POLES’ SENSE OF SECURITY - SELECTED SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS

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Abstract: Security is one of basic individual and social needs. It is the responsibility of public institutions which, operating in a democratic state, must not only make sure that it is ensured on various planes and in various dimensions, but also accept that the opinions of citizens are important in this respect. Poles generally feel safe in their country, and declare that their place of residence is peaceful. This however does not exclude the fact that recently part of Poles have been victims of crimes or are afraid that such a situation may happen to them.

Keywords: Security, public security, threat of terrorism, opinion polls.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the „Introduction” to one of his books, Andrzej Misiuk writes that „one of the fundamental human needs is sense of personal safety”. Of the same opinion is another author, who points out that „efforts to satisfy the need for security at possibly highest level is an essential element of human existence”. Nowadays, responsibility for ensuring security lies with special formations established for this purpose – uniformed public services. In every country, it is important how these groups perform their tasks and whether they really fulfil their functions. In a democratic state, it is also important how the activities of these groups are perceived by society.

The paper presents selected opinion surveys on Poles’ sense of security, conducted on Polish population (all-Polish research sample). The issues addressed included, among other things: national security and threat of terrorism, safety in the place of residence, subjective sense of threat and situations in the respondent’s life when he/she became a victim of a crime.

2 METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Security studies – an autonomous, new field of research - appeared in the western science in the 1990s. In Poland, institutionally, this field was born in 2011, but research and studies constituting the starting point for numerous scientific publications and conferences had been conducted earlier. The issues that today are part of security studies were addressed as part of various specific sociologies (e.g. sociology of the army, or the emerging sociology of dispositional groups), as well as political science and international relations, administration and law, and military studies. Different scientific fields, based on various methodologies, and using different methods and studies, addressed the issues of the importance of security and its dimensions, transformations occurring within it, normative solutions and practical aspects, as well as those who are responsible for security, law and order in various dimensions and at different levels of social life.

As Józef Kukulka pointed out, failure to satisfy the need for security affects an individual and society. Lack of security “does harm to an individual or a group of human beings, as it destabilizes their identity and functioning. As a result, they show tendencies to change the existing situation, resist disadvantageous changes in the outside sphere and use defence measures to restore their sense of security. These tendencies show that security is not so much a certain state of affairs as a continuous social process where its participants try to improve the mechanisms that ensure them sense of security.”

As pointed out by R. Zięba, who was already cited on a number of occasions, methodology of studying security in social sciences involves two dimensions. The first is ontological dimension, which refers to the social nature of security of various entities. The ontological dimension can be illustrated by means of an imaginary axis, where at the one end is objectivism, and at the other - subjectivism. It is about the answer to the question about the existence of some objective reality, objective security or its subjective creation by people. The second dimension is epistemological dimension, which refers to acquiring knowledge about security of entities. Here two approaches can be distinguished. The first one allows for scientific...
explanation of the issues of security, while the second one allows for their understanding.7

Assuming after R. Zięba, that security is a social construct and the way it is described and studied depends on the tradition of researchers, an attempt has been made to answer the research question of whether Poles feel safe. Specific questions were: is Poland a safe country? Do Poles feel the threat of terrorism? Do Poles feel safe in their place of residence?

Within sociology, which is one of social sciences, empirical studies are conducted based on the division of methods and techniques into qualitative and quantitative ones. Research methods result from the adopted methodology and model of social world, tasks set by a researcher and results that he/she wants to achieve. Quantitative methods, which are genetically set in positivism, should give comparable, numerical data, which is “untainted” by the influence of a researcher, and thus objective. In contrast, anti-naturalistic qualitative methods, which assume that a researcher is active at different levels of research, are used to obtain material that is unique, specific and de facto not represented by numbers and percentages.8 The second type of research was more attractive as the basis for this discussion due to the nomothetic scope of research findings, structured research strategy adopted by the researchers and the character of the results themselves. Thus, undertaking a research problem involving the answer to the question about the sense of security among residents of Poland, entailed the choice of positivist methodology and reliance on empirical studies of quantitative nature.

