CHALLENGES AND LIFE ORIENTATIONS OF YOUTH. THE CONTEXT OF TRANSITION COUNTRIES

Izazovi i životne orijentacije mladih. Kontekst zemalja u tranziciji

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the life orientations of youth living in post-communist countries. Although a large part of them function today within the same global organism, their political past still differs them from the other countries, defining in a special way all the socialization space the youth grow up in. The analyses undertaken in this paper try to argue that this is not only the problem of the political heritage, but much more complicated interaction between transformation and globalization processes, that can be described in terms of glocal space, where nothing is the same, starting with socialization process, through life opportunities, and ending with political significance of youth. Empirical basis are here existing data collected in an international project covered Poland, Eastern Germany, Latvia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, China and Vietnam. The analyses show life orientations of youth – representatives of the first generation, who have grown up intellectually within the new system – as an important driving force of changes, on the one hand, and equally serious source of social and political tensions, on the other, possible especially where the “aspiration gap” (the distance between what young people aspire to and what they can achieve) is large and concerns considerable part of youth.

KEY WORDS: youth, life orientations, post-communist countries, socialization and transition context

APSTRAKT: Rad se fokusira na životne orijentacije mladih koji žive u post-kominističkim zemljama. Iako većina njih danas živi unutar istog globalnog sistema, njihova politička prošlost ih ipak razlikuje od drugih na taj način što određuje na poseban način kontekst socializacije u kome odrastaju. Analize sprovedene u ovom radu pokušavaju da dokažu da to nije samo pitanje političkog nasleda, već mnogo složenije interakcije između procesa transformacije i globalizacije, koji bi se mogli
opisati terminom globalnog prostora, gde ništa nije isto – od procesa socijalizacije preko životnih mogućnosti do političkog značaja mladih. Empirijsku osnovu čine podaci prikupljeni u okviru međunarodnog projekta koji je uključivao Poljsku, Istočnu Nemačku, Letoniju, Mađarsku, Rumuniju, Bulgarsku, Rusiju, Kinu i Vijetnam. Analize pokazuju da životne orijentacije mladih predstavnika prve generacije rešele novi sistem u kome su intelektualno odrasli, koji je, sa jedne strane, značajna pokretačka snaga za promene, a sa druge strane, takođe ozbiljan izvor društvenih i političkih tenzija, možda posebno tamo gde je “jaz aspiracija” (između onoga što mladi žele i što mogu da postignu) veliki i odnosi se na značajan deo mladih.

KLJUČNE REČI: mladi, životne orijentacije, post-komunističke zemlje, socializacija, kontekst tranzicije

International reports on youth are a classic example of the art of comparing data, bypassing the context they concern. In studies of this kind the specificity of (for instance) post-communist countries disappears. Although a large part of them function today within the same political organism (EU), their political past still differs them from the rest of Europe, defining in a special way all the socialization space the youth grow up in. And this is not a problem of a political heritage, but much more complicated interaction between Europeanization and globalization processes on the one hand, and local tradition and local transitions on the other. All of them generate a very specific glocal space, in which nothing is the same, starting with socialization process, through life opportunities, and ending with political significance of youth. In the article I want to indicate this specificity – to describe the unique socializational context and life orientations of youth. They seem to be – on the one hand – an important driving force of changes taking place in these countries and equally serious source of social and political tensions, on the other, possible especially where the “aspiration gap” (the distance between what young people aspire to and what they can achieve) is large and concerns considerable part of youth.

The choice of “life orientations” results, on the one hand, from the fact that they illustrate the main effect of socialization impacts that young people are subject to, and on the other reveal potential lines of tension in relations to the social structure (Hurrelmann, 1988: 42). They can be defined as a constant and internally consistent set of views and beliefs about the individual’s needs, values, aspirations and life goals, and as a special type of value orientation, strongly conditioned by the situation and related to the action (Kluckhohn 1962). As such life orientation serves not only as a guide for the individual’s actions in a given situation, but also helps in maintaining a life course (Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018).

Over the years, numerous definitions and typologies of life orientations have developed. They usually have the character of a multi-dimensional theoretical construct describing the preferences, choices and human actions related to
the formulation of life goals and selection of means for their implementation. Explorations conducted in different countries, different socio-cultural contexts, generate some methodological problems (Abramson, Inglehart 1995). Although the results cannot be compiled as fully comparable, they have a large indicative value and allow to identify the essential trends.

Whenever the terms youth, young generation, or young people are used in this paper, they mean people between the ages of 15 and 30. Indeed, this means that periodisation is happening more frequently in most international studies, the reasons for which are related to young people's tendency to stay in the education system for longer periods (which was the basis for distinguishing the category of youth even in the 20th century). This increased periodisation is also due to social, economic and cultural changes happening in the contemporary world which profoundly redefine social roles, disturb well-known rhythms of living, and change developmental standards. The category of youth is becoming a complex phenomenon (pluralised) and are far more problematic than was previously the case. However, this is an internally heterogeneous category, and includes people at different stages of life, with different needs, problems and different life experiences. Only one thing holds them together in today’s reality: a lack of life stability and structural difficulties when entering adulthood. Their young age has defined their place in a series of historical transitions, to which the (post)communist countries were subjected. Indeed, these young people were born and raised in a new socio-political reality and are now trying to find their way around it while building their future and career. At the same time, the youth – as a group of marginal location in a society and with aspirations growing beyond existing reality – represent a medium of ferment and change. As such, this group is the perfect subject when it comes to observing changes which have taken and are taking place in the countries, we are interested in.

In such a context are references to the classic conception of Karl Mannheim, 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 (Mannheim, 1938). We also adopt another Mannheimean thesis – a thesis pertaining to the role of the young generation as an agent of social change. This is particularly significant when historical tasks of implementing significant reforms are carried out for society (Mannheim, 1943).

