Jacek Poniedziałek* (ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3757-2750)

The young generation as the vanguard of democratic change in Central Europe

Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the results of a youth study carried out in selected post-communist countries in Central Europe, published in the monograph *The Me-Generation in a Post-Collectivist Space. Dilemmas in a Time of Transition*. Its authors ask a question about the role of the young generation in the processes of systemic transformation. Their research reveals that young people have little involvement in public life, rarely participate in elections, and are mostly preoccupied with individual strategies and satisfying their own needs. Those who show an interest in public affairs and actively participate in political life tend to contest the idea of liberal democracy, and support nationalist and populist parties; they blame democracy for failing to fulfil their aspirations. This type of youth generates social changes that contribute to the strengthening of nationalist and anti-European trends in Central Europe. Nevertheless, conclusions presented in the study seem to be overly pessimistic, as there are also groups of young people who present post-materialist attitudes and who are interested in the democratisation of the political systems in their countries.

Keywords: Youth, Central Europe, social change, European Union.

* Institute of Sociology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

In recent years, Central Europe has seen social changes that have slowed down the processes of systemic transformation and the development of social market economies within the democratic political order. The rise of xenophobic and nationalist sentiments, and the loss of faith in the emancipating power of market capitalism, coincide with global tensions. All of this prompts the following question: What direction will the post-communist countries of Central Europe follow? A group of sociologists from Toruń have tried to answer this question in the monograph *The Me-Generation in a Post-Collectivist Space*. They analyse whether the young generation will participate and thus contribute to the processes of systemic transformation in the studied countries; or, conversely, whether they will be a source of problems. This article seeks to determine whether the authors of the publication have succeeded in answering this question.

The Me-Generation in a Post-Collectivist Space:
Description

The book was written by a group of Polish researchers, Krystyna Szafraniec, Jarosław Domalewski, Krzysztof Wasielewski, Paweł Szymborski and Marcin Wernerowicz, who collaborated with other research teams from eight countries: Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Germany, China, Vietnam and Russia. The resulting monograph completes their research work carried out in 2014–2016, as part of the HARMONIA [Harmony] competition held by the National Science Centre (NCN) in Poland.

The aim of the study was to examine the role of the young generation in processes of systemic transformation in the aforementioned countries and in Poland. The authors focus on describing the life situation of today's youth, as determined by the political, socio-cultural and economic conditions resulting from the country's systemic transformation. In their introduction, the authors say: 'We are interested in the direction systemic changes take: if they are to be determined – on the one hand – by innovation reservoirs of the young generation […] and – on the other hand – by structural opportunities created by the system; with its numerous internal deficiencies and difficulties, as well as pressure exerted by global impacts? Can the processes of systemic transformation in these countries count on a supporting contribution from the young generation, or is this

the source of the problems?' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 9). Below they add: 'Whenever we use the terms youth, young generation, or young people, we mean people between the ages of 15 and 30. Indeed, this means that periodisation is happening more frequently in most international studies' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 12). In the Polish context, this applies to young people born and raised in a new political and economic system, i.e. since the country's transformation in the last decade of the 20th century, or those born before the beginning of political changes but who grew up in new political conditions.

When describing the method of obtaining data, the authors explain that the technique they have employed 'in this project is classic desk research, consisting of secondary analysis of existing sources, subordinated to the research purposes of the project'; they aimed to prepare a preliminary diagnosis of the situation of the young generation, mainly on the basis of existing data resources. 'This includes the results of empirical youth-focused research […], monographs, articles and scientific expertise, together with data coming from national and international statistics, social and academic surveys, and reports developed for the purposes of international organisations' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 13). The analysis of the data from the period between 1989 and 2015 is further supported by the authors' own observations from study visits to the examined countries. Their selection for the study was motivated by the fact that such countries constitute 'a specific space of common political core', although 'they have taken various transformative paths and have different – local – problems to solve' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 9).

The English version of the monograph amounts to 369 pages. The book consists of an introduction, six chapters, and conclusions. The introduction presents the aim and object of the research, and the methods used to obtain the data. Next, the economic and demographic aspects of the transformation processes are described, along with the socialisation contexts and life orientations of the studied populations. The third chapter focuses on education, in terms of its function and significance during the transformation. Then the monograph moves on to analysing young people's transition into adulthood, placing a particular emphasis on their professional activity and their presence in the public sphere. Chapter six discusses divisions due to social and material status, presenting them as a threat to social cohesion. Finally, the study offers some conclusions,

pointing to the role that young people can play in transformation processes in the future.

