

# Social aspects of aging in the opinion of medical schools' students in Poland, Belarus and Greece

## Spoleczne aspekty starości w opinii studentów uczelni medycznych w Polsce, na Białorusi i w Grecji

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### Abstract

**Background.** Community of the elderly differs in many ways but primarily in their sex, age, education, place of residence and source of income. **Aim.** The aim of this study was to identify opinions of the respondents on the social aspects of aging. **Material and methods.** The study was conducted between January 2013 and November 2014 in three study groups: Polish, Belarusian and Greek students. A total of 600 (200 for each group) respondents were tested with the questionnaire created by authors. **Results.** 70.5% of respondents believed that the old age can be a time full of success. In response to the question „Which of opinion on the elderly is similar to your view?” almost 58.0% of all respondents considered the elderly to be needed in the society. The majority of respondents (60.7%) were of the opinion that aging is easier in other countries than in their own. **Conclusions.** Results of this study show significant differences in the public perception of older people, depending on the country of origin, despite general. There is a need to educate people to make positive changes in the perception of the elderly in society and to introduce such system changes that improve the living conditions of the elderly. (*Gerontol Pol* 2015, 4, 143-58)

**Key words:** aging, elderly, social problems, students

### Streszczenie

**Wstęp.** Społeczność osób w podeszłym wieku różni się na wiele sposobów, ale najczęściej zależna jest od takich cech jak płeć, wiek, wykształcenie, miejsce zamieszkania i źródło dochodów. **Cel.** Celem pracy było określenie opinii respondentów na temat społecznych aspektów starości. **Materiał i metody.** Badanie zostało przeprowadzone w okresie od stycznia 2013 do listopada 2014 roku w trzech badanych grupach: wśród polskich, białoruskich i greckich studentów. W sumie badaniem objęto 600 respondentów (200 w każdej grupie) przy wykorzystaniu autorskiego kwestionariusza ankiety. **Wyniki.** 70,5% respondentów uznało, że starość może być okresem pomyślnym. W odpowiedzi na pytanie: „Która z opinii na temat osób starszych jest bliższa Twoim poglądom?” prawie 58,0% wszystkich respondentów uznało, że ludzie starsi są potrzebni społeczeństwu. Większość respondentów (60,7%) była zdania, że łatwiej jest przeżyć starość w krajach zachodnich, niż w Polsce. **Wnioski.** Wyniki badań pokazały znaczne różnice w odbiorze społecznym osób starszych, w zależności od kraju pochodzenia respondentów, mimo ogólnych podobieństw. Istnieje potrzeba, aby edukować ludzi w celu pozytywnego postrzegania osób starszych w społeczeństwie i wprowadzić takie zmiany systemowe, które poprawią warunki życia osób starszych. (*Gerontol Pol* 2015, 4, 143-58)

**Słowa kluczowe:** starość, osoby starsze, problemy społeczne, studenci

## Introduction

Social classes in the elderly differ in many ways but primarily in their sex, age, education, place of residence and source of income [1]. Analysing sex as a variable determining social category of seniors, women rarely feel healthy (subjectively), often feel too lonely [2]. Although older people living in the city have less frequent or any contacts with their relatives as well as are rarely employed and have better living conditions, are subject to broader institutional care than rural residents, and their satisfaction with life is higher [2].

The effects of aging are complex [3,4]. For ten major include [2]:

- increased feminisation factor in the population (women live longer and more often reach an old age than men) [5];
- changes in the method of financing public expenditures (attempts to extend the retirement age, increase of taxes or decrease in the value of pensions);
- an increase in demand for social care services and the health sector (including the training of specialized staff);
- changes in family structures (increase in the number of childless and lonely old people in need of care, fewer children, an increase in the number of four-generations families, the decline in the importance of horizontal family relationships, growth in vertical ones, increased demand for the involvement of men in housework);
- changes in local communities (increased demand for preservation of local communities, civil society organizations and the third sector, intergenerational structures, investment in public transport, social services, the organization of architectural space with accessibility for the elderly);
- changes in the structure of consumption (increase in demand for medicines and cosmetics; development of cultural infrastructure, education, recreation and tourism, change in seniors' lifestyle)
- changes in the structure of investments (pension funds stimulate economic growth and elderly people often make short-term investments)
- changes in the innovation and productivity of human labor (dissemination of early retirement; slow adaptation of new knowledge and jobs; the occurrence of labor shortages; "aging of knowledge" - slowdown in the renewal of human capital and likelihood of appearance of geniuses and their breakthroughs; news and risk avoidance;