The basis is the analysis carried out as part of an international research project covering nine post-communist countries of Europe and Asia: Poland, eastern lands of Germany, Latvia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, China and Vietnam. All of these countries, not without some difficulty, are departing from former systemic solutions, and imitating Western models to a greater or lesser degree. It is happening in a time when many of these solutions are in

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2 The project, implemented in 2015-2016, was financed by the National Science Centre, Poland. It covered wide range of issues illustrating the life situation and various activities of youth in socio-economic, political and cultural contexts (education, reaching adulthood – work, privacy arrangements and living standards, political engagement).
crisis and the need for an alternative is felt more than ever. Simultaneously, the countries’ shift from communism is taking place amidst a clash with two other powerful forces. These are, on one hand, processes of globalisation establishing in the Western world the so-called other, second modernism (Giddens, 1991; Beck 1992; Bauman 2000) that emanates from the whole world, especially in the economic and cultural sphere. On the other hand, these forces are local peculiarities (local models of transformation), defined both by the history and pre-socialist tradition of these countries, as well as their communist past. Extremely interesting, particularly in the context of such clashes, is the effect of globalisation (Robertson, 1992; Bauman 1998a), which makes the society – similar to many other “global hybrids” developing non-linearly – seem to be on the verge of chaos. This does not build structures but networks; it does not bind but generates symbiotic, irreversible and unstable relations (Castells 1996).

Simultaneous global and local processes create specific dynamics in which great amounts of resources and flows go both ways. What is more, they form an integral whole and cannot exist separately (Urry 2003).

**Methodological notes**

The project I refer to was planned as a classical desk research aimed at a wide diagnosis of the situation of the young generation, on the basis of existing data resources, the results of empirical research and surveys published in reports, monographs, articles, expertise, official national and international statistics, mostly obtained from large representative samples.

The availability of many different sources did not decide their value like relevance or reliability connected with the so-called “material truth” (related to hard data) and “psychological truth” (important for making use of data describing states of consciousness and people’s attitudes). All these issues required particularly critical evaluation with regard to the method of data collection, their aim or level of aggregation. A separate matter was a level of confidence resulting from temptations to retouch images of own society. In the case of some of the countries (China, Vietnam), institutions of censorship or self-censorship still operate. We attempted to minimise this type of risks by conducting a series of discussions and seminars, where detected inconsistencies, any ambiguities or insinuations were immediately raised and explained, or confronted with analogous information coming from other, external sources (international reports and international databases functioning in a public domain). A serious difficulty turned out to be the issue of data incompleteness, incomplementarity or incomparability. It is very hard to describe and even harder to compile the data, which have been gathered in different ways, in reference to variously defined groups, in different periods of time, by different institutions and for various purposes. In reference to some countries, some issue have never been subject to research, in other (as Germany), controlling differences between Eastern (post-communist) and Western (federal) lands has been ceasing to be possible for some time. The level of advancement of unification processes makes official statistics, reports and scientific studies ignore
distinctions corresponding with historical divisions. Finding these distinctions was often connected with analytical work reaching for original, unprocessed data but it was not always possible.

In selecting the units / countries we could refer to one of the two classic procedures for benchmarking schemes – to a scheme of the most similar systems or to a scheme of most dissimilar systems (Przeworski, Teune 1970: 34–43). Sociologists believe that “best samples for comparative studies are composed of the most similar systems” (in our case that would be the countries of communist past under political system’s transformation). According to this scheme, “a multitude of common properties (...) makes that a possibility of external variables, although unknown and still strong, is considerably decreasing” (Naroll, 1968). Observations in the sample selected in that way are made from the system’s level and the objects of interest are both similarities and differences.

Another type of analyses and inferences is possible thanks to the pattern of the systems of maximum dissimilarity. Here, the systems are compared from the level of individuals or the selected social group. Since the observed groups represent the same population, systemic factors are not necessary for explaining their behaviour, but that does not mean they are completely unnecessary. They can be omitted as long as it is possible to legitimately formulate general statements without them (Przeworski, Teune 1970).

While the first pattern is based on a belief that when comparing similar systems one theoretically finds significant differences between them and that these differences can be used to explain a dependent variable, according to the second pattern, despite intersystemic differences, the observed groups (here: youth in post-communist countries) differ only due to the fact of a limited number of variables of relations and they are therefore generally similar. This is not an easy choice – both schemes (each one in its own way) offer attractive models of inference and analysis. Eventually, we decided to use the pattern of the systems of maximum similarity with regard to a possibility of determining theoretically promising explaining variables related to – most of all – differentiating influence of local models of transformation, and also different level of development or cultural specificity of a particular country.

The post-communist countries, creating a specific space of common political core, have taken various transformative paths and have different problems to solve. By transformation we understand – generally – a shift from a less to a more liberal system. This shift may concern the whole system (economy, political institutions, ideology) or only certain areas (e.g. economic principles). These changes may take place with the participation of many social players (state, civil society), or under control of the state. They may have a clearly defined direction of changes or not. As the result, we have a model of complete, wide-ranging civic transformation – covering all the spheres of life (economy, politics, culture) and engaging a broad spectrum of equal players; a model of limited statist transformation – implemented from the state’s level and only concerning the economic sphere; the model of wide-ranging statist transformation – allowing for changes in many spheres, including a political system’s change with a state
as a leading player; and the model of a suspended transformation, unspecified, in which neither the political elite (state) nor the citizens have made their final decisions yet (see Table 1).

Table 1. Array of the models of transformation assumed as explaining variables

| (Leading) Players → | STATE | CIVIL STATE AND SOCIETY |
|----------------------|-------|-------------------------|
| Range of systemic reforms ↓ | REFORMS LIMITED TO ECONOMIC SPHERE | MODEL OF LIMITED STATIST TRANSFORMATION (with a vision of the party-state and national market economy) | MODEL OF SUSPENDED UNSPECIFIED TRANSFORMATION (e.g. Ukraine, Serbia) |
|                       | CHINA, VIETNAM | NO REPRESENTATION |
|                       | WIDE-RANGING SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION | MODEL OF WIDE-RANGING STATIST TRANSFORMATION (with a vision of authoritarian democracy and political capitalism) | MODEL OF WIDE-RANGING CIVIC TRANSFORMATION (with a vision of democratic capitalism) |
|                       | RUSSIA | CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES |

Source: own study

The first model, focused on a vision of democratic capitalism, is represented by five post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe: Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia and Germany (German Eastern lands). Such a great number of countries included in this category results from different systemic properties and boundary conditions of transformation which can be of interpretative significance. The second, opposing model of limited transformation with a leading role of the party-state and the vision of the so-called national market economy is implemented by Asian post-communist countries, represented by China and Vietnam in the project. The third model is a path taken by Russia which was also selected for the research. The fourth model includes such cases like Ukraine or some of Balkan countries affected by the war – unfortunately, not represented in our analyses.

