

Climate Pessimism Gets Us Nowhere

An interview with Adrian Wójcik, Marcin Wrzos

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Arguing that there is no way to stop climate change risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead of relying on the language of fear and resignation, it is important to highlight the direct effects of the climate change as it occurs. In an interview with Marcin Wrzos, social psychologist Adrian Wójcik analyses how Polish people think about the environment and which messages hit home most.

Marcin Wrzos: The Club of Rome Report on the limits to growth was published in 1972. We've had plenty of time to protect the climate since. Why have we made such a habit out of postponing climate action?

Adrian Wójcik: People do not think about risk in statistical terms and so are not fully rational when assessing it. We evolved to be able to cope with instant threats to our lives and safety quite well but when it comes to assessing risks we still have some blind spots, especially regarding huge systematic dangers that are not straightforwardly connected to everyday life.

We don't see dangers like climate change coming?

We do not comprehend their seriousness. Many environmental threats are felt less strongly because, as they evolve at a slow pace in terms of human experience, we have time to adapt to them. Climate change progresses step-by-step, not in a radical fashion. It is not like that it is minus 20 degrees in one year and plus 20 degrees in the same place the year after.

Should we speak up and try to warn people about the forthcoming apocalypse then?

When we face huge threats it is easy to end up falling into specific form of denialism and resignation. We have two ways of confronting this situation. The first is to focus on finding solutions by understanding the problem and developing a plan to solve it. Preventing climate change means instantly limiting greenhouse gas emissions, promoting renewable energy sources, and phasing out coal from the energy sector. The second way is based on emotions and unfortunately can be much easier to follow. Faced with such an immense task, it is far easier to just to deny climate change than to confront it.

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Negating and dismissing negative signals seems quite tempting in a situation, in which individual people feel that they cannot do anything to counteract such a threat. Such a mechanism can be seen in the case of climate change. Even if each and every one of us were an engaged environmentalist our own influence on the climate is very limited. If I decide to go on a meat-free diet, start using a bike instead of a car, and limit my air travel, this alone will still not change the climate situation all that much. As we have a very low level of control over that which is changing, we choose denial instead of finding solutions.

Does this tendency to choose denial explain the lack of social pressure for climate action in Poland?

People understand climate change differently than climatologists or professional scientists who focus on modelling it. In our research from last year, 45 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that climate change is due to both human activity and natural factors. 'Pure' climate deniers who rule out human activity are quite uncommon.

Most of the people agree that climate change is caused by humans. The problem is that while such awareness

exists, the problem itself is not seen as a crucial issue. And that seems to be the case in all countries in which such analysis has been carried out. A survey conducted half a year ago confirmed that assessment. People know that climate change exists and is a serious threat, but they do not see it as the most important issue in terms of their own safety.

Another important thing about how climate change is perceived is the distancing mechanism. People, both in Poland and across the world, think that of course climate change is a very important problem for the world—and even for their country—but they do not see it as something that will influence their families or themselves. They know of the problem, but they do not see it as their problem.

How can we overcome this and build support for protecting the climate?

If the discourse about the impossibility of stopping climate change—or about it being in such an advanced state that we will not be able to counter its negative effects—becomes more popular, we may end up with a real problem. In Poland these ‘climate pessimists’ make up about 40 per cent of society.

From what I have seen, a large part of pro-environmental campaigns on climate change focus mainly on raising public awareness. I think that such knowledge is already present, even if not fully thought through. For a large part of society climate change is something obvious, like the fact that the Earth revolves around the Sun and not the other way around. Limiting the scope of this climate pessimism and focusing on stopping climate change is therefore crucial.

How does Poland differ from other EU countries and its neighbours in the region?

In political terms Poland is a bit of an outlier. The distinction between left and right is understood differently in Western and Eastern Europe and the same thing applies to ecological issues. Together with Aleksandra Cislak, we are conducting research on how this plays out. Though ecological issues have not been fully politicised yet so I do not know if this has any influence on the way Polish people think about climate change.

Poles are renewable energy and energy efficiency enthusiasts however and tend not to favour subsidising coal-fired power plants.

