

# Entering Adulthood - from Diagnoses of Youth to Social Policies towards Them: In Search of Specificity of Transition Countries

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**Abstract:** This article<sup>2</sup> presents the main findings from a report about young people made within the context of an international research project, including 9 transition countries of Europe and Asia. Poland, as a country with its own social and demographic, economic and political specificity is placed in the centre of this analysis. However, its casus represents problems typical of a broader group of transition countries in general matters related to the social situation of the youth. The areas revealing the largest cumulation of young people's life problems are the subject of this article's investigations. According to our findings, these are education, entering a labour market and issues related to becoming self-reliant and personal life arrangements. The specificity of the transition countries is that all of the above presenting a quite different, non-standard face of the youth, which may be excessively prolonged in entering adulthood, more complex (hybrid), more difficult to bear, systemically bereft and politically riskier.

**Keywords:** The youth, young adults, education, labour market, privacy arrangements.

Today in many countries, young people are a critical element of social structure. However, it is hard to identify manifestations of defiance or negation in their life situation and the impossibility of the realisation of aims imposed by the culture. What is required is thus close observation of their life situation and problems.

We are interested in the young citizens from the transition countries; the representatives of the first generation whose intellectual adolescence occurred in the new

political system which is, in a sense, their common generational experience and distinguishes them from the elders. Since the end of the eighties, the countries behind the "iron curtain" began to open up to the world, entailing that, since then, young Poles, Romanians, Chinese or Russians have been growing up in the borderland of different societies and cultural worlds. Their being "between" creates a new quality and complicates different matters. If these are determined, then the orientation

that the political changes will take involves, on the one hand, the resources and capacity for innovation of the young generation (their competencies, aspirations, life orientations) and, on the other hand, the structural possibilities being created by the system with their numerous internal shortages and problems and their being pressurised by global impacts. Can the processes of the political transformation in those countries then count on the supportive participation of the young generation, or would it rather be the source of problems?

This article explores the main findings of a report about the young people which was part of an international research project examining 9 of the transition countries of Europe and Asia<sup>3</sup>, including Poland. Each country had its own social and demographic, economic, political specificity which were placed in the centre of the analyses. However, its casus represents problems typical for a broader group of transition countries in general matters related to the social situation of the youth.

### **1. The youth, i.e. who?**

The majority of studies distinguish young people in terms of their age range which conventionally has been reserved for it. Formerly, this categorisation overlaps with phases of life or social roles (for the youth, the time related to secondary education was reserved). Today, this criterion has become insufficient and, as a consequence, the field of features encapsulated as 'the youth' consists not only of people of the age of 15-19 or 20-24 years, but also (more

and more often) 25-29 years. Later generations have remained for a longer period of time in the education system, but this is not the only reason.

The criteria dividing the youth from adults are not clear because the changes (economic, social, cultural) taking place in the contemporary world are redefining social roles, disturbing regular rhythms of life and changing the norms of development. They find their expression in the phenomena specified as pluralisation and hybridisation of the age categories [36]. There are more elements which are proving to be more and more explicitly erosive of former, ascribed phases of life, social, psychological and cultural characteristics. Youth and adulthood are pulling away not only from the age categories, they are also pulling away from social roles and lifestyles which are characteristic for them and even from psychological and developmental features.

In classic theories, young people were situated at a very particular period of life between childhood and adulthood, and referred to those persons who did not reach their self-reliance in the life yet. Yet, some time ago, the end of this phase of life was related to such special events and life situations as taking a job, entering into marriage, starting a family, or establishing a self-reliant household. Adulthood was recognisable after the achievement of complete life stabilisation which was usually (even in the industrial societies) possible more-or-less at the age of 20.

Transition from the phase of youth (which means the status of a dependent person who is not taken seriously and who

cannot decide about themselves) to adulthood (which meant the status of a full member of a society who is able to decide about their lives independently) used to occur relatively early. In a contemporary reality, this transition is neither certain nor simple. Today, young people remain in the roles of pupils/students from the age of 25, while they get married about the age of 30 (or do not marry at all) and have a baby. Similarly, having an independent residence is a situation which occurs even later and more rarely. This is the case because, to a large extent it is the key to adulthood, i.e. autonomy (employment) has become, due to structural conditionings, the commodity in short supply and uncertain.

The result of looking at the social and cultural implications of youth (holding the youth on the margin of the real life for too long) is to produce a psychological profile of youth which extends to the period of adulthood - later reaching social, emotional, moral maturity. The essence of this phenomenon is the so-called "quarter life crisis" - a crisis of postponed adolescence, a lesson from an early youth which has not been learnt and the phenomenon which is more and more often observed amongst 20-year-olds, especially amongst young students [39, p.4]. The adolescence crisis, experienced in the second decade of life, usually ends with obtaining the foundations of one's own ME [12, pp.551-538]. Today, the most crucial questions, such as "Who should I be?", are answered with a difficulty in the third decade of life. Decisional impasse, fear of the future and sense of isolation are dominating feelings experienced in the face of a confrontation

with 'the real world' which takes place significantly later, and significantly more often has the taste of defeat [2, p.4].

