

# EU Youth Dialogue

Polish edition

# EU Youth Dialogues – Polish edition

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this first edition of the project, **12 university students and young professionals** gathered for a friendly conversation on democracy, politics, ecology, solidarities and the contemporary challenges for Poland and Europe.

The **lively and intense exchanges** showed a broadly shared consensus on the unsatisfactory situation of the political system, the unfortunate weakness of the current political class, and its lack of leadership – especially in the face of the major challenges represented by climate change, the European construction, and economic development. Another point of shared concern was the **increasing polarisation** of the public debate and within the society. As middle ground and moderate views are waning, the cohesion of the social fabric is gradually **threatened by a more brutal partisan confrontation** and receding solidarities.

Depending on their own personal perspective and priorities, some participants appeared more optimistic and some less. But the whole group, whether politically active or not, defended **the idea of reinforced political and civic education**, a more expert- and **knowledge-driven public action**, and their own commitment to **making an impact** on the society.

## Short bio

An historian and European affairs expert, **Edouard Gaudot** is a writer and a political advisor. Committed to the causes of Europe, Ecology and Education, he teaches (ESSEC, HEC business schools), works as a trainer and facilitator, and regularly publishes on European politics, and political ecology. He also conceives and implements European projects on youth, citizenship, education and ecology. His next book, *Les Sept Piliers de la Cité*, is due on 29 September, at Plon.

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## 1. A conversation about life, politics and the future

The Polish edition of the EU Youth Dialogues took place on **11 June 2022**, in the premises of the Krakow University of Economics.

It gathered 12 university students and young professionals for an informal yet organised conversation co-animated by **Liliana Smiech**, president of the Students' Scientific Circle for the Green Challenges and **Edouard Gaudot** project coordinator. Equally gender balanced, the group's ages ranged from 17 to 30 years old, with a slight majority of students, coming from different backgrounds, namely economics, finances, political sciences, law and engineering.

In addition to the variety of profiles, the discussion was conceived as an exchange between participants who consider themselves as politically active and those who prefer to declare themselves inactive. In this regard, the balance was also strictly respected, even though the definition of "politically active" also became a topic around the end of the discussion.

The aim of this European project is to draw a partial yet living picture of the current situation of the EU's younger generations, their aspirations, state of mind, hopes and anxieties, as well as civic involvement. In Krakow, the conversation revolved around four interconnected issues, covering the current challenges faced by this young generation in the EU, from democracy and geopolitics, to ecology and solidarities.

The conversation started with a broad and rather intimate question about the state of mind and feeling of the participants. How do they feel, after two years of pandemic, a war on their border, and the massive arrival of Ukrainian refugees in their cities?

**Crisis mood** – we emerged from two years of constraints and restrictions due to the pandemic, only to fall into the shock of the return of war on our continent. Prices are rising. There are tensions on the energy and food markets. The news cycle is ridden with war rhetoric and propaganda. And the pandemic already took a heavy toll on the mental stability, confidence in the future and hopes of many young Europeans.

*"We live in troubled times and yet you are starting your lives and preparing your future as well as the future of Europe, your country, etc."*<sup>1</sup>(EG)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All excerpts from the conversations are quoted in *cursive*.

<sup>2</sup> Unless noted EG (Edouard Gaudot, animator), the quotes from the participants will remain anonymous for confidentiality reasons.

**Changing atmospheres** – Then the conversation expanded into the potential feeling of eco-anxiety, and the perception of ecological challenges, in the context of a long-term ecological crisis, from climate change and the loss of biodiversity, to the various pollutions affecting our environment.

*“Who relates to this eco-anxiety feeling, namely this fear that there is no future because the climate is changing too fast and too strong?” (EG)*

Does the new climate regime challenge their beliefs in the sustainability of our economic model; does it question our production and consumption habits and our way of doing business; does it impact our society’s organization and prospects?