- decline of political dynamism and change in political preferences (placing expectations of the elderly in the political agenda)
- the risk of undemocratic system introduction: the centralization of the decision or the growth of consent for the complete abolition of the functioning of political parties);
- the need for public education (lifelong learning, education to old age, the promotion of lifelong savings and a gradual retirement, promotion of social activity and a healthy lifestyle) [2].

There are many scientific publications regarding a relationship between the social aspects and health [6-8]. Choosing social values, according to Spranger [6], favors establishing lasting relationships, as well as the interest in social life and taking action for the common good. Including the realization of large social tasks into life plans also fosters better physical condition [7]. In studies carried out by Kasser and Ryan [8] it has been proved that people appreciating contacts with other people and the sense of social bonds more than financial success, have better adaptation, are stronger and fulfill themselves. It has been also demonstrated that they are less affected by feeling emotions such as anxiety or depression, and exhibit fewer behavioral disorders [8]. According to this, it is assumed that people who appreciate social values can establish better relationships with others, and thus benefit from social support in difficult situations, as well as offer this support to other units, which can be a source of satisfaction [7].

## Aim

The main aim of this study is to identify the opinions of the respondents on the most common, in their opinion, social problems in old age that is among people over 60 years old.

## Material and methods

The study was conducted between 3rd of January 2013 and 15th of February 2014, with the permission from the Bioethics Committee of the Medical University of Bialystok (statute no. R-I-002/651/2012).

The research was conducted among three study groups. The first group of students came from the Faculty of Health Sciences, Medical University of Bialystok (Poland) -200 people, the second – from Yanka Kupala State University of Grodno (Belarus) (200), and the third - from Faculty of Nursing, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece) (200 persons).

The study used a questionnaire created by the authors concerning ascertaining the opinions about aging and old age as well as health problems connected with old age. The questionnaire comprises of two parts and in total contain 54 questions. The data obtained was compiled using Microsoft Excel 2010. Statistical analysis was made by applying the Chi-squared test. Statistical hypotheses were verified at the 95% CI. Calculations were completed using IBM® SPSS® Statistics program, version 20.0.

## Results

More than 55.0% of surveyed students from Belarus, 85.5% from Greece and 70.0% of Polish students were of the opinion that old age can be a time full of success. It should be also noted that rather small part of the respondents could not respond positively or negatively (from 10.0% in the group of students from Greece to 22.5% among students from Belarus). Statistically significant differences between the groups ( $p < 0.001$ ) were noted. Other results are presented in Table I.

To the question: 'Do you want to live to a ripe old age?', the major part of respondents in each group confirmed that they would like to live to a ripe old age. The

highest percentage was in the group of Greeks (85.5%) and the lowest in the group of Belarusians (51.5%). Also in the Belarusian group, comparing to others, the highest percentage of responses suggesting that they do not want to live to a ripe old age (21.5%) has been observed. Statistically significant differences between the groups ( $p < 0.001$ ) were observed. More details are presented in Table II.

In response to the question "Which of the opinion on the elderly is the closest to your views?" almost 58.0% of all respondents has considered that older people are needed to society. In the group of students from Grodno this percentage was 59.0%, among students from Athens - 62.5%, and a group of students from Bialystok - 51.5%. Statistically significant differences between the groups ( $p < 0.001$ ) were observed. The analyzed data are shown in Table III.

To the question "Do you think that the image of elderly people represented in the media is correct?" 40.7% of total respondents replied "hard to say", and almost 2.0% less answered "no". Among Poles, in contrast to the Belarusians and Greeks, the answer "hard to say" dominates. The differences between the groups were not statistically significant ( $p = 0.946$ ) (Table IV).