The young, after long years of being held in the education system, strive to find a job with a great difficulty. They face an uncertain future and the sense that, because of the relentless passing time, no mistake can be made. This causes fear and makes them reluctant to undertake binding life decisions. These circumstances also induce them to build the life strategies having a *moratory* (postponing and fleeing) character - into provisional and temporary solutions, including prolonged parents' care.

Owing to these circumstances, the concept of youth has become complicated; it has broadened its meaning and changed its sense. It now includes both the "classic" youth (the persons who are learning) and the young adults who, as a result of structural conditioning/systemic blockades, are starting their adult life with a certain level of delay. Publicists and researchers present various terms illustrating this state of affairs. We no longer have kids, adolescents contrasted or compared to adults; we have kidults and adulescents as mixed, border categories. However, without starting an interesting analysis of the phenomenon, and only to signalise the important linguistic problem, I am going to use the simple term "the young" in the following study. It combines various phases/variations of youth and by indicating the context which is responsible for described changes, we avoid the risk of excessively simplified defining the youth/the young.

As a consequence of such an extended meaning of the concept of the youth, we are standing before a difficult choice. Which areas where young people are positioned would require the most immediate interference and actions at the level of the state or supranational organisations responsible for a social well-being? What should be involved in (and to what problems should respond) social policy towards the youth?

The list of neglect in reference to the transition countries is long. These are visible not only in more frequent criticisms of education and in the lack of appropriate health care or housing, but also in the constant threat of unemployment, in weakening motivation to start family, increases in social inequalities, risky behaviours, or conflicts with the law. For many years, the problem of the youth has not been present in the public discourse about the past; even if it is present, then it is being trivialised, or hysterically overplayed. For the media, youth is also a target for advertising designed to satisfy their needs. In contrast, school has completely lost its pedagogical functions and which is hated by the youth. For politics, the problem of the youth is present only as an element of a pre-election game, it then successfully vanishes to give way to more important matters (the necessity of militarisation, quarrels about the past, about promises and influence).

In the modern economy, there is no place for a lot of today's youth. Dwindling and ever more dehumanised labour markets provide no chances for the future; capitalism itself in its present form has nothing special to offer to young people.

Higher education, formerly education to join the elites, has lost its cultural mission and has transformed into the producer of ready packages of skills to meet the needs of the labour market [21]. The area which requires social policies is very extensive. It has been unambiguously proven by the report about the young prepared by an international team of researchers, which analyses the situation of young people in the transition countries studied here [41].

## **2. Main areas of systemic support**

I have selected three questions to address from a long list of problematic issues, those which, in my opinion, require the most immediate intervention. First of all, education, the area traditionally associated with youth; secondly, the transition from education to a labour market; thirdly, the set of problems related to entering adulthood (starting a family, conflict of private and professional roles, especially severe in case of young women). A broad spectrum of problems appears in all those areas requiring thoughtful, coherent public policies which, as such, do not currently exist in Poland (and other transition countries)<sup>4</sup>. The areas which I am going to present are currently subject to interim and uncoordinated actions.

### *2.1. Education*

It is impossible to say about an education system that it has not been subject to changes. Education, which once was a difficult to access value, has in our times become the value aspired to by the

majority of Polish youth. Investments in education are those the most obvious, both for the youth, their parents and the experts in social development. After 1989, the education system, which for many post-war decades was being conserved in the corset of socialist limits and rules, has opened up to new needs and challenges. Under this new pressure, changes in education began before the systemic reforms were even undertaken. The first and their most expressive manifestation was the derogation of limits of admission to studies and enactment of the law establishing the education market [1]. Another step, being of no less importance, was to reduce the proportion of vocational education in general education. As the result of initiatives undertaken by the grassroots (and accepting decisions made by education authorities), vocational schools, perceived to prepare students poorly for the needs of the new labour market; hence, socially degrading started to vanish. In their place, secondary schools were being created which were intended to pave the way of students to the higher education institutions and higher social positions for the largest number. By the end of the nineties, thorough reform of the education system establishing middle schools has been introduced.

Dissemination of secondary education has undoubtedly brought Poland closer to a group of modern countries, but the scale of the change has caused new problems to appear. Changes in the valuation of vocational education and general education has caused a drastic reduction of the proportion of the students attending basic

vocational schools (of up to 13%) [22, p.60]. The result has been a noticeable shortage of qualified people to occupy simple but much demanded professions on the labour market. Simultaneously, a larger stream of people who choose secondary schools have caused a different group of young people to aspire to higher studies - people coming from families with a low cultural capita, average graduates of average secondary schools and young people with non-crystallised interests.

From the beginning of the 1990s to 2012, the schooling rates at the top of the educational ladder have increased by 370%. Although we are experiencing extremely different trends now (the results of the demographic decline) in Poland, there is still strong faith in the power of a diploma, despite the fact that the mass consumption of higher education does not translate into professional careers. In conjunction with an excessive supply of education, not only devaluation but revaluation of diplomas has taken place [9]. Their value, in conjunction with saturation of the market with graduates of higher schools, is falling. Simultaneously, according to the demands of the market, they have become a necessary condition to begin a professional career. Diplomas and qualifications are less and less sufficient even if more and more are required.

