

Radosław MARZĘCKI 

Pedagogical University of Kraków, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Poland

Does the “Generation of Freedom” Really Exist? Evidence from Qualitative Research among Polish and Ukrainian Students

**Czy „pokolenie wolności” naprawdę istnieje? Dowód z badań jakościowych
przeprowadzonych wśród polskich i ukraińskich studentów**

• Abstract •

Thirty years after the onset of democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe, the first generations of post-communist societies have been raised, educated and become professionally active. Objectively, they are a specific group of people whose primary and secondary socialisation occurred during a period that differed profoundly from that of their parents and older acquaintances. The article presents the results of a qualitative study conducted among Polish and Ukrainian students to diagnose their subjective generational self-identifications. The aim of the study was to determine whether and how young people in both countries perceive themselves and their social environment, and whether they identify themselves in terms of a unique generation.

Keywords: generation; generational identity; youth; Poland; Ukraine

• Abstrakt •

Trzydzieści lat demokratyzacji Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej wyznacza okres, w którym urodziło się, wychowało, wykształciło i uaktywniło zawodowo pierwsze pokolenie w społeczeństwach postkomunistycznych. Obiektywnie rzecz biorąc, stanowi ono specyficzną grupę osób, których pierwotna i wtórna socjalizacja przypadła na okres głęboko różniący się od czasu, w którym żyli ich rodzice i starsi znajomi. W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badania jakościowego przeprowadzonego wśród polskich i ukraińskich studentów w celu zdiagnozowania ich subiektywnych samoidentyfikacji pokoleniowych. Celem badania było określenie, czy i jak młodzi ludzie w obu krajach postrzegają siebie i swoje otoczenie społeczne oraz czy identyfikują się w kategoriach wyjątkowego pokolenia.

Słowa kluczowe: pokolenie; tożsamość pokoleniowa; młodzież; Polska; Ukraina

Introduction

Post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where the transformation process started 30 years ago, faced the challenge of solving a number of problems in many areas simultaneously: political (democratisation), economic (marketisation), and social (building a civil society in unfavourable institutional conditions) (Nikolayenko, 2011). In some countries – like in Ukraine – the transformation had to quadruple: it was necessary to rebuild statehood (after the collapse of the USSR) and national identity (to overcome the problem of incomplete and distorted identity) (Kuzio, 1997, p. 3, Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015), which created a substantial diversion from two major goals: building a developed democracy and an efficient free market economy (Riabczuk, 2017, pp. 13–14). The new system, in an attempt to set a path of democratisation, created new mechanisms, but originally they were not “perfect”, many people did not understand them, and moreover, they needed time to adapt to them (Ágh, 2001). There is no doubt – both from the theoretical perspective and from the practice of everyday life – that young people can be social innovators, because they represent the generation of the political turning point (García-Albacete, 2014, p. 2). The multifaceted consequences of the political changes initiated in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe prompt us to adopt a generational perspective in our attempt to interpret the attitudes and views of those who were born after the fall of communism and who are today – increasingly – beginning to affect contemporary politics. This approach assumes that young age is a special period in terms of the formation of political attitudes (Wielecki, 1990) and is founded on the general premise that the basic structure of the human personality, including our fundamental values, is formed even before we reach adulthood, undergoing hardly any change thereafter (Inglehart, 1977, 1990, 2018; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Neundorff, Smets, & García-Albacete, 2013). Political, economic, social and cultural transitions have set the boundaries and conditions for the socialisation of these young people. They are a source of important social experiences and can shape a kind of ‘generational identity’ (Garewicz, 1983). This concept is used less frequently in the socio-political literature today, although research on social identity is conducted on a large scale. A closer observation of these generational self-identifications of young citizens of post-communist countries can reveal a great deal about the nature of the political system and the prospects for change (Diuk, 2012, 2013). In the views, needs, aspirations or emotions of young people, one can reveal their attitudes to the ‘world of politics’ (political elites) and the ‘world of parents or grandparents’ (older generations) around them (Settersten, 1999).

