, this does not constitute evidence of the absence of such relationships. Comparisons by gender and education remain descriptive.

The results obtained are primarily cognitive and exploratory in nature. They demonstrate the need to consider jointly the territorial and institutional context and the characteristics of those in management positions, but they do not make it possible to determine the strength or direction of the influence of individual determinants. The literature indicates that future research should extend the set of variables to include local government experience, continuity in office, leadership style, adaptive capabilities and behavioural competences. These are not, however, empirical conclusions from the present study, but directions for further verification.

The study has significant limitations: a small sample (n = 12), temporal inconsistency between the financial data for the years 2020–2024 and the profile of leaders serving in the 2024–2029 term of office, the partial nature of 2024 as a year of transition in local authorities, the nominal nature of the financial data, and the narrow range of leader characteristics analysed. These limitations do not permit generalisation or causal inference. Future research should include a larger sample, longer time series covering complete terms of office, information on re-election and local government experience, and a broader set of economic and demographic determinants. In analyses of financial dynamics, it would also be appropriate to use real values adjusted for inflation.

Translated by Author

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