Paradoxically, as an effect of educational expansion, the phenomenon of a massive advancement through education had been characteristic for many decades. However, it has now been replaced with the phenomenon of relative degradation - labour below qualifications, unstable or

lacking. The reasons for these phenomena are complex. They are demographic (the effect of to post-war population booms); related to a political system (capitalism and its logic of effectiveness); caused by an economic situation (crisis); or the result of a style of education reforming if not a social mentality. The issue is not only the subordination of education to technocratic aims [3, pp.204-205], but unthoughtful decisions made by the youth itself. That is, they choose those studies which are easily available and are not in a habit of recognising of their own talents, convinced that studies serve only to obtain a diploma and enter a profession. In spite of this, we have been observing corrections of educational decisions of the youth for some time now. Vocational schools and bachelor degrees enjoyed the increasing trend in 2003, 2009 and 2015. High schools and MA degrees recorded the gradual fall while there was a fluctuation of post MA degrees. Notably, the educational aspiration of those in vocational schools was the smallest and those studying for MA degrees the biggest. Existing system solutions to shortage of vocational schools and their inadequate profile to the needs of economy/a labour market) orient the interest of the youth towards secondary schools. They then proceed to higher education institutions which are being forced to accept responsibility for their professional preparation.

Here, pressure comes from different sides. Understanding the reasons why higher education institutions are becoming “the bastions of meritocracy” entails the absence of self-reflection of the

pragmatism which is the basis for the new philosophy of higher education. This is shared between by the decision-makers in the field of education and parents and the youth itself<sup>5</sup> undergoing a far-reaching trivialisation. It means adopting studies with a more practical use more directly and more frequently, for a professional career which is measured with a position of a graduate on a labour market. This approach changes not only the model of functioning of a higher education institution and distorts the meaning of an academic education, Moreover, it results paradoxically in a lack of expected “practical added value” in the form of independent thinking and productive innovators for whom the real challenges are not so much new skills and technologies, but the question of which should be used and how [40, pp.167-180].

Polish education reforms have been positively graded by international organisations and assemblies, especially to the extent to which they have increased the availability to the youth of better and longer education [37]. Poland not only belongs to the group of countries with the highest dynamics of increase of the schooling rates - both in average and higher level of education (it is above 90% and 48% correspondingly [38, p.298]) - but also to those where the rates of early school leavers are the lowest (5.5%) [38, p.298], or people who are not in employment, education or training (so-called NEET's - 12.2%<sup>6</sup>). Simultaneously, both in the opinions of international assemblies and Polish researchers, the quality of education and its internal and external functionality are not good. Even if Polish students of middle schools have

been obtaining improving results within the PISA survey, Polish higher education institutions are not present amongst the first five hundred higher education institutions placed at Shanghai Ranking.

The critical voices of experts have highlighted a broad spectrum of issues requiring changes<sup>7</sup>. Firstly, the necessity of reforms to vocational education. Secondly, the necessity to reform higher education. Thirdly, the reorientation of education from a retrospective to prospective and from a technocratic to more general approach, one which teaches the youth understanding of themselves and the world they live in. Contrary to reforming current practices of education oriented to changes in the education system, the reforms needed today concern, above all, an interior of a university and a school (programmes, methodical reforms, those which will change selection principles, those supporting the career counselling system and educational coaching, abandoned or mistakenly conducting civil, health and sexual education).

The demographic decline and increasing criticism from educational institutions could be brought together in the face of many of those reforms. However, it would not be reasonable and supine to bow to the pressures of politicians who treat education as a sphere of their ideological influences and do not meet the expectations of the youth. After all, it is the short-sighted observer of civilisational trends and changes to the labour market. Their claims concerning education are oriented by fears resulting from a subjective vision of the future. Its pressure on the rigidly understood

practical utility of education, far-reaching commercialisation and professionalisation is not only developmentally limited, but also inadequate with regard to new trends and challenges. They are putting up with versatility, an understanding of phenomena and functioning creatively in a complex world. The future, together with its challenges do not necessarily need conventional, adaptive and expert technocrats, but wise, unconventional innovators who are able to negate creatively the reality of dominating patterns of acting and thinking. However, in Poland and many other transition countries, such thinking is unknown, especially for the youth.

## *2.2. Transition from education to employment*

The transition from education to employment and securing a stable job is a crucial issue for young people. Its success not only has an influence on whether young people become free from the parental control (leave the family home, become financially independent) but also whether they realise their aspirations and life needs. In our times, this process has become complicated and extended in duration (in Europe, for the majority of the youth this period falls on the period between the age of 20-24. [17, p.162]. Stable employment allows them to understand what is required to have the status of an adult and independent person. Now, they tend to achieve this later and often fall at the beginning of the fourth decade of life.