Research methodology

The main motive for undertaking this research was to empirically identify a group of citizens that can be defined as the “generation of freedom”. A similar term (the “first free generation”) was already used by Nadia Diuk (2012) to refer to young people in all post-Soviet countries. In this article, I present a more detailed conceptualisation of this social category, however, the most important research goals are of empirical nature. Consequently, I am going to discuss primarily the results of qualitative research used to determine the generational self-identification of young Poles and Ukrainians. The existence of a generation is often inferred from external labels or internal self-identification. I focus primarily on whether and how young Poles and Ukrainians perceive their social environment in generational terms. A series of 40 individual in-depth interviews (20 interviews in each country) was conducted among Polish and Ukrainian students to scrutinize the youths’ self-identification. The field research was conducted between 2018 (autumn) and 2019 (spring) using the strategy of mixed methods: both qualitative and quantitative (Hewson, 2006, p. 180).¹ This approach was put forward because the description and explanation of thus defined research problem required not only showing the scale of specific phenomena (the dissemination of views, values or behaviours in a population), but also gaining a better understanding of them, looking into their in-depth rationale, and exploring motives, emotions, desires and interests of the respondents (Creswell, 2009). In the qualitative stage, deliberate selection was used with an important recruitment criterion for the study being the social role in the academic circles: the respondents were activists in student organisations and councils.

The aim of the study was to determine whether: (1) young people underline different conditions in which they grew up (compared to their parents) while describing their own position and social role; (2) they emphasize their own (group) otherness, a sense of a generational community; (3) they describe (and how) the typical attitudes of representatives of their generation? I assume that the respondents selected in this way are competent enough to depict their social environment in detail. Therefore, I hypothesize that the students participating in the study will emphasize the generational identity of their social environment, although I expect differences in the way of describing and assessing the dominant attitudes of young Poles and Ukrainians.

¹ I discuss the detailed results of the research (both qualitative and quantitative) in a separate book (see: Marzęcki, 2020).

Theoretical concept of “generation of freedom”

In the classical paradigm proposed by Karl Mannheim, a generation is understood as “a particular kind of identity of location”, which means that although the “phenomenon of generations is ultimately based on the biological rhythm of birth and death”, social interactions between people, social structure and history are of the utmost importance for the formation of a generational community (Mannheim, 1952, pp. 290–292). When using the term “generation of freedom”, we should bear in mind that human behaviour and attitudes are shaped through participation in specific social and cultural events occurring at a given historical moment, which evoke and perpetuate similar reactions to these events (the so-called “generational community”) (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). It is in this context that Gema García-Albacete (2014) uses the term “generation”, when she proposes to distinguish between the so-called political generations and sociological or political cohorts. The concept of a cohort hence denotes features ensuing from evolutionary changes in society (an example is the development of education or new technologies which permanently changes the patterns of behaviour or hierarchies of values); while political generations signifies groups defined by specific political events (such as wars or transformations of political regimes). The “generation of freedom” is a social construct, in the meaning of which both the age of individuals, their stage of life (adolescence, possibly early adulthood, but not yet full adulthood), the moment of their birth (after Poland gained independence in 1989 and Ukraine in 1991 – as the inability to relate the relationship of the “old” system to one’s own, even fragmentary, experiences), but most of all the life circumstances of their socialisation (years of growing up, entering social relationships, contacts with the institutions), which both constitute a political generation and a sociological cohort. The “generation of freedom” means, first of all, a group of people whose time of birth and, in particular, the period of primary and secondary socialisation fell under particular new conditions, different from those in which their parents and older colleagues and friends spent most of their lives. In other words, the “generation of freedom” is the generation of the time of freedom, democratisation, marketisation of the economy, strengthening of sovereignty, and becoming independent from old – undemocratic – political structures. These are the people who cannot remember the “old” system because they did not experience it first-hand (Nikolayenko, 2011; Diuk, 2012). The contemporary context of their socialisation will be crucial for the socio-political attitudes they will represent in the future, since the development of a young person’s personality occurs in interaction with the socially transmitted social and material environment (Tillmann, 1989).

