

**SECURITY, SAFETY, AND FREEDOM IN ROMANIA: AN
ANALYSIS OF GENERATION Z PERCEPTION IN THE CONTEXT
OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

Abstract:	<p><i>The “special military operation” launched by the Russian Federation in Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 had a strong impact on the European security environment. The full-scale invasion marked an unwelcome return of armed conflict within the continent and an unprecedented humanitarian situation. It was also the first time that members of Generation Z are seeing what war really looks like.</i></p> <p><i>The existing literature provides extensive studies about Gen Z’s perception of various issues like social and political values, workplace, and quality of life. However, very little is known about young citizens’ perception of security, safety, and freedom after the war in Ukraine started. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature and analyses how Gen Z’s perception of security, safety, and freedom has changed in the current security environment.</i></p> <p><i>The analysis is based on a single case study – in Romania, and semi-structured interviews conducted in September-October 2022 with young citizens coming from different socio-demographic profiles. The main purpose is to explain how the conflict affected the perceptions variation of the abovementioned indicators, in a post-communist state where those under 25yo did not experience a large-scale military conflict so close to our borders.</i></p>
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In the last decades, the international system's evolution transformed the socio-political context of any state. Implicitly, individuals live in different societies, follow different rules, and support distinct values. As such, besides the aspects that make each context-independent, the perception of similar aspects is varying. Although we share comparable core values, the way we relate and understand them is inconsistent and, in most cases, determined by local context, previous experience, or even age.

The existing literature on values perception is relatively limited and mostly discusses specific contexts and values, thus is difficult to generalize the findings. But a significant common point is that context and age are two elements that can shape and transform how an individual behaves¹. Moreover, unexpected major events (like economic crises, wars, natural disasters, and pandemics) tend to determine individuals to reconsider or modify their perception in relation to certain values. Similarly, they will also adapt their behavior to better face new challenges or threats. Complementary, the literature on generational differences supports the idea that generations are characterized by distinct particularities and that age is a fundamental perception-shaping factor.

One of the most studied generations is Generation Z (Gen Z) and it includes the cohort formed by those born and raised between 1995 and 2010 (with some debates on the period). In this specific case, the individuals are experiencing unacquainted events that for those older than them might look familiar or like other experiences. So, it is unclear how the perception of the value is affected by current changes and developments within the international system.

Previous studies provide extensive research about Gen Z's perception of various issues like social and political values, workplace, and quality of life. However, very little is known about young citizens' perceptions of security, safety, and freedom. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature and analyses how Gen Z's perception of security, safety, and freedom has changed in the current security environment. The analysis is based on a single case study – in Romania, and semi-structured interviews conducted in September-October 2022 with young citizens coming from different socio-demographic profiles. The main purpose is to explain how the conflict affected the perceptions variation of the abovementioned indicators, in a post-communist state where those under 25 did not experience a large-scale military conflict so close to our borders.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the literature about values perception, factors influencing the attitude,

¹ Rebekka Kasberg, Johannes Keller, *The Relation Between Human Values and Perceived Situation Characteristics in Everyday Life*, in "Frontiers in Psychology", part of *New Approaches in Exploring Value-Behavior Relations*, Vol. 9, No. 1976, 2018, *The Relation Between Human Values and Perceived Situation Characteristics in Everyday Life*, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30271362/>, (17.11.2022); Collin Foad, Gregory Maion, Paul Hanel, *Perceptions of values over time and why they matter*, in "Journal of Personality", Vol. 89, No. 4, 2021, pp. 689-705

perception of security, safety, and freedom, and the impact of war. This is followed by a short presentation of the main features of Gen Z. Next section is a brief discussion of data and methods used in the analysis, while the following parts include our analysis of how Gen Z perceived security, safety, and freedom after the war in Ukraine started. The last section includes a critical discussion of the findings and the main implications for the broader field.

The dynamics of values perception

Values are defined as "principles for action encompassing abstract goals in life and modes of conduct that an individual prefers across contexts and situations"¹ or "abstract beliefs which serve as guidelines in peoples' life and affect the way people and events are evaluated"². Since the variety of values an individual can support is complex, Schwartz and others placed them in four categories: conservation (safety and security are included here), self-enhancement, openness to change, and self-transcendence³. The model is a circular one and helps us understand how the value change is happening: the pattern shows that those at opposite ends of the circle change in opposing directions and, by this, the value structure is maintained⁴. Thus, an individual is not supposed to adhere to opposite values.