Resignation from own research, despite awareness of greater value of such research, was based on attractiveness of already existing reports. This attractiveness was increased by cyclicity of the surveys, the fact that they were conducted according to the same pattern and using the same tool in different periods, which also made it possible to reconstruct certain tendencies and find trends. Thus, an attempt to answer the main research questions and sub-questions was based on official data from Public Opinion Research Center.

3 POLAND A SAFE COUNTRY TO LIVE

Literature of the subject names various functions of the state. The external function includes maintaining relations with other states and international organisations, whereas the internal (protective) one – ensuring security and public order. We can also distinguish an economic-organisational function (where the state pursues an appropriate economic policy), social one (ensuring citizens minimum livelihood), cultural one (ensuring access to cultural goods), educational one (ensuring equal access to education), health care related function (setting up an adequate number of health care establishments) or environment related function (creating appropriate regulations to ensure protection from degradation and preservation of the existing state of the natural environment).9 In Poles’ opinions, the main obligation of the state is to ensure its citizens security and protection from crime – this attribute of a political organisation was indicated by as many as 99 % of the surveyed who were asked to specify the most important functions of the state.10 Thus, the fundamental question is whether, according to Poles, this function is performed. The answer to this question will be provided on the basis of surveys conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre.

In a 2013 survey,11 as many as two-thirds of respondents (exactly 64 %) claimed that they felt safe in Poland. One-third declared the opposite, and only three out of a hundred respondents didn’t have an opinion on this issue.

Fig. 1 Answers to the question: Is Poland a safe country to live? (2013)
Source: Bezpieczeństwo publiczne, CBOS, BS 63/2013, Warszawa 2013.

This relatively high sense of security is however not record high – two years earlier (April 2010), as many as three-thirds of respondents declared feeling safe. In the 2010 survey, the data was gathered

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7 ZIĘBA, R.: O tożsamości..., op. cit., p. 17.
10 Powinności państwa wobec obywatela i obywatela względem państwa, CBOS, BS 104/2012, Warszawa 2012.
11 Bezpieczeństwo publiczne, CBOS, BS 63/2013, Warszawa 2013.
between 8 and 19 April, but it seems that the Smolensk Crash did not cause a decrease in respondents’ sense of security. This can be explained by a lack of theories at that time indicating other causes of the tragedy than weather conditions and human error and the feeling that the state “passed the exam” in those moments.

A 2014 survey leads to even more interesting conclusions. Poles’ sense of security increased compared with the previous year. There is a noticeable increase (from 64% to 70%) in the percentage of people who think that Poland is a safe place to live in, whereas the percentage of those believing that the country is in danger is falling (from 33% to 24%). The percentage of those who have no opinion on this matter has doubled (from 3% to 6%).

Fig. 2 Answers to the question: Is Poland a safe country to live? (2014)
Source: Opinie o bezpieczeństwie w kraju i w miejscu zamieszkańiu, CBOS, BS 84/2014.

Given the issues connected with the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, i.e. countries that are close neighbours of Poland, this result may seem surprising. It can be, however, explained by media statements of state authorities and representatives of the army about Poland’s security, Poles’ limited knowledge about what is happening in Ukraine, and lack of real interest in international affairs. The army, which earlier rarely made appearances in the media, have now become more visible, their commanders appear on TV programmes, attractive equipment is presented on television, and modernisation of the army and further purchases are announced. Public Relations campaign, combined with stressing the professionalism of the Polish Armed Forces and presence in the NATO, is fairly effective, therefore Poles’ sense of high security is not surprising. Thus, the influencing factor is Poland’s presence in the NATO and EU and belief that Poland holds an attractive position on the international arena.

Does – according to Poles – the situation in Ukraine is a threat to the security of Poland? Analysis of the responses in a 2014 survey shows that they are clearly connected with the current situation, but at the same time the assessment of what is happening behind the eastern border has practically no impact on perceiving Poland’s security as such. In February 2014, such threat was indicated by only 30% of those surveyed, whereas in March 2014 (finalization of the issue of the Crimea) this figure was 72%. In April 2014, the percentage of people viewing the situation in Ukraine as threatening the security of Poland fell to 61%, while in May – to 52%.