**Evolving solidarities** – The third aspect was connected to the existing and potentially disappearing solidarities in the Polish and European societies.

*“With the growing polarization in the society, and the lack of cohesion perhaps, how do you perceive the levels of solidarities in your country?” (EG)*

In many countries, including Poland, the rights of minorities or the fundamental rights of women come under pressure, sometimes critically threatened. In addition, we may find ourselves increasingly torn, between the unwanted consequences of a more connected, interdependent world, and the dangerous call for egoistic or individualist priorities.

*“Whether you work or study, how do you relate to your work? Is it important for you that it makes sense not just to pay your rent but also to impact the society?”(EG)*

Finally, the question of politics and **taking care of democracy** – Most of these issues brought us to that of individual implication in the life of the society, in other words to “politics”. As institutional and civil worlds seem to drift apart from each other, the notion of general interest seems increasingly diluted in the claim of more particular interests, whether private, local, or sectarian. A phenomenon reinforced by the polarization brought by social networks practices.

*“The leadership issue is quite important, and a lot of you have mentioned also the political system and how it is either broken or dysfunctional. Do you think because there is a thing that leaders aren't just a reflect of the people?” (EG)*

But this last issue actually pervaded the entire conversation with recurring references to a deplorable political class and distrusted partisan quagmire.

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## 2. A group fairly representative of the Polish youth

For confidentiality purposes and because this is not a scientific survey, we abstained to enquire into the social and family backgrounds of the participants. However, the fact that all of them had some good command of English as a second language, and all a university curriculum, leads to the swift conclusion that in spite of the differences in their personal situations they do represent a culturally homogenous group, quite in phase with the Polish urban connected European youth<sup>3</sup> – as one participant shared *I feel more at home more connected with people in other cities Paris, Madrid, Milano or Berlin than in Olsztyn, Bialystok.*

This is a generation that is largely defined by a stark contrast between their personal optimistic expectations about their private and personal lives, while the state of public affairs and the trajectory of their country and society leave them with a rather bitter taste of distrust – sometimes to the point of cynicism.

The group responded quite well to the set of questions, sharing their personal and family situations to illustrate their rather peculiar experience of the pandemic.

*- It was a hard time because I'm an extravert and quite social person, and that was restricted.*

For some, the pandemic, like for many of the more affluent, relatively well protected young Europeans offered to some of them the experience of a *pause, an opportunity to focus*, a reassessment of priorities.

*- I would say that for me pandemic wasn't that bad. I just switched to like mode where I don't need people. I would say we changed our approach to several things.*

However there was a general feeling of exhaustion coming from the past two years, and interestingly enough, the concerns were sometimes less directed at their personal situations and more at the younger generations, more emotionally and socially impacted, according to them.

*- It was difficult for people younger than us.*  
*- For me it was the time I changed from primary to high school and the integration was difficult. We as a class*

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<sup>3</sup> For further developments, see this may 2021 British Council survey *Next Generation – Poland*, <https://www.britishcouncil.pl/en/next-generation-poland>.

*are still not integrated and I think that's a big problem.*  
*- The pandemic wasn't so fun. I couldn't socialize much, too much home and Netflix and health issues. But the tragedy was actually for bigger the younger ones.*

What these remarks tend to underline, is the obvious integration of the Polish youth within its Western/European context, as such statements of could have been shared by young French, German or Italian nationals. As a matter of fact, the European youth did suffer more from the pandemic than most of their parents, not physically but morally<sup>4</sup>.

There is however indeed a sentiment of Polish idiosyncratic situation in Europe, as we'll see next, but culturally and sociologically, the convergence is taking over the differences.

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### 3. A concerned youth

The predominant feeling though shared by the group, was a sentiment of general pessimism about the overall situation, whether domestic, European or international.

*- When we talk about the future, the geopolitical situation, energy crisis, politics, conflicts in Poland, my point of view is much less optimistic.*

Led by the more politically aware, and sometimes more active, members of the group, the conversation took very quickly a critical tone of the country, the economy and the relationship with the EU. Whether expressed in specific terms, with illustrations or as a generic statement, there was a predominant feeling of lacking the grips on Poland's course within the EU and in the world.

