



## **Past and Future in the Life of Poles – A Young Person's Perspective**

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### **Abstract:**

The presentation focuses on the attitude of young Poles to their country, European Union and the globalizing world. The present time gives a lot of opportunities when it comes to travel, work, and meeting other nations. It also often results in the process of cutting off the roots (traditions, national identity etc.), which another important issue in Poland. We will also go back in time, very briefly, to analyse the attitude of previous generations conditioned by history (political and economical). Special emphasis will be placed on the communism regime and the transformation period to capitalism and democracy. There are still some unresolved issues from that period which influence the present attitude of many Poles, especially in the field of economy and politics. The personal experience of the presenter who himself belongs to the young generation will be referred to when discussing the above mentioned issues.

**Key words:** youth, EU, globalization, system transformation, civil society

My article concerns today's young generation in Poland. This generation is in some way special, because of uncommon times within they live. This is transformation times in Poland, transformation from PRL, which stands for Polish People Republic with communism economy to III RP – Third Republic of Poland with capitalism patterns. This generation, my generation, because I was born in 1985, has to live in the world which is very different of world of their parents. Firstly because of system transformation, secondly because of globalization process which has been galloping last years. Poland not only changed the economy pattern but also joined the EU, which opened travel and work perspectives for many people. The Internet and other modern technologies changed the communication abilities which, among other things, brought lots of different type of information from all over the world.

This article describes attitude of my generation to their country, EU and globalizing world, but before that I would like to present the reader the background to understand the way our nation went through.



In 1989 something has changed in Europe. Iron Curtain vanished, communism ended, times changed. New perspectives opened for countries from Eastern Block. New Polish governments chosen (firstly in part-free then in free) democratic election had a difficult task to change political and economic reality. It's essential to describe what happened during communism times in different areas to see what were the main problems people had to overcome.

After World War II, due to resolutions of "Big Three" as we call them in Poland, which stands for the three decision-makers – Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, countries like Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czech Republic and Slovakia, Bulgaria and part of Germany would get to Soviet "area of influence". In that countries political parties from the narrow left wing got in power. In their programmes they opted for social, communism economy. None of those parties got in power in free democratic election, in Poland for instance results of election were falsified. "At last" countries were governed by the people, especially from the low-society classes, which were, as communism ideology says, discriminated during ages. It is not the place to assess whether this assumption is truth, however as history showed, communism especially in Russia, where it was introduced to help the low classes of society, exploited them even worse. It can be easily said that Russia had been the greatest victim of communism ideology or rather its practical realization.



Source: Wikipedia (28 IX 2010)

Most of Poles did not like the mentioned decision of "Big Three". "Polish", put in quotas because of USSR dependency, government had to maintain the power anyway and to preserve it, Soviets established their Red Army bases on Polish territory. The enemies of new system had to be punished because they were giving bad example to the society. Those enemies were people with money or land, intellectuals and often former soldiers which fought for independence during II WW. It happened that their reward for courage and sacrifice were death penalty or work in concentration camps in Russia. The worst years were those after war when there were a lot show trials, then especially after Stalin's death (1953) system became less cruel.

The government took control over all economic factors. Politicians from left wing to prevent exploitation of farmers and workers by class of owners, stood in charge of everything, taking all the responsibility. It happened that they failed, although official propaganda told the opposite. Even though, people saw that they are in worse situation they had been before, and in 1958 first strike broken out in Poznan. Then others in 1970, 76 and 80. Each of them was some kind of milestone on the nation way to freedom. Government were forced to make some changes after big strikes, of course not without a fight – force were often used to silence the crowds. I encourage You to visit [http://www.1956.pl/poznaj\\_prawde/?lang=en](http://www.1956.pl/poznaj_prawde/?lang=en) and spend some time there to get some knowledge about that time. There is a nice



presentation contained from short movies (played one after another), showing what happened during strike and also explaining the immediate cause of it.

The question arise - if the system was bad, how he managed to recruit people to serve him, people from the Polish nation? It is very important to say here that situation of laborers during history was not the one to envy (varied from time to time, country to country). This situation makes communism ideas popular. Apart from the terror which was brought by realization of communism ideas, there were people who believed that this ideology was just and righteous, maybe not perfect but anyway, far better than capitalism. This attitudes were also ably encouraged by the official propaganda. System has its own ways to convince people to serve him, especially people who worked in "terror machine" – SB, UB, MO. It was easier for them to get a flat, car, furniture, food and everything "material". In communism times even when you had money it was not easy to buy those things because there was a shortage economy. So there were two main reasons you get to "them" – one ideological second economical. Sometimes people were forced to cooperate with militia or other government services.