The context of transition – common heritage, different development paths and problems

The countries differ not only in the chosen strategy of reforms but also in historical background, cultural (religious) tradition and level of economic development. Among the European countries – mostly implementing a similar model of transformation – there are those which was not included in the former Soviet Bloc and those which were a part of the Soviet Union; those of different
lengths of EU membership; rebuilding their system with the use of “socialist debris” (Staniszki, 1991; Mach, 1998) and through external transformation – “import of a ready-made state” (example of former GDR transformation) (Offe, 1993). We expected quite a lot from the comparison of the cases of Germany and Vietnam which, on one hand, represent two polar opposites on the axis of civilisational development; on the other hand, and that is especially intriguing, these are entities established as the result of joining two different parts with regard to the political system. In Germany, principles organising the system have been the rules of democratic capitalism developed in western lands; in Vietnam – the rules of national market economy developed by the communist party-state from the north.

Therefore, we are dealing not so much with the transformation of multiplicity as with the multiplicity of transformations, assuming their individual nature, determined by social and historical factors (Wnuk-Lipiński, 2005: 44). This does not mean, however, that the processes that have taken place in Central and Eastern Europe since the early Nineties have been spontaneous and non-directed. Rejection of the thesis concerning the linear nature of transformational changes is not equivalent to resigning from any point directing the transformations occurring in the post-communist countries. This azimuth is invariably the centre of the world system – developed Western societies (Domalewski, 2018: 27–29).

As a result we have something what J. Staniszki calls the “asymmetry of rationality” (Staniszki, 2003), where globalization processes defined by the centre of the world system are guided by a different rationality than the one that characterizes the post-communist societies. The clash of these two rationalities (centre and semi-periphery) forces them to work out their own coping strategies in a new, globalized reality. Paradoxically, China, in which a model of limited statist transformation is implemented, has the most tools to develop a strategy for asymmetry of rationality (state control over economic change and low labour costs). Although Vietnam has chosen a similar path, its transformation capabilities – due to the general civilizational backwardness – are significantly weaker. To a lesser degree, such instruments remain at the disposal of Russia, where the logic of transformational change was determined by group actors, largely oriented towards building a new post-communist order on the ruins of the past. In the least extent, the possibilities of counteracting the asymmetry of rationality remained within the reach of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which implemented transformational changes in an imitative and even non-reflective way, above all in the institutional dimension (cf. Staniszki 2003: 69–79). However, the accession of Central and Eastern European countries to the European Union in the first decade of the present century accelerated their inclusion in the global system, although certainly without the possibility of developing individual strategies to deal with the “asymmetry of rationality.” This was defined by transnational institutions, thereby limiting the role of the state. This, however, does not change the fact that the European Union project has significantly brought the European semi-periphery closer to the centre of the global system. At the still unresolved stage, there are countries whose transformation has been disturbed by the war (Ukraine, post-Jugoslavian countries).
The context of socialization

Socialisation of the young generation in the communist times occurred (in principle) in a closed socio-cultural area, subjected to a strong political indoctrination, as well as the party and state control. The choice of models of life and lifestyles was limited, despite progressing liberalisation in many countries, while access to the rest of the world was filtered and available only to the few. Moving away from communism and opening up to the world, the societies thus far living in real socialism also experienced a change in the rules according to which their socio-cultural area was shaped and in which their young generations were growing up. Without doubt, this change today has a bordering status, with all the consequences taking the form of an institutional mismatch (Ogburn 1957), an immature cultural area (Goldberg, 1941), social anomy (Durkheim, 2002; Merton, 1938), or unfinished, fragmented socialisation (Giddens, 1991; Szabo, 2009; Szafraniec, 1986).

This is the area in which the clash of (global) offers and patterns with (local) socio-economic determinants takes place, followed by the clash of local offers (contents) with global institutional solutions. Each of them is a dynamic structure. Areas of local possibilities constitute a characteristic conglomerate of national traditions with elements of the legacy of communism, but the relationships between them in many countries have not yet been conclusively defined. The global offer enters this context in the form of values and symbols of the postmodern world (with its individualism, consumerism, value of freedom, right to equal treatment of minorities, etc.). It spreads within the local area, but in a very selective form, devoid of its original context and heavily affected by the local conditions.

The mutual movement and overlapping of these areas, together with their ongoing adaptation to one another, occurs at a different pace, depending how quickly and effectively the given country tries to depart from its former systemic trajectory, while the duration and course of this process are significant from the point of view of socialisation. In Poland, this process started already in the Seventies, when it produced a generation of socialist rearguard. This collectivity of young people did not only opt for a mass participation in the social movement “Solidarity”, but also for other ideas external to the current political system and concerning their own life and social life. The systemic change, as disturbing as it must have been3, was not a strong cultural shock for Poles. It was socially awaited, accepted and it constituted an element of previous endeavours, experiences and plans.

In contrast, Russia is an example of a country that has experienced probably the most shocking and traumatic change. The dissolution of the Soviet Union did not only denote moving away from the former system; it meant the fall of the empire, far-reaching paralysis of state institutions, social and political chaos, and economic decline resulting in numerous dysfunctions (Staniszkis, 1995), the consequences of which can be seen in the increased number of pathological

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3 This is symbolically related to the Round Table talks in 1989, which resulted in the first free elections in Poland and in the establishing of the “Contract Sejm”.


phenomena and threats to the development of children and the youth (Zouev, 1999). This deep social trauma was yet more painful for Russians, who thus far had lived in a system which had not experienced a major crisis of legitimisation before, while the identification of the society with the former system appeared to be authentic. When, at the end of the Nineties, the reforms and reorganisation of the country began, for which the model of transformation controlled by the authoritarian power was chosen, Poland and the Polish society were already in a different place.