Transition to the labour market occurs according to different patterns - either

through a long education (academic studies, often combined with parallel gaining professional experience) or through short education (not ending with obtainment of desired qualifications - the case of graduates of secondary schools, i.e. so-called early school leavers). Different types of problems are related to each pattern of transition. The first one generates the over education effect and the related phenomenon of underemployment, which is reaching more and more young people (models characteristic for Poland, Russia and Latvia). The second is related to a reversed phenomenon - the insufficient level of qualifications and education against the needs of the labour market (under education) which results in a never-ending balancing trick between provisional forms of employment, entering the black economy, lack of employment, or a presence in the NEET category (these patterns are characteristic for the Balkan countries, China and Vietnam).

As the phenomenon and the problem, transition from education to employment is increasing worldwide, which is proven by new specialist studies concerning this issue published by international organisations [29, pp.51-60]. Despite this reality, the youth is becoming better and better educated and their number is consistently falling; yet, it is they who are the most critically hit by principles of post-modern market economy. Notwithstanding the context, unemployment, occupational activity and the employment rates are still much more favourable for adults than for the youth. Moreover, legal regulations and employers' preferences ensure that even

those young people who have been already present at the labour market cannot rely on stable employment.

In Poland, the proportion of the young people employed on the basis of temporary contracts was 54% amongst the total number of employed persons in 2014. Moreover, it was the highest amongst all member countries of the European Union [18, p.197]. Unemployment rates which, after the accession of Poland to the European Union, were at the relatively low level, are returning significantly (above 25% in the younger age group 20-24, and 10.5% amongst the people at the age of 25-29). This is placing Poland in the group of countries with the highest level of risk (according to the ILOSTAT database even higher than in the other transition countries<sup>8</sup>).

Many studies have shown that a difficult entrance into the labour market can leave a permanent mark on the young generation. According to the experts of the ILO, the greatest concerns focus on the possibility of generating a so-called "lost generation" - young, well-educated people who were intended to make a civilisational push, but are distant from the labour market, and became the social problem [28, p.1].

There are many reasons why young people are more threatened with the effects of the global economy and economic shocks than the elders. Above all, it is *the situation on the labour market* - the shortage of workplaces, discriminatory practices conducted by employers towards the youth as a group who are professionally less experienced and weakly organised politically (punishable with worse job offers and quicker dismissals). Secondly, it is the

issue of a possible *mismatch of skills* between those sought by the employers and those with which school equips the younger worker. A disharmony appears especially between technical (so-called hard) and non-technical (so-called soft, social) skills. Both those types are considered today as very important, if not crucial in building own professional career. Their shortage is especially strongly revealing in case of the youth coming from disadvantageous social environments and having received an education of worse quality [28, p.54 and ff.]. The third reason is the practice of searching for a job being hindered by *improperly working systems of recognition* of an employee's skills which causes an increase of non-substantive employment criteria.

The fourth reason is weak motivation for individuals to seek self-employment and entrepreneurship as an alternative to conventional employment. Self-employment in China involves 51.4% of the young workforce (below the age of 25). [48, p.53]. In Poland, the proportion of self-employed people at the age of 20-24 was barely 6% in 2013 (below average level for the EU), while young people at the age of 25-29 were above 10% (about 2 per cents above average for the EU [18, p.200], [15]. The most common obstacle are difficulties in access to capital (financial, physical, social), but mental and personal barriers seem to have equally high significance. Most young people associate entrepreneurship which with independence, higher incomes and a higher standard of life, but it simultaneously requires discipline, openness to risk and creativity. Only those people who have special attributes of being

able to identify the marker, read social needs and accepting a stressful life, hard work and sacrifices break through and achieve success [10].

Many of these attributes of the self-employed contrast with the personal and mental characteristics of today's youth. On the one hand, we have the 'self-made men' generation - the young people who learned that they can count mainly on themselves. On the other hand, a self-obsessed, narcissistic generation seduced by consumerism, where success absorbs the imagination rather than actually achieving it, which usually requires hard work, patience and the ability to postpone gratifications, as well as self-sacrifice, cooperation and trust [41, pp.453-480].

Today's youth is the creation of an instant culture - they want to have everything quickly and easily accessible. The qualities of diligence and self-sacrifice are often abandoned after their education. The end of school education is considered by many graduates a ritual leaving their strenuous investment in their future. They leave university/school convinced that the labour market is, admittedly, largely unpredictable, but that it should be the market of ready offers (of open professions, regular career patterns and stable workplaces). Meanwhile, it is subject to very dynamic transitions, while recognition of its possibilities requires special skills. Paradoxically, the main sector which offers job to young people is the private sector. More than 80% of young Poles are employed below the age of 25 and 68% at the age of 25-29 [24]. Those with the largest problem with employment are the

youngest people who have no professional qualifications, including especially the graduates of secondary schools. In 2014, 25.8% of people of the age of 15-24 were employed, in contrast with 77.3% amongst

older people above the age of 25 where almost everyone (by 90%) had higher education [54].

