

THE ATTITUDE OF LOCAL RESIDENTS TOWARDS FUR FARMS IN POLAND



ZACHODNI OŚRODEK BADAŃ
SPOŁECZNYCH I EKONOMICZNYCH

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* This paper provides a summary of research reports concerning the fur industry in Poland and the attitudes of Poles towards fur farms. The reports were prepared by: Mikołaj Iwański, PhD – an economist; Tomasz Marcinkowski, PhD – political studies, public security; Jarosław Urbański – a sociologist.

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A complete statutory ban on fur farming is currently being debated in Poland. The voices of local communities are among the most important ones to be heard in this case. Therefore, we asked whether and to what extent residents of selected communes with a large number of fur farms are in favour of or against the operation of such facilities.

To that end, we conducted a direct-method survey in three communes in Greater Poland and West Pomeranian provinces, where the number of fur farms is particularly high: in Czarniejewo, Koźmin Wielkopolski, and Nowogard. The survey was representative for each of the local government units.¹

Before we proceed with discussing the results of the survey, we would like to provide a few words of introduction. At present, Poland is the third largest producer of fur pelts in the world, after China and Denmark. In 2016, production was claimed to have been 8.5 million pelts. It is concentrated mainly in two provinces: West Pomeranian and Greater Poland. Over 90% of the production is exported.

Historically, Poland was an important exporter of livestock, pelts of farmed animals, and pork in Europe. There was also a trade route crossing Central Europe, leading from today's Russia to Western Europe; it was often used for transporting a large number of pelts of wild fur-bearing animals from boreal forests located in the north-east of the continent. Polish urban centres – such as Lublin, Gniezno, and Poznań – acted as intermediaries in the fur trade. Certain cities in Central Europe, e.g. Leipzig, were also important manufacturers of furriers' products in the "Little Ice Age" (1300–1850). Nevertheless, fur production had not developed in Poland. If anything, small numbers of rabbits were raised in backyard farms. The earliest fur farms date back to the late 1920s. Before World War II, only several dozen fur farmers operated in Poland, whereas for example in Sweden there were already as many as 1200 representatives of the trade at that time.²

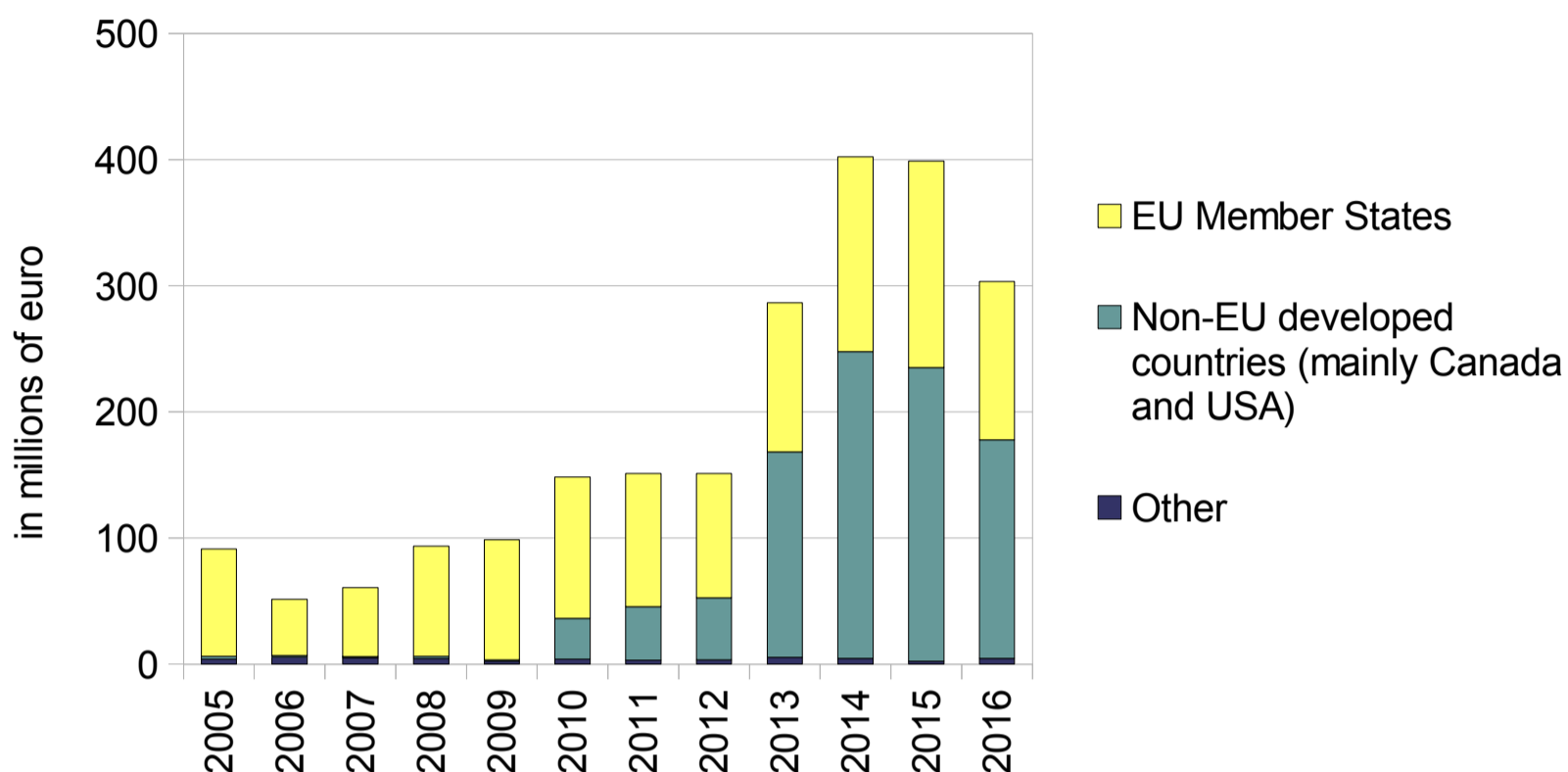
Even after the war had ended, this industry was not considered particularly important. It was not until about the mid-1990s that it was afforded slightly more attention, and a boom in fur farming in Poland was sparked when Dutch companies and NAFA (North American Fur Auctions) agencies entered the market. In 2009, NAFA opened a large fur sorting facility near Goleniów (West Pomeranian province). Another company to invest in Poland was the Van Ansem Group. The van Ansem family currently owns several fur farms in Poland. Norpol, a company based in Żdżary near Goleniów, is also affiliated with the van Ansem family. According to the company's website, Norpol "is the world's largest processor of mink pelts. (...) We provide services to many breeders from all over Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland). For several years now, we have been processing over 3,300,000 pelts each season."

As a result of these investments, Polish exports of fur-bearing animal pelts quadrupled (in value terms) from EUR 98.6 million in 2009 to EUR 402.3 million in 2014 (see Chart 1 for details). Currently, the number of carnivorous fur animal farms, mainly of the American mink (i.e. excluding the usually small backyard farms of herbivores, such as rabbits or nutrias), can be estimated at 700–750.

1 The survey was conducted in the first quarter of 2018 through direct face-to-face interviews. The samples were as follows: Czarniejewo commune N=356; Koźmin Wielkopolski commune N=379; Nowogard commune N=356; estimation error 5%, confidence threshold 0.95.