The concept of the “generation of freedom” relies on several important theoretical assumptions. The first is that each young generation introduces into social life partly a new set of norms and values, and partly also reproduces those behavioral patterns instilled in it by “significant others” or symbolic elites (Giddens, 1976). Young Poles and Ukrainians can act as a “revitalising factor” in socio-political changes, because attitude change through generational renewal represents one possible scenario for social development in light of demographic trends. Therefore, in their attitudes, we can look for values that were not present in the attitudes of societies during the communist period. This specificity is sometimes described in generational terms. In Polish political and sociological literature, we can find terms such as “independence generation” (Kuisz, 2018), “transformation generation” (Biernat, 2006; Galas, 1996; Sińczuch, 2011), or “1989 generation” (Mach, 2003; Guzik, Marzęcki, & Stach, 2015). A similar interpretive framework is used to describe the attitudes of young Ukrainians. For example, Anna Fournier (2012, p. 2) analyses the attitudes of “the first generation of post-Soviet youth (children born after 1991)” for whom the Orange Revolution was the landmark event that shaped their political personality. It is worth noting the argument justifying the possibility of treating a certain cohort of young people in generational terms. The generational factor is their shared psychological experience, which should constitute a ‘generational identity’. The importance of ‘shared generational experience’ was already recognised by Karl Mannheim (1952). It is worth bearing in mind that each generation matures socially under the influence of different events (Garewicz, 1983), but what is at stake here is not individual events, but broader processes that reflect “the totality of social, economic and political relations in which children, and then young people grow up before they become a generation” (Wielecki, 1990, p. 71). The change in the conditions of socialisation that followed the breakdown of the “old system” and the onset of the political transformation in Poland (1989) and Ukraine (1991) redefined the opportunities and threats that most likely would not have occurred if both countries had not entered the phase of democratic transition (Bunce, 1998; Way, 2004; McFaul, 2009). In the case of Poland, these opportunities included joining NATO and the European Union (which affected, for example, the security, mobility and freedom of travel, and economic development), while in the case of Ukraine, we must mention Russia’s policy, which resulted in suppressing its aspirations to further approximate Europe, in political destabilisation, and violation of the country’s integrity or the war in the eastern territories (Diamond, 2020). In this sense, the transformation considerably influenced all the most important determinants of the socialisation of contemporary societies in Poland and Ukraine, thus becoming a generational effect (García-Albacete, 2014, pp. 55–56). Additionally,

the social and material background of the personality development of the young generation was not uniform in all countries transitioning away from communism. Poland and Ukraine have a different past, their potential at the time when they were gaining sovereignty, adaptation and modernisation strategies in the first decade of transformation, political decisions, their social and economic effects in the following years, and positions in networks of international dependencies, which determine their prospects for a future, also differed (Havrylyshyn, 2006, 2017). Therefore, comparing the effects of these two different socialisation contexts (in the context of other countries in Central Europe and Eurasia, as illustrated in Table 1) on political culture can be interesting.

Table 1. Freedom Rating According to Freedom House for Selected Countries in 2018 (at the time of the research used in this article)

	Freedom rating	Status*
Norway	100	F
Sweden	100	F
Germany	94	F
France	90	F
Estonia	94	F
Lithuania	91	F
Czech Republic	91	F
Slovakia	88	F
Latvia	87	F
POLAND	84	F
Romania	81	F
Hungary	70	PF
UKRAINE	60	PF
Moldova	58	PF
Russia	20	NF
Belarus	19	NF
Kyrgyzstan	38	PF
Kazakhstan	22	NF
Azerbaijan	11	NF
Uzbekistan	9	NF
Tajikistan	9	NF
Turkmenistan	2	NF

Based on Freedom in the World 2019.