Having a war on your borders does indeed *weigh on your views*, but the word barely came up in the conversation. There wasn't a feeling of insecurity, or any fear of imminent invasion like in other part of Central and Eastern Europe<sup>5</sup>. It

<sup>4</sup> As confirmed by this report published by Eurofound on 9 November 2021  
<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2021/impact-of-covid-19-on-young-people-in-the-eu>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/suwalki-gap-russia-war-nato-lithuania-poland-border/>



might surely be connected to Poland being part of the EU or NATO, although this aspect of the strategic situation was never mentioned.

However, the consequences of the war were mentioned: *we don't see what's happening on the eastern border, but we feel it as a society*. Refugees, economic difficulties, social tensions (*Poland is becoming almost a bilingual country, with the increasing presence of UKR people*), the terrible inflation and so on...

- *Refugee crisis: no one is helping anymore as much as in the beginnings, people are getting more disengaged and blame Ukraine for the disagreements.*

But quickly the conversation moved towards the failure of those in charge, whether the political class or more specifically the central bank, on the subject of skyrocketing inflation: *There's no good management in central bank. I would say it's terrible. It's very bad. We have classes of Macroeconomics at University and I think we should be there instead of them because we know how the central bank works.*

This was a constant throughout the conversation: the judgement that those in charge lack the competences required for their job. *We won't solve the climate crisis if we let the officials do it*, as one participant puts it. Surely, when it comes to the climate crisis, the signs of eco-anxiety are not so present. There is even a debate as to whether there is such thing in Poland - *it's maybe a little bit growing, but also in younger generations.*

Some do feel it quite strongly, some don't: *I wouldn't say that there's something like eco-anxiety*. But whether the feeling is agreed upon or not, the awareness of climate and ecological issues is broadly shared, acknowledged and systematically connected to the economic and welfare aspects of it. In other words, ecology is a priority for the wealthy, those who can afford these costly *solar panels or new technologies*.

- *I think we are very conscious. We know that we need immediate energy transformation. However, I would say that Polish society is not wealthy enough to really have such anxiety.*
- *I can see many I think a majority of my friends and my colleagues do feel this eco-anxiety. But I can see in my village how people do not care about climate because, I think, they don't have money for it.*

Ever increasing, thanks to the efforts of dedicated NGOs, green parties and EU action, the environmental awareness in Poland is however still relatively weak – and below the European average<sup>6</sup>. The Green Deal and the EU’s ambitious environmental objectives are met with some resistance from a defiant government supported by large chunks of the society still anchored in the widely shared belief that ecology runs counter economic development. When it comes to the environment, though, the major issue is of course energy and especially the phasing out of fossil fuels, which for Poland means departing from coal mining and burning, a constitutive element of its identity – and economy: *If we remove coal, it means like a lot of people are going to lose jobs and then that might actually cripple the economy.*

But what might concern them as well in this matter is the strained relationship with the EU. If none seem to believe that the EU membership is at risk, since *Poles want to stay in the EU no matter what*, there is however the worrying statement that the climate crisis weakens these links.

*- The government’s anger at the EU and the sanctions are making the relations more conflictual. The climate crisis further separates the EU from Poland because of the coal-mining sector.*

Nevertheless, if the distrust for the Polish government and institutions remains, it doesn’t imply that the EU is considered as right in its entire attitude. The feeling and the claim of a Polish specificity, particularly when it compares to Germany or France, comes across strongly in the speech: *for example, the Green Deal initiative, it might have been built on the Western parts of Europe, like it could work properly for France and Germany, but not as much in Poland. Since the European Union is about Unity in diversity, if we don't agree on certain things it shouldn't disqualify us from being a member of it.* The concern of being sidelined or even neglected by the more powerful EU members is quite present. *If Polish people or Czech or Slovaks do something different, it is presented as if we are not that developed.*