In 2008 and 2009, sense of security among Poles was quite high, as it was declared by 68% and 69% of respondents respectively. What’s interesting, a relatively high sense of security was observed among Poles also in 1987, i.e. in the twilight of an undemocratic system in Poland, before the Round Table discussions, first democratic elections (1989) and the emergence of political pluralism in the form of different parties functioning on the political stage in the early 1990s. In the first years of the political transformation, most respondents perceived Poland as a country which is not safe to live. The peak of negative assessment occurred in 1995, when as many as 79% of respondents declared a sense of threat, and only 19% claimed that they felt safe in Poland. It seems that Poland’s accession to the European Union was a turning point after which this trend reversed. While in March 2004 Poland was perceived as a safe country by 33% of respondents, one year later this percentage grew to 46%. In 2006, it was 43%, and did not fall below half the respondents in subsequent measurements.

Analysing the figures above, we can ask why in the period of the Polish People’s Republic most respondents claimed that they lived in a safe country, but in the period of transformation the situation was different. Apart from a range of factors that made a daily life more difficult for an individual at that time (unemployment, poverty, liquidation of workplaces and introduction of principles of free market with a limited protective function of the state), the most important seems to be the argument pointed to by Wojciech Sitek. For a public survey to show real opinions and attitudes of respondents.

Ocena działalności władz państwowych i wizerunk klasry politycznej po smoleńskiej katastrofie, CBOS, BS 73/2010.
Opinions on security in the country and place of residence, CBOS, BS 84/2014.

Views that Poland holds a good position on the international arena were indicated in May 2014 by 61% of the respondents. The opposite view was declared by 30% of those surveyed. See: International situation and security of Poland, CBOS, BS 80/2014.
towards specific phenomena, respondents cannot be afraid of expressing their opinions.  

4 THREAT OF TERRORISM

The 2001 World Trade Centre attack released an avalanche of events that led to a military action in Afghanistan and Iraq by some Western countries. Regardless of different nations’ attitudes to the conflict, its nature and grounds, from the perspective of residents of the USA, Spain, Great Britain or Poland there was a threat of terrorism on the territory of their countries. Terrorism is most often defined as a use of force or violence against people or property in violation of law. The aim of terrorist activities is to force a certain action. They may affect the whole population, but most often – they hit a certain part of it. In countries where there is democracy and free media, civilian population constitutes an attractive target of a potential attack. Countries participating in military operations take into account public opinion. Death of several, a dozen or several dozen citizens is perceived there completely differently than in undemocratic countries. Despite adoption of a range of solutions and tightening up security procedures, it is not possible to eliminate the threat of terrorism.

In May 2013, one-fourth of respondents (26%) claimed that they were personally afraid of terrorist attacks, however only one out of twenty respondents categorically declared such fears. Seven out of ten respondents (72%) claimed they didn’t have such concerns. Analysis of the results of previous surveys shows that sense of threat caused by terrorism was lower in 2010, when it was expressed by 25% of respondents. In the years 2003-2005, such concerns were expressed by over half of the surveyed. Back in 2003, subjective sense of terrorist threat was declared by 52% of respondents, whereas one year later this figure grew to 64%.

Fig. 3 Perception of the threat of terrorism in Poland

The survey cited above included a question about respondents’ opinions on the current threat of terrorism. According to 43% of respondents, Poland was under genuine terrorist threat, 28% of respondents believed that this threat was exaggerated, and 24% saw no real danger of terrorism. An attempt to outline, based on the surveys above, opinions on terrorism dominating in the Polish society, would show that although there is genuine threat, individual respondents are not afraid of it.

In Poland, there are various institutions established to counteract terrorism. Once again let’s cite A. Misiuk, who states that „specialised state institutions should be prepared to prevent threats and if they occur – they should undertake preventive and repressive actions.” How do respondents assess preparation of such institutions for this type of activities? Over half the respondents (58%) claimed that Polish authorities and public institutions were not well prepared to prevent terrorist attacks. One-third of respondents (28%) believed that they were well prepared for this task. Similarly pessimistic is the fact that, according to most of the respondents (51%), the authorities and institutions are not well prepared to inform the public about possible threat.