2 Data cited from the Polish Association of Breeders of Fur-Bearing Animals: <http://pzhzf.net.pl/o-nas> (access date: 30.04.2018).

Chart 1. Export of fur-bearing animal pelts in 2005–2016, expressed in millions of euro (source: Central Statistical Office).



As the number of farms and farmed animals increased, there were more and more protests from local communities, who opposed the functioning of the existing farms, as well as the creation of new facilities. Local protests concerning fur farms are monitored on an ongoing basis by the Open Cages Association. Between 2012 and 2017, 141 protests of local residents were recorded.

Furthermore, following audits conducted in 2011 and 2014, the Supreme Audit Office (or NIK, a body established in Poland to assess the functioning of the state, management of public funds, and compliance with the law) issued trenchant reports, criticizing the owners and managers of fur farms. A document issued in 2011, following an inspection carried out in Greater Poland province, provides a large set of data and findings revealing very serious negligence on the part of veterinary services, which essentially failed to perform their task of supervising fur farms. Out of the 29 farms inspected by the Supreme Audit Office, only one met all the relevant requirements, i.e. in the areas of environmental and veterinary protection, as well as construction law. Nearly a half (48%) of the farms audited at that time operated in facilities that had been illegally built or were used for purposes other than originally intended. 35% were found to be in significant breach of applicable veterinary requirements.

Very similar conclusions can be drawn from the Supreme Audit Office's report issued in 2014. The audit covered the period from 2011 to 2013. The document covers animal husbandry as a whole, of which fur farming is only a small part. The conclusions confirm the findings presented in the document cited above, i.e. that government authorities are unable to ensure appropriate veterinary and sanitary oversight and do not have at their disposal reliable data at as elementary a level as the number of farms themselves. As far as fur farms are concerned, out of the 20 facilities audited, 15 were found to be in breach of, for instance, the provisions of the Water Resources Act, which means that there was a direct risk of groundwater contamination.

Before foreign entities began investing in fur farming in Poland, Polish regulations had been amended, and the requirements to be met by such facilities had become more lax. It was only later that the Ministry of the Environment realised, for example, that American mink escaping from farms wreak havoc in many nature preserves and protected landscape territories, and that in some areas of north-western Poland escaped animals constitute about 40% of the total population of this species.

Finally, it should be noted that farms and the uncontrolled development of fur farming in Poland are the cause of numerous problems. The fur industry, led by such giants as NAFA and the Van Ansem Group, benefits from externalising costs, which are not borne by the companies themselves, but passed on to the society as a whole and/or to the environment. At the same time, the state is unable to enforce existing laws and often chooses to liberalise them. Today, it is difficult to estimate how high the externalised costs are. Most importantly, however, the odour and plague-like numbers of insects originating from farms have seriously compromised the life quality for the people living in the vicinity of such facilities. This has caused waves of indignation and social protests, which in turn led the Polish government to propose a law to prohibit the farming of fur animals. On the other hand, the fur industry claims that the abolishment of fur farms would have negative impact on the economy and local labour markets.

Fur farms from the local residents' perspective

When studying the impact of industrial farms on the social environment and the opinions of the local population, it is important to take into account the settlement network and population density. Central Statistical Office's data (GUS) suggest that the studied local government units differ in this respect. Czerniejewo is a small commune with a relatively scarce population, one third of which lives in the town of Czerniejewo. Another large population cluster in this area is Żydowo, which officially is a village, but its population (about 2000 inhabitants) is not much smaller than in the town of Czerniejewo. A certain part of Żydowo's population lives in multi-family housing originally created to house the employees of the local State Agricultural Farm (PGR). The population density of the commune is 65.4 inhabitants per square kilometre. The population density of the commune of Koźmin Wielkopolski is higher – 88.3 people per km². About half of the population lives in the town of Koźmin. Finally, the Nowogard commune differs from the previous units in that it is larger and takes up an area three times the size of Czerniejewo commune and twice the size of Koźmin Wielkopolski commune. Two-thirds of the population are residents of the town of Nowogard. Consequently, although the population of the entire commune is 73.0 people per km² (i.e. similar to the previously discussed communes), it is only 24.6 people per km² in rural areas (much less than in rural areas in Czerniejewo and Koźmin). Taking into account the number, size (Table 2), and distribution of fur farms in each of these areas, we can conclude that – in our opinion – the burden of such facilities on the residential areas in Nowogard seems to be lower than in the case of Czerniejewo or Koźmin Wielkopolski.

According to the data of the Veterinary Inspectorate, a total of 7 such establishments were registered in Czerniejewo in 2017. However, it should be noted that from the south Czerniejewo is also affected by fur farms formally established just outside the commune (e.g. in Kawęczyn). Rajmund Gąsiorek, one of the leading fur animal breeders, runs his business in this area. According to the Veterinary Inspectorate, as many as 71 facilities of this type are registered in Koźmin Wielkopolski. However, such a large number stems from the “artificial” division of at least one of the establishments into many smaller units (about 51 separate companies) in the town of Góreczki. This practice serves to avoid the need to comply with environmental protection requirements. If it were to be considered as a single facility (probably above 210 LU³), the number of farms in this municipality would come down to 20. However, it cannot be excluded that other farms have also been split up. Some farms operating in Koźmin are managed by the Dutch company Joni Mink Van Ansem Spółka Jawna, which also runs farms in other Polish communes, including Nowogard. Nowogard is also home to facilities owned by other well-known breeders of fur animals – Andrzej and Zbigniew Piątak. A total of 7 facilities of this type are registered in the latter commune.

Table 1. Data pertaining to population density and the number of fur farms in the studied towns (own calculations based on 2016 data of the Central Statistical Office).

	Czerniejewo			Koźmin Wlkp.			Nowogard		
	Area [km ²]	Population [people]	Population density [people per/km ²]	Area [km ²]	Population [people]	Population density [people per/km ²]	Area [km ²]	Population [people]	Population density [people per/km ²]
Residents:									
aggregate	112	7327	65.4	152	13,423	88.3	339	24,757	73.0
in towns	10	2637	263.7	6	6624	1104.0	13	16,722	1286.3
in the countryside	102	4690	46.0	146	6799	46.6	326	8035	24.6

³ Large Livestock Unit used as a reference for farming purposes. The point of reference is an equivalent of an animal with a live weight of 500 kg (1 LU). For mink, the conversion factor between the actual number of animals and LU is 0.0025. In other words, 1 LU = 400 mink and 210 LU = 84,000 mink.