* F – *Free*; PF – *Partly Free*; NF – *Not Free*

The quality of democracy is a chief factor that determines the process of socialisation, i.e., young people acquiring attitudes through observation, analysis and evaluation of socio-political life (Babakina, 2010). The condition of civil society depends not only on formal education, but is also influenced by the actual practice of the functioning of the political system, the contradiction between actions and statements and promises of the leaders, and the criticism and distrust of society towards the elite and political institutions. Civic education is often ineffective because the world of institutions is not a sufficient guarantee of the credibility of educational content. Olha Batishcheva has accurately diagnosed this problem in the Ukrainian context, arguing that “it is difficult to ‘teach democracy’ when young people see that it does not exist in the state” (Batishcheva, 2013, p. 11). Obviously, we should also take into account other contexts that determine the processes of socialization of young generations in both countries, such as geopolitical, historical, cultural or economic factors. For example, Ukraine’s GDP (billions of USD in current prices) in 2018 accounted for 22% of Poland’s GDP in the same period, while GDP per capita – for 20% (data from the World Bank). Finally, the agents of primary socialisation (mainly the family) have a fundamental effect on young people’s attitudes and values (Flanagan, 2003). For example, older generations can act as positive (source of norms and role models) or negative reference groups (Newcomb, 1953). In the latter case, the individuals try to oppose the role models and standards of the negative group and want to distinguish themselves from it as much as possible. If we have assumed that a generation is a cohort of people of similar age who experience common historical events during a critical period of identity formation, this does not mean that all people who belong to a generation have identical detailed standards, values and views. They are different in terms of how they have been raised, the socio-cultural environment, and the level of education. Therefore historical and social events affect people differently, even though they grew up at the same time (Islam & Haque, 2021, p. 2; Alwin & McCammon, 2007). We can rather speak of a dominant model of norms and values and co-existing ‘alternative versions’ of this pattern (Hildebrandt-Wypych, 2009).

Empirical exemplification

Both young Poles and Ukrainians strongly emphasise the different conditions (in a positive sense) in which they grew up (compared to their parents). Interestingly, the importance of the fall of communism as a caesura separating the “world of parents” from the “world of young people” is more emotionally accentuated by

young Ukrainians, who mainly appreciate the freedom of expression in the political revolution. This observation can be interpreted as an indicator of a discursive community of values. It is worth quoting some of the students' statements (their answers to the question: "Young people, born after the transformations of 1989/1991, are sometimes referred to as the 'generation of freedom', the '1989/1991 generation'. Do you feel that you have grown up and lived in special conditions, which were unlike those of your parents' youth?"):

I think so, because our parents survived both the totalitarian regime and then the 1980s and 1990s, i.e., the transformation of the Soviet Union. They are experiencing a loss of Soviet consciousness, but also no awareness of the citizen of independent Ukraine is born. They have a warped consciousness, almost every one of them does. As for our generation, we really do have the freedom of thought [Kiev].

This is how I feel the difference. When I was born, Ukraine had been independent for five years. I talk to my parents about this. My parents, born in 1969, were around twenty during the collapse of the USSR. When I draw comparisons, I understand that there is a great difference, we are not used to being oppressed, to thinking that we are obliged to listen to someone, especially now, at a more conscious age. We understand that we can make our own decisions. But we also have to bear the consequences of our decisions [Lviv].

Respondents emphasize the fact that different conditions of socialisation have contributed to the consolidation of a new type of attitude. The answers which show the different attitudes of children and parents, arising from the pressure of the political system and the adaptation strategies of individuals, are particularly telling. The respondents used a number of metaphors to describe this phenomenon. One of the more interesting ones can be cited:

I was very interested in what conditions my parents lived at that time. From around the eighth grade I started asking my parents about it, and one time I asked my father what he felt when the Soviet Union dissolved and he said this: imagine our family is falling apart. And that's how it was in Western Ukraine in the Transcarpathian region. You can say that this is a cultural difference between the parents and their children born after 1991 who have lived their whole lives in independent Ukraine [Nizhyn].

This positive narrative about the values of the younger generation is countered by a pessimistic description of the economic living conditions of today's youth in

Ukraine. Apart from the symbolic or axiological avowal of the transformation, young Ukrainians also observe many failures, mainly economic ones, which make their lives more difficult:

Yes, 100%. Our living conditions are very different. I want to say that the conditions are very hard, but we feel that it is our country and we are going to work and live here. We feel that we are in a difficult situation, but already in our independent land [Nizhyn].