**Table I. Respondents' answers to the question "Is old age can be a time full of success?"**

**Tabela I. Odpowiedzi respondentów na pytanie "Czy starość może być okresem pomyślnym?"**

			Students			Total	P
			Belarus	Greece	Poland		
Can old age be a time full of success?	Yes	n	112	171	140	423	< 0.001
		%	56.0%	85.5%	70.0%	70.5%	
	No	n	43	9	16	68	
		%	21.5%	4.5%	8.0%	11.3%	
	hard to say	n	45	20	44	109	
		%	22.5%	10.0%	22.0%	18.2%	
Total		n	200	200	200	600	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

**Table II. Opinion of respondents on willingness of living to a ripe old age**

**Tabela II. Opinia respondentów na temat chęci dożycia do późnej starości**

			Students			Total	P
			Belarus	Greece	Poland		
Do you want to live to a ripe old age?	Yes	n	103	171	110	384	< 0.001
		%	51.5%	85.5%	55.0%	64.0%	
	No	n	43	25	29	97	
		%	21.5%	12.5%	14.5%	16.2%	
	hard to say	n	54	4	61	119	
		%	27.0%	2.0%	30.5%	19.8%	
Total		n	200	200	200	600	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Table III. The opinion of the respondents on the position of older people in society

Tabela III. Opinia respondentów na temat pozycji osób starszych w społeczeństwie

			Students			Total	P
			Belarus	Greece	Poland		
Which of opinion on the elderly is closer to your views?	Yes	n	16	3	30	49	< 0.001
		%	8.0%	1.5%	15.0%	8.2%	
	No	n	118	125	103	346	
		%	59.0%	62.5%	51.5%	57.7%	
	hard to say	n	66	72	67	205	
		%	33.0%	36.0%	33.5%	34.2%	
Total		n	200	200	200	600	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Table IV. Opinion of respondents on the presentation of older people in the media

Tabela IV. Opinia respondentów na temat prezentacji osób starszych w mediach

			Students			Total	P
			Belarus	Greece	Poland		
Do you think that the image of older people represented in the media is correct?	Yes	n	37	68	18	123	< 0.946
		%	18.5%	34.0%	9.0%	20.5%	
	No	n	91	73	69	233	
		%	45.5%	36.5%	34.5%	38.8%	
	hard to say	n	72	59	113	244	
		%	36.0%	29.5%	56.5%	40.7%	
Total		n	200	200	200	600	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Table V. Respect for the elderly in society - opinion of respondents

Tabela V. Szacunek wobec osób starszych w społeczeństwie – opinia respondentów

			Students			Total	P
			Belarus	Greece	Poland		
Do you think that older people are respected by society?	Yes	n	125	11	34	170	< 0.321
		%	62.5%	5.5%	17.0%	28.3%	
	No	n	39	171	87	297	
		%	19.5%	85.5%	43.5%	49.5%	
	hard to say	n	36	18	79	133	
		%	18.0%	9.0%	39.5%	22.2%	
Total		n	200	200	200	600	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Significant differences were recorded in case of analysis of the responses presenting respect for the elderly in society. Almost 2/3 of the respondents in Belarus found that the elderly are respected by society. Inverse distribution of responses was observed in Greece - 85.5% of the respondents felt that the people do not respect the elderly. In Poland, 43.5% of students responded "no", and 4.0% less - answer "hard to say". The data gave no support to identify significant differences between the groups ( $p = 0.321$ ). More detailed data are shown in Table V.

According to more than half of the total respondents (51.0%) generally kindly treat older people. The highest response rate was observed among students from Belarus (84.0%). A slightly more pessimistic attitude was expressed by students from Greece - more than 40.0% of the respondents said that seniors are treated by society as indifferent. The differences between groups were statistically significant at  $p < 0.001$ . Detailed data are shown in Table VI.

