



# Angry, Young, and Apolitical

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**Prof. Mirosława Grabowska from the Institute of Sociology at the University of Warsaw, director of the opinion polling center CBOS, discusses the attitudes of young people towards politics and democracy in the context of their hopes and expectations**

**Academia:** Last year, CBOS published the report *Youth 2013*. Both the findings of that study and the outcome of the recent presidential election demonstrate that young people in Poland have distinctive views on many political, economic, and democratic issues.

**Mirosława Grabowska:** *Such distinctiveness is especially visible in the field of politics. We have been able to observe such trends in CBOS surveys over a long period of time, since 1992. Young people are growing less and less interested in politics. They have never taken a special interest in this topic, but the younger they are,*



Young people are not yet sure what their economic or socioeconomic views are. Their answers are not coherent. There is a considerable share of respondents who say openly, "It's difficult for me to say if I lean left or right or move towards the center."

the less interested they are getting. Most interestingly, however, there is a difference between young men and young women – our respondents are young adults, aged 18-19. Such differences have always existed, but young women tend to lose interest in politics faster than young men. For that reason, it will be difficult to meet the demands of feminist groups and politicians and encourage young women to go into politics. Young women entering adulthood are less and less interested in public issues.

What can we infer from all these findings? First of all, skeptical views on democracy. Adults are not exactly delighted with the way democracy functions in Poland, but young people are especially critical: a vast majority of those surveyed, that is 70%, declare that they are not satisfied. Back in 2010, the share of those critical of democracy in Poland stood at 61%, so we can observe growing

criticism. Young people are harshly critical of the institutions of the democratic order in Poland: 92% of those surveyed claim that politicians only care about their own careers, 84% say they don't care about the welfare of the general public, over 80% believe that parties don't take into account the opinions of citizens and only care about votes in elections, and nearly 80% say that citizens have no influence over the government's actions. Such assessments are worse than the average in society.

That entails serious consequences: young people are less likely to vote than adults. Also, it is evident that their political preferences are vague. This means that many respondents can't indicate a party they like and vote for. An apolitical generation has grown up in Poland.

#### Among young people, 60% declare that none of the parties meet their expectations. Are such findings comparable to European trends?

Things don't look that bad in Europe. It could be said that the findings of surveys in Poland reveal criticism of the parties present on the political scene, which according to young people fail to address them or represent their interests and, importantly, their beliefs. That may be the reason behind the success of the former rock musician Paweł Kukiz, who took 20% of the vote in the first round of the presidential election. After looking at Kukiz's voters, we found out that he had achieved success among the youngest voters, taking the largest share of the vote in the group aged 18-24. Meanwhile, the Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS) hold the lead among somewhat older voters (aged 25-34).

I think that very young voters needed Paweł Kukiz both to vote "yes," in other words in favor of a candidate who got through to them, and to say "no," in other words to demonstrate they would not vote for "the same old" politicians, who were not to their liking. Kukiz didn't make too many concrete promises (voters don't really expect facts and figures, anyway). Instead, he launched into criticism of what was going on in the country. Kukiz spoke of this in a very general and emotional manner. That emotional style and a very clear anti-party rhetoric were what won him supporters. Also, I think that his personality helped, too – I mean the way he talks, dresses, and behaves. He knows how to develop rapport with an audience, with the public. He uses a simple, colloquial language and does not hesitate to vent both positive and negative emotions, on top of being exceptionally expressive.

## Young Poles and politics

*That was how he reached out to a large group of voters, especially young people.*

### **Was it possible to predict Kukiz's outcome?**

*To predict the emergence of such a radical candidate who would score 20% of the vote? No. Even so, it seems to me that politicians don't pay enough attention to informal public discourse. It's not enough to watch television to gain insight into public attitudes in the country. Politicians don't care too much about sociological studies, either. The findings I've cited can be found in a CBOS report that has been available since 2014, or long before the elections. It was evident that young people were dissatisfied, averse to what was happening in the country. I think it was possible to predict that they wouldn't vote or would go the polls only to express their protest.*

**On the one hand, almost all young respondents say that the state should ensure that people have jobs. On the other, more than half believe that social assistance benefits are collected by people who don't really meet the eligibility criteria. So does that mean that they lean right or left?**

*They aren't sure yet what their economic or socio-economic views are. Their answers aren't coherent. There is a considerable share of respondents who say openly, "It's difficult to say if I lean left or right or move towards the center." Young people generally do want a welfare state. Judging by their attitudes about the economy and the obligations and functions that young people would like to impose on the state, we could say that the Left stands - or might stand - a chance of succeeding among those youngest voters. If a left-wing version of Kukiz emerged on the political scene (I'm intentionally speaking purely hypothetically), that candidate would stand a chance of achieving political success. Apparently, however, the parties that occupy that wing of the political scene are incapable of seizing this opportunity.*

