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SOCIAL IMAGE OF THE CANDIDATE FOR POLICE SERVICE – RESULTS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract: *The social image of a candidate for police service is one of the important factors determining the image of the Polish Police both as an institution and an employer. It can also influence the sense of security of Poles, the level of trust in the police and the prestige of the police profession. The manner the candidates are perceived is conditioned by many factors, including social stereotypes, individual and group experiences or media coverage. In order to show the social image of candidates for service in the police in Poland, an empirical study was conducted in June 2021 using a diagnostic survey utilising the CAWI technique. A total of 384 Poles took part in the study.*

Keywords: image, brand, candidate, police, service

1. Introduction

A person's personal brand is shaped by his or her actions, and there are factors influencing the evaluation of an employee's/candidate's brand that do not result directly from professional experience and competence, but from the social stereotypes of the employees in the respective professions, as well as from the image of the organisation where the individual applies for a job. In order to validate the above hypothesis, the social image of candidates for service in the police was analysed within the framework of the conducted research. Thus, the aim was to reveal how the society in Poland evaluates the image of persons applying for service in the police, including the indication whether this image is positive or negative.

2. The candidate's image

Personal branding (building one's own image) has been increasingly emphasised in recent years as an activity that really contributes to growing interest in an employee, making him/her a desirable candidate for a given position. According to the definition, image *is a reflection, a picture of some character, created on the basis of his/her professional activity and personal characteristics, or the image, face, character of an object* [1]. In turn, the term personal brand is defined as *(...) a combination of impressions, associations, emotions, feelings, opinions and values that appear in people's minds at the sight or mention of a particular person. It is the sum of functioning opinions that distinguish it from similar people (...)* [2]. As the researchers emphasise: *A personal brand builds your reputation, influences your image, relationships and life in general. A good personal brand is desirable, valuable, credible, unique and irreplaceable* [2]. Personal brand can be considered in narrow and broad terms. In narrow terms – the so-called marketing terms, branding refers to how a person is

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perceived by others. On the other hand, in a broad sense it is the image of a person created by him/herself [3]. In this article, the author would like to focus on the above-mentioned issue considered in a narrow perspective, and thus to assess how Poles perceive candidates for police service. The social image of candidates for police service is important in the context of the image of the police, including the level of trust and respect the society has for officers, as well as the sense of security of citizens, which the police officers guard. According to J. Malinowska-Parzydło, *each of us evokes some associations in people's minds - and in this way everyone is a brand* [2]. Discussing the essence of associations, they do not have to be in accordance with reality, and they may result both from own experiences and information obtained from the media or social groups to which a given individual belongs.

Social stereotypes are also an additional factor that affects the personal brand of officer candidates. The concept of stereotype was introduced to psychology in 1912 by American sociologist W. Lippman, who defined stereotypes as *simplified opinions shared by people about groups and social phenomena* [4]. In turn, a more extensive definition is presented by K. Olechnicki and P. Załęcki, according to whom a stereotype *is a mental construction, usually common among the members of a particular social group, based on schematic and simplified perception of reality (social, cultural phenomena or a certain category of people), tinged with value, often based on prejudice and uncertain knowledge* (...) [5]. The simplified opinions indicated by the researchers make it possible to distinguish certain people by attributing to them features that are commonly regarded as typical, and therefore also consistent with reality.

The social image of candidates for police service, on the one hand, has a real impact on citizens and their subsequent willingness to cooperate with officers. On the other hand, the way the candidates themselves and later the officers are perceived may influence the decision to apply for service in the police. Designing a favourable image of the police is connected with building the prestige of the profession, and thus also with shaping the image of the police as a desirable employer.

While raising the issue of the image of a candidate for work – service in the police – it should be noted that this issue has become the subject of detailed analyses of representatives of many scientific disciplines. It is connected, among others, with social changes, including generational diversity of employees. As F.L. McCafferty points out *There are differences between the old (traditional) police officer and the new one, based on the experiences of people from the baby boom generation and generations X and Y* [6]. Currently, the selection process mostly involves representatives of generations Y and Z, while it is worth noting that new police officers do not measure success in the same way as previous generations. Different values, experiences and conditions of functioning influence behaviour, including the approach to work – providing service to ensure safety. All this translates into the social image of candidates for service in the police, their perception, assessment of competence and professional usefulness. It should be noted that this image is simplified, generalised and often based on indirect experience, which does not diminish the fact that the way candidates for service are assessed determines the way police officers are assessed later on.

