



Towards axiological maturity – the implementation and fulfilment of values by academic youth from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine

Abstract: The outlining of the values appreciated by academic youth and their perception of the possibilities of implementing and fulfilling them was based on the international comparative research conducted in 2019–2021 in the Polish-Czech-Slovak-Ukrainian borderland. In the pedagogical analysis undertaken in the study of this subject matter, some theoretical and methodological conceptualizations were applied, which referred to: (1) Ronald F. Inglehart's concept of changes of values, (2) the objectivistic approach to values and axiological maturity according to Adam Węgrzecki and (3) comparative analysis in international studies. Comparing the declarations of student groups in the investigated environments reveals significant differences in all value assessments, except for the implementation of moral values and a respectable life. The analysis and interpretation of the collected empirical material also indicate that the image of university students' axiological preferences is characterized – in the context of Inglehart's theory – mainly by secular-rational authority and post-materialism aimed at achieving a particular quality of life.

Keywords: values, axiological maturity, academic youth, Polish-Czech-Slovak-Ukrainian cultural borderland, comparative analysis in international research

Of all the possible identity reference points in the human world, the values found in it seem to be the most durable. They constitute the most reliable horizon of meaning for the interpretation of events and subjective experiences, allowing one to define oneself through conscious choices of goals and actions consistent with values, because ultimately a human being is who one will be, thanks to what one is heading for.

Staś-Romanowska, 2004, p. 58

Political and sociocultural transformations and axiological awareness of the young generation

The process of political transformation, which began in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine over three decades ago, caused a number of significant changes in the sociocultural sphere, in individuals' systems of values, and in behavioural patterns. The prospects of radical changes in economy increased the optimism of many people – they expected a “bright” future resulting from the restructuring of the state economy and the introduction of free market mechanisms. The reality verified these expectations – the rapid enrichment of some was accompanied by the stagnation and sometimes even pauperization of others. What emerged was the issue of unemployment and the feeling of politicians' lack of interest in the problems of ordinary people, as well as numerous social dilemmas pertaining to education.

After a rather turbulent period of the transition from real socialism to real democracy, the contemporary youth is continuing social changes, by taking part in them and partly shaping them. How young people perceive a particular state/states and society/societies and the changes taking place in them, what criteria they use in making their assessments, how they would like to build their private and social lives, what they consider worthy of imitation and what they firmly reject – largely results from the impact of various directions and thought trends that clash in the environments in which young people exist and learn (Plopa, 2009; Długosz, Niezgodna and Solecki, 2014; Grabowska, 2021; Mariański, 2022).

In this context, some important questions arise, especially from the standpoint of university students:

- What is the picture of the axiological preferences of academic youth living in culturally diverse environments/communities over time, after the political and sociocultural breakthrough?
- Are university students more aware and sensitive to values, or rather sceptical – without an orientation and life prospects for the future in their country of residence?
- Can it be said that, similarly to Western countries, in the case of the young generation currently living in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and in reference to the theory formulated by Ronald

F. Inglehart, one deals with a “silent revolution” of values that is taking place? – a revolution that consists in moving from preferences for material values related to the needs of (physical, economic, etc.) security to the development of post-material values related to the needs of affiliation, recognition and affirmation. Moreover, this is also a positive change, consistent with the transformation of an industrial society into a service society.

- Are Inglehart’s hypotheses of deficiency and socialization confirmed in culturally diverse environments, and to what extent? They assume, firstly, that individuals’ priority values reflect their socio-economic environment, and that items that are relatively scarce in it are given a subjectively higher value. Secondly, it is assumed that the basic structure of individuals’ values reflects the conditions in which they were brought up (Inglehart, 2004, 2007)¹. In his analyses, Inglehart drew attention to the important fact that post-material values become particularly important among young people who, unlike older generations, have been shaped through different experiences. The observed tendency seems to be irreversible, though in the case of a long-term economic crisis, it is possible to reverse the current effects of modernization, which ultimately means another increase in the significance of material values (Inglehart, 2000, pp. 215–225; Inglehart and Baker, 2000, pp. 19–51).