Table 1: The Median of Employee’s Remuneration According to their Age and Ranks of Organisation (gross in PLN) [52]

	Age of 26-30	Age of 31-35	Age of 36-40	Age of 41-50	Age of 51-64
Ordinary employees	2,700	2,800	2,750	2,750	2,700
Professionals	4,300	4,820	4,600	4,100	3,700
Managers	5,400	7,000	7,000	6,500	5,589
Directors and board members	8,700	12,000	13,500	15,000	10,980

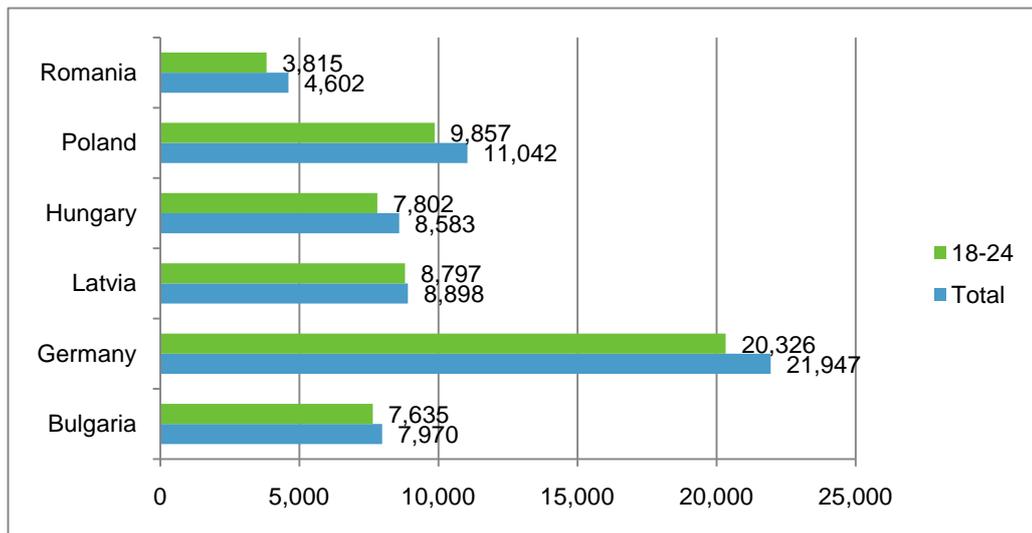


Figure 1: Average Equivalent Net Income in Selected European Countries - the Young against the General Public (2014) [54]

For the majority, the first years of a professional career mean low incomes (Table 1) and the chance of promotion for only a few, which is not so much the result of lack of appropriate qualifications but the

practices of employers which are unfavourable to the young. Simultaneously, it is not older countrymen but peers from Western countries who are the reference point to assess their own incomes. In

Poland, the young who start working earn, after conversion, 9,857 PPS in contrast to young Germans who earn 20,326 PPS (Figure 1). This distance is increasing amongst the people who have a few years of service<sup>9</sup>.

Even just a few years ago, the clearest indicator of distortions of the labour market and the most alarmist signal of social problems were unemployment rates. Today - under the influence of civilisational changes - the borders of life and work have become fluid. Unemployment is combining with variable, pluralistic forms of part-time employment, and the fear of losing a job has been replaced by the generalisation of employment uncertainty [4, pp.210-212]. In the past decade, many European countries including Poland have registered a dynamic increase in provisional, temporary employment which has mainly involved young people. This solution was originally intended to protect against too high unemployment, but in practical terms it has meant the deregulation of temporary contracts and the simultaneous maintenance of rigorous principles with reference to contracts for an indefinite period of time.

In the initial period, these solutions caused a visible increase of employment growth (*honeymoon effect*). However, they soon led to the creation of the dual labour market (divided into segments). The first ("internal") is being domesticated by full-time employees who are orientated to permanent employment and a career offering promotion (*insiders*). The second is filled by temporary employees who live in an uncertain situation, threatened with unemployment and have weak prospects of

transition to a stable employment (outsiders) [14, pp.127-142].

The segmentation of the labour market making young people second-class employees also means worse working conditions and worse prospects of professional development (the temporarily employed have a limited access to training donated by companies). It also has an influence on the structure of remunerations and diversifies the income levels of a total number of the employed (a large number of temporary employees whose wage claims can be ignored and whose continuation of employment can be refused is strengthening a bargaining position of full-time employees) [14]. The division into temporary and full-time employment is diversified due to qualifications and the period of time spent after education. Temporary contracts are more often taken up by the graduates who leave school earlier and low-qualified youth. Usually, five years after the end of the school education, the share of occasional employment in the total number of employment contracts is decreasing. Nevertheless, in some countries this high share is still maintained. Poland is one of those countries where, let us recall, more than half of employment contracts are temporary contracts offered to young people [18, p.197].

Although temporary employment facilitating the transition from education to the world of work is a contemporary reality, they are simultaneously increasing the risk of uncertain start into the adult life. Young people taking casual activities show a tendency to live with parents more often, delaying the moment of reaching independence or starting their own family.

Raised to achieve success and oriented to comfort, they should struggle for survival in the conditions of limited offers and weak security protection against poverty. In Poland, this risk involves 25% of the young at the age of 20-29 years<sup>10</sup>. This means that every fourth Pole who has the sense of blocked or limited opportunities in the life may become convinced that either the system or determined groups of people are responsible for their situation and increasing the risk of their marginalisation (this includes all others, foreigners and the unfairly privileged).