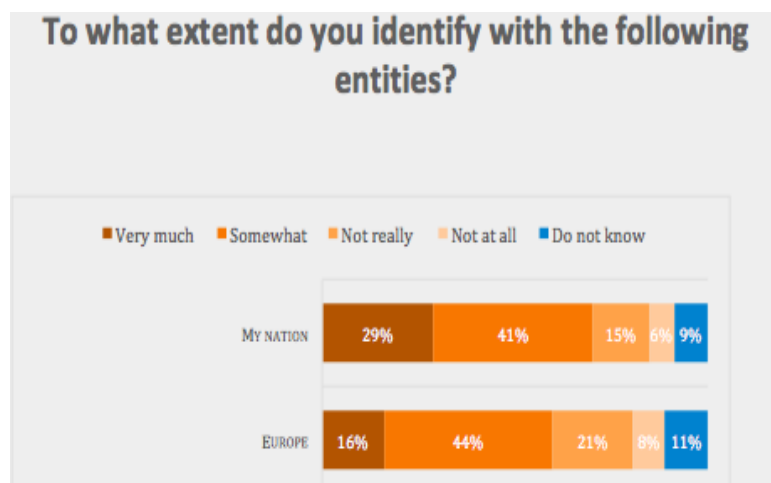
It shouldn’t come as a surprise. Young Poles show strong signs of national identity (up to 92%) alongside its strong European sentiment of belonging (80%)<sup>7</sup> – and they do not particularly oppose the two loyalties, in spite of a political context that might do so.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/system/files/2021-06/pl\\_climate\\_2021\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/system/files/2021-06/pl_climate_2021_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Unless specified otherwise, all figures and numbers are taken from Filip Pazderski, *Survey of Youth Attitude about Politics and Democracy in Central Europe*, July 2020, by the NDI and ISP. <https://www.ndi.org/publications/youth-attitudes-politics-and-democracy-central-europe>.

For sure, it suggest that their commitment to Poland's European horizon doesn't equate to the usual blind support for the federalist agenda – nor that Brussels is necessary always right in its showdown with Warsaw.



*I've heard very funny sentence because I attended one conference in Vienna and there was one guy who said that if Germans or French people do something different from us, it's called chic.*

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#### 4. Political disenchantment

In fact, the EU institutions seem here to be wrapped by the same blame of failed leadership as the national government. Especially when it comes to climate issues.

*- The problem in the European Commission is that they're telling me that I should stop driving a car. And I agree because I think that we should use different ways of transport. But then the European Commission is increasing their budget on private jets. So for me, it's like hypocrisy and I really don't like it.*

Once again, on this issue as on the other ones, the public action – or rather lack of it – is a subject of concern. Leadership is the issue. *If someone is telling me that I should give up on my car and I should stop eating meat, okay, I can do it. But I would also expect this person to do exactly the same thing.*

The distrust of the young Poles, almost as much as their parents, for the political class and the national leaders is well traceable in the recurring flares of votes for anti-establishment candidates or parties, such as the 2011 Palikot movement

(*Ruch Poparcia Palikota*), the 2015 Kukiz-15 or 2017 Your-Movement (*Twój Ruch*) to name but a few<sup>8</sup>. They also make the bulk of the troops in the social movement protests such as the 2012 mobilisation against the “ACTA treaty project” that threatened their online freedoms<sup>9</sup>, or the 2016 *Czarny Protest* (Black protest) in defence of women’s fundamental rights<sup>10</sup>. One interesting common feature in these movements is their kind of “spontaneous generation”: rather leaderless and self-organised they do not have to suffer from the blunders or ambitions of their representatives<sup>11</sup>.

*I think we don't have good leaders. I think that's what's missing.* Particularly when faced with a highly divided and polarised society. For *polarization is increasing*: all participants at some point in the conversation have lamented the toxic and deplorable levels reached by the political quarrels in their country.