As indicated by the results of numerous studies on the values appreciated by the contemporary young generation, many people show great variability and confusion in their understanding of values (Hildebrant-Wypych and Kabacińska, 2010; Galas, 2013; Cybal-Michalska, 2013; Lewicka, 2015; Wolska-Długosz, 2019; Uklańska, Kotowska-Wójcik and Chomczyński, 2020; Przybylski, 2021; Mariański, 2021, pp.163–184). This confusion results from the ongoing changes that favour specific axiological transformations (axiological reductionism, differentiation, broadening or narrowing the object of fulfilling a particular value, absolutization of values, revaluation of values, instrumentalization of values, axiological crisis), in the scope of which it is necessary to distinguish the changes in values taking place in life from the

¹ R.F. Inglehart placed values in two dimensions: (1) the type of recognized authority: traditional (mainly religious) vs. secular-rational one and (2) the dimension of materialistic values (experience) vs. post-materialistic values (quality of life). Quoted in: Lewicka, 2005, p. 17; Zdziech, 2010.

transformation of values objectified in culture and contained in the objects created within it (Łojewska-Krawczyk, 2001, pp. 20–47). Moreover, what has spread in contemporary axiological literature are some approaches that reject the possibility of full implementation of various values, as well as some proposals emphasizing other, new values, such as heuristics or openness – recognized as both psychological and cognitive values (Brzozowski, 2007; Oleś and Bartnicka-Michalska, 2022, pp. 1–9).

The analysis and interpretation of the current results of international comparative research in the field of education, psychology and sociology (including Matulnik, Kratochvíla and Kyselica, 2008, pp. 163–184; Ogrodzka-Mazur, 2013, pp. 106–127; Malinauskas, Dumciene and Lapeniene, 2014, pp. 285–293; Swadźba, 2015, pp. 101–122; Długosz, 2016, pp. 100–124; Rogulska and Antas-Jaszczuk, 2017, pp. 59–67; Riberio, Pereira, Freire, Oliveira, Caso-tii and Boery, 2018; Rabušić and Chromková-Manea, 2018; Saukh, 2019, pp. 66–70; Ogrodzka-Mazur and Saukh, 2020, pp. 11–23) allows one to outline the typical features of the image of the qualities valued by the current young learning generation, namely:

- it is characteristic of the social knowledge of the “transformation generation” that, within this knowledge, there is no awareness of one’s own generational distinctiveness,
- on an intergenerational scale, there is a decline in the level of the overall system of values and an intensifying tendency to focus on life for oneself,
- the importance of individual and private values is increasing, as opposed to social values promoted by various institutions (including educational ones),
- a new type of personality is being formed, for which the ideal is self-fulfilment, understood as acting in accordance with the individual’s own capabilities and needs and at the same time as rejecting all ideologies, including religious ones.

On the one hand, this image fully reflects the noticeable phenomena of axiological transformations taking place primarily in the field of revaluation of basic values and their instrumentalization. It also creates the opportunity to define the worldview horizon of academic youth, as well as the formation of their new axiological preferences. Therefore, it will be interesting from the angle of the conducted considerations to learn the opinions of the surveyed

students from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine regarding the possibility of achieving and implementing their declared life goals, and therefore learning about their “efficiency” in reference to selected values.

Theoretical-methodological context of the own research

In the pedagogical analysis of the issues related to values appreciated by academic youth and their perception of the possibilities of pursuing and implementing them, a theoretical conceptualization was adopted, referring to the aforementioned Inglehart’s concept of changes of values. It still serves – despite both theoretical additions and critical positions – to explain contemporary changes in systems of values, especially in the context of the scarcity and socialization hypothesis. Moreover, relating it to the analyses of the value systems of post-communist countries systematically undertaken since the 1990s, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine (Rabušic, Chromková-Manea, 2018; Halman, Reeskens, Sieben and Zundert, 2022) makes it possible to indicate similarities and differences in the value systems chosen by the young generation currently living and learning in these neighbouring countries.

The understanding of the category *axiological maturity* was adopted in compliance with the standpoint of Adam Węgrzecki, who treats it as “efficiency in relation to values, which is devoid of one-sidedness, [...] which concerns various values and which, depending on the type of values, may be slightly differentiated, manifested also as a certain type of fidelity to selected values conditioned by a sense of internal freedom” (Węgrzecki, 1994, pp. 19–21; 2012, pp. 47–56). Acquiring axiological maturity takes place in the process of evaluation, which includes, among other things: free choice, choosing from alternative possibilities, supporting the choice after considering the consequences of each of the options, accepting values appreciated by the individual, positively assessing values that were freely chosen, acting in accordance with the choice of values and consistent orientation with selected values in various situations and behaviours (Oleś, 2002, pp. 53–75). Therefore, the application of an objectivistic approach to values and axiological maturity in pedagogical analyses has important theoretical-cognitive implications:

- the objectivistic approach to values is, from a cultural point of view, universal in nature – despite the significant range of differences existing in individual cultures in the contents of actually recognized moral

- norms or the adopted cognitive images of the world and humanity – everywhere people treat cognitive and moral values objectively,
- axiological objectivity introduces the concept of normative order into an individual's life – the sphere of values defining what is and should be valuable, distinguished from what actually is (also the object of desires and preferences), creates a specific perspective that not only allows the assessment of what is currently or has been previously produced, but also allows the formulation of new goals and the creation of new goods that are carriers of values,
 - what stems from objectivistic theories of values are the institutions existing in social life and the human rights recognized in our contemporary culture, as well as the universal imperative of protecting cultural heritage, which applies to all cultures and people today – every culture, regardless of its specific character, contains goods that are valuable not only for members of a particular culture, but also for the whole humanity (Łojwska-Krawczyk, 2001, pp. 18–19).

Due to the comparative nature of the research, references were also made to comparative analysis in international research, which meant the process of selecting research samples in different countries and analyzing the investigated phenomena compliantly with appropriate criteria in order to determine the same, similar or different degrees in intensity of the examined features (Szarucki, 2010, p. 55; Cowen and Kazamias, 2019; Nowakowska-Siuta, 2023, pp. 75–152). Moreover, the most important preliminary conditions concerning data comparability were met, namely: conceptual comparability – the measurements refer to the same concepts and categories, statistical comparability – the data collection methods accepted in statistical research were used for all categories, and interpretative comparability – the investigated categories were interpreted in a similar way in all the surveyed countries, yet at the same time, they took into account the conditions existing in selected countries (Kordos and Szulc, 2020, pp. 15–34.).

The main problem addressed in the own research is comprised in the questions:

- What values do academic youth from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine who study pedagogy in the full-time system appreciate?
- To what extent do students' living and learning environments determine the possibility of implementing and realizing the values they declare?

- Are Inglehart's hypotheses of deficiency and socialization confirmed in the examined environments, and to what extent?

The comparative research was carried out in 3 stages. Stage I included monographic (field) studies aimed at familiarization with the inherited and currently created sociocultural capital of the Polish-Czech-Slovak-Ukrainian borderland. In stage II, quantitative research (survey) was carried out based on standardized authorial tools. In the final stage III, qualitative research was carried out using individual, semi-structured interviews and document analysis in order to deepen the obtained data in the investigated areas.

In the analysis of the empirical material, the reducing and expanding way of data processing was used. Moreover, the assumptions of the interpretive approach to the analysis of statement senses were taken into account in the context of: understanding the respondents' thoughts, critical common sense understanding and theoretical understanding (Kvale, 2004, pp. 213 – 231; Miles and Huberman, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2009). In preparing a full description of the phenomena, the phenomenological approach was also used (consisting in moving from individual textural-structural relations of meanings and the essence of the respondents' experiences to a synthesis in the form of a universal description of cultural experiences), representing the group (groups) as a whole (Moustakas, 2001, pp. 147–149).

The obtained empirical data were subjected to quantitative and qualitative statistical analysis. For this purpose, statistical analysis programs included in the computer package STATISTICA Advanced Package 13 PL were used. In order to present the degree of diversity of the investigated environments, the method of hierarchical cluster analysis was used, and to determine the relationship between conditional variables and the obtained research results – the method of one-factor and multi-factor ANOVA analyses. Descriptive statistics were also used to characterize the study groups.

The research, conducted in 2019–2021, covered a total of 709 students, including 164 in Poland (97% women and 3% men), 166 in the Czech Republic (72.3% women and 27.7% men), 174 in Slovakia (90.8% women and 9.2% men) and 205 in Ukraine (85% women and 15% men). 7% of the respondents are aged 17–18 (48 people, including 46 in Ukraine), 46% are 19–22 years old (324 people), 27% (193) of respondents are 23–26 years old, and 20% of students are 27 years and over (144 people). The surveyed group is representative of pedagogy students, studying full-time at the first and second degree studies at the University of Silesia in Katowice/Cieszyn (Poland), the Univer-

sity of Ostrava² (Czech Republic), Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia) and Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University (Ukraine).