The attempts to use systemic instruments for supporting the young who are the labour market appear to be very difficult in the realities of the global market economy. The ILO prognosis forecasts that due to their lack of experience (but also due to survival strategies adopted by companies), young people will be pushed to the end of a queue with those who are searching for a job. The implementation of legal solutions unifying labour law requires an agreement between all the parties having the interest. Without it, employers are encumbered with the high costs of employment and they will start to choose solutions which use modern technologies rather than people. The demographic decline changing the labour market to the market of an employee may turn out to be favourable to young people, but not in every field.

### *2.3. Private life: marriage, family*

Another area of problems for young people requiring systemic support is problems with quality of life and starting a family. The

changes to which these areas are subjected are the result of the same processes influencing jobs, education or free time. These changes are, on the one hand, global and local transformations of an economic character. However, on the other hand, they are the pressure of global and local cultural models. The source literature names them as deinstitutionalisation and destabilisation processes leading to diversification of the forms of family life and changes in customs [20, p.260]. As a result of these processes, fertility endures at a level which is far below the simple substitution of generations. The transition from a family focused on a child (the 'king child with parents' model) to a family focused on parents takes place, where the needs of a child are important, but are not competitive [44].

Anthony Giddens claims that there are no more important and spectacular changes than those which occur within a marriage, family, personal life and emotional relationships. In his opinion, a global revolution in lifestyles is taking place before our eyes in the sphere of privacy and intimacy; its global character means that there is no possibility not to participate in the changes which are being brought by modernity. These changes are, according to Giddens, like a hurricane which sooner or later reaches everywhere, and when touches local deals, it does not leave them as they were previously. It is characteristic for them to reach some place, whose nature depends on how intensive and rough their process is [19, pp.687-699].

This is the case with Poland and most of the transition countries. The young generation today is the first to experience

these processes. Changes with regard to cultural models of sexuality, high valuation of freedom and individuality in connection with an uncertain future, structural/system limits in reaching status of an adult person produce choice between self-reliance in a life (which is guaranteed by finding a job and involvement in a professional career) and starting a family (deemed as a condition of happy life) is the basic dilemma for a young human. The choice - very difficult when someone follows the culturally endorsed work-life-balance principle - falls upon self-reliance in life and (more often) on testing alternative forms of family life or living alone.

The statistical data shows that young Poles are becoming self-reliant increasingly later in life, where the moment when they leave a family home (on average at the age 28) is systematically delayed. The work share of persons at the age of 20-29 who live with their parents is 70%, while for the category of 18-34 years it is 56%, which means that in recent years little has changed<sup>11</sup>. Contrary to prevalent opinions about the progressive immaturity of the young, the crowded nest phenomenon in Poland has a mainly social, cultural and economic background, but not a psychological one. The longer the period of educational activity, difficult situation on the labour market and the real estate market, along with the low availability of credit for young people, and their low incomes. Living with parents allows an easier and more comfortable transition to self-reliance in life [8] but it is also an obstacle to marriages.

“Family home dwellers” have a worse position in the wedding market: 40% of people at the age of 20-34 remain in matrimones. A decrease in the number of fulfilled marriages is explicit. According to the GUS data, it was 6.8 of marriages per 1000 people in 2008 and only 4.7 of marriages per 1000 people in 2013. The number of divorces is increasing in parallel, especially amongst people below the age of 35 or amongst couples with a short period (in 2016, divorces in the couples of the people at this age were 31.2% of a total number of divorces) [25, p.252 and ff.]. Yet, international comparisons prove that Poles are significantly more transnational (although less liberal than Romanians, Bulgarians, or Slovenians, i.e. those countries which have the similar political past to ours) [51, p.4].

Deep changes are taking place in the erotic and sexual sphere. On the one hand, a traditional attachment to love where a partner is its object is declared; on the other hand, a multidirectional sexual activity is visible [31]. The example of the young shows how the processes of subjective construction and reconstruction of the area of one’s erotic “Me” start working. Less and less importance is given to observing the customs imposed by tradition and cultural models reserved for a gender where attention is concentrated on a partner, but the emphasis now is to concentrate on oneself and one's own pleasure. The trend involves *weakening a normativity of heterosexuality* as an explicit, ruling manner of interaction between a man and a woman. Moreover, the naturalisation of homosexual and bisexual orientation has occurred. Not long ago both were

stigmatised, and at the utmost being disguised or ignored. Today, they are being treated more often as one of permitted (and undisguised) forms of sexuality [31] provoking reactions from traditionally oriented social circles in the forms of hostility and prejudices.

The deepest transformations cause changes in the cultural definitions of femininity and social frames in which they find themselves. The family life in Poland for years was based on femininity models imposed by tradition, while the model of the "Polish Mother" has dominated thinking about femininity inseparably connected with readiness to "sacrifice" for a child and family [45, pp.144-157]. In the case of the new young generation, this traditional model of the family (dually burdening a woman) is evolving into a modern family (based on the idea of partnership and co-responsibility). However, the changes are not occurring as fast as it could be expected. The traditional model (combined, dually burdening women) concerns 32% of young couples, while the partner model involves only 19% [5, p.8]. The burdens of household duties are still great (they spend the same amount of time as men, but spend twice as much time on their household duties, while they have increased their custodial activity five times) [33, p.88]. The struggle for employment and uncertainty of employment (it involves from 65-70% of the women at the age of 25-34 [50]) results with low fertility rates (they are currently at their lowest level since the post-war period -1.222).