The socio-cultural area of the remaining European countries from the former Eastern bloc – Latvia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria – was shaped quite differently. Surprised by the historic change, with no tradition of social resistance and strongly Sovietised (Wnuk-Lipiński, 2005: 112–131), they chose a pro-European policy which was implemented by the means of political decisions, to a rather limited social enthusiasm but robust social expectations. The imitative character of changes in the first phase, in the absence of proper infrastructural facilities and intellectual capacity, along with the implementation of the Western models despite numerous local shortages, not only extended the period of transition from communism, but also made this road much more rocky and considerably less comprehensible for the society. This has affected the process of socialisation which can probably be more accurately described in terms of social anomy (Szafraniec, 2002).

The presented examples do not constitute a continuum in which the particular countries could be arranged and assessed. Instead, they only show the variety of logic behind the transformative transition, impinging on the development of the socio-cultural area which provides the context for the socialisation processes of the youth. Indeed, it is not Poland that can be used as the foremost example of quick transition from one socio-cultural area to another, but Germany, where the unification of the communist Eastern States with the democratic Western States required neither for new models to be sought nor funds to be secured for their implementation. Instead, all was within reach – ready solutions, ready institutional infrastructure, political leadership and financial support4. This and the social enthusiasm of Germans, particularly on the eastern side of the Elbe provided for a relatively quick unifying effect. However, as we will see, this did not even out the differences between the East German and West German youth, which can still be observed even today (Diewald, Goedicke, Mayer, 2006).

In this respect, Germany can be compared to Vietnam, a country which also experienced (although much earlier) the joining process of two systemically different parts: the communist North and the democratic South. However, the communist order incorporated the new models and therefore prevailed. It is from this level (and from the level of postcolonial backwardness) that Vietnam has been opening up to global impacts. Following China’s example,

4 Klaus Offe talks about the transformation from the outside through the importation of a ready state model by the former German Democratic Republic. See also B.W. Mach (1998). *Transformacja ustrojowa a mentalne dziedzictwo socjalizmu*, Warsaw: ISP PAN.
it has adopted the strategy of selective and controlled change, allowing for the marketisation of the economy, but excluding the possibility of political change or questioning the communist ideological order⁵. Vietnam has created a situation in which economic changes inevitably become a vehicle for a global cultural content and systemically foreign models, while the overt ideological indoctrination is to secure political loyalty to the system. To a comparable degree, both in poor Vietnam and rich China, the socio-cultural area, in which the processes of socialisation of the young generation take place, has become a carrier of a dual message. The youth of the both countries grows up in an environment full of conflicting cultural messages whose dimorphic character is not officially problematised. The differences discussed here are essentially responsible for the variety of attitudes towards adopting new models, external to the local cultural area, which due to global influences continues to detach in a more absolute way from ready models and practices, in result of which social life becomes increasingly individualised and de-traditionalised. The crumbling of traditional institutions and authority figures, along with the volatile character and non-transparency of the environment, make the world (even the closest one) hardly predictable. It is turning into a “to-do-world”, in which the basic task is to develop new strategies and life models, adequate to new situations and challenges.

The offer that most effectively penetrates local systems is consumerism. Under the pressure of consumerism, a life based on deprivation, restraint and shortages, characteristic of communist times, falls into oblivion as a cultural pattern. In the strategies of economic growth, pleasure and affluence are now overly propagated (not as an element of ideology in a broad sense). The world of consumption becomes obligatory, normal and offers no alternative. It is very important from the point of view of the circumstances in which young people grow up. Owing to marketing and advertising campaigns, today’s major creators of aspirations and dreams of the youth, consumption turns into a need the satisfaction of which becomes a prerequisite for self-fulfilment. At the same time, the cultural pressures devised by the system are not experienced as forms of oppression; instead, what they promise is mainly pleasure and joy, which in an obvious manner is favoured by young people and is not problematised by them.

Paradoxically, the dreams of freedom and of “a Western life”, typical of the analysed post-communist countries, started to come true thanks to the market which became a major opponent to the homogenisation of the society for years drilled into conformity. Under the pressure of lifestyle-oriented culture, submitting oneself to consumption has become a condition to achieve individual freedom, the right to be different and develop one’s own identity based on one’s own beliefs and arrangements (Bauman, 2000b). The sense of freedom, the fundamental value for young people, is coupled here with

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⁵ The China and Vietnam model of transformation may be described in terms of the transplantation paradigm discussed by B.W. Mach. See B.W. Mach (1998), Transformacja ustrojowa... op. cit., p. 20.
the desire, possibly stronger than anywhere else, to have and to use items and material objects (the philosophy of “to have”), rather than with a more sophisticated approach to them, for which a certain level of resources and general social well-being is necessary (the philosophy of “to have in order to be”) (Fromm, 1975; Fromm 1976).

When consumerism becomes the main message that reaches the societies once described as “equal in poverty”, today still poor and subjected to dynamic differentiation, one should not concentrate exclusively on its friendly and attractive side. Only a certain number of people can afford it and thus benefit from it, and in developing societies they definitely constitute a minority. This dramatic difference between life situations and life opportunities becomes a source of ever stronger frustration in post-communist societies who clash with growing inequalities to which thus far egalitarian societies have not been mentally used (Mach, 1998). It is reflected in various types of anomic behaviour violating social norms (either in order to attain desired goods or vent frustration and anger), or by the statistics pointing to an increase in emotional disorders (Szafraniec, 2011: 305–314), or – as recently – in giving support to the conservative and populist political projects.