As well as the toxicity of party politics – especially for women, as expressed by one of the participants. When it comes to women, in fact most women would agree in the group that the discriminations, from gender pay-gap to social division of tasks are still quite active in the society, even though they might tend to slowly recede.

*- I agree with you that politics is very toxic. It's not easy for women to be in politics because it's dominated by men. I was also politically engaged and I was one of the very few women there. And if men really want to destroy you, they will really do anything to destroy you.*

The increasing polarisation of the society is as much a result of, as a cause for, the failure of the leadership. And a toxic media environment feeds it: *Internet extremism and polarization are harming democracy; in the past, the media kept the politicians in check, but no longer.*

The lack of cohesion and the declining levels of solidarities in the country, and the society are part of this disenchanted landscape. And the polarisation goes beyond the mere political landscape. It emerges *between elderly and younger generations, especially about climate*, or between rich and poor, which is exploited by the social agenda of the ruling nationalist party, with its generous “500+” policy.

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<sup>8</sup> See the NDI-ISP study above.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16735219>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/czarny-protest-how-polish-women-took-to-streets/>

<sup>11</sup> Unlike, for example, the *Komitet Obrony Demokracji* (Committee for the Defence of Democracy), mobilised for the constitutional rights, and of quite older age (50) in average.

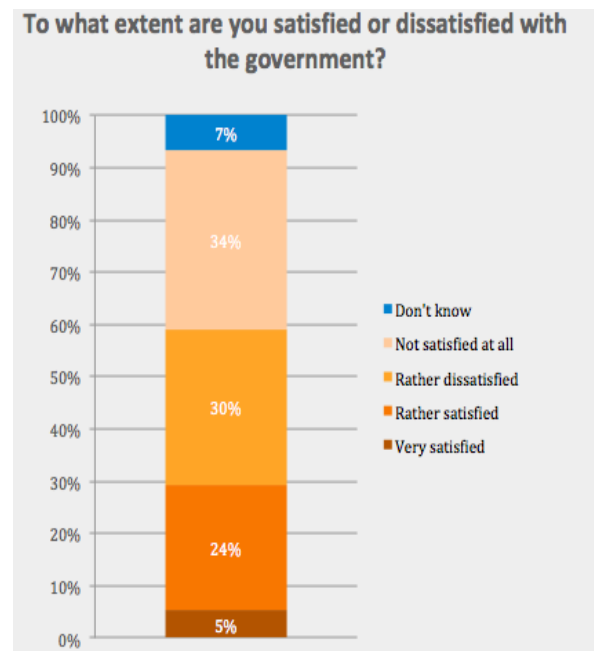
- *There's no solidarity in the society, no general mutual support in the society, especially between rich and poor; no understanding between poor people and rich people*
- *In Poland it's difficult to change the system*

*The legacy of the Solidarnosc years was balanced, in the mining sector, for example, but now closing them is impossible, because the heavy lobbying is making everything unbalanced, causing rising social inequalities.*

In fact, it is the disappearance of the middle ground, and consequently of the middle class, that worries them the most.

And rightly so, for middle classes are the pillars of representative liberal democracy<sup>12</sup> – their demise is foreboding a rise of distrust in the institutions.

Interestingly enough, the Eurofound survey quoted above concluded to a resilience of “young people’s trust in institutions, overall higher than other groups despite being hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis in terms of mental health and employment.” This is quite interesting in the case of Poland, since young Poles do not trust their institutions at all. In the NDI-ISP survey, not even a third would express their satisfaction with their government; and the dissatisfaction had even increased to 64% in 2020.



