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Freedom by Default: How the Post-'89 Generation Views Democracy

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Summary

This year marks the thirty-sixth anniversary of November 17. The Velvet Revolution brought back democracy, freedom, and an open society. Today, the generation born after 1989 makes up a significant share of the population and the electorate. They have never experienced life without freedom, yet they are growing up in an age of uncertainty — geopolitical, economic, and environmental. How do young people understand values such as freedom, democracy, and civic responsibility? And what challenges does this pose for the state, the education system, and society as a whole?

Key points

- The post-1989 generation sees democracy as something taken for granted. That doesn't mean they don't value it — they simply understand it differently. For democracy to stay alive, it has to be lived every day.
- The apathy of young people is not a rejection of democratic values, but a reaction to dysfunctional institutions and political language that feels unclear and inaccessible.
- The future of the democratic system depends on whether young people learn to work with information, think critically, and take part in shaping public life. Freedom should be understood not as a textbook concept, but as a practice.

Democracy today is no longer a dream but a reality. For the generation that grew up in freedom, it feels like a given — and that is precisely why it must be rediscovered. Recent research shows that while young people consider freedom of expression and the ability to choose as self-evident, their trust in democratic institutions is declining (STEM, dikyzemuzem.cz, 2025). Most of them do not identify politically and feel that their voice is not heard. At the same time, they seek out alternative forms of engagement, often through community projects or online campaigns.

This paradox — valuing freedom while distrusting institutions — reveals that democracy is, for young people, more of a cultural experience than a political one. Apathy, disillusionment with politicians, and information overload create space for individuals or groups that may weaken the foundations of democracy.

Freedom is not a monument; it is a skill. Democracy cannot be invoked only once a year on November 17. It must be rediscovered by every generation. The post-revolution generation has the opportunity to preserve this skill in collective memory and turn it into lived experience.

The Anniversary of November 17, 1989

On that day, week, and month, events unfolded in the streets of Prague — and gradually across the entire former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic — that led to transformative changes in the country's political and social order. The Velvet Revolution ended the monopoly of a single political party and brought free elections and an open society. For many people, November 17 became a symbol of hope for a better future. For today's young generation, however, it no longer represents a struggle for freedom, but the starting point of their existence.

Today, the generation born after 1989 makes up a significant part of society, the labor market, and the electorate. What sets them apart is that they have no memory of life under a totalitarian regime; for them, freedom and democracy are simply a given. Yet this very generation faces a unique task: to understand what freedom means in an era of digitalization, globalization, climate challenges, inflation, pandemics, a housing crisis, geopolitical instability — and the list could go on. Research conducted by STEM for “Díky, že můžem” shows that half of young Czechs feel that the situation in the Czech Republic is not developing in the right direction. Young people are also divided when it comes to expectations for their own future: just under two-fifths are optimistic, while one-fifth describe themselves as pessimists. A large number of young people perceive the future as uncertain — specifically, 45% of those aged 17 to 29 (STEM, dikyzemuzem.cz, 2025).

Generational Shift in Values

Young Czechs grew up in an open society and a period of growing prosperity, yet they have already experienced a relatively unstable era marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, an economic crisis, the war in Europe, and more. All of this has inevitably shaped a specific set of values — quite different from those of the generations who once jingled their keys in the squares.

According to research conducted for the Generace F platform, the post-1989 generation tends to be more optimistic about democracy, although their outlook is often cautious: 15% of young people believe democracy today does not work, while 43% think the opposite and another 42% are unsure (Generace F, 2025).

Age significantly influences how people view the current political system, and the generational shift is clear at first glance. Among those under 30, 65% consider today's system better than the pre-1989 regime. Among people over 60, the share of positive evaluations is much lower (39%), and 43% actually consider the former regime to have been better. "Young people often appreciate democratic values, freedom of speech, and the ability to participate in political life — aspects that the previous regime lacked," explained Bára Stárek, Executive Director of Díky, že můžem. Analyst Jitka Uhrová added: "Young people tend to be more optimistic in many of their attitudes. They see the opportunities that today's world offers and that lie ahead of them. They understand the old regime mainly through the experiences of their parents or grandparents" (iRozhlas.cz, 2024).

Young and older generations differ not only in their overall perception of democracy, but also in how they assess specific aspects of life in society — particularly morality, social order, financial inequality, and perceptions of decency and safety. While younger people more often value the freedom to make their own choices and the Czech Republic's membership in the European Union, older generations emphasize stability and order. Research also shows that an overwhelming majority of young people believe that basic freedoms in the Czech Republic are guaranteed (STEM, 35 Years of Democracy, 2024). This sense of certainty stems from having grown up in a democratic system — for young people, freedom is a natural framework for life, not a rediscovered privilege.