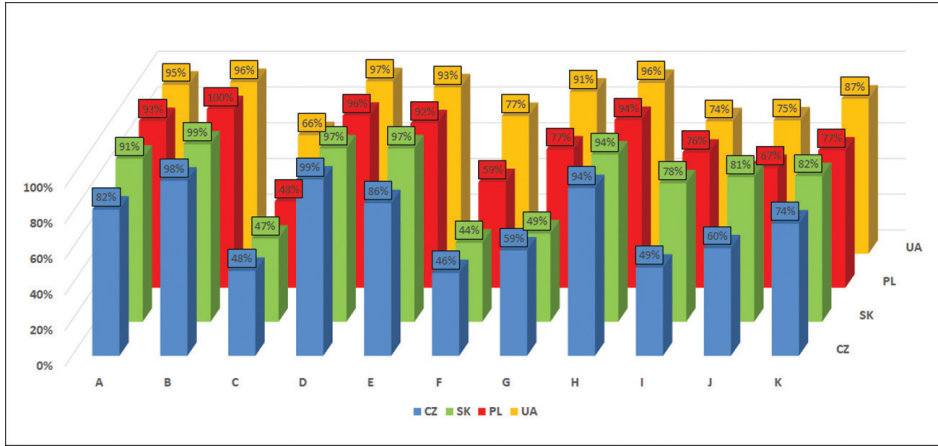
Implementation and fulfilment of values by academic youth

The investigated groups of university students are people in an intensive period of shaping their sense of self-identity, which includes, firstly, the process of interpersonal and interpsychic comparisons, during which the sense of one's own individuality (separate Self) develops. Secondly, this period includes the process of intrapersonal, intrapsychic comparisons, strengthening both the sense of one's own individuality and the sense of coherence (integrity), and thirdly – the process of temporal comparisons, underlying the sense of continuity of the Self. These processes determine the individual's search for answers to three fundamental identity questions throughout the entire individual life cycle: What am I like?, Who am I? and Why am I here? (Wojciszke, 2010, p. 184). Especially in response to the second question, there is a need for axiological self-determination, i.e. conscious choice and acceptance of values, as well as taking actions consistent with the selected values, i.e. their implementation and fulfilment. They lead to the individuals' achieving, apart from intellectual, emotional and social maturity, also axiological maturity, which is an important determinant of their identity.

In the current structure of values preferred by all investigated groups of students, three qualitatively similar subsystems can be distinguished (cf. Figure 1). The first, clearly dominant subsystem includes the values they appreciate the most – family life (98.25%), exciting work and professional career (97.25%), the implementation of moral values and a respectable life (94.5%), knowledge and education (92%) and a comfortable problem-free life (90.25%). Family values occupy the highest position in the choices made by young adults, which indicates a kind of generational continuity – the family is still the value they appreciate the most, being the basic educational environment and the place of transmission of values.

² The studies carried out in the Polish-Czech borderland are more broadly presented in: Ogrodzka-Mazur, E., Szafrńska, A., Malach, J. and Chmura, M. 2021.

Figure 1. Values preferred by students from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine (percentages)



Legend: a – comfortable, problem-free life; b – life among family and friends; c – popularity, fame, success; d – exciting job, professional career; e – knowledge, education, scientific achievements; f – high position, supervising people, decision making; g – fortune, high living standards; h – implementation of moral values, respectable life; i – social engagement, civil activity; j – participation in culture, artistic activity, creativity; k – life full of changes, adventures and attractions.

CZ – Czech Republic; SK – Slovakia; PL – Poland; UA – Ukraine

Source: own research.

In their individual statements, the surveyed students, being in the so-called phase of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, pp. 470–479) – similarly to their peers in most European Union countries – declare entering into their first marriage at a later age (women – 27–28 years; men – 29–30 years) or deciding to have children. They make this dependent primarily on the economic, political or sociocultural situation of the country of residence, which currently most often reduces their motivation to engage in adult family roles and leads to their postponement.

