Closing Schools, Closing Communities: The Impact of Public Service Loss on Depopulation and Local Democracy

Łukomska Julita
National Institute for Local Governments, Łódź, Poland

Abstract: The closure of local schools, as one of the most tangible forms of public service withdrawal, may not only accelerate demographic decline but also reshape local political dynamics. This paper examines how the disappearance of primary schools in rural areas of Poland affects both community viability and local democratic participation. The analysis is conducted at the village level, allowing for a fine-grained understanding of demographic and political transformations within rural settlements.

Building on prior research linking school closures to depopulation, the study adopts a quasi-experimental design to identify the causal impact of school closures on local communities. Using a dataset combining school closure records (2008–2012), local election results, and demographic indicators, the analysis employs a difference-in-differences approach to test three hypotheses: (1) depopulation intensifies in villages where schools have been closed; (2) villages that lose schools display stronger support for populist parties in local elections; and (3) municipalities experiencing school closures show lower levels of electoral competition in mayoral elections, often characterized by only one candidate running for office.

The findings aim to advance understanding of how the erosion of public services weakens community resilience and transforms local democracy. The paper also draws on survey responses from local officials, who identify demographic decline and population ageing as key challenges in everyday local governance.