Relationship to the State, Politics, and Civic Engagement

The post-1989 generation is value-oriented toward freedom and openness. They see democracy less as an institutional system and more as a form of personal responsibility or a way of life. Yet this is also the group in which we see a growing distance from formal political structures such as elections, political parties, or government institutions. Data from CVVM show that only 34% of people aged 20–29 take an interest in politics, whereas among those over 55, the share is almost twice as high (CVVM, 2025). An even more striking difference appears in institutional trust: young people more often express distrust toward the government, parliament, or political parties, while at the same time placing greater trust in NGOs, experts, and local initiatives.

In recent years, public debate has often focused on the low voter turnout of young people. Yet this assumption is challenged by research from PAQ Research. In 2021, political interest among young people rose significantly, and 63% of voters aged up to 34 cast their ballot. This is only a few percentage points away from the turnout of older age groups. For comparison, in the 2017 elections only about half of young people went to vote (PAQ Research, 2021). No comparable study for the most recent parliamentary elections is yet available, but given the new composition of the lower house, the increased activity of politicians on social media, and the overall intensity of political communication, a similar level of youth participation can be expected.

The post-1989 generation is also characterized by its search for alternative forms of engagement. They are active in various student initiatives, environmental movements, or community projects that have clear goals and measurable outcomes. Typical examples include Fridays for Future, student elections and school parliaments, or volunteer activities. For many young people, civic engagement is something that happens here and now and brings immediate results, rather than long-term membership in a formal structure. This trend is not a sign of declining interest in public affairs, but rather a transformation of how engagement is expressed. For this energy to turn into long-term civic

responsibility, politics needs to communicate more openly, and education systems need modern tools and mechanisms that help young people feel that their voice truly matters.

Risks: Apathy and Value Relativization

The relationship of the young generation to democracy is marked by a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, they reject authoritarianism and value personal freedoms and an open society. On the other hand, many young people feel that politics is distant, ineffective, and opaque. This ambivalence is not an expression of rejecting democratic principles, but rather — and perhaps more worryingly — a quiet withdrawal from public life. Apathy thus becomes one of the most serious risks: not because young people deny democracy, but because they stop seeing it as their concern.

This distance has deeper roots than mere disinterest. Young people today are growing up in an environment saturated with information but scarce in certainty. They face contradictory news, crises, and widespread questioning of facts on a daily basis. In such an atmosphere, trust is easily lost — not only in politicians, but also in the very idea that the world can be influenced through rational debate.

A less visible risk is the relativization of values. Democracy — a hard-won achievement for their parents' generation — is simply the default environment for today's youth. When freedom becomes taken for granted, the emotional connection to it weakens, and so does the perceived need to protect it. Many young people no longer view democracy as a value, but as a kind of basic infrastructure — something replaceable if it stops working efficiently. This pragmatism is understandable, but it can be dangerous if it leads to an erosion of fundamental social trust.

Apathy and the relativization of values are not isolated phenomena; they form a connected chain. Distrust leads to disengagement, disengagement opens the door to simplistic answers, and those answers ultimately undermine the very essence of democratic dialogue. In this situation, appealing to young people's sense of responsibility is no longer enough. It is the task of the state, schools, and civil society to rebuild the conditions in which it feels meaningful to believe that democracy works.

Democracy Is Something We Must Live

The challenges posed by young people's relationship to democracy cannot be addressed by appealing to nostalgia for the past. You cannot convince the post-1989 generation of the value of freedom simply by reminding them what life was like without it. Freedom needs to be redefined as a form of responsibility — something to be developed, not only protected.

Education

Civic education should shift from teaching about institutions to developing practical skills — critical thinking, media literacy, argumentation, and democratic dialogue. Students should not be passive recipients of information about the system, but active participants in it on a small scale: deciding on school projects, debating public issues, or collaborating with their local community.

Such approaches already appear in the work of NGOs like One World at Schools, *Náš stát*, or Stories of Our Neighbours. However, these efforts lack systematic support from the state. The Ministry of Education should embed civic education more firmly in the curriculum and support teachers who are willing to engage with current social issues.

Politics

Young people do not reject politics — they reject its language. They feel lost in bureaucratic jargon and marketing phrases that lack substance. They need political communication that is clear, straightforward, and visually engaging.

Political parties and public institutions should rethink how they speak to the younger generation — not about them, but with them. Instead of campaigns focused solely on election results, they should invest in long-term dialogue: open debates, participatory budgeting, interactive digital platforms, or collaboration with influencers who can talk about public issues without pathos or moralizing.

Civil Society

Young people need to see that their engagement has a real impact. Many organizations today offer volunteer programs, internships, or micro-grants, but these often lack continuity. The key is long-term work with smaller communities: creating mentorships, networks, and opportunities that allow one-off activism to grow into lasting civic competence.

The foundation of a sustainable democracy is trust. It cannot be forced or mandated, but it can be rebuilt through openness, honest communication, and tangible results. The state and the media can help by explaining more, moralizing less, and acknowledging mistakes more often.

Young people do not need to be told that they should be grateful for freedom. They need to experience that freedom works — that their voice matters, that they can influence their surroundings, and that the state cares about their lived experiences.

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