The reviewed study refers to Karl Mannheim's concept, according to which 'the young generation have natural innovative potential resulting from their psychological and social peculiarity and from a particular historical context. This context "strengthens" enculturatively obtained features of youth as features of the generation' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 12). In this sense, young people are, by their inherent nature, agents of social change, and play a particularly significant role in the times of inevitable, rapid social change. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the studied countries were on the verge of political transformation. The young generation at that time stood at the forefront of the changes, contributing to the dynamics of political transformation in their countries.

The European Union (EU) is nowadays confronted with changes of similar significance. With China's economic expansion, Russian imperialism, the influx of refugees and the growing climate crisis, the current political and economic models are running out of development opportunities. One of the most severe challenges faced by the EU today is the growing anti-democratic and nationalist trend in Central Europe, which violates the laws and rules that govern the European Community. Poland and Hungary have been identified as the primary sources of these decomposition processes (Jaskulski 2016: 230). They are followed, albeit to a lesser extent, by Romania and Bulgaria; and neither Slovakia nor Czechia is entirely free of similar trends (Świder 2018: 26). The situation in these member states is beginning to be recognised as a threat to the unity and stability of the EU, which has found itself on the brink of critical change. Taking this context into account, will young people be a social force that generates change? Will they defend or reform the old order, or will they be the source of growing problems? (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 5).

The youth in post-communist countries have been considerably influenced by the processes of systemic transformation. Large numbers of young people have availed themselves of opportunities offered by European integration. The young generation in Central Europe can therefore initiate social changes to stop the process of moving away from liberal democracy, the rule of law and social market economy, and return to the path of changes launched by systemic transformation. Disregarding traditional forms of political activity and using the tools that come with digital democracy,

they can initiate the exchange of political elites and redirect the trajectory of development towards a further and closer integration of the EU. 'The political emancipation of the young generation in Central Europe will be necessary if the latter is to return to Europe – just like their parents demanded three decades ago' (Forbig, Przybylski 2018: 13). However, is such a scenario probable?

The Me-Generation: The Central European context

Selected post-communist countries were included in the analysis. Their choice was determined by the decision to compare states whose systems are very much alike. The authors argue that although it produced different results, the shared experience of a communist past and systemic transformation makes the systems of the studied countries similar (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 15). However, in my opinion this argument is not sufficient justification for regarding all the analysed states as possessing a single set of equivalent systems. For cultural, political and economic reasons it would be difficult to compare China, Vietnam or Russia with European countries that are EU member states. Thus, when analysing the role that young people can play in the process of their country's return to the path set by transformation processes, one should first rule out the states that never left this path – i.e. the new federal states of Germany (the former East Germany) and Latvia.

The assumption of the study was that Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria have followed the model of a complete and extensive civic transformation in all spheres of life (economy, politics, culture), and with a wide spectrum of equal actors (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 17). What they also have in common is EU membership, and historically established characteristics that distinguish them from the countries of Western Europe. The latter features include the long dependence on external political centres, late transition from feudalism to capitalism, delayed development of national identity, and a strong and lasting sense of religious identity with a variety of denominations. They are countries that for many years were dominated by a development model based on Soviet Marxism, which functioned differently in the respective countries. The pace and depth of the post-1989 systemic transformations in Hungary and Poland were

comparable. Consequently, both Hungary (until the second victory of Fidesz in the 2010 elections) and Poland (until the second victory of the Law and Justice party in the 2015 elections) were recognised as examples of successful transformation (Kowalski 2009: 277; Pająk-Patkowska & Patkowski 2012: 273–274). Another similarity is the anti-democratic and anti-liberal revolution that started in Hungary in 2010 and in Poland in 2015. It has led to the formation of conservative autocracies in these states – operating within capitalist economies, they reveal features typical of clientelism and statism (Magyar 2018).