Just when the Revolution of Dignity began, that winter, I was a freshman and there was undoubtedly at least a shift in consciousness, everything looked different somehow. I started looking at our country in a different way. Something has changed in our minds, but if we're talking about the standard of living, I would say that we haven't come far. In the past, 200 UAH could buy food for a week, and now... [Pereiaslav].

Young Poles also recognise, although less often emphasise it, the disparity between the present (in which they live) and the past (in which their parents and grandparents lived). Admittedly, although in the respondents' answers transformation is identified as a new important context influencing their lives, some respondents also relativise or play down the gravity of the dissimilarities between their living conditions and their parents'. However, they draw attention to the characteristics of youth (typical of this phase of life, regardless of the social or political context). Nevertheless, the “time of freedom” itself (after 1989) is treated as a special condition of their lives that older generations have not experienced:

My generation lives when we have had these twenty-something years of freedom and try to make something out of it. It is unique in this respect, and in many other respects it probably does not differ from the times in which our parents lived [Rzeszów].

Others make the differences very clear by associating the present in a positive context:

I think it is true that the times of my childhood, after 1989, are different for many reasons. It's also hard for me to comment on those times, because I know them only from my parents' stories, and additionally people have a tendency to mythologize their youth, and I know that I can also fall victim to it. However,

based on historical sources, having read about this epoch, I suppose so. I think we live in much better times now [Poznań].

Yes, for sure, because I often talk with my parents about how it used to be, and it seems to me that our times and their times are heaven and earth, really. They had it hard, they had it a lot harder than we do now [Lublin].

If they brought up the benefits, they mainly related to the opportunities connected with Poland's membership in the European Union, i.e., a delayed consequence of the political changes in 1989:

Certainly in part yes, because I was already born in a 100% free Poland and never had to deal with the communist regime. Poland went through various changes after 1989. Whether we are now 100% free is also up for debate, but everyone can say that we are in Poland. Now, thanks to the European Union, we still have open borders, so we live in a completely different world. They couldn't go to the West [Wrocław].

Group (or generational) identity should posit a sense of belonging to a group, but also of separateness from other groups (generations) (Settersten, 1999). Usually it is built on a positive or negative stereotype of one's group. In order to diagnose this stereotype, a question was formulated: "There are two common-knowledge points of view about the young generation. One negative (that the youth is immature, in some sense worse than the older generations), and the other which emphasizes the fact that young people represent an important potential and can play a positive role in the life of our state and society. Which of these opinions do you agree with more? What is the greatest value for the contemporary youth in Poland/Ukraine?". The answers of young Ukrainians contain five main arguments evidencing positive self-identification:

- a) we are better because we represent the democratic generation (as opposed to the "Soviet generation"):

I agree more with the second opinion, because for us the youth is hope, the youth has plans and is developing. All our councilmen are still the older, Soviet generation, not people who were born after 1991. And my generation is becoming adults, studying, graduating from universities, fighting for their rights and know their rights, and will be actively involved in political life in the future [Nizhyn].

- b) we are better because we have the energy and the will to act (although in this case the respondents claim that this is not a sufficient condition):

I even feel it on myself, let me phrase it in Russian, *ношеский максимализм* [youthful maximalism]. A young person is able to do anything and can influence some decisions, make a difference, for example, if they join a political party. On the one hand, it is true, but on the other hand, if we are talking about reforms in the state, then of course they must probably be done by not entirely young people, and people with more experience, who studied abroad and so on [Nizhyn].

- c) we are better because we represent civic attitudes (empathy, social sensitivity, solidarity with the weaker, poorer, etc.);
d) we are better because we are active (in voluntary organisations);
e) we are better because we want change:

There is an important potential within the youth, and young people play an important role. Everyone wants change, especially young people, but not everyone knows that it is not so easy to make change happen [Uzhhorod].

Young Ukrainians are associated primarily with hope, a harbinger of a change for the better, with values that have been absent so far, as well as a new style of doing politics. They perceive their generation predominantly as an expectation, but also a herald of a multidimensional change:

I live with the hope for the future of this country. The youth is our future [Pereiaslav].