5 SAFE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Whether in the final years of the period of the Polish People’s Republic (1987) or during the political transformation, the overwhelming majority of Poles who were asked if their neighbourhood could be regarded as peaceful and afe gave a positive answer. In all the surveys conducted between 1987 and 2013, the percentage of respondents who perceived their „locus” as safe was
In the light of survey results showing a relatively high sense of security in the country and even higher sense of security in the place of residence, respondents’ answers indicating potential concerns about their personal safety may seem striking. In the 2013, 39% of respondents declared being afraid that they might be victims to a crime, whereas lack of such concerns was expressed by 60% of respondents. Although the percentage of respondents who aren’t feeling insecure is higher, the result may be puzzling if we look at the opinions about feeling safe in the country and in the place of residence. In 2014, lack of fears was indicated by only 53%, while 45% of the respondents feared that they might become a victim of a crime.

At the same time, it’s worth stressing that the current number of people expressing concerns about their safety is relatively high – in the previous years, it was significantly lower. For comparison, in 1996 it was 30%, and in 2002 – 32%.

It becomes even clearer when we look at the responses to the question about fear for the safety of the loved ones. In 2013, the percentage of respondents fearing for the safety of their loved ones is again lower than the percentage of respondents who did no express such fears (50% and 48% respectively). Earlier, we saw similar situation in 2007, when 52% of respondents were not worried about the safety of their loved ones, whereas such concerns were expressed by only 46%. These are two exceptions when the number of those not fearing for the safety of their loved ones is higher than the number of respondents expressing such concerns.

However, in 2014 the proportions changed. Only 43% of those surveyed did not fear for the security their closest ones, while 55% of the respondents signalled fear. This means that the threat of crime has increased compared with 2013. Comparison of Police-owned statistical data for 2013 and 2014 will make it possible to verify whether this sense of threat was reflected in facts or not.

There are many factors that impact our sense of security or insecurity. One of them is personal experiences of an individual respondent. Were the respondents victims of a crime recently? 15% of respondents declared that they had been a victim of theft within the last five years. 8% experienced burglary, 3% were mugged and robbed and 2% beaten up or intentionally hurt, and 5% became a victim of some other crime. In 2014, the situation is very similar. 16% of those surveyed experienced burglary, were mugged and robbed or beaten up or intentionally hurt (3%), while 6% were a victim of a different crime.

A city can be defined as a type of a historically developed unit of settlement with high intensity of housing and services-related developments, whose inhabitants are employed in service and industry sectors and are characterised by urban lifestyles. In contrast, in the countryside, the dominant type of activity is work in agriculture, the density is smaller than in the city, a characteristic type of social bonds is created, and specific characteristics of culture are present (strong role of tradition, lack of historical perspective: stable and unchangeable view of the world, emphasizing the authority of the elderly, conservative attitudes, clear distinction between us and them, distrust). Naturally, the traditional rural society is undergoing changes and the term „the countryside” is sometimes replaced by „rural area”, but there are still „hard” planes of the city and countryside differentiation, such as differences in income. Thus, when analysing the empirical material, we will look at how the issues of safety are perceived by urban and rural dwellers.

23 Bezpieczeństwo publiczne, CBOS, BS 63/2013, Warszawa 2013.


For the purpose of reminding, 70 % of respondents positively responded to the question of whether Poland is a safe country, whereas 24 % expressed the opposite opinion. In terms of the division into the city/countryside, the lowest sense of security in Poland was observed among residents of cities inhabited by 101 – 500 thousand people, followed by rural dwellers. Both residents of small towns and largest cities (over 501 thousand), mostly responded that Poland was a safe country to live.

In a 2013 survey, the percentage of respondents declaring that their place of residence is safe and peaceful was 89 %, whereas 10 % expressed the opposite opinion. Respondents living in the countryside felt the safest (96 %), and those living in cities with 101-500 thousand inhabitants felt least safe (77 %). Sense of threat of becoming a victim of a crime was the lowest among respondents who were urban dwellers (9 %), and the highest – among inhabitants of small towns with up to 20 thousand people (12 %); Respondents who were rural dwellers least often declared that they had been a victim of some crime in recent years (13 %). With inhabitants of large (101-500 thousand people) and the largest (over 501 thousand people) cities, the situation looked different – here respectively 31 % and 32 % of respondents were victims of crimes.