Table 2. Data pertaining to the number and size (in LU) of carnivorous fur animal farms in the studied towns (source: information obtained from District Veterinary Inspectorates)

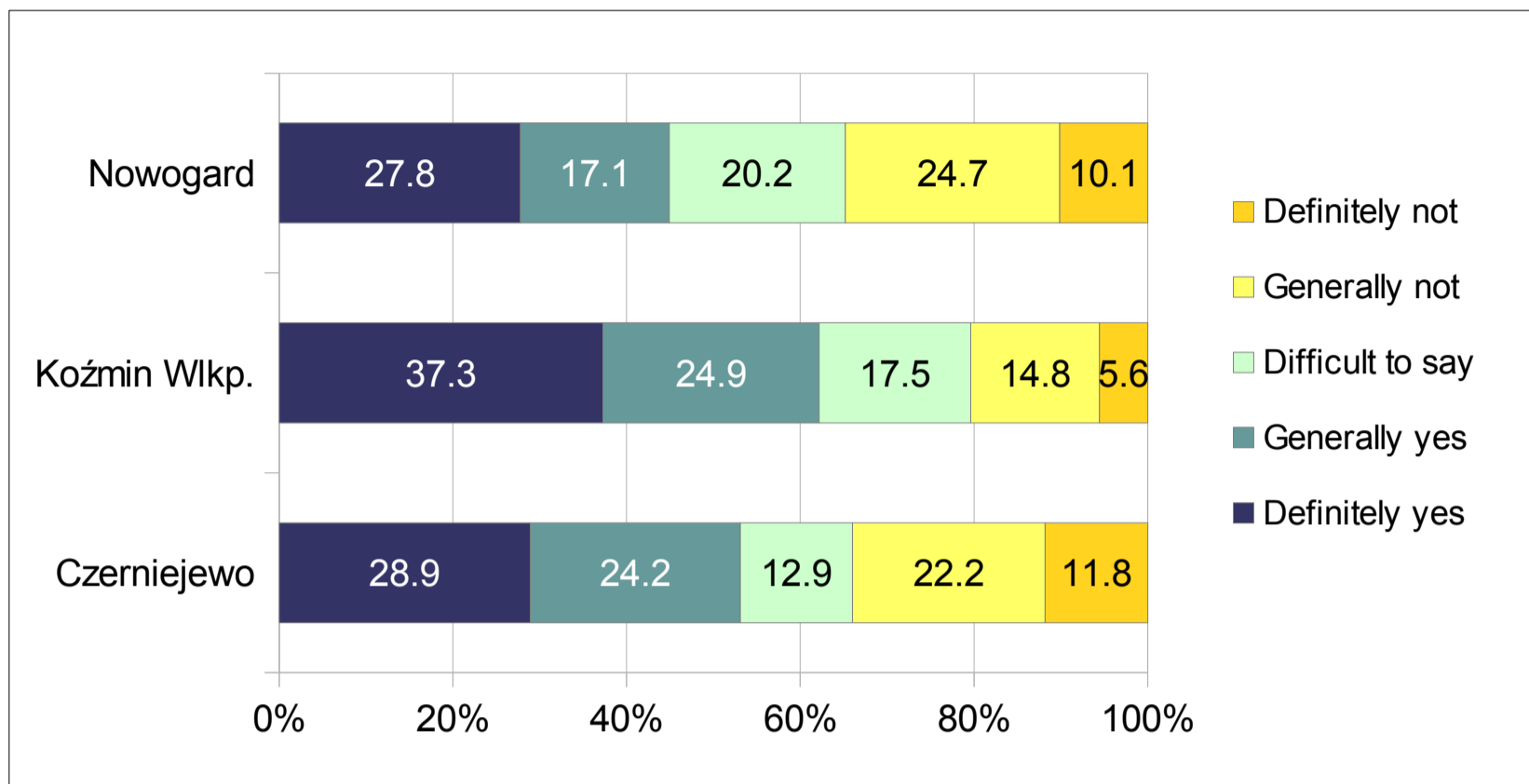
Farms of carnivorous fur-bearing animals:	Czerniejewo	Koźmin Wlkp.	Nowogard
up to 60 LU (less than 24,000 animals)	4	64	0
60–210 LU (24,000 to 84,000 animals)	1	7	6
Over 210 LU (over 84,000 animals)	2	0	1
TOTAL	7	71	7

Naturally, merely knowing the number of farms does not suffice to determine their environmental impact in a given commune. What would also need to be considered is for example the number of animals kept in each facility. The burden on the environment also depends on the way the farms are run, the infrastructure the farmer has at their disposal, and the number of workers employed to keep the place in a clean and orderly condition. For the purposes of this study, we assumed that the impact, especially the odour, is felt within a radius of about 2 km from the facility, although it may vary periodically depending on such factors as wind direction. According to the declarations of the respondents, 53% of Czerniejewo commune population resides within such vicinity of fur farms (i.e. at a distance of max. 2 km), in Koźmin Wielkopolski the percentage of such residents is 44%, and in Nowogard – 21%.



We believe these results have an impact on how inhabitants of the studied communes perceive the nuisance caused by fur farms. As we can see in Chart 2, as many as 53.1% of the respondents in Czerniejewo commune stated that farms are a nuisance to local residents (definitely yes – 28.9% and generally yes – 24.2%); in the case of Koźmin Wielkopolski commune, this percentage was even higher – 62.2% (definitely yes – 37.3% and generally yes – 24.9%); while in Nowogard, it was lower – 44.9% (definitely yes – 27.8% and generally yes – 17.1%). In all cases, the percentage of people considering these types of farms a nuisance in their commune outweighed the percentage of those who took an opposing view (from about 1/5 of the population in the case of Koźmin to about 1/3 of residents in the case of Nowogard and Czerniejewo).

Chart 2. Total responses to the question: *Are the fur farms operating in the commune a nuisance to the local residents?*