The problem seems to be much more complex, as the situation in the post-communist countries resembles not only the early-capitalist Western societies of the first half of the 20th century (“on the rise”), but also the rich, consumption-oriented Western societies of the second half of the 20th century, where the anomy of poverty was replaced by the anomy of prosperity (Simon, Gagnon, 1976: 356–378). Globalisation processes affecting the post-communist countries dominated the sphere of culture and social expectations (endeavours) faster than any other sphere of life. Meanwhile, due to the incommensurability of the pace of these changes, we do not only experience the tensions which appear in the early-capitalist societies (functioning under the conditions of a chronic economic depression), but we also adopt the ones generated by rich consumer societies. Moreover, one cannot omit what, in some countries, is still the clear presence of elements of the bygone socialist past, retained in the styles of political governance, institutions, media and in the mentality of older generations.

While the socio-cultural area in which young people grow up may be assumed to develop into a more cohesive one with time, the axiomatic and normative disorder can turn out to be permanent, not only due to the period of political transformation, but also because of many local and global cultural processes. It may be further driven by a specific political and economic situation of the post-communist countries, collapse of “big narratives” (Lytard, 1984), expansion of new media, and their peripheral status with its characteristic vulnerability to “symbolic violence” (Staniszkis, 1995: 35–60). The pressure to achieve individual success in the face of structural limitations, typical for developing societies and economies, can therefore be both a source of positive changes and problems.
The youth – life orientations and challenges

We are interested in young people from post-communist countries – representatives of the first generation, who have grown up intellectually within a new system; indeed, this, in a sense, constitutes their common generational experience and distinguishes them from older citizens. How far their way of thinking and life aspirations go far beyond their parents’ achievements and older friends’ ambitions, and what is their significance for the transformation changes taking place in these countries?

Changes in socializational field visibly has extended the sphere of freedom that young people have at their disposal, but it has also transferred the burden of the responsibility for the choices onto the youth themselves. It is now their problem not only to choose from the existing life or career models, but also to create new models adequate to new situations and challenges. In this task, the traditional solutions and authority figures do not necessarily work. In a world that rushes forward without any steersmen, the “do-it-yourself” strategy seems to be the most logical, as other people either do not know how to do it, or do not have the right tools or ability to use them. However, it has its price. Although it provides an opportunity to decide about one’s own life independently, it comes with the responsibility for one’s own fate and mastering the necessary skills. These primarily include open-mindedness, reflectiveness and active approach to everyday life. Young people usually do not know about it. This applies especially to children whose parents themselves do not have enough imagination or sufficient knowledge about the changes happening in the world.

Frequently, a sense of inadequacy, disappointment and dissatisfaction appears as a consequence of these processes, being a psychological reaction to tensions and shortages of the surrounding world, in which the young people are left alone. National and international reports contain ever more alarming information which signalise that the mental condition of the youth in the countries experiencing the systemic transformation is deteriorating. Young people do not only have problems with the choice of relevant school or profession, but the process of their mental maturation is more and more difficult. Many of them cannot cope with the overwhelming demands from the society, cultural pressure to succeed in life, unclear social norms, weaker family ties or the burden in the form of their parents’ problems. Problems connected with drug and alcohol abuse intensify, aggression and violence grow, and incidences of depressions and neuroses increase among the youth (Szafraniec, 2011; see reports from Poland – Szafraniec, 2011; Latvia – Jaunieši, 2014: 123; or results of ESS, HBSC).

The youth’s tendency to postpone the moment of entering into adulthood is another, quite a new phenomenon. The so-called standard adulthood, still possible in the communist times, becomes difficult under the conditions of systemic transformation. The implemented changes, primarily the introduction of the free market economy rules, cause the pillars of the early, stabilised adulthood (easily predictable future, guaranteed job and social security) to fall into ruins. Jobs – a key to adulthood – have become a scarce and uncertain
good, disrupting the pace of entering into other adult roles. Today, young people remain in education until the age of 25, and get married around the age of 30 (or do not marry at all), while having a separate apartment and then a child come much later in life and are rarer, depending on the country and social group in question.6

These socio-cultural entanglements in youth (keeping the young too long on the peripheries of the social life) results in the psychological profile of the youth being extended into the adulthood – young people reach social, emotional and moral maturity much later. This phenomenon is illustrated not only by the so-called quarter-life crisis (Robbins, Wilner, 2001: 4–13), but also by the psychologically different profile of adulthood in which the essential questions of “Who do I want to be?”, “How do I want to live?” are settled with difficulty in the third decade of life (Arnet, 2007). In the West, the contemporary 20-something-year-olds have been labelled by the American publicists the Generation of Peter Pan, after the fairytale hero created by James M. Barry who is also afraid “to grow up”. They live with their parents, are not in a hurry to start their own families. On the one hand, they want to live according to the ethos of the consumer culture in which they were brought up, which affirms youth and life not limited by duties, while on the other hand, they feel pressure from the society to plan for the future and to be involved in the so-called adult roles.

This description does not fully fit the 20– and 30-something-year-olds living in the post-communist countries, where structural blockages are in operation, stopping young people from reaching adulthood and independence, despite the strong impact of the consumer culture. It is important that when the prerequisite for reaching adulthood is strongly embedded in the social system and its limited possibilities (in terms of the availability of jobs, apartments and satisfactory income), a conflict arises. Initially interpreted as a generation gap (and thus a private conflict between parents and children), it turns into a conflict of structural and generational nature, in which it is no longer the adults against the youth, but the youth (with their unsatisfied needs and aspirations) against the social system (typically associated with specific people, representatives of the authorities).

In the past, such conflicts gave rise to turbulent protests, which radically changed the structure of these societies (as it was the case in the 1960s and 1970s in the West, or with the “Solidarity” movement in Poland). Nowadays, such perspective does not necessarily have to be taken into account. The contemporary society with its ideology of consumerism turned out to be, as Bauman writes, “a perfect translating device” that “translates diagnoses of social problems into the language of private concerns”, breaking down a possible collective protest (1995: 317–318). Socialization towards the value of success makes people still putting their faith in individualism to test. Or in a strong welfare state.