Work and professional career also occupy a high position in the structure of the values appreciated by academic youth. Such a high position of this group of values may indicate the proper implementation of developmental tasks of early adulthood. Starting professional work determines, to a large extent, success in achieving other goals emerging in a particular period of a person’s life, at the same time leading to satisfaction and success in fulfill-

ing goals in later stages. Valuing work and professional career is conditioned – in the opinion of 94.5% of the respondents – by the moral attitude and a respectable life, as well as knowledge and education (92%) – i.e. the values shaped primarily in the family environment and in the course of secondary socialization. Compared to the beginning of the transformation period in the 1990s, currently three times as many Polish, Czech, Slovak and Ukrainian young adults continue their education at university, constituting over 50% of the total population aged 19–24.

The subsystem of the most appreciated values is closed by a very positive attitude of the respondents towards the implementation and fulfilment of a comfortable life, free from problems, currently and in the future (90.25%), as evidenced by respondents' individual statements obtained in the interviews. Aware of their capabilities and needs, university students are – from the sociological point of view – the so-called generation Y, also called the “Millenium generation”, “next generation” or “digital generation”. Being born at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, they value independence, free time and comfort. They are characterized by, among other things: active use of media and digital technologies, a good level of education and readiness for further self-development, a high opinion of their own abilities, the belief in their own uniqueness, excessive expectations and strong aversion to criticism (Laird, Harvey and Lancaster, 2015, pp. 87–100). The obtained research results are also similar to the set of values appreciated by young people created on the basis of the research conducted over a decade ago in seven European countries (Great Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Greece, Sweden). The set includes: *tradition* (recognizing the importance of family and parental authority), *individuality* (a sense of autonomy and independence), *honesty* (expressed by the attitude of friendship and loyalty towards others), *effort* (attributing importance to work ethic and focus on success) and *optimism* (positive thinking as the key to success and a happy life)³.

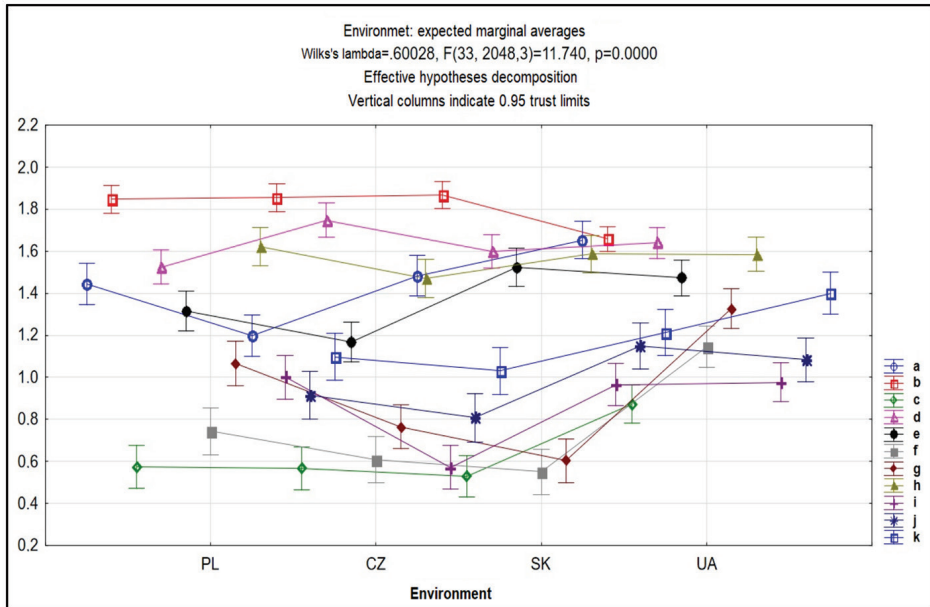
The second, lower ranked subsystem included choices concerning the implementation of a life full of changes, adventures and attractions (80%), participation in culture and artistic activity (70.75%), involvement in social affairs and civic activity (69.25%), and possessing and acquiring large fortune (69%).

³ “*Youthopia*”, the research conducted in 2009, commissioned by *MTV Networks International*. <https://mmponline.pl/artykuly/131285,mtv-mlodzies-jest-dobra> (accessed: 28.08.2023).

All the surveyed students attribute the least importance to the values forming the third subsystem, related to holding high positions and managing people (56.5%) and popularity, fame and achieving success (52.25%).

A comparison of the declarations of student groups in the four studied environments reveals significant differences in all assessments of values (cf. Figure 2), with the exception of the implementation of moral values and a respectable life. At the same time, the thesis is confirmed that the objectivistic approach to values is, from a cultural point of view, universal in nature – people most often objectively treat moral values, which also occupy a high position in the entire system of preferred values.