In many societies, there is no strong opposition between women's economic activity and fertility. On the contrary,

economic self-reliant women, who are able to deal with both roles, usually decide to have more children [16, p.600]. The unemployment (or its modern form - temporary employment) and high differences in men's and women's income do not favour fertility. When there is a wage gap between men and women, then the fact of having a baby causes that women (as those who are less paid) decide to stay at home. Presumptive men's involvement in childcare is related to too large a loss. If a woman earns much, then resignation from a job radically decreases her incomes. The losses can be overcome either thanks to adequately high allowances (maternity, nursery allowance) or by facilitating the access to external care or by implementing both of them. Research conducted in other countries indicates that transfers benefiting families with children and lowering taxes, but they are not indifferent from the point of view of shaping women's professional activity to have a lower influence on fertility than their chances of having a job [33, p.15].

A satisfactory solution to the fertility problem has been achieved in those countries where a rational pro-family policy has been conducted over the years, involving the complementary application of many solutions. This requires spending huge amounts of money, but it also brings some results, in the form both of overcoming negative demographic trends and addressing women's professional activity. Those policies combine elements of social support for mothers (a prenatal care, leaves, nursery allowances, availability of nurseries and kindergartens) with solutions concerning working and

employment (lack of practices which are discriminatory for women, flexible working time, friendly organisation of work). Moreover, they also address access to good care services (nurseries, kindergartens, a protective school) or regulations regarding social and health benefits.

Campaigns and actions of different types have aimed at eliminating social prejudices and stereotypes concerning genders are conducted in parallel. This is what Scandinavian countries do where, before the implementation of extensive pro-family policies, fertility was negatively correlated with women's professional activity. After the policy's implementation, the state has managed, in a certain moment, to ensure that both those factors are strengthening each other. Experiences of other countries, where the increasing fertility of educated and professionally active women is observed, are suggesting that the primary importance may have the activities

orientated on improving the level of education and promotion of employment of women [16].

Young women in Poland have a very small chance of counting on a possibility of a peaceful combination of professional and family duties. Their educational investments (statistically they are better educated than men) [13, p.88] are not only changing their professional careers and employment importance in their lives, but also have an influence on their decisions concerning their personal and family life. Their dilemmas are intensifying even more under the influence of the models which are brought by post-modernity - individualism and the need of a unitary autonomy become more and more important for them. Each of these tendencies indicate the existence of a deep conflict between roles - personal, family and professional, while ideal (desired) and real fertility are two separate values.

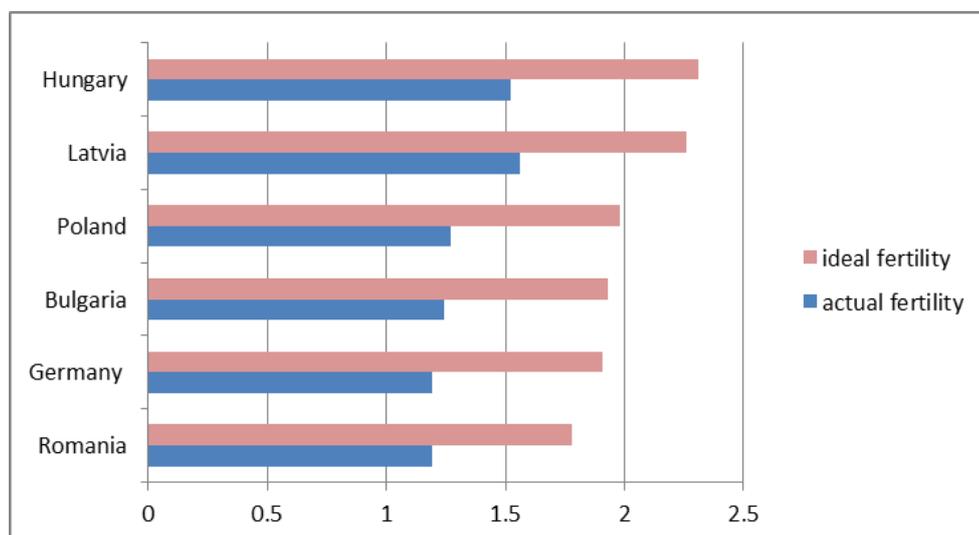


Figure 2: Desired and Actually Observed Fertility amongst Women of the Age of 24-39 - Poland Compared to Selected EU Countries [55]

The first one is securing the process of substituting generations naturally and the second one is dramatically endangering it. Both are revealing an ambivalent attitude of Polish women towards maternity. This ambivalence is mostly resolved when they abstain from delivering a child or delay the decision to become a mother to a biologically critical moment. Postponement of the decision to start a family is often connected to stress resulting from tensions related to roles and duties, both on the part of men and women; the upshot is that approximately 15% of the young pairs in Poland have problems with fertility<sup>12</sup>.