The available data reveals that the cultural offer of the contemporaneity (status, professional career, colourful lifestyle, money) effectively seduced

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6 See more in: K. Szafraniec et al. 2018. The Me-Generation in a Post-Collectivist Space. Dilemma in a Time of transition. Berlin Peter Lang GMBH.
the youth of the post-communist countries already in the initial period of the systemic transformation. Although their ideas of success are considerably more conventional than those of the Western youth, aspiring to a better and more colourful future and pressure to achieve promotion are very high. This applies to the same degree to the European and Asian countries. The difference is in the local context. In Vietnam, new values clash not only with a strong tradition (family solidarity, life in a multigenerational family), but also with the communist ideology. The promoted model of a man includes ideational involvement, modesty, honesty, life with respect of law and morality, striving for education, creativity and expert knowledge. The research carried out in 2012 shows that the urban youth accepts this model more or less formally (answers “important” and “very important” accounted for 83% to 95% of all the responses) (Nguyen ThiBich Hang, 2015). Other studies present more private opinions about what is important in life. Above all, it is the responsibility towards the family and the country (with a clear emphasis on national pride – 62%), having a goal in life (61%), and an honest, decent life (59%). Nearly one third of the young Vietnamese points to money. Social values such as benevolence, caring for others and solidarity, are on the last position of preferred life values. In another survey 51.8% the young Vietnamese care about the development orientation of the country. 48.2% care about the defence and security policy of the country. The officially collected data contrasts with the opinions of sociologists who say that an increasing number of the youth is interested in for the pursuit of material goods and profit, no matter the price, believing that “if you have money, you have everything”. It is a reason for concern not only among the observers of social life, but first and foremost, among parents who cannot understand such radical changes in the behaviour of the young generation.

The Chinese youth, more often than the Vietnamese, declares the views which do not suit the party or its ideological ideas. They are clearly in favour of increasing the differences in income and a greater liberalisation of life (Quing, 2014), and they more often reach out for non-system models. Nevertheless, the system of directional values is very similar in the both the countries. The

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7 This research (and the majority of other Vietnamese studies) refers to the urban youth.
8 The studies were conducted in 2009 by the Youth Research Institute in cities and towns of 10 provinces in Vietnam.
9 Nguyễn Văn Sơn, 2009, “Thức thức giá trị của trách nhiệm trong văn hóa xã hội hiện nay”, Tâm lý học, Số 5, 5-12 [Nguyễn Văn Sơn, 2009, “The choice of moral and human values among the students in Hochiminh City”, Psychology, No5, 5-12]; Quỹ Đån Mơ Liên hiệp quốc Việt Nam, Bảo hiểm, 2015, Báo cáo quốc gia về văn hóa, tôn trọng và phát triển con người Việt Nam [United Nations Population Fund, The Interior Ministry, 2015, National Report on Vietnamese Youth]; Bộ Y tế, Tổng cục thống kê, 2003, Điều tra Quá Quốc gia về văn hóa, tôn trọng và phát triển con người Việt Nam [Ministry of Health, Division of Statistics, 2003, National Survey on Adolescents and Youth].
10 Nguyễn Thị Bích Hang (2015), Negaive lifestyle of a part of Vietnamese youth under the Freud's human behavior theories, doctoral thesis, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics. See also: “Giới trẻ có quan tâm đến thời cuộc?”, http://tuoitre.vn/tin/nhip-song-tre/20160316/gioi-tre-co-quan-tam-den-thoi-cuoc/1067860.html
pro-social orientation (expressed in a high acceptance of “civic responsibility”) and value of personal success (with the career and the family as a basic element of standard happiness) are declared as equally important. The materialistic orientation (indicated by the desire to have money) is declared by the minority of the youth, but sociological research shows it is on the rise. Moral relativism of the Chinese youth becomes more visible, as less significance is ascribed to values and ethical criteria, rather than to legal standards and social morality (Peng, Shao, 2013). Students of the largest Chinese universities are a group which stands out when compared with the mainstream youth striving for promotion and material success. They are characterised by postmodern models, amongst which the deconstruction of authority figures, preferences for informal intimate relationships, seeking new identifications or adopting the so-called post-modern point of view (“live for yourself”, “to have in order to be”) are the most frequent (Zhong, Liu, 2014).

The transition from the collectivist to the individualistic orientation is much more visible among the Russian youth. As the research reveals, its more distinct features include an overall moral relativism, or even cynicism and indifference to ideals. This view is shared by 70% of the older generation and 64% of the youth. A considerable part (46%) claims that today’s Russia is a completely different country and the past values or ways of thinking have become out of date and anachronistic. The past model of a widely educated and ideationally involved man have given way to other, much more introverted models, formed not by large social structures but by the closest environment. Nowadays, the ideal man is intelligent, ambitious and motivated to achieve success, he/she believes in himself/herself and is responsible for his/her own future, is courteous and empathetic, and has a good sense of humour (Gorshkov, Sheregi, 2010: 122–167). According to young Russians, the most important thing is to have a happy family life, a well-paid and interesting job and an interesting, prosperous life (Konstantinovskij et al., 2015). Due to these directional values, the family as the main object of life aspirations is pointed to by 13% of the youth. The orientation most often reported is the one focused on striving for wealth/private business (26%) and for high social status/position of high quality specialists (17%). These groups, together with the respondents who would like to achieve everything that is possible (19%), account for the most numerous segment of the youth (60%), for which the philosophy of “to have in order to mean something” seems to be the most significant. The rest are either “passive hedonists” (15%) or desperate people who do not set themselves any goals. The presence of youth subcultures does not distort the structure of this image so much (Gorshkov, Sheregi, 2010: 132–133).

The life orientations of the youth in the post-Soviet countries of Central and Eastern Europe look slightly different. On the one hand, one can perceive them in contrast to those discussed before; on the other hand, they need to be described individually to capture the local specificity. What distinguishes them from Russia, China or Vietnam (i.e. the countries in which capitalism and openness to the world are controlled and/or limited), is a more fluent transformation of their
cultural patterns and the fact that they are understood less literally. Apart from the transition from the collectivist to the individualistic culture, one can observe in them the evolution of what the value of success actually means, moving away from purely materialistic (wealth, money), through meritocratic and status-related (position, significance, prestige) to the considerably individualistic, subjective and post-materialistic values, connected with the expression of the Self. This is the essential difference created not only by the groups of the “exotic” youth (like prosumers, the Greens or hipsters), but also in the mainstream way of thinking.