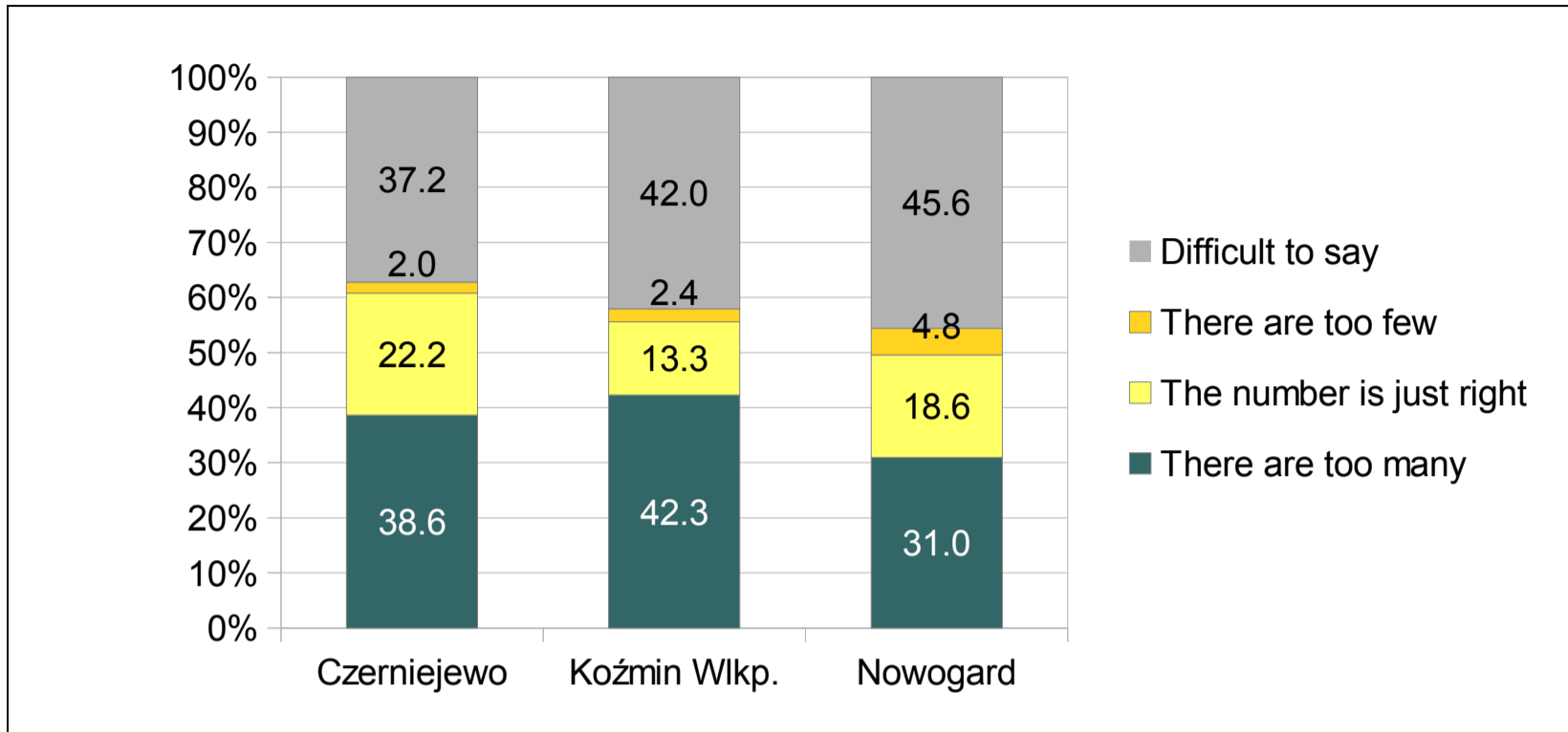
In all communes, respondents who stated that fur farms are a nuisance to local communities most often pointed to unpleasant smell (odour) (in each case, over 90% of respondents). A higher number of insects (e.g. flies) in the summer was the second most frequently listed reason (Czerniejewo – 47.9%, Koźmin Wielkopolski – 47.2%, Nowogard – 57.2%), and animals escaping from cages were the third one (Czerniejewo – 36.2%, Koźmin Wielkopolski – 32.3%, Nowogard – 47.8%).

We also asked the local residents about their opinion on the number of fur farms in and around their commune. A relatively high percentage of respondents said that it was difficult to answer that question (difficult to say: Czerniejewo – 37.2%, Koźmin Wielkopolski – 42.0%, Nowogard – 45.6%). Nevertheless, in the case of this question, a significant proportion of residents (Czerniejewo – 38.6%, Koźmin Wielkopolski – 42.3%, Nowogard – 31.0%) were of the opinion that the number of such farms in their commune was too high. This is especially evident when compared with other responses: the number is just right (Czerniejewo – 22.2%, Koźmin Wielkopolski – 13.3%, Nowogard – 18.6%) or there are too few (Czerniejewo – 2.0%, Koźmin Wielkopolski – 2.4%, Nowogard – 4.8%). Detailed responses are presented in Chart 3.



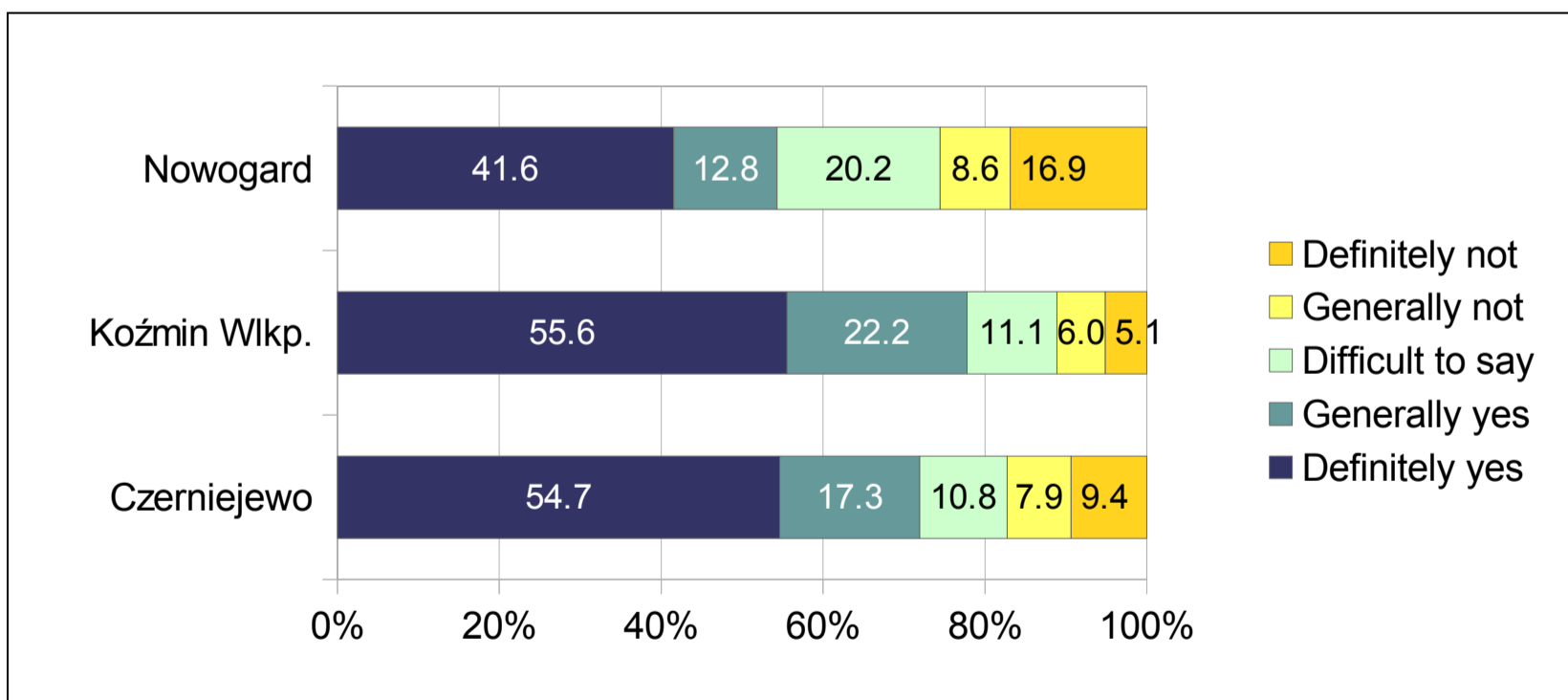
local resident against fur farms

Chart 3. Total responses to the question: What is your opinion on the number of fur farms in and around the commune?



We also asked the inhabitants whether they had heard about protests against fur farms in their commune. As has already been mentioned, in recent years such farms have been a source of conflicts in many localities, mainly in the West Pomeranian and Greater Poland provinces – also in the communes covered by the study. In our survey, 39.6% of Czerniejewo commune residents, 31.5% of people from Koźmin Wielkopolski, and 68.5% of Nowogard population stated they had heard about protests against fur farms. A vast majority of those who knew about the protests, supported them: 72% in Czerniejewo, 77.8% in Koźmin Wielkopolski, and 54.4% in Nowogard (aggregate responses definitely yes and generally yes, as detailed in Chart 4).