As we all know, the system has changed and the new democratic governments had to face the problems with changing the economy to capitalism and to take care of people who had had served the system. Leszek Balcerowicz has introduced "shock therapy" to let our economy take off. To stifle the inflation he had to make reforms which hurt many Poles' life. He got his target. Polish economy is now capitalism, even though it's not so free according to Heritage Foundation's ranking. Assessment of Balcerowicz and others reforms is difficult and there are a lot of opinions. Some people say that he rescued our economy, other that he killed it or make too big sacrifice from the people. The privatization of national companies is also very controversial. It is said that some companies were sold for less than their one year profit or that the beneficiaries were former activists of communist party. It is not the place to verify this thesis, although it is very important issue. Essential is that many people believe that this "robbery privatization" was a fact. The other problem is presence of former party activists in public life. During the transformation it was decided not to close all doors for them. Apart from official activists there were also unofficial servants of the system for instance secret informers, agents and members of secret services. What to do with them was very important question which brings many conflicts today. Now, anyone who wants to start in election need to claim



whether he/she cooperate with the system or not, the court can verify this. In spite of that, some well known people are blamed for cooperation with secret service (real or imaginary).

This were the problems that came from previous system which young generation mostly don't remember. We have different problems, for instance with finding jobs or weak education system. However, the political debate is often concerned on problems from the past. Politicians of course wants to "buy" votes from young people, so they promise solving our problems, some of us believe them some do not. Many people in Poland not, only young are bored with today's politicians, which are threatened as necessary evil. Elections are considered as choosing smaller evil.

It is important that with the change of the system there was also change in mentality. Western companies entered our market with their products and advertisements. Also traditional values seem to be less important when in the same time on the foreground people put money. Money which can open you doors to better life, as advertisements and sometimes some practice show. This attitude which sociologists call consumerism, become more and more popular among young generation and of course must have its consequences. If one wants money and in the same time it is hard to get it in Poland while the borders are open and foreign labor markets are inviting us and tempting with high salaries and higher life standard, why don't we go and use our life? Language and distance become little barrier because of cheap flights and pressure to learn English all over the world (generally speaking). Internet allows us to communicate with each other and to seek for jobs globally. So we go abroad, and with us go our skills and our potential investments and taxes. It is not rare that person with academic education goes to Britain to work as a waiter or chef or dish cleaner, so he/she doesn't develop in his/her field, although he gets more money he could get in Poland, often even if he had worked using knowledge and skills learned during education period. It does not sound optimistic. Our today's prime minister told us in previous parliamentary campaign that he would make our people come back to Poland, the results are unfortunately different.

Joining the EU was also controversial but nobody argue it gave us a lot of opportunities. Open borders and markets able us to seek for money and also adventure. My friend in age 25 had already traveled around the world with her



boyfriend – they got money during the trip by working in Anglo-saxon countries they visited like UK, US and Australia. Other friend from high school while her bachelor studies in Poznan traveled to other EU countries to work during holidays. She was always quite open-minded, however today's situation gives opportunities to many kind of people. Some of my friends know no foreign languages, although they moved to work in Germany or England. Some stayed there, having started new life. Also Erasmus scholarship (financed by Brussels) gives opportunities to study all over EU and countries associated. I was personally beneficent of that, and spent one semester in Finland where I met not only with Finish people but also other foreign students also from Africa (Nigeria) and Far East, like Nepal, China or Vietnam. It was very good occasion to meet other cultures, change views, learn tolerance and ability to cooperate with each other, despite the differences between us.

I must say that our attitude to EU and the world is generally speaking positive or even very positive. I mean not all the Poles but my generation only. On the other hand, it is sad that perspectives in Poland are not so good as we would like to. This, together with consumerism make feeling to our country quite cold. It is possible that this attitude will bring unwanted results in the future. It is long story to show why the economic situation in Poland is not so good as in the western countries, but in this article I can show why it could or could not change for better because of our attitude. One problem is consumerism, the other lack of confidence in taking part in public life and at the same time distrust to politicians.

I would like to compare today's attitude of young generation with attitude of previous generations. History of Polish nation has more than 1000 years (starting from AD 966). There were times Poland was superpower in Europe and in part of that times nobles took part in the government more than in any other country (it was called noble democracy). I am not saying that this form of governance made Poland superpower because it is more complicated matter. Those nobles were about 10% of the nation and it were times before XIX century which gave us definition of modern nation. Then in XVIII century Poland lose her position and was in 1772, 1793 and 1795 partitioned by her neighbors: Prussia, Austria and Russia. Poles generally never accepted the idea of losing independence, especially because of repressive politics of foreign powers – Prussia and Russia, who wanted to impose their language and habits on us. Poles organized upbringings and worked hard to preserve and develop their culture and national identity.