I can say that it stresses me out in a way, because I am part of this youth and we have our own vision of the future, we believe that the youth who will come to power will change everything, because we want it so much [Nizhyn].

They perceive young generation as a constructive alternative to the negatively evaluated political elites. The argument justifying this approach is that young people are: (1) more pro-Western; (2) more critical of the Soviet past:

Basically, there can be no alternative, the youth should be in power. Who, if not young people, should govern the country? If there are still people from the Soviet Union in power, Ukraine will always be what it is now [Nizhyn].

However, in the respondents' statements, there are elements of bitter frustration at the fact of ignoring of the younger generation by politicians:

The voice of the youth only started to be heard in the public sphere after the Revolution of Dignity, but then it became quiet again. However, I noticed that the students do not want to remain silent [Pereiaslav].

After a systematic review of the answers of Polish students, I have come to quite different conclusions than in the case of young Ukrainians. Among the most symptomatic differences, we must list the following that young Poles are much less likely to contrast their values, views, habits, behaviour, etc., with their parents': both in a positive ("we are better") and negative ("we are worse") sense. Similarly, they are less likely to speak unequivocally well about themselves. The respondents who were actually activists often stepped into the role of "reviewers" of their peers, whose attitudes they assessed relatively critically. They often accused them of lacking the qualities they attributed to themselves:

I'm sorry to say it, but these are very conformist people who just don't try to act [Cracow].

They use the category of "we, the youth" less often, meaning a broad generation of people born after the country regained full autonomy. However, they point to "intra-generational" differences more often, as is compellingly illustrated by the following opinion:

I grew up with slightly older friends. Almost all of my friends are about 30 and I can see how they used to act, how they approached various tasks. And at the moment, when I meet people two or three years younger than me, I can't find any common ground with them, because these people do not have any thought-out views, they are not trying to accomplish anything. They only try to live from day to day, just trying to make it till Friday, till another beer, till they have a smoke and we don't care [Cracow].

Although the respondents often criticize other young Poles for their socio-political attitudes, a fairly consistent picture of the young generation emerges from their description. The most frequent comments and complaints voiced against other students stressed the negative effects of the modern lifestyle: indifference and apathy.

What emerges from the statements is an image of a depoliticized group for whom politics and public affairs are only marginally important. Some of the most revealing self-descriptions of the young generation of Poles suggest:

a) doubts about the creative potential of youth:

I do not think either that today's youth is particularly positive or that it definitely is going to change the world for the better. This is a diverse community, and different things may come out of it [Gdańsk].

b) concentration on one's private life, one's own passions, interests, learning, or work;

c) lack of cognitive and behavioural involvement in the life of the community, apathy;

d) demobilisation and demotivation (often depicted as a kind of “sign of the times” that do not require struggle and commitment):

It seems a little bit that young people waste the potential they have, because we have open borders, we have 100% freedom, we can create what we want, we can really set up new companies, a lot could happen thanks to young people, and yet these young people are wasting this a bit, also because we don't have to fight for anything. Yes, we have practically everything [Cracow].

e) lack of crystallized views, ideas, visions;

f) postmodern attitudes, addiction to new technologies that distract them from important matters:

I can see on my example that they are too immature, that they prefer to do things that don't require much effort [Wrocław].

g) consumerism, the cult of money, a pleasant, care-free lifestyle:

h) immaturity, which is not necessarily regarded as a flaw:

Youth has its rules. We are young. Young people have the right to make mistakes. Anyway, everyone has the right to make mistakes. We are not perfect, so are the young immature? Probably in some ways they are, but this is, so to speak, our robber's law, let's call it that, to be immature, enjoy this life while we have time for it [Rzeszów].

i) conformism, helplessness, falling back on one's parents:

I think that our parents, who had nothing in the times of communism, want to give their children everything now and often such pampering means that maybe these young people will not be able to fend for themselves in the future, and one needs to be defiant, to fly the nest, not to live off their parents [Warsaw].

j) no prospects for stabilisation in life, precarisation, inaccessible housing market: here references to the past appeared:

We are students, yes, we study, but there is no guarantee that you will get a job after graduation. In my parents' previous generation, for everyone who graduated, there was work. Even when someone failed to graduate from the university, there were still opportunities. People started families much earlier and they just had the opportunity and they could afford it [Wrocław].