Chart 4. The responses of those who knew about social protests against fur farms to the question of whether they support them.

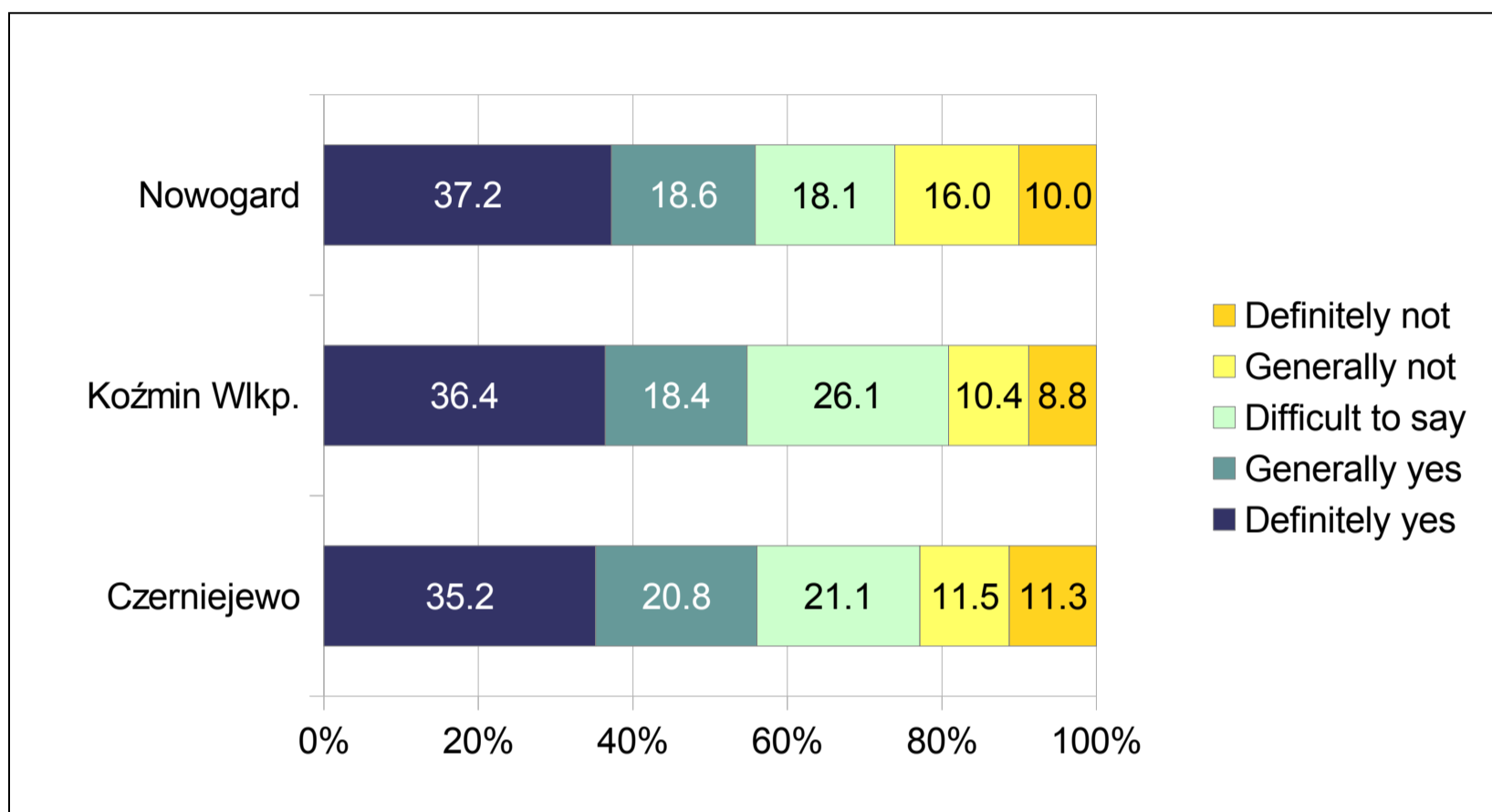


Animal suffering



This study does not deal with the matter animal welfare on farms. However, recognising that this is an important factor in shaping public opinion on the ban on fur farming, we asked whether local communities agreed with the view that animals kept on farms suffer. As it turns out, residents of all the discussed communes are extremely unanimous on this issue, a majority of them agreeing that this is the case: Czerniejewo – 56.0%, Koźmin Wielkopolski – 54.8%, Nowogard – 55.8% (aggregate responses *definitely agree* and *generally agree*). People who held a view to the contrary (aggregate responses *definitely disagree* and *generally disagree*) were, in this case, a substantial minority: Czerniejewo – 22.8%, Koźmin Wielkopolski – 19.2%, Nowogard – 26.0% (see Chart 5 for details).

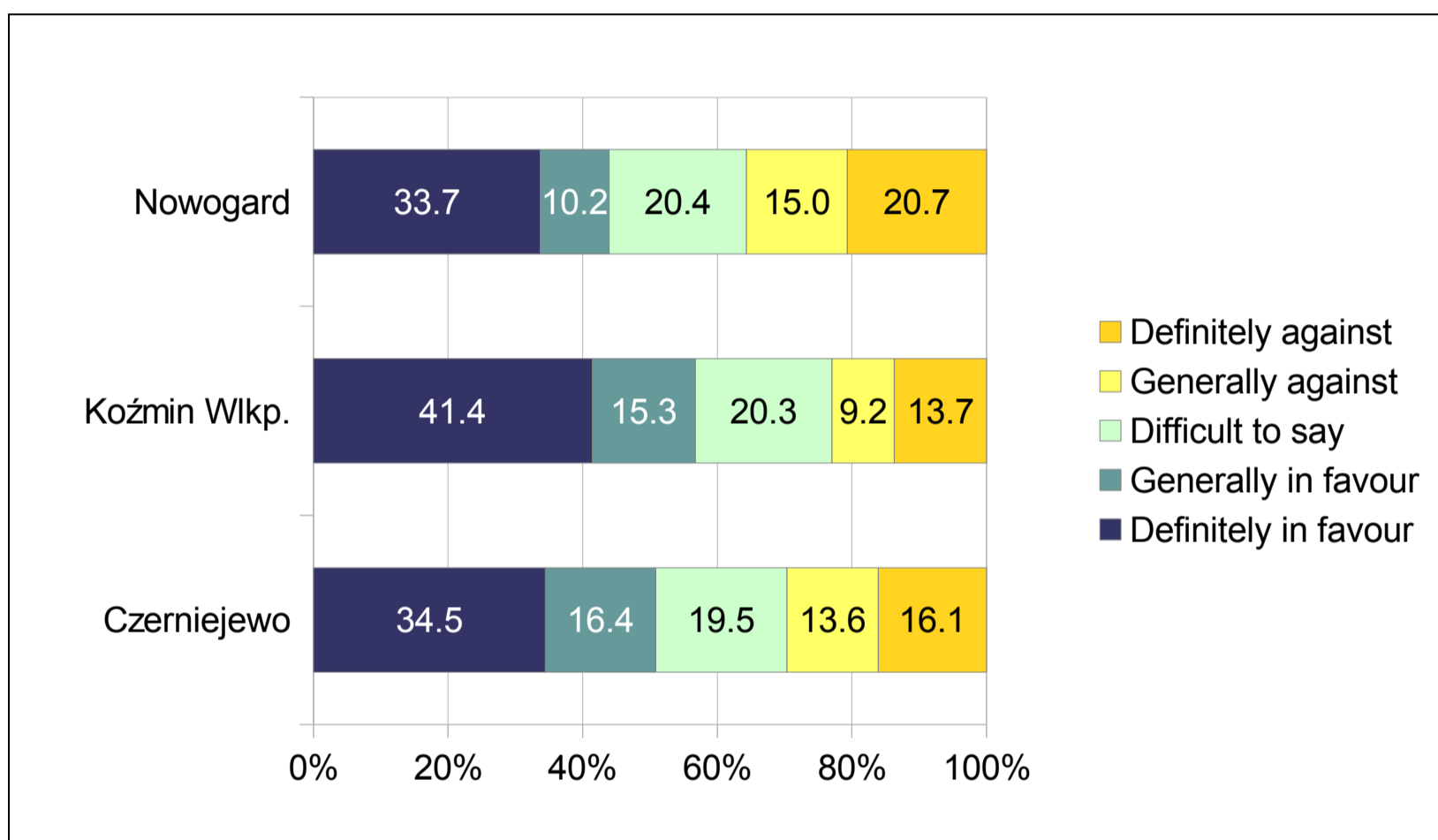
Chart 5. Total responses to the question: *Do you agree with the view that animals kept on farms suffer?*