During I World War Poland got her chance to regain independence. Our enemies were then antagonized (Prussia and Austria against Russia) and both sides want to use Poles in their war. However, Poland played her own game especially thanks to Jozef Pilsudski, who became national hero and living legend. Poles were prepared mentally and organizationally to take care of themselves, even during the war they were able to take advantage of the situation and establish their institutions which started to taking care of issues which usually government takes care of. Of course our enemies weren't satisfied by this, having their own plans.

When Poland gain independence in 1918, it was hard to establish a well-going modern country. However the dynamic of development was not bad and attitude of people were very positive and patriotic. In schools patriotism and sacrifice for the nation and country were highly promoted. Young generation were organized and took part in public life. They appeared later during II World War as brave and determined soldiers with famous successes like Monte Casino or Battle of England. I would like to notice that between I and II World War Poland was constantly threatened with war with USSR or Germany.

During communism times attitudes to Poland as a soviet satellite generally weren't positive, however Poles dreamed of making fully independent country. They did not "buy" the communism propaganda of success, preserve their catholic faith while government repressed the church and promote atheism at the same time, they didn't believe in "eternal friendship with USSR".

I have mentioned big strikes, which were expressions of people's disapproval and ambitions to have better future. The most famous was Solidarity movement which focused 10 million people from different class of society. This movement fought for freedom and became successful in that fight.

It can be said that patriotic attitude were common in our society in situation of threats. But today we are independent and democratic society. Nobody forces us to leave our culture and values, we rather loose them because of our choice, or some people can say that the pressure of consumerism forces us to do so. It is often said that the worst enemy of person is that person himself/herself. The same apply to the nation or society. It is essential, in my opinion, to understand that people need to fight all the time, fight with themselves, fight with their government's weaknesses. I do not mean revolution on the streets but rather taking active part in the public life, because democracy allows it and moreover demands it. If one's engagement is



reduced just to vote once for few years for candidate he knows only from some few TV programmes, it would be difficult to build a well-being country. "If you do not turn on to politics, politics will turn on you" as Ralf Nader said. Unless Poles start to feel as a stakeholders of their country, nothing will change and the politicians will go unpunished. Today's "young" generation is tomorrow "adult" generation and some of us would have to take the seats in parliament and so on. Some of us did it already. If we do not start to take care about our country it will not take care about itself alone and it could mean catastrophe.

It is of course easy to say, harder to do. In my opinion to start it is essential to type few thing everyone could monitor. First of all, we should know how the government use our money and whether it makes deficit and if so, how it wants to pay it back. Sometimes it is good to take credit, invest borrowed money and make good profit of it. Unfortunately, I get the impression that our governments don't have any reasonable plan for the deficit. I think people deserve to know why their children will be born with debts to pay.

Secondly, we should ask ourselves whether politicians keep their promises which they made during election times or not. It could be a rule that if one make promise and do not keep it (assuming that there were not any special unexpected circumstances) he/she should take punishment for that (i.e. loosing right to take place in public life – to vote and to be elected). If it seems very tough, politicians may point out which part of their programme they promise to do unconditionally and which on some conditions.

It is also worth to consider whether politician or clerk should take financial responsibility for his work and in what measure.

I mentioned only basis, which are essential but still not enough. People generally have to make pressure on politicians that if they make good work they get respect and good money for that, but if they fail, especially because of cheating, they will be punished. The results of their work should be checked very often. To make this possible people should have access to proper information. In Poland we have public TV, financed from compulsory subscription fees. However when it comes to public matters it is very hard to find good analysis and I am sure we have good analitics in our country. I get impression that propaganda didn't vanish together with communism. Media gives all the time information which are not worth anything i.e. why one politics say this or that, or if he like or don't like his opponent and why he





blame him for something etc. Those are substitute topics which divert people's attention from really important think like the deficit, for instance. Thus, to overcome that people should have critical point of view and demand reliable information. This is I believe the most difficult task, because it requires people to get knowledge about mechanisms of country's economy, politics and other things. Unfortunately without that it would be very hard to judge if the reform A or B was successful or not. Anyway if we do not take this difficult challenge, we may face very serious problems in the future and someone could always exploits us to some point.

If You know some good solution from Your or some other country of controlling government by the society, I would be grateful for an e-mail from You.