In poorer countries, marked by a shorter period of institutional links to the EU, these processes are relatively weak. After a period of naive ideas about the opportunities that come with liberal capitalism (dreams about wealth and one's own business), young Bulgarians and Romanians, still want to grow richer (42% of young Bulgarians are success-oriented, no matter the price – see Mitev, Kovacheva, 2014). However, nowadays they are much more interested in a job which will ensure their professional development and a proper income to avail of the goods of the consumer society. Their ideas about a successful life oscillate between the traditional and postmodern models, but with the prevalence of the former. The work has to be interesting and well-paid, but at the same time it needs to be safe and stable. The family has to provide for emotional security, but it does not necessarily have to be a conventional marriage with many children (on average, 1/5 of the supporters of this view believes that the model 2+1 is sufficient). Religion is also included in the category of matters important in life (for 60% of Romanians and 70% of Bulgarians). However, it is interpreted very individually, not necessarily in connection with spirituality or the need for self-fulfilment. The latter is satisfied rather by pop-culture entertainment and recommendations11.

In the countries with a longer history of institutional links to Europe, and yet no success in terms of systemic transformation (Hungary, Latvia), life orientations of the youth in many respects resemble the characteristics of young Bulgarians and Romanians. They also grow out of the pessimism towards the opportunities offered by postmodern capitalism, and are narrowed down to a very pragmatically understood individual success – an interesting, prestigious, well-paid job with further development opportunities (career). Over 90% of the Latvian youth aspire to them (Jauniešuiespēju, attieksmjuuvertibupētijums, 2013), a slightly fewer amongst the Hungarian youth who is significantly more pessimistic, as regards their own future. The most recent studies clearly indicate that the general well-being of young Hungarians is deteriorating. They are worried about their own material situation and the situation of their families (51%), the future of the country’s economy (58%), and they generally experience existential uncertainty and are afraid of unpredictable and future with no perspective (Oross, 2013: 356).

11 http://www.btv.bg/gallery/ratings/btv-e-bezuslovnijat-izbor-na-zritelite-tazi-prolet.html, see also: http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=1132212
Almost every young Latvian and the majority of young Hungarians dream of a comfortable house or apartment and attractive leisure time activities (Nagy, 2013: 353). The family is placed on the top of life values and it is not necessarily understood as a traditional marriage with children. In Latvia, approximately 2/3 of the respondents speaking about a happy family, simultaneously speak about having children (Jauniešu, 2013: 4). In Hungary, this figure is even higher although in practice childlessness is the norm (Makay, 2013: 247). Both the Latvian and the Hungarian youth emphasise their indifference to religion. The data collected in the both countries shows that it is not an issue of individualisation, but rather of a progressing secularisation of the generation which places its own ambitions, independence and comfort of life in the central position (Rosta, 2013: 357).

The strivings of the Polish youth in some places come close to those of the German youth. Young Germans have generally optimistic ideas concerning the future – both their own and that of their country (Shell, 2915), while young Poles think just the opposite (CBOS, 2014: 106). As a result of the impact of the postmodern culture, the life strivings of the Polish youth for years have been moving away from the material success understood in the categories of a compulsive need. At the same time, years of recession and lack of promising perspectives have weakened young Poles’ pursuit of a colourful lifestyle, once so highly valued by them.– They have turned to affiliating values as their pillars, which include a successful family life (50%), love, friendship (50%), a job that plays various roles, is a source of personal satisfaction and facilitates friendships (41%), a high social position (35%), satisfactory income (29%), or a peaceful life without greater concerns (28%) (Szafraniec, 2011: 41; CBOS, 2014: 6). At the threshold of adulthood, 25% of the Polish youth reveal an interest in achieving an average status and conventional happiness, 30% would like to have an unconventional career and lifestyle based on sophisticated consumption, 13% would like to combine their life pragmatism with social involvement and experiencing culture. Minimalists (12%) and demanding dreamers (20%) constitute nearly one third of the Polish youth.

The distinctive feature of the German youth is their need of security and positive, stable relations with their closest environment – ensured mainly by good relations within the family. German parents, more often than in the other countries, are convinced that their children do not have to – at most they can. Therefore, they can fulfil themselves and live a full life without being forced to choose between “to have-or-to be”, as they can have both. Without doubt, the young generation of Germans (also in the new, post-communist Lands) is to a greater extent a generation of possibilities rather than of “musts”. It may be seen in their attitude to work. They are mainly interested in material benefits (27%), satisfaction (18%) and developing a healthy distance to their work responsibilities (18%), whereby making a career is secondary. It is a life goal for only 37% of the German youth (Shell, 2015; Loeven, Quentzel, Hurrelmann, 2015: 72–88). Nowadays young Germans aspire mainly to securing a stable and interesting job which will allow them to earn money, thanks to which they will be able to enjoy their life and enjoy their free time with the loved ones. The transition from the
principle of “career at any cost” to “work-life-balance” does not eliminate the consumerist strivings of the German youth and does not weaken their ambition to succeed – it simply gives it a different character and meaning.

When we talk about differences in life orientations, it is necessary to realise how subjective they might be and how difficult it may be to juxtapose them due to highly individualised motivational dictionaries followed by the respondents. It is hard to quantify and compare their responses literally. However, we made such an attempt (see Table 2) and we obtained interesting, albeit tentative, results about one of the groups (although it needs to be borne in mind that the statistical analysis presented below is based on data generated with the use of different methodologies), i.e. the so-called “pragmatic idealists” who reconcile the “to have” and “to be” values in a manner which is characteristic for the postmodernity (by combining the material success and the satisfaction that comes from practicing a consumer lifestyle with the value of doing something for others or for an idea: of healthy lifestyle, environment protection, creativity and cultural participation, supporting the weaker). German sociologists recognise that this type accounts for 25% of their youth, Polish sociologists see it in 13%, while Russian sociologists do not see it at all in their youth (or they do not care to look for it). Even if it is a very tentative comparison, it is very meaningful – it shows the meaning of cultural, mental and civilizational differences in shaping life orientations of the youth.