The problem is illustrated by a very high acceptance of in vitro fertilisation across society - 79% according to the CBOS survey in 2012 and even higher in the age group of 25-34. The level of acceptance of such operations may be explained most clearly by low levels of education, couples living in small home environments and identification with the teachings of the Catholic Church. However, even in this group, support for using the in vitro method continues to prevail in case of married couples which are struggling with the problem of infertility [6].

Table 2: Formal Care of Children from the Age of 3 to School Age - Poland Compared to Selected EU Countries (data expressed in %) [53]

	30 hours and more	1 to 29 hours	Zero hours
EU (28)	49	34	17
Bulgaria	66	5	28
Germany	54	35	11
Latvia	74	5	21
Hungary	74	13	14
Poland	34	8	57
Romania	15	37	48

An observation of the situation in the countries with high levels of fertility and women's professional activity (the Scandinavian countries) allows one to claim that efficient system of institutional solutions (which allows women to combine professional and family activity<sup>13</sup>), while social acceptance of the division of duties in a family between the partners (both regarding a financial responsibility and family and household duties) are crucial to solving this problem. The inadequacy of the

institutional solutions to the women's professional works (a so-called structural conflict), alongside traditional approach to social roles of women and men (a so-called cultural conflict) are generating the situations of low fertility [35, pp.55-77]. Many things prove that we live in a country of strong cultural conflict and not much weaker cultural conflict [33, p.7], while the course which is followed in the current social policy for the "Family 500+" programme<sup>14</sup> seems rather to satisfy

political interests of the governing party than to solve the problems of low fertility and women's dilemmas.

### 3. Conclusion

The perspective of a life cycle which is distinguishing youth as longer and more and more complex phase of a life allows to see a dangerous concentration of social problems within one social category. This includes the young people towards whom social expectations are heightening but whose life problems do not find proper systemic support. The crucial recommendations to be drawn from a diagnosis of their life situation are, firstly, the labour market, improvement of conditions of their professional start and finding a way to stabilise the life situation of the young generation. The second area concerns the modern family, models of a common or collective life and the dilemmas of young people wishing to start a family. The third area of recommendations concerns the education system and the idea of the deeper adjustment of modern education to challenges of changing world, economy and the labour market with simultaneous preservation of criticism towards an overly technocratic perspective in which the whole (Polish) education has been entangled and subject to the strong pressure of the so-called world polity and various local groups making up the interested parties (employers, parents, the youth).

Even at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sociological youth analysis undertaken in a context of questions concerning social change has concentrated on teenagers or

older youth. Their rebellious tendencies but capacity for innovation typical to their age and their marginal position in a social structure are treated as a potential source of the social tensions and change. Today that role is not played by teenagers or students, but by the young people in an age group above 25 who not only reach the adulthood later, but are late in becoming independent and self-reliant in meeting serious structural obstacles. Their struggles with adulthood are clear: searching for a job, starting a family, attempts to realise their life aspirations are crashing with the realities of the political transformation. Moreover, these struggles are taking place in a difficult environment of local limitations and global influences, which are the new space for challenges that are far riskier than in the Western, developed countries.

### Notes

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<sup>3</sup> 6 countries of the EU (Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and, according to particular rules or conditions: Germany/Eastern Lands), Russia, China, and Vietnam [42].

<sup>4</sup> Various actions are being undertaken, usually resulting from the EU policies towards the youth; amongst them especially educational projects (Erasmus, Eurodesk etc.). However, the transition countries have generally no long-term, coherent plan for a social policy towards the youth.

<sup>5</sup> And it is far away from the sense which the creators of pragmatism gave to it [11].

<sup>6</sup> Data for persons at the age of 15-24. Similar indicators in Bulgaria are 21.6%, in Romania 17%, in Hungary 15.5% - the data calculated on the basis of the ILOSTAT database for 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Report on the state of education. A society on the way to knowledge, 2010; Report on the state of education 2011. Continuation of transitions 2012; see also M. Szczepański, K. Szafraniec, A. Śliz (eds.) 2015 [43].

<sup>8</sup> Calculations on the basis of the ILOSTAT database – KILM statistic module.

<sup>9</sup> PPS is a unified unit, relativised to real incomes and the prices of goods and services in different countries. Calculation on the basis of: EUROSTAT [53].

<sup>10</sup> Data by EUROSTAT [ilc\_peps01]

<sup>11</sup> On the basis of the EUROSTAT data [48] - compare prior data, the report *Youth 2011.Poland* [55, p.184 and ff].

<sup>12</sup> The estimates of the Polish Gynaecological Society (2011).

<sup>13</sup> In Poland 4.2% of the children are in nurseries [23]. Average for the EU is 26%. In many countries, this indicator is reaching 50%, and in some (for example in Denmark) it is even exceeding it.

<sup>14</sup> The election promise of the Law and Justice party involves paying from the state's budget PLN 500 per month for a second child and every next child in a family. It is being fulfilled with great difficulty and poses a threat for the stability of public finances.

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