Table VI. Opinion of respondents on the environment compared to the elderly

Tabela VI. Opinia respondentów na temat stosunku otoczenia wobec osób w podeszłym wieku

			Students			Total	P
			Belarus	Greece	Poland		
How in your environment, people generally treat the elderly?	kindly	n	168	42	96	306	< 0,001
		%	84.0%	21.0%	48.0%	51.0%	
	indifferently	n	17	81	49	147	
		%	8.5%	40.5%	24.5%	24.5%	
	reluctantly	n	1	48	25	74	
		%	0.5%	24.0%	12.5%	12.3%	
	hard to say	n	14	29	30	73	
		%	7.0%	14.5%	15.0%	12.2%	
Total		n	200	200	200	600	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Table VII. Respondents' answers to the question "Do you think that it is easier to be elder in Western countries than in Poland?"

Tabela VII. Odpowiedzi respondentów na pytanie "Czy uważasz, że łatwiej jest przeżyć starość w krajach zachodnich, niż w Polsce?"

			Students			Total	P
			Belarus	Greece	Poland		
Do you think it is easier to be elder in Western countries than in their home country?	Yes	n	111	111	142	364	< 0,001
		%	55.5%	55.5%	71.0%	60.7%	
	No	n	43	46	7	96	
		%	21.5%	23.0%	3.5%	16.0%	
	hard to say	n	46	43	51	140	
		%	23.0%	21.5%	25.5%	23.3%	
Total		n	200	200	200	600	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

The majority of respondents (60.7%) were of the opinion that it is easier to be an elderly person in other countries than in the home country. Among the Greeks and Belarusians reported an identical distribution in the affirmative responses (55.5%). The differences between groups were statistically significant at  $p < 0.001$ . Answers to the question are presented in Table VII.

More than half of respondents (52.0%) were of the opinion that the elderly complain about old age. There was a low percentage of statements saying that seniors do not complain about old age (13.2%). About 1/3 of the respondents (34.8%) were unable to assess the mentioned wording. Significant differences between groups of respondents ( $p = 0.002$ ) were noted. Details are presented in Figure 1.

Even distribution of responses was observed in the possibility of choosing best way to spend old age by seniors. Nearly 33.0% of total students felt that older people have such opportunities, 36.5% were of the opposite opinion, and almost 31.0% were unable to respond

to question. More than half of the students from Belarus (52.5%), in contrast to the Greeks (24.0%) and Poles (21.5%) said that the elderly are able to choose to spend old age (Figure II).

According to almost half of the respondents (47.8%), the elderly should live in their own home or apartment. The answer is most frequent among Belarusians (48.5%) and Greeks (66.0%). More than 1/3 of the total respondents (34.5%) believed that seniors should live together with family. The answer was most often pointed by Poles (48.0%). Only 2.3% of the total respondents were of the opinion that the elderly should live in nursing homes. The differences between the groups were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Detailed results are presented in Figure 3.

Almost 1/3 of the students (32.0%) would like to take care of the elderly, but only if they are the relatives. Nearly 30.0% of the respondents were not able to determine whether they would be able to help the elderly or not. Only slightly more than 18.0% of the respondents