Supporters and opponents of the ban on fur farming

We asked the local communities whether in view of the government's proposal to ban fur farming they were in favour of or against a statutory ban on the functioning of such farms in Poland. As we can see in Chart 6, when asked this question, more than a half of Czerniejewo and Koźmin Wielkopolski residents gave positive responses, i.e. were in favour of the ban (aggregate responses *definitely in favour* and *generally in favour*; 50.9% and 56.7%, respectively). In Nowogard commune, this percentage was lower and amounted to 43.9%. Importantly, in all cases, the percentage of those in favour of the ban outweighed the percentage of those supporting fur farming in general.

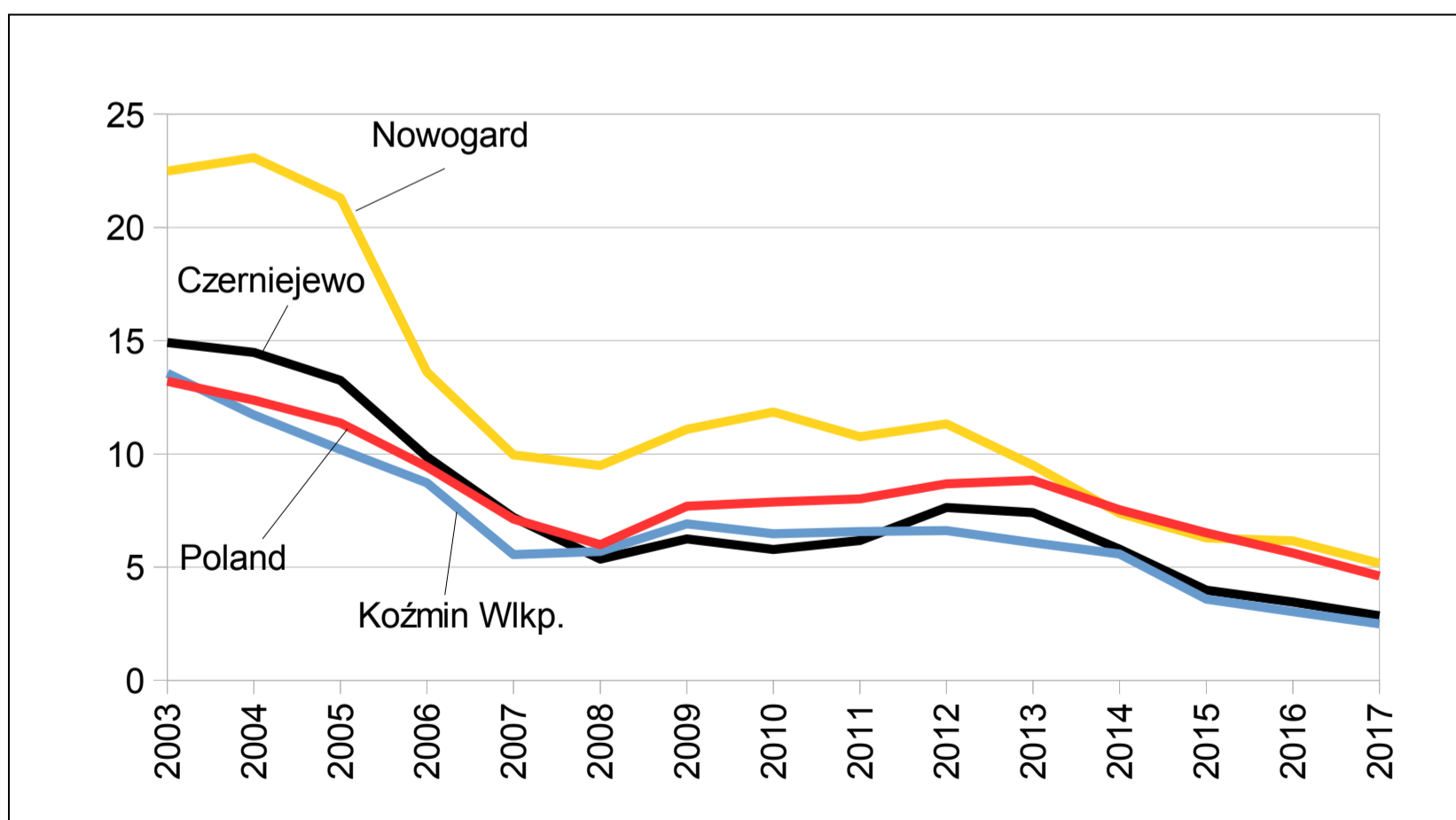
Chart 6. Total responses to the question: *Are you in favour of or against a statutory ban on fur farms in Poland?*