In my opinion, the study could only benefit if the authors had included in their analysis the situation of youth in the Czech Republic and Slovakia – two countries with a history and culture similar to Poland's and Hungary's – even more so when considering that 'culture determines almost everything' (Landes 2003: 42). Having successfully completed the profound transformation of their economies and political systems, these two states have in recent years also been governed by populists who refer to nationalism, albeit without violating the EU's principles (Bujwid-Kurek & Mikucka-Wójtowicz 2015: 90–140).

The situation in Romania and Bulgaria is slightly different. In the study, the authors explain that the transformation in these two countries was delayed, with post-communist parties – rather than social movements established by former dissidents – as the main political force responsible for the reforms. The transformation of their economic and political systems towards the Western European model in fact started only with the pre-accession negotiations, i.e. when their EU membership became more probable. However, the political and economic changes were here not as profound as in the countries of the Visegrád Group. Their political systems have proved to be corrupt and based largely on clientelistic capitalism (Szyszlak 2017: 140). The standard of living of the Romanian and Bulgarian populations, including their young generations, is significantly lower than that of Western Europe, and even in comparison with the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary (Klonowska 2018: 79). Bulgaria and Romania remain within the area of influence of the Orthodox culture, while Poland and Hungary belong to the Latin cultural circle (Huntington 2006: 61–272). Therefore, in my opinion, out of the nine countries discussed in the study, only four seem to have developed similar systems.

According to the monograph, young people in these countries are

… defined by a local reality (entangled in immediate, communist past as well as in the more distant one), and on the other, by a global reality (particularly expansive in the area of culture, and additionally strengthened by activities of supernational organisations, political and – first and foremost – economic ones). They both create a very complex, dynamic and unpredictable space that generates symbiotic, irreversible and unstable relations with its own (internal) and external environment. (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 337)

This raises the following questions: can the young generations of these states – forced to function within the local and global logic simultaneously, i.e. in the EU and in states that are increasingly deviating from the EU model – become an agent of change in the immediate future? One that will bring the political transformation in the said countries back to the path of democracy? Will they become active and trigger *a spring of change*, similar to the one that spread across Central Europe in 1989? (Forbig & Przybylski 2018: 13).

The young generation as a force of democracy in Central Europe

To become a major social force that generates change, the young generation would have to engage in political activities on a massive scale. According to *Me-Generation*, the youth in the analysed four countries are included among groups presenting a 'lower level of political engagement and activity […]. Generally, young people do not care for matters which do not have direct influence on their lives and political matters count amongst these' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 256). On average, 30% of young people aged 18–29 expressed that they had an interest in politics in 2015, with most of them describing themselves as 'rather interested'. 'The level of declared electoral participation amongst young people is lower in comparison to older people' (ibidem: 267). Due to the *ageing of populations*, young people have ceased to be the dominant demographic in the structure of the studied societies. This, in addition to their limited interest in politics, suggests a certain level of scepticism when envisioning young people as a significant political force seeking to democratise Central Europe. In political elections, the middle-

aged and older generations, i.e. mature people and the so-called *grey-haired voters*, seem to have more significance than young people.

In general, the electoral activity of the young generation is small; this is due to the low level of trust in political institutions, such as parties, parliaments and governments. In the analysed countries, 'barely every tenth person gives any trust to the political parties. The average for the states of Central Europe has been increased by Hungary where the level of trust in political institutions is almost identical with the indexes reported for the EU' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 262). This distrust is reflected in the fact that 'young people do not perceive politics as a career opportunity for themselves. The person who would like to change the surrounding reality through party activity has to be confronted with a wall of social suspicion' (ibidem: 263). This is best illustrated by the low representation of young people aged 15–29 in political parties across the entire structure of party membership. According to Statistics Poland (GUS), they accounted for only 6.8% of all registered members of Polish political parties (GUS 2018: 4). The situation is similar in other countries of Central Europe, where young people also constitute merely a small percentage of local party membership (Barański et al. 2018).