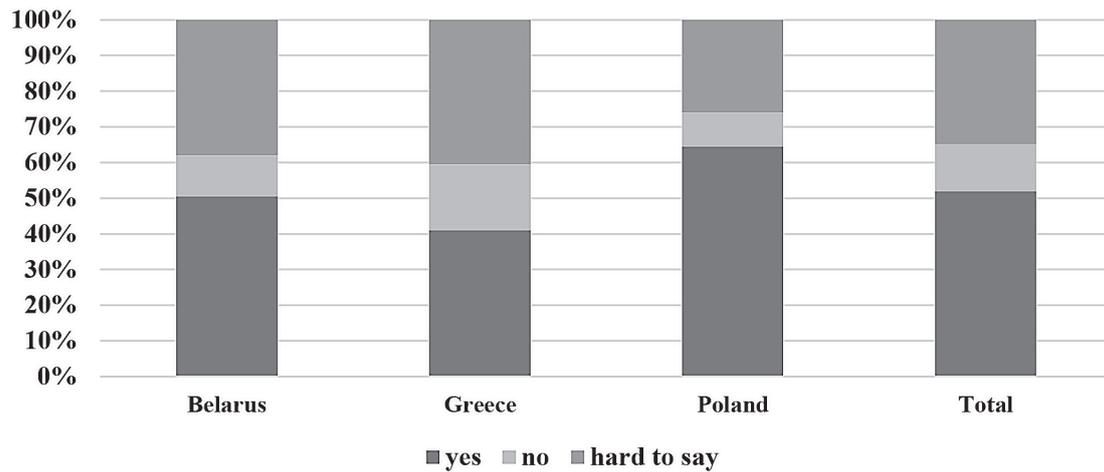


Figure 1. The opinion of the respondents on the complain about the old age by the elderly  
 Rycina 1. Opinia respondentów na temat narzekania na starość przez osoby w podeszłym wieku

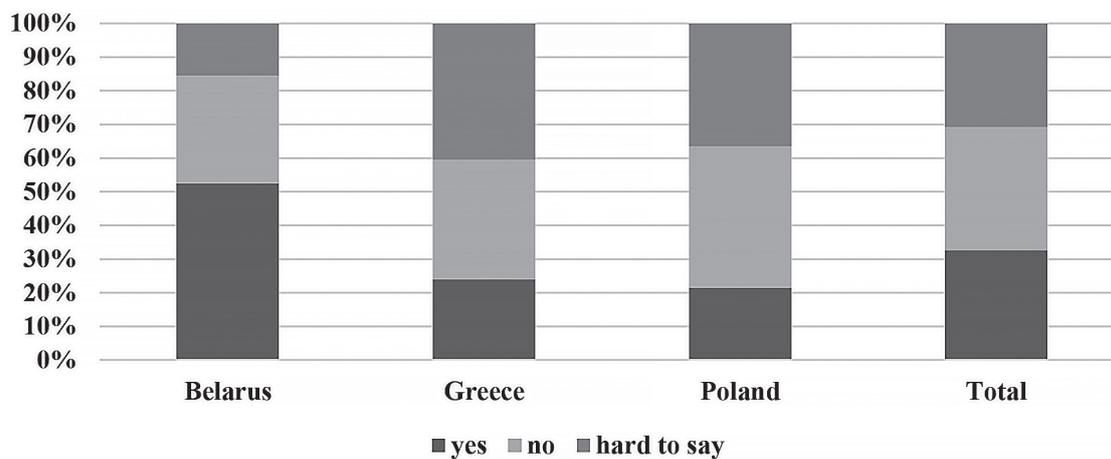


Figure 2. The opinion of the respondents on the choices to spend old age  
 Rycina 2. Opinia respondentów na temat możliwości wyboru spędzenia starości