Fur farms and local labour markets

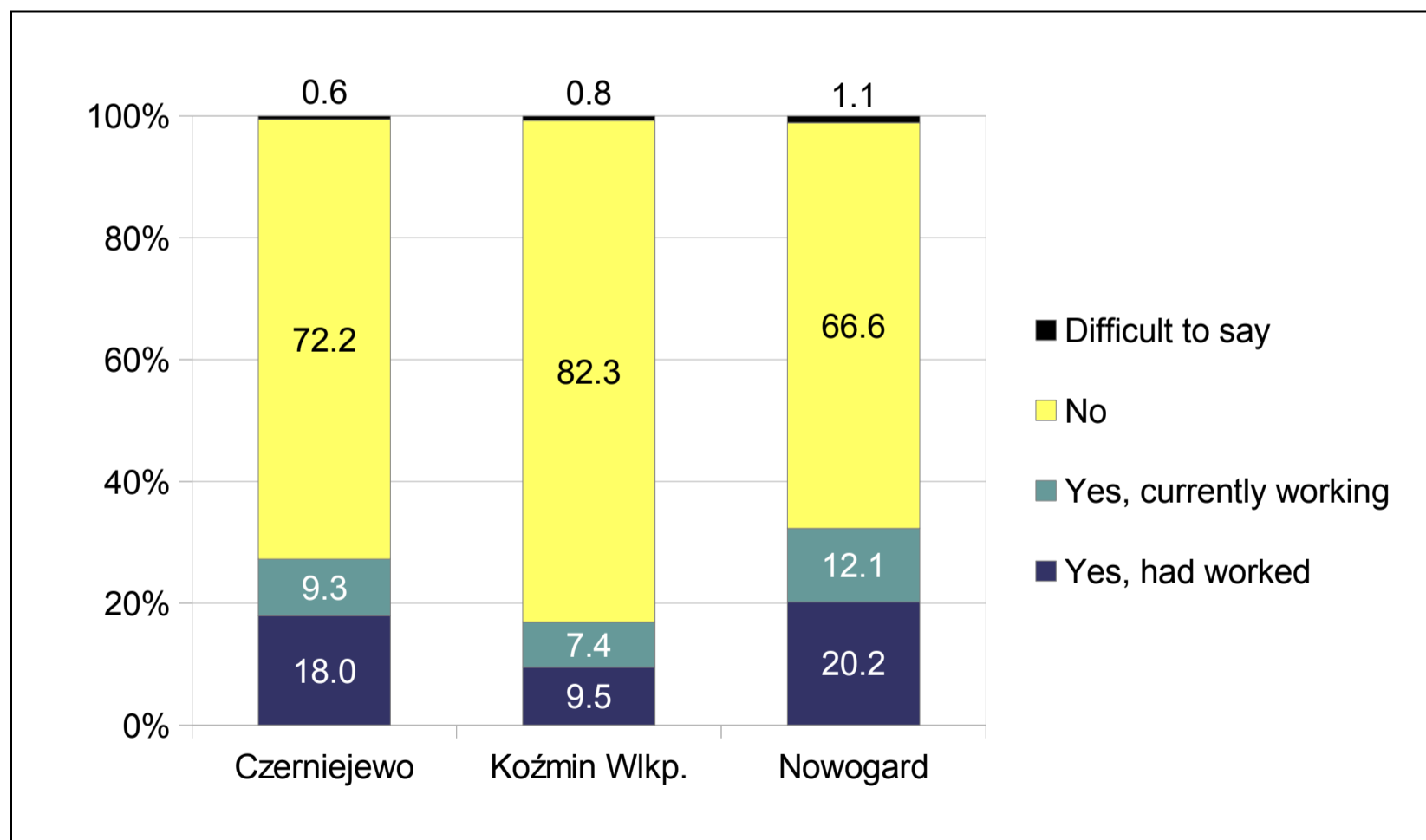
We believe that apart from population density combined with the environmental and social burden of industrial farming, as well as the need to preserve animal welfare, the condition of the local labour market is another important factor shaping the local residents' opinions on the functioning of such facilities. Chart 7 shows the percentage of unemployed residents of each commune against the working age population in the last 15 years (according to GUS data). It shows that, as far as unemployment is concerned, the situation of Nowogard was the least favourable and by far more disadvantageous than in the cases of Czerniejewo and Koźmin Wielkopolski throughout the analysed period, as well as that for most of that period the unemployment rate in this region stayed below the national average. Even when fur was booming in Poland, i.e. 2009–2014, when pelt exports (in value terms) increased fourfold, the employment market in Nowogard was in a much worse condition than in the remaining communes and in Poland as a whole. At the same time, if we compare the upward trend in fur pelt production in Poland with the unemployment rate in Nowogard (a commune located in the Goleniów district, which is considered to be a "hub" of such production), the development of this industry does not seem to have had a particularly positive impact on the labour market. The most significant drops in the unemployment rate in Nowogard (and, as a matter of fact, in Czerniejewo and Koźmin Wielkopolski as well) were recorded, on the one hand, after Poland's accession to the European Union and the opening of Western European labour markets (Chart 7, 2004–2008), and, on the other hand, during the current general improvement of the economic situation in Poland and on the domestic labour market (2013–2017), i.e. in periods when the Polish fur industry was either not yet strongly represented or experiencing noticeable declines in turnover. The unemployment rate remained relatively stable during the fur industry's boom (2009–2012).

Chart 7. Percentage of unemployed people in relation to the total number of working age population in Czerniejewo, Koźmin Wielkopolski, and Nowogard (as compared to Poland) in 2003–2017; the data for 2017 are estimates (own calculation based on GUS's data).



Later, we asked the residents of the communes whether a member of their immediate family (household) had worked or works on a fur farm. As we can see in Chart 8, an affirmative answer (aggregate responses: *yes, currently working* and *yes, had worked*) was given by 27.3% of Czerniejewo residents, 16.9% of Koźmin Wielkopolski residents, and 32.3% of Nowogard population. As regards the respondents themselves, the percentage of past and present fur farm workers was far lower: 14.1% in Czerniejewo, 4.7% in Koźmin, and 11.2% in Nowogard (Chart 8). Analysing the percentage of families (households) whose members work on fur farms (or worked there in the past), it turns out that this concerns, respectively: in Czerniejewo – 34.8% of families, in Koźmin Wlkp. – 19.5% of families, and in Nowogard – 36.5% of families.⁴ It would seem that this indicates a relatively high importance of employment in this type of establishment. However, if we determine the percentage of people currently working on fur farms in relation to the total number of respondents declaring they are currently employed, it is rather small and amounts to 3.8% in Czerniejewo, to 0.9% in Koźmin Wielkopolski, and to 2.2% in Nowogard (Table 3). Furthermore, it should be noted that the employment does not necessarily concern farms operating in a given commune. In each of the analysed cases, there were also fur farms in neighbouring local government units (e.g. in the Goleniów district, where Nowogard is located, there are 13 farms, of which – as stated above – 7 are situated in Nowogard itself). Therefore, data shown in Table 3 reflect the actual importance of fur farms for local labour markets. We believe that the large percentage of people previously employed on fur farms is primarily due to the high turnover of employees. This is evidenced by the accounts given by the residents of Czerniejewo and its surroundings. A former fur farm worker said that everyone “in the area had already tried working there. There is no one who has not given it a shot”. “People usually say”, a current farm worker told us, “that three years is the longest you can hold out. After three years, they quit, because they can’t stand it any longer... as soon as people see a light at the end of the tunnel, that there is some other opportunity, they are gone. Nobody wants to stay there.”

Chart 8. Total responses to the question: *Has anyone in your immediate family (household) worked on a fur farm?*



⁴ In this case the results for each commune presented in charts 8 and 9 do not add up, as we are dealing with situations when both the respondent and one of his or her family members works or has worked on a farm.