Moreover, values are mental processes that include representations, concepts, goals, and beliefs⁵ and tend to differ according to age. There are studies showing that adolescents and emerging adults perceive the same values in a different way (a generational difference)⁶, while the variability decreases with age (for the members of the same cohort)⁷. Complementary, Schwartz et. al show that over the lifespan, conservation values are relatively stable in importance, thus protecting the status quo (by keeping safety and security) is a stable value for most of individuals, regardless of age. Since freedom as a human value was defined by

¹ Clyde Kluckhohn, *Values, and value-orientations in the theory of action: an exploration in definition and classification*, in Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils (eds.), *Toward a general theory of action*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 388-433

² Rebekka Kasberg, Johannes Keller, *Op. cit.*, passim

³ Shalom Schwartz, Jan Cieciuch, et. al., *Refining the theory of basic individual values*, in "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology", Vol. 103, No. 4, 2012, pp. 663-688

⁴ Anat Bardi, Julie Ann Lee, Nadi Hofmann-Towfigh, Geoffrey Soutar, *The structure of intraindividual value change*, in "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology", Vol. 97, No. 5, pp. 913-929

⁵ Paul Thagard, *What are values?*, in "Psychology Today", 16.04.2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/hot-thought/201304/what-are-values>, (05.10.2022)

⁶ Claudia Sălceanu, *The evolution of human values – a comparative study of values in adolescents and emerging adults*, in „Postmodern Openings”, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2019, pp. 74-83

⁷ Jordi Quoidbach, Daniel Gilbert, Timothy Wilson, *The end of history illusion*, in "Science", Vol. 339, No. 6115, pp. 96-98

Deutsch as "the number of significantly different choices between actions actually available to and recognized by"¹ an individual, we can assimilate it with other conservation values².

On the other hand, scholars show that there are three systematic sources of value change: historical events, physical aging, and life stage³.

Regarding the first category, there are some general events that can be included here for example wars - no matter their type; either if we talk about international conflicts or internal rivalries, the violence associated with these kinds of events are affecting the individual's value; economic depression (in most cases, a strong economic recession will influence individuals' behavior and will transform the basic set of human values), or other circumstances that reshape the traditional social and political environment.

Physical aging is another source of value change. Over the lifetime of an individual, multiple psychological development stages can be identified⁴. Each of these stages is characterized by different cognitive capabilities and is associated with different coping mechanisms. Therefore, in the case of older adults the impact of historical events is less significant than for younger ones. Moreover, different opportunities, demands, and constraints may cause a different perception or attitude towards similar values, a case in which the life stage can be considered an influencing factor.

Also, other scholars explain that: "People's value system comprises both terminal and instrumental values, which are developed and reinforced through the culture in which they grow on one side and the environment on the other. Socialization from parents, religious institutions, friends, personal experiences, and society contributes to the formation of values in individuals. The individual values are affected by our belief system, prevailing social systems and to some extent socio-economic conditions"⁵. Thus, since all the previously mentioned factors are influenced by a major event like the war in Ukraine, it is worth to consider it as a change trigger when analyzing the values of a specific group.

¹ Karl Deutsch, *The value of Freedom (I)*, in "The American Scholar", Vol. 17, No. 2, 1948, pp. 150-160.

² Although some scholar associate *freedom* with the openness-to-change category.

³ Shalom Schwartz, *Basic Human Values: An overview/Theory, methods, and applications*, in "On-line readings in Psychology and Culture", Vol. 2, No. 1, 2012, <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1116&context=orpc>, (06.10.2022)

⁴ Gabriel Orenstein, Lindsay Lewis, *Stages of Psychosocial Development*, in "StatePearls", StatePearls Publishing, 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK556096/>, (02.10.2022)

⁵ Ramgopal Ratnawat, *Understanding values and their role in human life*, in "HRKatha – Human Resource Simplified", 31.05.2018, <https://www.hrkatha.com/opinion/understanding-values-and-their-role-in-human-life/>, (05.10.2022)

Moreover, as we showed above, values are not static elements specific to humans, thus their perception can also change, although the core values remain the same. The existing literature discusses a strong relation between values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. It is shown how the perception of specific values determines different attitudes and generates a particular behavior¹. Thus, a change in value perception will make the individual adapt their behavior and react to external triggers, showing a dependent relationship between the socio-political environment and each human being.

Furthermore, previous research explains that the perception of different values is to be analyzed in accordance with the context and previous experience. So, in the following paragraphs, we will focus on how security, safety, and freedom are perceived from a theoretical perspective.