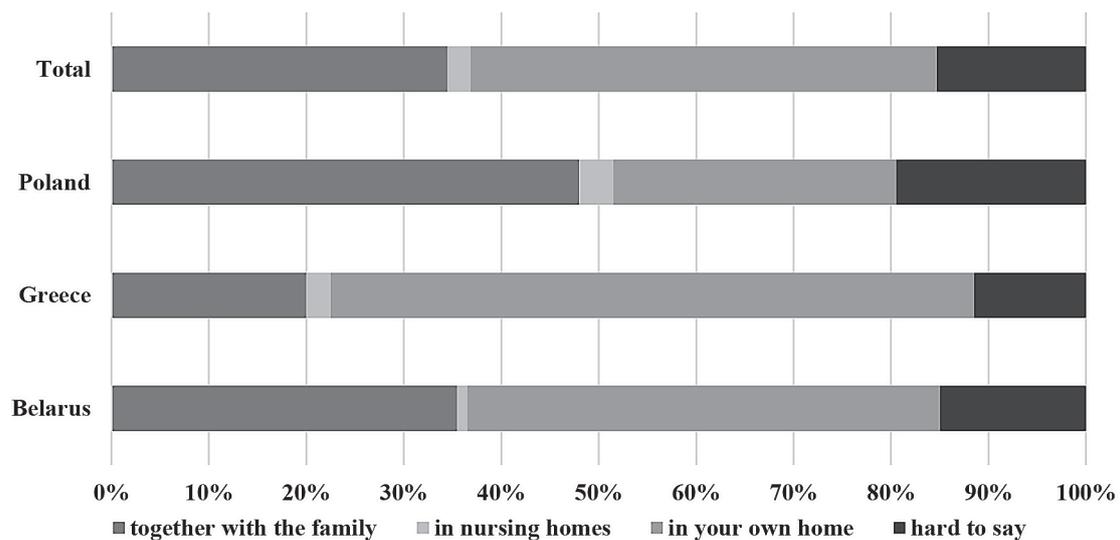


Figure 3. The opinion of the respondents on the places where older people should live  
 Rycina 3. Opinia respondentów na temat miejsc, w których powinny mieszkać osoby starsze

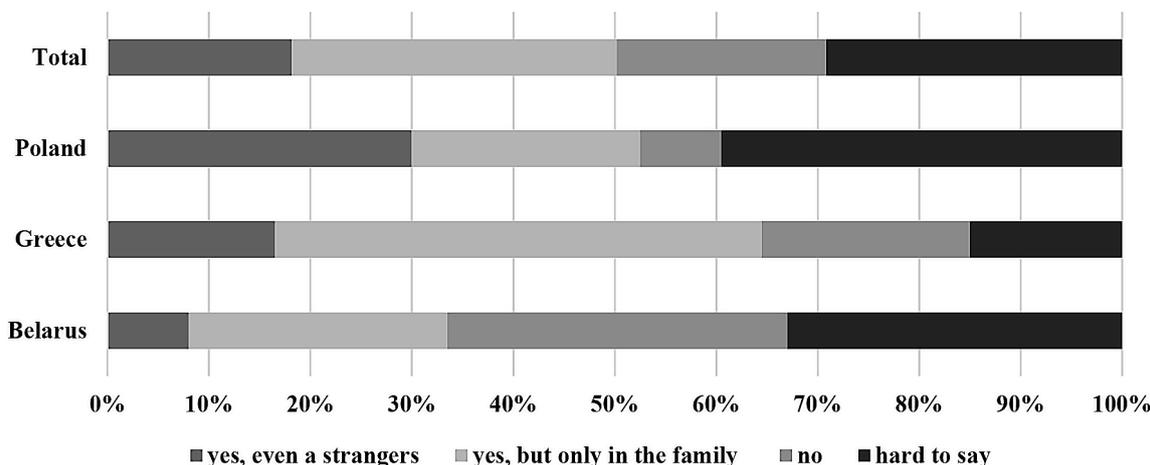


Figure 4. Respondents' answers to the question "Would you like to spend your free time caring for and helping the elderly?"

Rycina 4. Odpowiedzi respondentów na pytanie "Czy chciałbyś spędzić swój wolny czas opiekując się i pomagając osobom starszym?"

Table VIII. The opinion of the respondents on the guarantee places in care institutions in their native country

Tabela VIII. Opinia respondentów na temat gwarancji miejsc w placówkach opiekuńczych w krajach pochodzenia badanych

			Students			Total	P
			Belarus	Greece	Poland		
Are older people have guaranteed a place in institutional care in your country?	Yes	n	69	33	15	< 0,001	
		%	34.5%	16.5%	7.5%		
	No	n	46	148	100		
		%	23.0%	74.0%	50.0%		
	hard to say	n	85	19	85		
		%	42.5%	9.5%	42.5%		
Total		n	200	200	200	600	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

expressed willingness to help all older people. The differences between the groups were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Details are shown in Figure 4.

Only 19.5% of respondents said that the elderly have guaranteed a place in institutional care in the home country. Nearly 50.0% respondents gave opposite answers, and 31.5% were unable to respond to this question. The smallest problems in access to care facilities have seen residents of Belarus (23.0%). The differences between the groups were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Exact figures are presented in Table VIII.

## Discussion

Czerniawska's [9] belief that old age is also called late adulthood or third age of life (after the growth and adulthood), is static, is a phenomenon both unconsolidated

(mainly getting old human) and social (getting older society).