The study argues that despite their low political activity, the majority of the youth in the analysed countries (between 70 and 80%) perceives democracy to be the best of political systems and 'appreciates the value of freedom (of speech and expression), human rights, democracy' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 254). However, this vision of pro-democratic attitudes among young people seems to differ from other studies of young populations in Central Europe. Relevant studies of political inclinations in this part of Europe show that democracy is believed to be the best system by 40–50% of young respondents, while 35–40% of them point to authoritarian systems as an attractive alternative (Marzęcki 2017: 137). This corresponds to opinion polls conducted between 2010 and 2018, which showed a rising support for political parties that undermine the very ethos of liberal democracies and their existence. In Central Europe, young people's support for nationalist parties which, indirectly or directly, called for the introduction of authoritarian rule, was constantly on the rise. In Poland and Hungary, nearly 50% of young people aged 18–24 voted for Law and Justice (PiS) and the National Movement/Confederation (Poland), or Fidesz and Jobbik (Hungary) (Barański et al. 2018: 19–20). High support levels for nation-

alist parties are also reported for young people in Bulgaria and Romania (Czarnecki 2019: 149–164; Muś 2019: 165–178).

This suggests a generational reversal:

> Not so long ago, young people were much more enthusiastic than older people about democratic values: In the first waves of the World Values Survey, in 1981–84 and 1990–93, young respondents were much keener than their elders on protecting freedom of speech and significantly less likely to embrace political radicalism. Today, the roles have reversed: On the whole, support for political radicalism … is higher among the young, and support for freedom of speech lower. (Foa & Mounk 2016: 8)

This phenomenon is not studied in depth in the monograph; although in my opinion, nationalist social movements are affecting and will continue to significantly affect the functioning of Central European countries in the immediate future. The rise of nationalist attitudes is visible in the young generation, as exemplified by Poland and Hungary, as well as Bulgaria and Romania. A significant percentage of politically active youth reveals anti-democratic and nationalist inclinations. Moreover, young nationalists in this part of Europe are well organised, politically active and increasingly better educated. A national community, defined ethnically, holds a key position in their system of values (Cordell & Jajecznik 2015); this may be illustrated by their attitude to the EU. As YouGov reports, more than a half of young people in Europe see the EU no longer as a community of values, but rather as a framework for the economic cooperation among nation-states (Forbig & Przybylski 2018: 7).

However, research shows that some groups of the young generation in this part of Europe reject nationalist attitudes. They include students or graduates of universities who live in large cities – a post-materialist social group that tends to identify with displays of attachment to democracy and freedom of speech. It is visible in their 'preferences for decisions of the government which consider the opinions of the people to a greater extent, increasing the influence of people on their occupational environments and local community […]; intentions to protect freedom of speech; ambition to head to a more friendly, less impersonal society' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 253). For this youth, liberal democracy and the values on which the EU is founded continue to be an important element of their worldview

(ibidem: 247). They form a counterbalance to the young people who turn against the values promoted by the democratic EU member states.

It seems that young nationalists are better organised and participate more regularly in public life, as well as in elections, compared to young liberals (Malendowicz 2017: 115–126). However, the pro-democratic youth are far from passive. In Central Europe, young people often organise protest actions and marches to support or oppose a law: 'There are many examples of such engagement from young people from the post-communist countries over the recent years. Many protest marches which have taken place in the capital cities in those countries have been initiated through the social media' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 274). For example, in 2014, young Hungarians protested against the government's plan to implement a tax on Internet data transfers. Two years later, Black Protests were held in Poland as a response to the attempts to introduce a total ban on abortion.

In light of the above, can young people with such worldviews stand at the forefront of pro-democratic and pro-European changes in Central Europe? We know from experience that this has been the case in the recent past. In 2007, people aged 18–24 in Poland voted against the conservative and nationalist Law and Justice party, which brought a political shift towards democracy and the EU that lasted for eight years. Undoubtedly, the fact that the monograph offers detailed data in the analysis of youth of both political profiles is one of its advantages. However, it would be all the more valuable if this highly axiological schism were more emphasised and more thoroughly studied in the context of the authors' question about the fate of transformation processes.

The aforementioned intragenerational schism may be also found in another problem analysed in the study: economic growth and social inequalities related to it. A significant proportion of young people in Central Europe cannot count on reaching a higher social and material status to the extent that their parents did. Social inequalities, economic stratification and inability to satisfy one's aspirations are increasing (Czakon 2017: 149). This is particularly true of the relatively poorly educated youth living in small towns and villages (Becker-Pestka, Kubliński & Lojko 2017: 16–31; Raczkowska & Wrzesińska-Kowal 2018: 12–13). Young people in Central Europe are increasingly aware of the gap between the poor and the rich, which translates into their growing reluctance towards liberal democracy and the market economy. Democratic elites and the EU are often held

responsible for this divide. Hence, young people's inability to meet their needs feeds their dissatisfaction with the status quo (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 283–284). The authorities in Central European countries are finding it difficult to deal with growing social inequalities,