Distancing from politics is a feature that distinguishes young Poles from Ukrainians. Although they evaluate the political elite negatively, at the same time they formulate concerns about whether today's youth are a good alternative to current politicians:

On the one hand, I'm afraid, because if I look at the young people today, my colleagues who are a bit younger, I'm afraid of that, but I hope that in time they will grow up like everyone [Wrocław].

To be honest, I'm a bit worried that the generation of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and whatnot will take over the reign of this country, but that's the way it has to be. It will work out somehow [Warsaw].

The respondents were sceptical about the possibility of collectively influencing politicians or making political demands shared by an entire generation. In summary, four arguments can be identified: (1) collective action in the political sense receives lower priority in the hierarchy of values than, for example, work and money; (2) conformism formed in the course of socialisation; (3) readiness only for acts of defiance or protest rather than positive articulation of demands; (4) lack of a formal organisation to coordinate actions. Students perceive the opportunity for effective activism not so much in a mass movement, but rather in the activities of specific individuals (sometimes associated in some organisations or associations)

with relatively higher social and cultural capital. What Poles and Ukrainians have in common is a sense of political exclusion (marginalisation):

Our voice is not completely heard and this needs to be said loudly [Warsaw].

Conclusions

One gets the impression that the “challenges of a given historical period” are the main determinants of the generational identities of young Poles and Ukrainians. The political, economic and social differences between Poland and Ukraine provide an important context for their collective self-identifications. Answering the research questions, I find that the presented self-descriptions show a number of similarities, but also significant differences between the two groups of respondents. This allowed for a detailed and in-depth verification of the research hypothesis. Undoubtedly, when describing their own position and social role, Polish and Ukrainian students emphasize the different conditions in which they grew up (compared to their parents). Axiologically, they view this change positively, although at the same time they say that today’s youth face economic problems (and their psychological consequences, such as uncertainty or instability) that previous generations did not experience. Of course, here the point of reference is the degree to which certain needs are met, both on an individual and collective level, which also affects ambitions in life. Ukrainians complain about the overall quality of life, while Poles complain about problems related to the labour market and the purchase of housing. Nevertheless, both emphasize their own (group/generational) otherness and sense of generational commonality, but they use different justifications. Young Ukrainians clearly emphasize their separateness from their parents’ generation. They construct their socio-political identity by negating the traits attributed to the older generation, contest the “old” political order and perceive themselves as agents of positive multidimensional social change. They construct an image of a united generation whose meaning of life is to fight for endangered values. They emphasize the idealistic attitudes and views of their peers, who represent an opportunity for a better life in the future. They seem to direct their demands towards elites or political institutions, which are regarded as barriers to development for Ukrainian society. In generational terms, it is a very community-based, holistic vision. In contrast, the vision of young Poles is decidedly more individualistic. They orient themselves economically rather than axiologically, viewing their generation in two roles: an active subject who strives for success, but at the same time a “victim” of an unfriendly economic system. Describing their

generation, they are aware of the negative effects of socio-economic development on youth attitudes, such as passivity, individualism, privatisation of everyday life, demobilisation, and depoliticisation. Therefore, their demands are aimed more at their peers, in whom they do not see a resource that can contribute something of value to Polish public life. Young Poles, unlike Ukrainians, do not place their hopes for political change in large-scale youth activism. There is no pressure to get directly involved in politics. They perceive their role in this field as “acts of protest” rather than a desire to “take matters into their own hands”. Individualisation and focus on the private sphere, as well as career planning, are the motives of representatives of this generation. And although the Polish respondents – due to their role in the student community – often distance themselves from such attitudes, their belief that they represent a unique generation is very clear. Although these are only the young generation’s attempts at self-description, they are certainly enlightening when it comes to the strengths and weaknesses of Polish and Ukrainian student youth, as well as the opportunities and threats that await them in the future. Unquestionably, they are also an important source of challenges for institutions that plan to implement an inclusive youth policy.

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