2. Service in the Polish Police – chosen aspects of selection and statistical data

The Polish Police is one of the three key public institutions responsible for security, next to the Armed Forces and the less vastly represented Border Guard. According to the state on 31.12.2021, there were 100,557 police officers serving in the

police, and the number of vacancies in all garrisons was 2,752 [7]. In order to become a police officer one has to go through a selection procedure, which is not easy. It includes, among others, a knowledge test, a physical fitness test, a psychological test, a job interview, determining the candidate's health condition and the degree of ability to serve, as well as checking the accuracy of data in records, registers and files. It turns out that many candidates do not obtain a sufficient number of points in the various stages of selection. Every year, thousands of people apply for service in the police, and taking into account the difficulty of the selection process, it is not surprising that the percentage of people who are rejected in the qualification procedure is high. Referring to data from 2018, as highlighted by the Police Headquarters spokesperson: *From the beginning of the year to 1 November, 15,500 people applied for work in the police, of which only about 4,000 successfully passed the recruitment process* [8]. Most candidates fail the third stage of recruitment – the psychological test (the so-called MultiSelekt). On average, it is 50% of candidates. Approximately 75% successfully pass the physical fitness test, in turn, 15% of candidates fail the procedure as a result of a negative opinion of the medical commission, and 10% after an interview [9]. In 2021, 6,684 officers were admitted to serve in the police, which is an increase of 52.85% compared to 2020 (Table 1).

Table 1. Admissions to the police Service 2020-2021

Month	Admissions	
	in 2020	in 2021
1 January	2	0
by 01 February	10	105
by 01 March	668	1005
by 01 April	11	168
by 01 May	5	1,037
by 01 June	6	71
by 01 July	42	174
by 01 August	653	1,185
by 01 September	21	13
by 01 October	916	1,024
by 01 November	1	81
by 01 December	909	615
by 31 December	1,129	1,206

Source: https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/540/resource/35979,31122021-dane-kadrowe/table (accessed on 10.02.2022).

Part of the increase in the number of officers recruited in 2021 is due to changes implemented to the selection procedure in 2020. These include:

– the possibility to take the physical fitness test two months after the first attempt, instead of 6 months as before,
– the possibility to retake the psychological test 10 months after the first attempt (change from 12 months),
– the possibility to conduct selection not only on Saturdays and Sundays,
– awarding additional points for a candidate's higher education,
– extending the validity of a passed psychological test for two years [10].

The indicated changes, in connection with the introduction of the so-called incentive pay after 25 years of service [11], had a real impact and will have in the future on the employment in the Polish Police, contributing among others to the increase of the retention rate.

3. Results of the research

3.1. Characteristics of respondents

In order to obtain the opinion of Poles on the image of candidates for service in the Police, in June 2021 a study was carried out using the method of diagnostic survey utilising the CAWI technique.

The research involved 384 Poles, which is a representative sample. The selection of the research sample was quota-based, which means that *the structure of the population is imposed: the sample and amounts of individuals representing given sub-populations are selected for the sample in proportions such as the share of these sub-*

populations in the entire population [12]. Three criteria were taken into consideration when selecting the research sample: gender, generation affiliation and voivodeship in which the respondents resided. The study involved 206 men and 178 women.

Among the respondents there were representatives of three generations functioning on the labour market, namely generations X, Y and Z. The largest group of respondents were representatives of generation Y – 38% of respondents, i.e. people aged 35-49. The second most numerous group were representatives of generation X – 32.8% of respondents (aged 50-65), and the least numerous group was the so-called generation Z – 29.2% (persons aged 18-34). The structure of the research sample can also be characterised by the criterion of voivodeship. The majority of respondents came from Masovian voivodeship - 13.8%, followed by Silesian voivodeship - 11.7%, and Lesser Poland and Greater Poland voivodeships - 9.1% each. The smallest number of respondents came from Lubusz voivodeship – 2.6%, Opole voivodeship – 2.6%, and Podlaskie voivodeship – 3.1%. The number of respondents from individual voivodeships reflects the population of these voivodeships, with the calculation taking into account the status as at 31 December 2019 indicated in the Small Statistical Yearbook of Poland (Central Statistical Office) [13].

3.2. Police recruitment in the opinion of Poles

Conducting research aimed at identifying the image of candidates for police service, respondents were first asked whether, in their opinion, it is difficult to get into police service. This is because the difficulty of getting into the police may be important in the context of the assessment of the image of those who take part in it, and especially of those candidates who pass this process successfully. The difficulty of getting into the police was indicated by 43.49% of respondents. The opposite opinion was held by 17.19% of respondents. A large percentage of the respondents could not unambiguously assess the difficulty of selection (39.32%).