> … and the political changes implemented at the institutional level are crashing the expectations and aspirations of people, which are exceeding the system's capabilities. … When the situation, like in those countries, is becoming so bad that a significant proportion of society are incapable of having an influence on their own destiny (and, simultaneously, are declaring their lack of trust in authority and a wish to take matters into their own hands), it is worth wondering how a state and a civic society could respond to avoid radicalisation of the losers. (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 329)

Social inequalities are much more significant in Central Europe than in Western or Northern Europe. The authors conclude that '"the rich–the poor" opposition becomes important, or even the most important axis of divisions in post-communist countries' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 280). The monograph shows that the scale of poverty related to social inequalities does not go unnoticed by representatives of the young generation. This situation is blamed on the economic system developed in the course of transformation:

> In all countries the threat of poverty concerning young people is higher than that concerning the representatives of older age groups. In particular, the youngest representatives are below the age of 25 and either are still learning/studying (depending on their usually poor parents) or – as the youngest – receive the least profitable job offers (or do not receive them at all). (ibidem: 281)

The said social inequalities are an intergenerational phenomenon that hinders vertical social mobility, particularly in areas where no systemic state support is available to eliminate them. A study by Florian Hertel and Olaf Groh-Samberg, *The Relation between inequality and intergenerational class mobility* (2019), shows that in the group of 39 richest countries, the highest level of inequality was reported for those in Central Europe. This is also where – in the absence of a social policy offering equal opportunities for

representatives of different social classes – two phenomena have developed that contribute to a lasting social divide. The first of them, called the '*sticky floor*', makes it extremely difficult for young people to rise out of poverty; it is a cycle of poverty inherited through generations. The second trend is known as the '*sticky ceiling*', which refers to well-off and middle-income families who are effective in ensuring that their cultural, social and material capital is multiplied and passed on from generation to generation.

Consequently, two dominant types may be distinguished in the population of young people. On the one hand, we have the poor youth with limited opportunities to gain better social status; they contest the rules that govern market capitalism, calling them unfair. On the other hand, there are young people who are satisfied with their life situation, as they are beneficiaries of systemic transformation. Society's economic stratification, combined with reduced opportunities for social promotion, poses a risk to social integration; while social inequality is indicated as 'an emerging, serious social problem' that remains unresolved (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 286–287).

The study shows that social inequalities, which prevent the fulfilment of one's aspirations, are more pronounced in consumer societies. In these contexts, individualist attitudes become a mass phenomenon, in which a person's value is not measured by their engagement in work for the community, but by their individual success, defined as accumulated material possessions. Individualisation also brings changes in terms of social relations. Traditional patterns of social control begin to be questioned as mechanisms that undermine the basic right to individual freedom, which is believed to be a fundamental right of the individual. Consequently, a completely different system of intergenerational relations has emerged, along with the infantilisation of culture. Symptoms of social disintegration are also clearly noticeable (Beck 2004).

All these processes are discussed in the study. The authors point out the growing individualisation of personal and materialist attitudes among the young generations in Central Europe. Individualism and consumerism create new conditions for the socialisation of youth; they put pressure on the individual to succeed, which is equal to seeking personal gain, instead of acting for the common good of entire communities. Collectivist orientations are essentially being replaced by individualism. It is not the civic community that is the goal of young people's actions and aspirations; instead, they strive for a high economic status and a unique professional

career while pursuing their passions (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 103–104). Young people in Central Europe expect the following from the state authorities: 'maintenance of order in the country; maintenance of high economic growth rate and a stable economy' (ibidem: 253). In their opinion, the state must, first of all, ensure the conditions necessary for young people to achieve their individual ambitions.

In times of high economic growth, this is possible even in the conservative and nationalist autocracies of Poland and Hungary. It may therefore be presumed that as long as economic prosperity continues in Central Europe, young people are unlikely to become a catalyst for pro-democratic changes in their countries. The growing levels of social inequality may change this situation, as they make it impossible to satisfy the needs generated by consumer culture. Despite the dominance of individualistic orientations, the authors of the study observe that one can also find examples of post-materialist common-good-oriented attitudes 'where ideas mean more than money' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 253). However, the authors stop there. They simply state that such groups of young people, depositaries of post-materialist axionormative systems, exist; no attempt is made at a more thorough analysis of this category of youth.