Table 2. Types of life orientation of the German, Polish and Russian youth (aged 19–25).

| TYPES OF ORIENTATION                        | GERMANY | POLAND | RUSSIA |
|---------------------------------------------|---------|--------|--------|
| Passive minimalists and dreamers            | 20%     | 32%    | 25%    |
| Conventional, consumption-oriented “normals”| 20%     | 25%    | 30%    |
| Ambitious, active and successful people     | 35%     | 34%    | 45%    |
| Pragmatic idealists                         | 25%     | 13%    | 0.0%   |

Source: Data taken from 1/ the Shell Study – 2010 (Germany), 2/ Polish youth research (Szafraniec, 2010, 2011) and 3/ Russian youth survey (Gorshkov, Sheregi, 2010).

All the others show different varieties of consumer orientation (“to have”) – starting with passive minimalists and dreamers (who – despite differences in the level of life aspirations – represent the same approach to life: doing nothing with their own aspirations), through conventional consumer-oriented “normals” (satisfying themselves a petty bourgeois lifestyle), and ending with ambitious, active people of success, who have been captivated by the unconventional patterns of life and careers, recommended by contemporary culture. While the first two categories highly value the need for security (stable job, guaranteed income, social support), the active successful people and pragmatic idealists appreciate the need for freedom (in lifestyle and/or in worldview and ideological issues).

The paths that the youth takes to (differently understood) success are various. Nevertheless, the common conviction is that education is a necessary condition to achieve something in life. In most of the analysed countries, children
are subjected to a strong pressure to achieve success and they grow up with the feeling that they do not have the right to make a mistake as, according to the message they receive from adults, it can mean a life disaster for them. Investments in education begin from the earliest years and are manifested not only in other (more demanding) attitudes of parents towards the child and school, but also in allocating more money to education and extracurricular activities in order to ensure better school grades, develop abilities, skills and interests. The higher the family status, the longer is the list and the more diversified is the type of investments arranging the future career of the child –in every country.

In the European countries, higher education turns into the core aspiration. In the poorer ones (like China and Vietnam), it is enough to graduate from the secondary or even vocational school to have better opportunities for a promotion. Yet even there, unprecedented numbers of university students and candidates interested in higher education are recorded (Wasielewski, 2018: 113–160). Although not so significant yet, the problem of credentialism and educational inflation also begins to affect these countries, causing a number of risks for young generations who are pulled into the trap of high aspirations that cannot be matched with the structural capacity of the system. It is paradoxical that in spite of this, the collective advancement, observed in many communist societies at earlier stages of their development and still pursued by younger generations nowadays, does not occur at such a scale anymore. What the transformation “from socialism” has to offer to young people, is uncertain future, pressure on a peculiar kind of life values (individual success, consumerism) and the “do-it-yourself” strategy which is difficult to implement. Nevertheless, young citizens of the post-communist countries seem to be heading in this direction with great determination. Its strength becomes even more evident when contrasted with the German youth. This large “aspiration gap” may be a sign of a potent social energy available in the system and of greater dynamics of political transformation processes. On the other hand, it may just as well become a source of tensions and problems of counter-developmental nature, increasing the peripheralization risk for the whole area (Bhabha, 1994: 171). The both possibilities will be further discussed in the following chapters.

**Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the social and cultural space in which socialisation of the young generation in the post-communist countries takes place is rather specific. Not only does it reveal the effects of glocality – resulting from the clash between global trends, ideas and values, and local determinants, but also individual (unique for a given country) trajectories of departing from communism, as observed in a broader historical perspective. This coexistence of different axio-normative systems, as well as not quite clearly defined relations between different elements of the newly created social system, make adaptation processes lose their direction and face problems. The problems affect both institutions and
individuals. In the case of the young generation, it means entering adolescence in the both dynamically changing and dimorphic social environment, in which the basic socialisation agendas still have their share. They no longer create a once uniformed educative front, but act in order to pursue their own (sometimes very different) interests and goals.

While the socialisation fields may differ respectively to local conditions and the adopted transformation model, they show that the socialisation space in all these countries is complex and, in many ways, culturally immature, devoid of its own moral code. It is not a friendly space for the young generation who are entering adolescence under the pressure of different cultural messages and influences and who face numerous risks which, in more developed countries, are absorbed either by a better economic situation or by more mature institutional solutions. The example of Germany is significant here for two reasons: firstly, because of continuing differences between the Eastern and Western Lands (in spite of the course of time and the scale of investment, the former lands still face the inheritance of communism); and secondly, because of the distance between the German Eastern Lands and other post-communist countries.

Wide-ranging generalisations are hard to make (as there are clear differences between countries and groups of countries). Nevertheless, common to characteristics of young people is a fragmented reflection of what the new type of rationality brings along and selective drawing from the patterns of global culture. Among them social advancement and lifestyle based on consumption have a particular power of influence and engage the energy of the mainstream of young people. Values forming the horizon of the “background” (ecology, climate, minority rights, women's rights, solidarity) do not become a part of the world experienced by young people so easily. The bigger “asymmetry of rationality” at the systemic level, the bigger difference in the status of consumption and other values, and the bigger gap between the consumer aspirations of youth and system's readiness to meet them.

A joint note is a total reorientation of the way of thinking from “us” to “I”, visible in a previously absent focus on oneself and one's needs, but also – what is important – in responsibility for one's own fate. This was caused by the processes of individualisation, carried into the socialisation space with a wave of global influences, as well as state's retreat from previous forms of guarantees and support. Without a shadow of doubt global contexts seized the driving role in socialisation of young people and a lot indicates that there is no way back to local/national contexts. If such attempts are made, there will have to be partial and/or boomerang effects. Mainly because the local narration ceased to be the only and dominating one, but also because when the new type of rationality is neglected and values brought in by the global culture are stigmatised, gravitating sometimes towards closed, exclusive communities, it becomes impractical for the main task the system should fulfils: covering the distance to the centre of the world and acquiring skills of partnership functioning in the network of global links.
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