Chart 9. Total responses to the question: *Have you ever worked on a fur farm?*

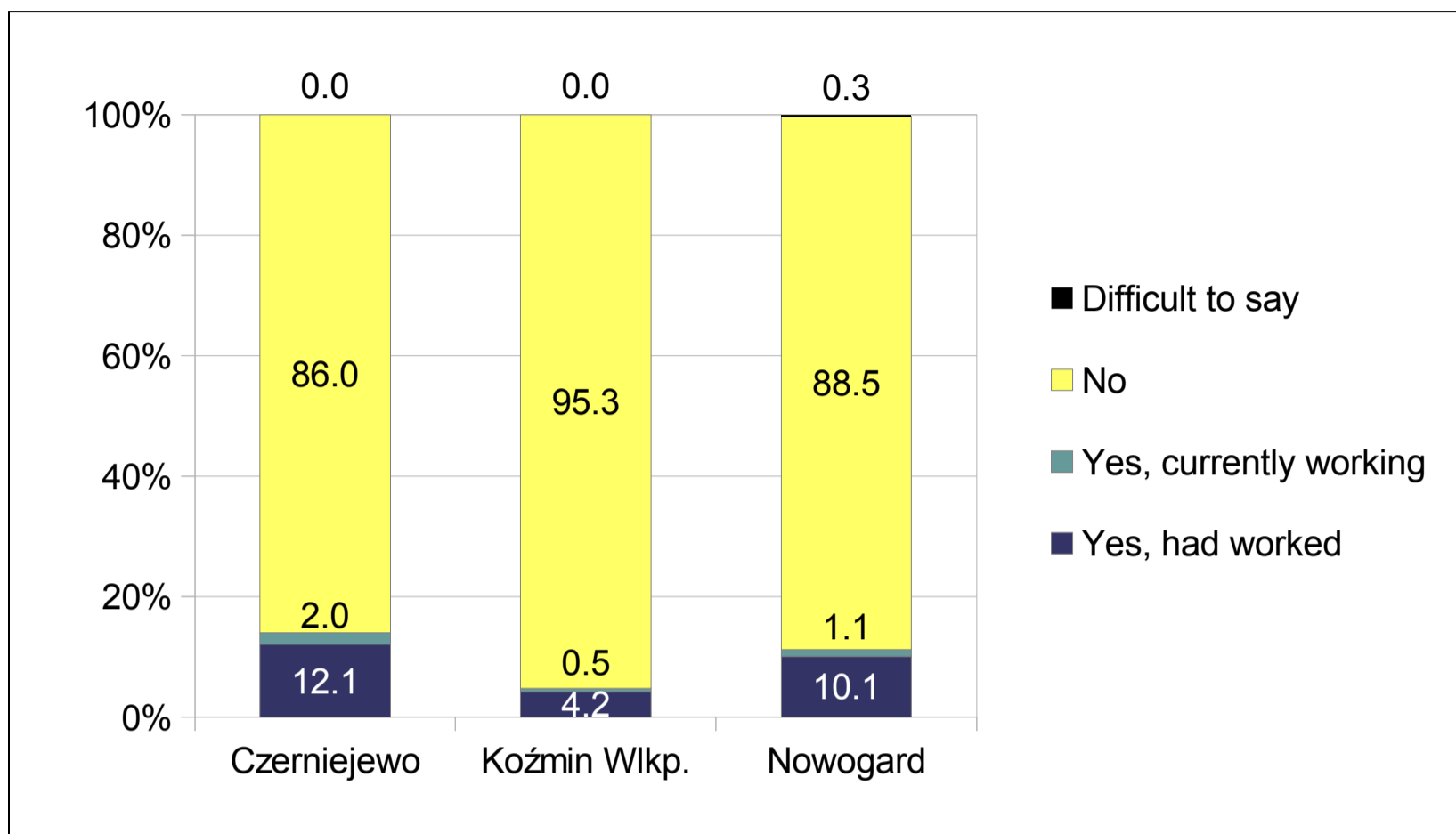


Table 3. Percentage of respondents declaring they work on farms in relation to the total number of people claiming that they are currently employed.

Czerniejewo	Koźmin Wielkopolski	Nowogard
3.9%	0.9%	2.2%

The turnover of employees on farms is believed to result from particularly difficult working conditions. Respondents who had direct knowledge of the subject, as they themselves or a member of their family have worked on farms, claimed that the main issue was the strong odour. Numerous animal bites and excessive working hours have also been an issue. Respondents also mentioned difficult working conditions in the winter (biting cold), as well as poor sanitary and social facilities for the workers. Some people also listed certain advantages. Among the most important ones were the ability to take up a job locally, and good wages. However, the relatively high (according to the respondents) monthly salaries were paid with long working hours and frequent overtime, especially during the season. Finally, on the basis of interviews conducted in Czerniejewo and its surroundings, it can be assumed that the base hourly rate ranges from gross PLN 12 to 16 (depending on the position), in addition to which employees sometimes receive a discretionary bonus. This would mean that the monthly net salary ranges from about PLN 1500 to 2000, although with overtime it is much higher, e.g. PLN 2850 to 3000 (with 250 to 300 working hours per month). Some employees even mention net PLN 3500, including the bonus. However, such earnings can only be expected during the growing season, for 6 months a year. Wages offered in press (internet) job advertisements aimed at seasonal workers – brought to fur farms from abroad (mainly from Ukraine) and working 10–14 hours a day, 6 days a week – amount to PLN 8–9 per hour (net). All indications are that employment on farms is largely based on civil law contracts, and not on employment contracts.

This issue would require further detailed research, but our initial findings suggest that the impact of fur farm development on the analysed local labour markets is rather limited. It is not only about the number of jobs, but also about the type and conditions of work. Nevertheless, it is understandable that local communities which have experienced particularly high unemployment rates in recent years tend to support all types of employment.

Therefore, the argument put forward in the context of the discussion on the fur farming ban is certainly a compelling one for a large proportion of the population in regions where the fur industry operates. In our study, the amount of support enjoyed by the industry corresponded to the situation on the local labour market – the greater the experience of unemployment and the higher the percentage of people employed on fur farms in a given commune, the higher the propensity to approve of industrial fur farming.





Summary

In conclusion, we may say that, undoubtedly, the population of the communes covered by the study (where a relatively large number of fur farms operate) is mostly and in many ways against this type of farming and in favour of introducing a statutory ban.

The findings concerning Czarniejewo, Koźmin Wielkopolski, and Nowogard are consistent with the results of studies representative for the entire country. For example, in a face-to-face survey (CAPI direct method) conducted by the CBOS, essentially in parallel with our research (at the beginning of February 2018), as many as 59% of the country's population expressed their support for a ban on fur farming (aggregate responses *I strongly support it* and *I generally support it*), and 31% were against the ban (aggregate responses *I strongly oppose it* and *I generally oppose it*); 10% of respondents found it *difficult to say*.⁵ In other national public opinion surveys, the differences between supporters and opponents of the ban on fur farming varied, but in all the cases that we know of, the number of those in favour of the ban clearly outweighed the number of those against it.

In this context, our studies seem to reflect this nationwide trend of public support for a ban on this type of farming. As has already been mentioned, in Czarniejewo 50.9% of respondents were in favour of a ban on fur farming, whereas 29.7% were against it and 19.5% considered it *difficult to say*. In the other communes covered by the research, the respective results were as follows: Koźmin Wielkopolski – 56.7%, 22.9%, and 20.3%; Nowogard – 43.9%, 35.7%, and 20.4%. Therefore, not only on a national scale, but also at the local level – in the communes where the number of fur farms is relatively high – the Polish society is in favour of a ban on fur farming.

5 *Dobre zmiany w ochronie zwierząt?*, compiled by Michał Feliksiak, Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS), Warsaw 2018.