Figure 2. Values preferred by students from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine (one-factor analysis ANOVA)



Legend: a – comfortable, problem-free life; b – life among family and friends; c – popularity, fame, success; d – exciting job, professional career; e – knowledge, education, scientific achievements; f – high position, supervising people, decision making; g – fortune, high living standards; h – implementation of moral values, respectable life; i – social engagement, civil activity; j – participation in culture, artistic activity, creativity; k – life full of changes, adventures and attractions.

PL – Poland; CZ – Czech Republic; SK – Slovakia; UA – Ukraine

Source: own research.

Ukrainian students significantly more often than their peers from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia indicate higher values related to:

- popularity, fame and success (Kruskal-Wallis test: $z = 4.23$; $p = 0.00$),
- holding high positions, managing people and making decisions ($z = 6.97$; $p = 0.00$),
- having large fortune and a high standard of living ($z = 8.81$; $p = 0.00$),
- a life full of changes, adventures and attractions ($z = 4.5$; $p = 0.00$).
- In turn, they attach significantly less importance to life with family and friends ($z = 3.01$; $p = 0.02$).

Academic youth from the Czech Republic – compared to Polish students – declare significantly higher assessments of values related to exciting work and professional career ($z = 3.16$; $p = 0.01$), but significantly lower assessments than peers from Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine:

- comfortable problem-free life ($z = 5.87$; $p = 0.00$),
- knowledge, education and scientific achievements ($z = 4.51$; $p = 0.00$),
- involvement in social issues and civic activity ($z = 5.15$; $p = 0.00$),
- participation in culture and artistic activity and creativity ($z = 3.90$; $p = 0.001$).

Such a diversified image of values currently appreciated by the learning generation of young adults indicates changes taking place in their axiological awareness, determined by their social sensitivity that is particular to this age and, at the same time, by the perceived difference in the economic and cultural condition of each of their countries of residence. Students are primarily aware of the importance of knowledge and education in the conditions of free market economy and the fact that the quality of the obtained qualifications will determine their life fate, future profession, job, position, living conditions, as well as the fulfilment of their own life aspirations.

As their individual statements provided in the interviews indicate, university students from Poland – to a much lesser extent than their peers from Slovakia and Ukraine – are interested in the implementation of religious values, and more precisely, religious practices. This is also confirmed by the latest research results in this area, according to which in the age group 18–24 years the percentage of regular practitioners dropped from 69% to 23% (Grabowska, 2022). Yet, a characteristic feature of the Czech society is its secularization – 91% of young people aged 16–29 declare themselves as non-believers (Bullivant, 2018, p. 6). The results of the research conducted by Petr Sak and Karolina Sakova also confirm that in the Czech society “there are relatively stable life scenarios accepted by people – obtaining education,

qualifications, using these elements at work, a partner, a marriage, starting a family” (2004, p. 159). These phenomena determine the axiological preferences of Czech youth, who – unlike their peers from Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine – associate their goals and future life plans exclusively with their country of residence. Moreover, Inglehart’s socialization hypothesis is more strongly confirmed in this environment, assuming that the basic value structure of individuals reflects the conditions in which they were brought up.

Summing up, it can be assumed that young learners demonstrate a cognitive-motivational conceptualization of themselves in the future, which is typical of their age. Their declarations are characterized by reflectivity specific to the period of early adulthood, reflected not only in the choices they made, but also in the undertaken behaviours aimed at implementing the appreciated values. What is more, the respondents’ opinions obtained from the interviews indicate that they are aware that they will repeatedly verify their own life aspirations, depending on new social challenges.

In reference to Inglehart’s theory of changes of values, the image of values appreciated, implemented and fulfilled by academic youth in the investigated countries is characterized mainly by secular-rational authority and post-materialism aimed at achieving a specific quality of life. Maybe this young generation – as a kind of social “barometer” – is heading towards a “quiet revolution” in values, which is a positive change consistent with the transformation of an industrial society into a service society? Although the obtained research results are not unequivocal, it can be assumed that Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine, previously treated in international research into values as post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, have a chance to educate an axiologically mature young generation, open to the world and new ideas. However, taking into account the fact that the declarations of students from Ukraine were obtained in 202, before the Russian aggression in this country, it should be also assumed that the current image of their axiological preferences may be different, as in the case of other groups of young adults from the analyzed environments. This as well encourages researchers to continue their studies.

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