Zielinska-Więczkowska et al. [10] in their study asked respondents to express their own opinion if old age may be a time full of success. Answer "rather yes" was indicated by 40.0% of respondents, while 35.0% marked the answer "it depends largely on the individual aging" [10]. In the present study, 64.0% of respondents would like to live to a ripe old age, 70.5% felt that old age can be a period of successful, and 18.2% responded "do not know".

The study Klimczuk [2] respondents were of the opinion that the Polish media excels negative stereotype of the elderly. In addition, respondents say about the age that is treated as marginal, and the stories reported in the press or TV cover the most needy seniors struggling with adversity, being in a difficult financial situation due to disability or low-retirement benefits [2]. Negati-

ve evaluation of the presentation of older people in the media also dominates among respondents in this study. 38.8% of respondents believed that the image of older people represented in the media is not appropriate, and 40.7% of respondents could not specify their opinion in this regard.

Conducted in November 2009 by the Public Opinion Research Centre study entitled "Current problems and events" [11] allowed to know the opinion of the Poles on the elderly, as well as in relation to their own old age. To the question "Which of the opinion on older people, ie those who have completed 60 years or are retired, is closer to your views?" 87% of respondents replied "older people are needed to society", 9% said that "the elderly are rather a burden for society" and only 4% of respondents marked the answer "hard to say" [11]. In the same question in our study reported a similar distribution of responses. In each group prevailed answer "older people are needed to society".

In the survey conducted by CBOS in a group of 1022 people [11], only 13% of respondents were confident that the elderly in Poland are respected by society, and every second respondent expressed a moderate view on this topic ("rather are respected"). Almost a third of respondents (31%) did not see the respect to older people. Analyses show respect for the elderly in terms of their environment, rather than society as a whole, respondents expressed a more positive opinion. Over 80% of respondents felt that the people around them relate to older people kindly. The indifference of his friends to the elderly indicated 16% of respondents, while only 2% say about the reluctance of [11]. In our study, 49.5% were of the opinion that older people are not respected by society.

According to the survey of CBOS [11] 2/3 of the respondents would like to live in old age in their own apartment and benefit from assistance of relatives (in emergency situations), mostly family, friends and neighbors. Only 12% of respondents think about life with family. Total independence from the family chooses 9% of respondents - mostly they want to live in their own home and employ people specialising in the care of the elderly [11]. There are also respondents considering living in their homes with the support of constant help provided by social services, the Red Cross, Caritas and other volunteers. Occasionally, respondents indicate a nursing

home - both private and public. It is also little interest to a stranger renting a room in exchange for the care or apartment, together with other older people in order to provide mutual support [11]. In another study, also conducted by CBOS [12] almost two thirds of respondents (64%) would like to live in their own home, using the emergency aid from their loved ones - family, friends, neighbors. Every seventh respondent takes into account (15%) living with the children, grandchildren or other family [12]. Roughly one in ten would like to live in their own home, using the constant assistance paid (8%) or with free care, for example, social assistance, the Red Cross, Caritas and other volunteers (3%). Other forms of organization of his life to old age, such as private or public nursing home, an apartment together with other older people in order to assist one another, it was pointed sporadically [12]. Own observations show, that 47.8% of respondents indicated that the elderly should live in their own home, while 34.5% of respondents indicated the apartment together with the family.

Taking efforts for the senior generation the aspect of elderly social functioning cannot be omitted. Attitude towards an old age has never been clear, however, there is a need to take any action aimed at strengthening health of seniors, as well as to combat the stigma of the elderly and to reinforce their roles in family [13].

## Conclusions

1. There is a need to educate younger generations about the problems associated with aging and old age, including social problems and to create a positive strategy for the presentation and perception of seniors.
2. Despite the general similarities, results of this study show significant differences in the public perception of older people, depending on the respondents' country. There is a need to educate people in order to see positive changes in the perception of older people to society and introduction of system changes improving the living conditions of the elderly.

## Conflict of interest

None

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