It seems that Polish energy policy differs from the public opinion preferences...

True. And it was a direction pursued by previous governments too, not only the one created now by the Law and Justice (PiS) party.

Can you tell us more about the results of your research?

The left-right divide is not reflected in attitudes towards environmental issues or climate change. When we ask about the environment and the need for EU to support the fight against climate change, it turns out that the responses do not vary much by party. There are no substantial differences between voters of the right-wing PiS, centre-right Civic Platform (PO), Polish People’s Party (PSL), centre-left Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) or liberal .Nowoczesna (.N). It is harder to check among voters of the populist Kukiz’15, left-wing Razem or the Greens due to their small size.

So there were no big differences on the environment between left-wing and right-wing respondents?

If we ask Poles about their worldview then social issues play the most important part. Pro-ecological standpoints are largely not influenced by the respondent’s position on the left-right axis. We often tend to extrapolate tendencies that are now visible in the United States to other contexts. It is true that political polarisation over

environmental issues is very strong there. On the basis of whether the person you are asking votes for the Democrats or the Republicans, you can predict his or her standpoint on the climate. In Poland such a correlation is almost non-existent. If you look at surveys across the world, it turns out that strong polarisation on environmental issues is rare. In Europe, it is much weaker than in the US and elsewhere it almost does not exist.

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Of course environmental issues could still become a polarising issue in Poland. Luckily this is not the case right now—at least in terms of party electorates— though some politicians have made controversial statements.

What does this mean for how we talk about climate change?

Most of the current campaigns focus on fear. It is a popular strategy because it gets a lot of attention. The problem with fear-based messaging is that it is not persuasive unless it gives people information on how they can remove the source of the problem at the same time. If we want to act effectively we need to show the people what they can do in their everyday lives to reduce the risk of climate change.

It is extremely important to focus on climate change issues that are already influencing our lives. When talking about climate change, we should not be looking at islands in the Pacific that are in danger of flooding, but on local issues such as problems around rising waters in central Poland. We need to speak about the results of a changing climate. Few people know that today the bulk of firefighters' work is not putting out fires but managing the damage from dramatic weather events. We need to inform people on how they can adapt and what they can do in their neighbourhood for themselves, their friends, and family.

Are there other mechanisms that can help us amplify our message?

I think we still do not appreciate positive social norms. Despite what people say about themselves they do like to do things in the same way as others. If we look at discussions online, we may often see people arguing that climate change does not exist. Some declarations of politicians also go in that direction. In response, we should point out that a large majority of Polish people believes in human-made climate change. We should also emphasise that the majority of Poles thinks that Poland should support the European Union in its plans to limit CO₂ emissions. We need to stress that these are majoritarian views. Too often that goes unnoticed.

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It is also important to diversify our messaging depending on who we are talking to. We should not shy away from citing the teachings of John Paul II or Pope Francis. Citing such arguments may not be appealing to liberals, but they can be very important in the eyes of conservatives. And why shouldn't we try linking pro-environmental stances to the national interest? There is no harm in combining talking about the need to expand renewable energy as a means to achieve energy sovereignty. We are speaking the truth and at the same time we are talking about climate change in a completely new way. Action for the environment may be good both for nature and for Poland as a national community.

Is it a good idea to focus on economic arguments as some campaigns do?

I like to communicate it in such terms. We should say that sticking to old forms of energy production, which in Poland mainly means coal, will become more and more costly as time goes on. When we analyse the consumer choices of Polish people, we clearly see that price is still the most important issue, whereas nature conservation is further behind. As price stability is seen as something important, highlighting the truth about the rising costs

associated with sticking with coal makes sense.

We seem might not be able to persuade everybody. What should we do in such a situation?

Social psychologist Paul Bain tries to answer how we can make climate deniers take part in the fight against climate change. In his view we should argue that climate protection activities will have positive results for us all regardless of their effects on limiting CO₂ emissions. Ending coal's use for energy production, even you don't think it would help with global warming, will result in thousands of new green jobs and will limit pollution levels, making people healthier. On that basis, even climate deniers can help out in protecting the climate.



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