**Why does this generation have no concrete opinions? It is described as pro-authoritarian and anti-systemic, which makes for a surprising mix.**

*That is not a group that could be described with one catchphrase such as the ACTA generation, a pro-European, pro-market or anti-market generation. It must be said that these people are socially immature. They still live a sheltered life, protected by their families and by the education system. As a matter of fact, their knowledge of the job market and the expectations of employers, if*

*any, is only theoretical, because their encounter with the reality of life is delayed. I don't think that family or school can prepare them to start their adult life, face the necessity of earning their own living, paying their taxes, and wondering where this money goes.*

*Polish society is social democratic, which means that it supports a welfare state, which helps out those who don't manage well or, for some reasons, can't manage at all. At the same time, people are suspicious. On the one hand, they expect the state to help them. On the other one, they are mistrustful - not sure if those who take advantage of such assistance are exclusively or largely people who actually need it. That is one of the elements of this incoherence.*

### **Does the Church wield a great deal of influence over young people?**

*Yes, I think it still does. I can give you one example from a different survey we conducted. We systematically monitor attitudes to abortion. These views are changing, shifting towards pro-life, which is especially visible in younger generations. In my opinion, that is first of all an effect of the law: people know what is and is not allowed and they are reluctant to state their opinions on issues they know are illegal. Secondly, there is no doubt that the teachings of the Church, both in schools and in public discourse, matter in this context. It is evident that pro-life arguments are to some degree convincing. Third, there is the issue of technology. It goes unnoticed, but pro-life attitudes may be reinforced by the popularity of prenatal tests, ultrasound images that you can email to your family and friends, telling them this is my baby, my little Michaś or Kasia, before they are born. But is the influence wielded by the Church entirely effective? Absolutely not. At the same time, young people are quite liberal on moral and religious issues. They are saying "yes" to sex before marriage, birth control, and in vitro treatment. But they are saying "no" to abortion. So that influence is very selective.*

**How do the findings of the CBOS surveys relate to the results of Prof. Stefan Nowak's analyses? You even participated in that study, carried out at the University of Warsaw back in the 1970s. One of the most important claims in that study was that there was no such thing as generational conflict.**

*Today, I would repeat those survey conclusions. I wouldn't like to say that young people are copying*



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*the beliefs of their parents and their biographies, but there is also no conflict. Families are warm, friendly, and supportive. There is a great deal of understanding, empathy, and readiness to help. In fact, why would they start out on their own if they have family support and freedom at home, can have interesting conversations at the table, and do whatever they want outside? There are a lot of things that keep them in the family home and nothing that pushes them to "fly the nest." Aside from that, they encounter various barriers when they leave the family home and start out on their own. One of them is the job market. It's difficult to find a good job, even in big cities, because all the good jobs are taken by older generations. They can find a job, any job, but the pay is too low to let them become independent. Getting an apartment is another barrier. These days, young people find it difficult to follow the same scenario as the generation of their parents.*

**After Poland's transition to democracy in 1989, adult Poles rushed to set up their own businesses, thus leading to the emergence of the middle class. Today's young people want full-time employment. Are they social democratic in their expectations?**

*Our surveys show that liberal capitalism is losing its seductive appeal. When we ask respondents whether they would set up their own business if they had problems finding employment, the share of those who consider this scenario as a possibility is on the decline. Consequently, respondents are less confident they can succeed in the market as entrepreneurs. The myth of a businessman, a self-made man, is falling apart. Strategies that I personally call "escapist," such as job migration, are more popular. Dreams of the welfare state abroad are gaining popularity.*

**Among young people, 30-50% have been unemployed for various periods, their education**

**is not adjusted to the job market requirements. Does that mean that we may witness the eruption of a rebellion against the system?**

*I don't think so. Again, the family offers a certain security, helps go through difficult periods, offers support. Several cohorts already treat this system as normal, natural. At this point, it is worth highlighting the tensions between expectations and the reality. Polish society is egalitarian and so are members of the young generation. They expect an equal start and integrity in "the rat race." At the same time, they notice that success in life depends on having connections.*

*Consequently, our young respondents fundamentally expect the system to be fair in terms of employment and work benefits and to offer opportunities, which are currently thin on the ground. They're familiar with the situation of their older siblings who emigrated to England, Ireland, Germany, and Norway. Those who stayed there succeeded in life, so messages that come from such countries are encouraging but also frustrating - why is the situation here not the same as out there?*

**In general, does this mean that we can conclude that this young generation is distinctive?**

*There are certain elements of continuity, but yes, especially from the perspective of my generation, which is about to leave the job market. For me and those who are my age, the turning point of 1989 was a miracle, most of us have favorable opinions of the changes that ensued. Young people, in turn, are not comparing today's Poland to the way Poland was back in communist times. Instead they look to the more affluent and more efficient countries of the EU as their point of comparison. ■*

Interviewed by **Anna Zawadzka**,  
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