These findings are completely aligned with the general tone of the conversation that dismissed a failed political system: *Nothing will change, because of a weak opposition would say one, and a weak administration would add another. No institutional solutions, too many systemic failures, says a third. Our institutions are failing and it's because of injustices accumulated over the past 30 years. We lack overarching values, would conclude, quite pessimistic, yet another one.*

<sup>12</sup> See Ivan Krastev, *After Europe*, 2017 and Edouard Gaudot, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/after-europe-thinking-about-europe-with-the-help-of-ivan-krastev/>

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## 5. Finding new ways of civic engagement

And yet, of the whole Central Eastern European countries, young Poles are the most connected and interested to their public life – an eloquent majority of 80%. This conversation proved it again; they are aware of their environment, want the world and the society to be a better place and function well. Usually their preferred mode of involvement is demonstrating, and voting – which was also emphasised in the discussion: *I consider myself politically inactive but I do find myself in taking part in politics through voting because I know that politics is a way, it's something that affects us daily.*

But what's to be done when no one does carry your colours? *I don't know for whom should I vote; I know for whom I will not vote, but I don't have a group that will satisfy my needs and those of the Polish economy, society and stuff like that.* The answer could be to leave all behind and emigrate. Like the youth of neighbouring Hungary, which some feared might be the forecast of Poland's fate. One participant indeed confessed her desire to sail for places with fewer polarisations and a better treatment of women's conditions. But 1 out of 12 makes a significant yet marginal exception.

So the central question becomes that of personal involvement to change the world, the country, the society. An argument that brought us to questioning the distinction earlier introduced between “politically active” and “inactive” citizens. While some of the participants preferred to declare themselves as “inactive”, the conversation revealed that what they actually meant was rather “retired from party politics” – but still involved in the society.

*- Intelligent people and those who have the right values prefer to stay away from politics.*

*- Corporations are more democratic than people in power.*

As an alternative, you are left with the possible alignment in your work – especially for a young talented woman. Becoming a female engineer in a quite male-dominated industry. Becoming a prosecutor, a lawyer, a professor, an influential economist... *You can change things but you don't have to be in a party.*

For this you need to be aligned in your work: *there's a mission. Work should be aligned with my goals and values.* And then it's about nurturing the solidarities. Educating the people around and insisting on more civic education.

But the favoured alternative is that of personal involvement at local level. Making an impact at your own scale, whether in your immediate environment, or through

alternative locally grounded initiatives: *We have focused too long on Poland, and the national elections. It's time to look at the local level*

*- I think the best way is trying to be like the Proactive on our local level and trying to educate people because the world is changing.*

*- I think we should focus on local power, local governments, like in small villages also because our central government is taking too much money and then transfer it to private bills.*

Truly, it is this kind of local and organised civil society-led initiatives that actually shouldered most of the generous welcome offered to Ukrainian refugees. *To build solidarity in society, we have to focus more on local governments.*

And there are as well the organisations and associations, such as these Students' Scientific Circles. This is where politics can concretely take place in a different way from that of party politics. *We have a lot of doing together check to educate people in the field connected with the international relations and do the national security. And I think it's something that is changing the behaviours in the young generation. This way, I'm active in the society.*

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**This EU Youth Dialogue** confirmed a lot of what studies and surveys had previously made public. It also gave it more flesh and actual voices. This is a generation both optimistic about their private lives and their own futures, yet pessimistic about the public realm and the fate of the society. While they aspire to independence and financial security, satisfying work, strong relationships and good social connections, they also are well aware of the world around them and its evolutions. If they have retreated from national and partisan politics, they surely haven't renounced political activities and the ambition to make an impact at their own scale.

Resorting to the Organised Civil Society when faced with a distrusted political system is neither surprising nor really a problem *per se*. CSO are but a shelter where civic forces can regroup and replenish, and where future political initiatives can mature.

This is also where the next generation of political leaders brews. Where the seeds of the political society sprout and start growing. But it is also a gamble that those in power will not try and stifle this potential opposition – like in Hungary. There might come a moment when the Polish civil society needs European solidarity from across all the EU – like in the heydays of Solidarnosc.

**Edouard Gaudot**  
Coordinator of the project