

# SOCIAL ACTIVITY OF SENIOR CITIZENS IN POLAND IN THE YEARS 1998-2009 – THE SCALE OF THE PHENOMENON, MOTIFS AND CONSEQUENCES<sup>1</sup>

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## **Streszczenie**

*W kontekście rozważań dotyczących problematyki mądrości wieku i wieku mądrości polskich seniorów, zaprezentowane zostaną ogólnopolskie wyniki badań prezentujące zaangażowanie tej grupy wiekowej w życie społeczne. Dokonując analizy przedstawionych danych odwołano się do rozumienia mądrości zamieszczonej w twórczości Zbigniewa Herberta, zwłaszcza w cyklu wierszy o „Panu Cogito”.*

## **Summary**

*While considering the issues related to the subject of life wisdom and the age of wisdom of Polish senior citizens we shall present findings of all-Poland research devoted to social activity of the age group in question. The analysis of the accumulated data was based on and related to the understanding of wisdom presented in Zbigniew Herbert's works, particularly in the cycle of poems entitled “Mr Cogito”.*

## **Słowa kluczowe**

*Zaangażowanie osób starszych w życie społeczne. Pro-społeczny predyspozycje starszych osób. Zaangażowanie osób starszych w ochotniczy czynności.*

## **Key words**

*Involvement of elder people in the area of civil society. Pro-social predispositions of seniors. Senior citizens' involvement in voluntary community work.*

## **Introduction**

The idea of wisdom was an important issue absorbing men of letters and social life explorers since time immemorial. Considered the desirable virtue and positively perceived, wisdom was frequently referred to not only in literature, but also in everyday discussions between people of all ages. Referring to the belles-lettres in particular, it seems to be necessary in that context to mention Jan Kochanowski's “Lament IX” (J. Kochanowski, 2010), a cycle of poems by Zbigniew Herbert about “Mr Cogito” (Zb. Herbert, 2008) or “A song about the end of the world” by Czesław Miłosz (Cz. Miłosz 2009). It is of special interest to mention here the “Mr Cogito” cycle, as the thoughts contained therein correspond with problems addressed in the present essay. Let me address here one issue only. Mr Cogito, or “Mister I Think”, the main character of Zbigniew Herbert's poems, does not pass indifferently by the world and its problems, but thinks about them. His wisdom consists in that very fact that he does not remain passive. That interesting look at the man's wisdom seems to be in close connection with the issues presented in the present text.

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<sup>1</sup> Aktywność społeczna seniorów w Polsce w latach 1998-2009 – skala zjawiska, motywy i konsekwencje

The aim of my considerations consists in making an attempt at answering the question concerning presence of Poland's senior citizens in the area of civil society. That is in fact a question about their involvement, about being or not being passive — not only in their private or professional lives, but also in scope of work for their local/neighbouring communities, churches, associations or other forms of social activity.

### **Social involvement of Poland's senior citizens in the light of results of nation-wide research**

After twenty years of actual operation of the democratic system in Poland, one question remains — still — topical: in what direction our society develops; do Poles show an increasing interest — in individual age groups — in matters exceeding the circle of their private lives; are they ready to co-operate for the benefit not only their own, their families and friends, but also for the common good?

Analysing results of surveys carried out by CBOS in the years 2002–2008 (B. Wciórka, 2008) it can be seen that two trends become apparent in that area. Firstly, some of pro-social predispositions of Poles become reinforced. Still more and more individuals perceive the necessity of inter-human solidarity; also, the number of people increases who have a feeling of civil power and believe in effectiveness of common activities in the area of local communities. The number of those discerning benefits related to co-operation with other people increases; similarly — although still at rather low rate — increases the trust of Poles with respect to strangers. Apart from that positive trend, another one, negative, becomes apparent. In the period 2004–2008, readiness of Poles to co-operate with others decreased. A negative trend is also visible in the area of voluntary work for people's local communities. Since 2006, the number of individuals with experience in that type of social work also decreased, but what is more important, the scope of currently rendered community work decreased also — i.e. the total time sacrificed to that type of activities is less than before and, first of all, the percentage of persons working for civil organisations<sup>2</sup>.

It can be claimed therefore that, despite reinforcement of pro-social attitudes and some minor increase of social confidence — both the readiness to co-operate in our society and actual involvement of Poles in community work decreased. It follows from the above that development of civil society is subject to some deceleration.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Famuła-Jurczak, *The School and the development of students*. [In:]: Tradície a inovácie vo výchove a vzdelávaní modernej generácie učiteľov : Predškolská a elementárna pedagogika: zborník z medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie. Levoča, Slovakia, 2009 .-Ružomberok : Katolícka Univerzita, Pedagogická Fakulta, 2009

Let us therefore examine, what is the picture — on that background — of involvement of senior citizens in the area of civil society.

First, let us analyse the status of pro-social predispositions of Poland's senior citizens. In that case, I will make reference to results of research carried out in the period 2002–2008 only.

**Table 1: Senior citizens co-operating with others for benefit of needful people or solving certain issues in their social environment**

Social-demographic characteristics	Percentage of those claiming that people just like them can, in co-operation with others, help the needy or solve some of the issues existing in their environment, housing estate, village, town (by research years)			
	<u>2002</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2008</u>
AGE				
55–64	49	54	61	58
64 and more	39	39	53	50

Source: CBOS research results: B. Wciórka, *The civil society 1998-2008* [in Polish]. Opinie i Diagnozy No. 8, Warszawa 2008.

Comparing the research from the four periods it should be noted that within the analysed period of time the feeling of effectiveness of their co-operation for the benefit of the local society become — in general — reinforced, although among senior citizens aged 65 years and more — in the year 2008 — some small decrease in that area can be observed. Its worth emphasising that — referring to results obtained in other age groups — the sense of effectiveness of senior citizens' co-operation for the benefit of local communities shows the lowest level.