Continuing the issue, the respondents were also asked whether they know the criteria to be met in order to become a police officer. The awareness of the criteria allows for a more precise assessment of the image of the candidates. The respondents' answers in this regard were divided. Knowledge of the criteria was declared by 35.94% of the respondents and lack of knowledge by 42.11%. Therefore, it can be hypothesised that people who do not know the criteria for selection to the police, evaluate the image of candidates for service through the prism of not factual knowledge, but commonly existing views and stereotypes, which are the result of the quality of media coverage, or not always personal experience related to contact with police officers.

Many people call serving in the police not a job, but a service, which emphasises the importance of the vocation and the social character of the activities performed that go beyond ordinary professional duties. Candidates for service in the police can therefore be considered as persons who, by vocation, wish to serve in the police, thereby serving citizens. In this context, the respondents were asked what is the attitude of young people towards service in the police. According to 63.28% of the respondents, candidates treat work in the police as a job, not as service. It is a job that mainly provides a source of livelihood and is not a vocation. The opposite opinion was held by 21.88% of respondents. 14.84% of respondents found it difficult to answer. Knowing the views of the Poles on the selection to the police force, the characteristics of candidates for service from a social perspective were analysed next.

3.3. Characteristics of candidates for service in the police

Within the framework of the conducted research, the characteristics which, in the opinion of Poles, are ascribed to candidates for police service were verified. The

identification of typical features in the opinion of respondents is of significant importance in the context of the image of the police, both in general and as an employer [14]. In turn, the features themselves may determine the way of evaluating officers' actions, including the influence on the respect of police officers and the prestige of this profession. The analysis included 12 potential features of candidates identified on the basis of scientific and non-scientific publications (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of candidates for service in the police

Candidates' features	%
Physically fit	67.97
Determined, courageous	50.26
People with a mission, wanting to help others	46.88
Persons for whom respect for the law is a key value	33.85
Persons of good repute who are role models for others	33.07
Persons for whom stability of employment offered by the police is important	30.47
Persons with family traditions connected with service in the police	28.65
Persons who like to perform their tasks in a strictly specified way	25.00
Persons from small towns for whom working in the police is one of the few professional opportunities	22.66
Persons having need for power, influence on others	22.66
Persons with leadership competences	18.75
Persons who cannot find a job in other organisations	17.45

Source: Own research results.

According to the respondents, candidates for police service are above all physically fit (67.97%), resolute and courageous (50.26%), with a vocation – wanting to help others (46.88%). One third of the respondents also indicated that they are people for whom respect for the law is a key value (33.85%) and people with a good reputation who are role models for others (33.07%). 30.47% of respondents emphasised that candidates for service are persons for whom stability of employment offered by the police is important, while 28.65% of respondents indicated the importance of family traditions of candidates. One fourth of the respondents is of the opinion that candidates for service are people who like to perform tasks in a strictly specified way, while 22.66% of the respondents indicated that candidates for service are people from small towns for whom working in the police is one of few professional opportunities, as well as people who have a need for power, influence on others. Only 18.75% of the respondents assessed the candidates as people with leadership competences, while 17.45% indicated that candidates for service in the police are people who cannot find jobs in other organisations.

As the analysis of Poles' opinions shows, the social image of a candidate for service in the police is not fully positive. Basic qualities such as physical fitness and firmness and courage were indicated most often by the respondents. However, in the opinion of a large part of the respondents, candidates come from small towns, for whom work in the police is one of the few professional options. In addition, almost every fifth respondent indicated that, in their opinion, a candidate for service in the police is a person who could not find a job in another organisation. Thus, this does not fully indicate well the social evaluation of the image of candidates.

4. Conclusions

The social image of a candidate for service in the police is an issue which, from the perspective of the effectiveness of the selection process and the overall image of the police, both as an institution and as an employer, is of considerable importance. Bearing the above in mind, within the framework of the conducted research the characteristics usually attributed to candidates for service in the police were analysed. The research shows a partially

positive image of candidates for police service, assessed as physically fit, resolute and courageous people willing to help others. However, some Poles consider the candidates as people who apply for a job in the police because they have not found employment in other organisations, or they indicate that they are people from small towns for whom work in the police is one of the few professional opportunities. However, the dualism of the social perspective on image is not visible in the views on the difficulty of being recruited to the police. According to the respondents, the recruitment procedure is difficult (43.39%), which has more positive than negative influence on the image of the candidates themselves. It should also be stressed that not all respondents knew the selection criteria, and therefore their image of the candidates did not result from a comparison of the criteria with the candidates' competences, but rather from social stereotypes or the views of the social group to which the respondents belonged. This image could also have been dictated by the quality of media coverage of police selection, as well as the effectiveness of officers themselves.

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