An in-depth study could reveal yet another new divide that seems to be emerging among the youth in Central Europe, with post-materialist orientations at one end and various consumerist-individualist attitudes at the other. This is a secondary distinction, marked by two antagonistic approaches. The first revolves around values such as participatory democracy, affirmation of social and cultural diversity, and being environmentally friendly. It is contrasted with the post-materialist orientation, which recognises the nation's ethnic identity as the fundamental value. The latter belief clearly promotes the supremacy of national community over individual interests. In *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy* (2019), Iwan Krystew and Stephan Holmes show that in Central European countries, particularly Poland and Hungary, nationalism is the idea that has the greatest power to build a community. Some young people see it as a counterbalance to multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, which they regard as a threat to the moral condition of the nation. An analysis of these discrepancies in the young generation would enrich the study and provide a more complete answer to the question about the future of transformation processes.

Authors who consider young people as a source of potential social change may have been inspired by Florian Znaniecki's works. He presented youth as an actually existing social group which, thanks to socialisation processes, has the ability to integrate the present and the future. It constitutes a mechanism that ensures the continuity of the social structure, which is at permanent risk, due to the unavoidable exchange of components. On the one hand, the young generation is the most important element of society's cultural tradition and its continuation; on the other, it is a significant factor of social innovation (Znaniecki 1973). The acquisition of social skills encourages participation in collective actions that are beneficial to individuals who undertake them, while securing the cultural interests and traditions of society as a whole. It allows us to raise people capable of creating societies of a new type, which will soon replace the current ones. In addition to initiating the collective tasks in groups that we are already familiar with, young people are also predisposed to create new groups. By acting, they integrate the 'old' values with the 'new'. Oriented towards their future and current roles, they act as mediators in the dialogue between the more and less conservative circles, and between the microstructures in the local community (family, peer groups, neighbours) and global society (Chałasiński 1938).

However, in postmodern societies, young generations are no longer depositaries or mediators of an intact cultural heritage created by previous generations. With family no longer having a monopoly on education, and with socio-professional status no longer dependent on class privileges, place of work or residence – and in light of the social mobility that comes with these developments – the burden of the socialisation process falls upon other agencies. As well as educational institutions, they include organisations associated with mass culture, particularly new media. This change has an effect on relations between generations, altering them fundamentally and thus threatening the continuity of cultural tradition. This is the background for the socialisation processes of youth in Central Europe. As the study aptly concludes, 'it means entering adolescence in both a dynamically changing and dimorphic social environment, while the basic socialisation agendas have their share in this phenomenon. They no longer create a once-uniform educative front, but work on behalf of their own (sometimes very different) interests and goals' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 110).

The study points to school as one of the most important socialisation agencies. However, the authors observe that schools no longer play the role of the institutional keystone for generations. Educating enlightened citizens and active consumers of cultural goods created by previous generations has ceased to be their primary goal. Instead, schools are increasingly responsible for 'delivering' human capital to the market, i.e. training individualists interested in personal success, who will be useful for future employers. Ongoing problems with underinvestment, bureaucracy and insufficiently prepared teaching staff are the reason why most students in Central Europe 'complain that the education system is not well adapted to the current world of work' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 95). On the one hand, contemporary schooling seeks to educate regarding the roles of the consumer and employee; but by failing to do it well, it causes frustration and dissatisfaction among young people. On the other hand, it promotes historical education with the aim of developing attitudes oriented towards the ethnically defined national community. It tries to prepare young people for the role of members of the nation, while neglecting the formation of attitudes characteristic of liberal democracies (Belowski 2017: 113).