Another interesting observation pertains to the readiness to offer aid to persons outside one's family. The results are as follows.

**Table 2: Senior citizens' readiness to voluntary and unpaid aid for persons from outside their families**

Social-demographic characteristics	Percentage of those claiming that they know a person from outside their family to whom they would be ready to provide assistance in voluntary and unpaid work for environment, housing estate, village, town or needful people (by research years)			
	<u>2002</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2008</u>
AGE				
55–64	51	49	48	42
64 and more	28	32	32	24

Source: CBOS research results: B. Wciórka, *The civil society 1998-2008* [in Polish]. Opinie i Diagnozy No. 8, Warszawa 2008.

In that case we deal with a negative trend — actually, less and less respondents are able to identify such persons in their social environment for whom they would be ready to provide a voluntary and unpaid aid. Also in that case, when compared with other age groups, the obtained results turn out to be the poorest, with readiness of the oldest respondents in particular being dramatically low. In that case, less than one respondent in four declares such readiness.

Finally, let us have a look at senior citizens' involvement in voluntary community work.

In the beginning, I would like to make a reference to results concerning senior citizens rendering community work — in at least one civil organisation.

Table 3: **Senior citizens active in at least one non-governmental organisation**

Social-demographic characteristics	Respondents rendering voluntary work — in at least one non-governmental organisation (by research years and dates)							
	Feb 1998	Dec 1999	2001	Jan 2002	2003	Jan 2004	2005	2007
AGE								
55–64	14	24	23	23	25	25	21	19
64 and more	26	18	18	18	16	16	21	13

Source: CBOS research results: B. Wciórka, The civil society 1998-2004 [in Polish]. *Opinie i Diagnozy* No. 1, Warszawa 2004 and The civil society 1998-2008 [in Polish]. *Opinie i Diagnozy* No. 8, Warszawa 2008.

The presented results indicate a retreat of senior citizens from voluntary work for benefit of local communities. Let us note that in the oldest age group, only a little more than 10% of them worked for at least one organisation. It should be observed that the negative trend can be seen also in other age groups — especially in the year 2007, however in the case of the oldest persons covered with the research, that is the lowest result obtained in published research results ever.

Presently, let us comment results of the research concerning work of senior citizens rendered for their social environment or needful people.

Table 4: Seniors working for benefit of their social circle or the needful

Social-demographic characteristics	Respondents voluntarily working — for their social environment or for needful people (by research years)		
	<u>2002</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2006</u>
AGE			
55–64	23	24	23
64 and more	9	11	15

Source: CBOS research results: The civil society 1998-2008 [in Polish] *Opinie i Diagnozy* No. 8, Warszawa 2008

Even lower indicators emerged from research concerning work of senior citizens for their social environment or needful people. In that case, even more significant retreat of respondents from that area of activity can be seen.

### **An attempt towards justification of the presented research results**

One could ask **why senior citizens, who usually have much more free time than other respondents (especially at the age of 65 and more), no more employed in their professions, with their children grown up, become community activists so rarely?** Of course, as I have mentioned already above, enfeeblement of development of civil society in Poland affected not only the senior citizens' group — but their case seems to be especially puzzling. So, what could be explanation for that state of affairs?

It follows unambiguously from numerous research works, carried out, inter alia, systematically (2004, 2006, 2008) by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre) that high level of citizens' involvement in social issues is accompanied by high level of education and religiousness of Poles. As for the education, the senior citizens represent — in general — a less educated age group than younger respondents. To some extent, that could explain their insignificant presence in the civil society structures. Justification of the presented research results with the other of the above-mentioned factors may be not so easy. In fact, senior citizens are religious persons in most cases, as confirmed by research work carried out by U. Gruca-Miąsik (2007, p. 277) – the frequently practising believers, and that very group shows higher level of commitment to public life issues. Such connection can not be however made in our case. It is also undoubtedly necessary to mention three more factors that, in case of senior citizens, become of still increasing importance; I mean here: previous experience in community work, Polish families' lifestyle and current state of health among the respondents (M. Kowalski, D. Falcman 2008).

Perception of community work among persons from that generation involves frequently negative connotations. That type of activity is frequently associated with compulsory physical community work organised by the ancient régime. Therefore, voluntary community worker is not necessarily a person perceived as an authority representing an exemplary behaviour.

As a justification for low initiative of Poland's senior citizens in the area of community work one could mention unsatisfactory state of health in many cases, strong feeling of loneliness (U. Gruca-Miąsik, 2008, p. 533) and the related necessity to devote much

more time to themselves or to their families and/or friends who are usually also of advanced age. Last but not least, the prevailing lifestyle of the Polish family should be mentioned, still converging towards the western model (including frequently absence of grandparents in their grandchildren's lives), however in Poland's actual circumstances, seniors frequently devote their time for upbringing of their grandchildren and that sort of activity absorbs significantly their understandably less vital forces.

## Conclusions

Referring to the issues pointed out in the title of this paper and consequences of the state of affairs described above, one could claim that Poland's senior citizens do not match the standard of wisdom proposed by Zbigniew Herbert in his poetry. As it follows from the presented research results, in most cases they do not reveal any genuine commitment in work for the benefit of persons from outside their families or friends. Strangers and local society circles remain in most cases outside their range of interest. Referring therefore to the well-known culture concept formulated by Margaret Mead (M. Mead 1987) it can be stated that it is the youngest generation that could teach their families and friends the social involvement, being not burdened with negative experience from the past, full of their powers and reading anew the value of being a community worker in Poland.

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