It’s hard to establish whether there is a simple correlation between a type of a unit of settlement and sense of security, but certain interesting relations can be noticed. Generally, rural dwellers were less often victims of crimes, were least concerned about their personal safety, and felt safe in the place of residence. The city, on the other hand, seems to be a place where an individual may become a victim of a crime and, as shown in surveys, he actually does. Nevertheless, inhabitants of the biggest cities claim that Poland is a safe country to live. This may be due to the fact that in Polish „metropolises”, the police, as a security institution, is a common sight, which impacts the sense of security of the inhabitants, or people living in Warszawa, Łódź or Wrocław think of such threats as part of the „landscape” of their cities and are not surprised by them.

6 SENSE OF SECURITY IN THE LIGHT OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

According to Poles, ensuring security is a fundamental function of the state. Surveys show that this function is successfully fulfilled in Poland, as currently two thirds of those surveyed declare that the country in which they live is a safe one. Earlier, this sense of security was even more widespread, but in the 1990s the situation was different. It seems that currently the sense of security in our country is high, but this doesn’t exclude the possibility of its decrease as a result of the crisis taking place in the East

other reasons. The case of the 1990s reminds us that the sense of security in a country is determined not only by the situation on the international arena, but also by internal issues.

The attempt to answer the question about potential threat of terrorism led to different conclusions. Depending on developments in other countries and Poland’s involvement in anti-terrorism coalition, the sense of security was lower or higher, but most respondents indicated that they felt threatened in this respect. This picture may seem surprising, if we take into account both indications of Poland’s inappropriate preparation for terrorist threats and lack of attacks, incidents or other events on the territory of our country. The last survey on the threat of terrorism was conducted by Public Opinion Research Center in 2013. Results of surveys conducted later, given the various terrorist incidents in 2014 or information about detention of CIA’s prisoners on the territory of Poland, may show the increase in the sense of threat of terrorism.

"Local Poland", i.e. place of residence, was assessed by Poles as an area where they are generally not exposed to any threats. These opinions are relatively stable, but it should be noted that they are constructed differently than those referring to national security or degree of protection against terrorism. In the case of security at macro level, it is the result of a range of factors among which direct experience is of slight importance, whereas in the case of security at meso or micro levels, our own experience is of key importance. Therefore, in this dimension, we should not expect serious fluctuations, but we cannot also exclude changes resulting from certain conditions.

7 FINAL CONCLUSION

Safety, as one of fundamental needs of a human being, is situated in the area of responsibility of public authorities. In a democratic state, it is important that citizens not only are, but also feel safe. There is a range of factors that impact our sense of security – they include our personal experiences, experiences of our loved ones and acquaintances, and reports. Analysing public opinion surveys, we arrive at the conclusion that institutions responsible for security fulfil their functions, as Poles generally feel safe. Maybe the final conclusion would have been different, if the paper had addressed the issue of Poles’ health security or

27 Of importance are surveys of Poles’ assessment of the influence of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine on security of Poland. Declarations show that over half the respondents are concerned about the impact of the situation in the East on security of Poland. Compare: Zainteresowanie sytuacją na Ukrainie i poczucie zagrożenia w październiku, CBOS, BS 144/2014.
social security, but it was not the subject of this discussion. Comparison of different surveys leads to a conclusion that the sense of public security in a broad sense was undergoing changes, whether in the context of political transformation or in connection with Poland’s involvement in the conflict in Iraq, or in the context of joining NATO or the European Union.

The issue of the Crimea, Russia and Ukraine comes up in the opinion polls analysed, but – in the light of the results of surveys on the security of Poland as a country – it seemed to be temporal and did not affect the general perception of security. In comparison with 2013, the percentage of Poles who feel safe in their country has significantly increased. In September 2014, we know that the issue of Ukrainian-Russian relations has not been solved, thus there is still a question of how Poles will view the security of their country in next surveys.

References

[24] Zainteresowanie sytuacją na Ukrainie i poczucie zagrożenia w październiku. CBOS, BS 144/2014.

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