The study points out that schools and many universities in the four analysed countries also promote historical education, without offering a critical analysis of the history of national communities; thus, they are essentially strengthening the nationalist narrative. 'Media, parents and school have neglected citizenship education […]. Family socialisation has focused on investing in the future career of the children, to wipe public affairs from the field of their interests' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 237–238). The authors also argue that 'generally […] churches and religions in post-communist countries do not have major influence on the youth, although they have such ambitions' (ibidem: 93). One can hardly agree with such an explicit statement. While churches in Central Europe do not influence young people as much as they did in the past, a certain percentage of youth still remains in the orbit of religious institutions. Comparative research carried out in this part of Europe shows that with the ethnicisation of the sacred and the sacralisation of the ethnos, churches have strengthened their role as socialising agencies for ethnically defined national communities. Attitudes presented by young people under the influence of these institutions are more often anti-liberal and nationalist rather than open, tolerant and pluralistic (Zenderowski 2011: 40–42).

The authors also propose that in the studied post-communist countries, 'political indoctrination, focusing on collectivity and in praise of modesty, has been replaced by an ideology of consumerism and thinking in categories of individual success. The impact of other models is very small. As a result, young people plan their life and identity in an area considerably dominated by consumption; this is not problematised either by politicians or parents and teachers' (Szafraniec et al. 2018: 86). The main value conveyed in the socialisation message is the hedonistic satisfaction of meeting one's individual, mostly material needs. New digital technologies are indicated as one of the principal sources and an effective medium for this type of socialisation content. 'The youth from the post-communist countries more often perceived the Internet in the category of chances rather than threats, in comparison to their contemporaries from the rest of the countries of the European Union. Young Germans are the exception and appear to be the most sceptical' (ibidem: 276).

The study gives surprisingly little consideration to the socialisation power of new social media. In fact, it only states that they constitute an important socialisation agenda, but less so than school or parents. However, social pedagogy research shows that they are now becoming the most significant institutions in the socialisation of youth, replacing parents, school and church (Forma 2015). In contemporary youth studies, the role and significance of such socialisation agencies should therefore be discussed as a key problem. This is because 'social media are nowadays the most important and most authoritative source of knowledge about social reality; they are the "lens" through which young people view the world and which is identical for all young people across regions and countries' (Dobrołowicz 2014: 149). An analysis of the content and trends emerging in the cyberworld could help the authors of the study to answer the question about the young generation's possible impact on socio-political processes that are likely to take place in Europe in the immediate future.

Conclusion

The publication reviewed here is a valuable sociological study of young people in selected post-communist countries, and the role that they have played and will continue to play in transformation processes. Those inter-

ested in youth will find it a rich source of information about the education of the young generation, its situation in the labour market, political activity, and attitudes towards family and church. One of the important and valuable aspects of the manuscript is that it shows the importance and shifting role of the main agencies responsible for the socialisation of youth. By analysing a wide spectrum of phenomena concerning youth, the authors have outlined a solid and fairly comprehensive picture of the young generation. Nevertheless, the multitude of topics addressed in the study has resulted in some of them being discussed rather superficially. This applies particularly to the political involvement of the young generation and the impact that social media has on them. The key problem – i.e. the division of the young generation into beneficiaries of transformation processes and those who have been marginalised because of them – has been discussed rather briefly, with its significance underlined only at the end of the study.

The authors ask if the processes of systemic transformation in the studied countries can count on a supporting contribution from the young generation, or whether young people are the source of the problems. Their conclusions are pessimistic. A significant percentage of young people feel disappointed with Central European democracies and the forms of capitalist economies that have developed in their countries. This results in a low level of civic activity among youth, further exacerbated by the non-existent offer of civic education, the provision of which could raise young people's awareness of being members of political communities. Those who are politically active often vote for authoritarian and nationalist groups that question the post-transformation order; and the beneficiaries of transformation processes are rich hedonists who are not interested in liberal democracy. The study concludes that youth will not be the driving force of democratisation processes in the analysed post-communist countries.

This image of youth seems to be overly pessimistic. Researchers point to other possible scenarios – according to some of them, young people will be the social force that will make the countries of the region return to the path of continued democratisation and development of the social market economy (Forbig & Przybylski 2018). The authors of the study, as if contrary to their own conclusions, also point out that this scenario, the co-called Spring 2.0, might become a reality. For some representatives of the young generation, post-materialist values, activity in anti-fascist movements, fighting for the emancipation of minority groups and environmental

protection are important. Analyses show that these groups of young people have the ability to restore the project of building European democracies that was started 30 years ago, although they are likely to encounter resistance from their peers, who want their countries to depart from the model of Western democracy. Time will show which of these groups of young people will play the leading role in the future.

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