Regarding security, as a human value, its perception varies significantly and the starting point in any assessment should be a conceptual clarification of it. So, according to Schwartz, the defining goal is represented by the safety, harmony, and stability of society, relationships, and self². While some values related to it might serve exclusively individual interests, there are others related to wider group objectives, cases in which national security can be included here. Moreover, "security is both a feeling and a reality"³, so, in most cases, people's subjective perceptions about the environment may significantly diverge from reality. Usually, these differences are determined by cognitive biases that are closely related to their previous experience, or what is already known to them⁴. In addition, security perception might be associated with threat perception. According to Cohen, this is a cognitive construct that creates an image of reality as a hypothesis, a case in which, we can assume that the existence of war will reshape the way individuals perceive their surroundings⁵. If we talk about Gen Z, the impact is supposed to be

¹ Vladimir Ponizovskiy, Lusine Grigoryan, Ulrich Kuhnen, Klaus Boehnke, *Social construction of the value-behavior relation*, in "Frontiers in Psychology – Personality and Social Psychology", Vol. 10, 2019, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31118911/> (17.11.2022)

² Shalom Schwartz, *Basic Human Values: An overview / Theory, methods and applications*, „On-line Readings in Psychology and Culture“, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2012, <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1116&context=orpc>, (01.10.2022)

³ Bruce Schneier, *The psychology of security*, in S. Vaudenay, (ed.), *Progress in Cryptology – AFRICACRYPT 2008, Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, Vol. 5023, p. 50

⁴ Adaja Stoetman, *Perceptions of security. How our brains can fool us?*, in "Strategic Monitor 2019-2020", The Hague Center for Strategic Studies & Clingendael, 2019, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/strategic-monitor-2019-2020/#contents>, (29.09.2022)

⁵ Raymond Cohen, *Threat Perception in International Crisis*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979, p. 6

more significant than in other cases (other generations), considering their psychological development stage and lack of previous similar experiences.

Safety is another value that compared to security is similar and different, at the same time. On one side, both share the same perception difference generated by the reality vs. feeling nexus, while, on the other hand, their meaning might be distinctive – e.g., national security vs. workplace safety. In our analysis, safety as a human value was approached as a lack of physical risks and threats – like human security as "freedom from fear". This means the nonexistence of all types of coercion, threat, and violence in the daily lives of individuals¹.

Freedom is another core human value. Like security and safety, it can be perceived in multiple ways, but any of them are influenced by context, age, and previous experience. In the literature, freedom is approached from various perspectives such as freedom of choice, freedom of speech, or freedom of assembly, for example, if we talk about politics or "freedom from" (constraints of society), "freedom to" (do what you want) or "freedom to be" if we discuss it from a philosophical perspective. Overall, all the variations are included in the definition provided by Oxford Dictionary: "the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants"².

As shown above, values are core components of each human being. The way we perceive them is translated into attitudes and behavior. Since all of us are "zoon politikon", everyone's values are related to the socio-political context. Thus, the perception varies and there is no pattern available to predict how this works. But there are some factors/elements that can show us how the perception evolves. One of these elements that are common to security, safety, and freedom is the perception of threat. According to the existing literature on this topic, threat perception is dependent on previous experiences, so in one way or another, is determined by socio-political context, trauma history, and age (life stage)³.

One of the most vulnerable life stages is adolescence/young adulthood. In this period change occurs very often, since most young people acquire and consolidate the competencies, attitudes, values, and social capital needed to make a successful transition into adulthood⁴.

Therefore, in the following sections of this article we will discuss about Gen Z and how their perception was shaped by the war in Ukraine.

¹ Astri Suhrke, *Human Security and the Interests of States*, in "Security Dialogue", Vol. 30, No. 3, 1990, pp. 265-276

² Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, *Freedom*, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/freedom>, (29.09.2022)

³ Orlando Fernandes, Liana Portugal, Rita Alves, et. al, *How you perceive threat determines your behavior*, in "Frontiers in Human Neurosciences", Vol. 7, 2013, How you perceive threat determines your behavior - PubMed (nih.gov), (17.11.2022)

⁴ Nicole Zarrett, Jacquelynne Eccles, *The passage to adulthood: Challenges of late adolescence*, in "New directions for youth development", No. 111, 2006, pp. 13-28

Gen Z – main features and attributes

Generation Z is the demographic cohort succeeding the Millennials and preceding Generation Alpha. It includes those born and raised between 1995 and 2010. As with any other generation, Gen Z has features that differentiate it from other groups. According to Yang&Land, the age effects, period effects, and cohort effects¹ are the basic factors that shape generational differences. Overall, these features are related to core values/attributes, influencers, respect for authority, leadership style, and communication. In all these particular cases, Gen Z has its own peculiarity.

As such, Gen Z is the first generation to grow up with internet access, touchscreens, and mobile technology, thus the main factor shaping this cohort is technological evolution. This context has a strong effect on their personalities, ways of thinking, and behaviors. Since they are surrounded by laptops, and smartphones and have access to the web, networks, and digital media they are often called iGeneration, Gen Tech, Online Generation, Facebook Generation, Switchers, or "always clicking"². Today, Generation Z represents 30% of the world's population (2 billion) and is considered the largest generation ever³.

Moreover, they are part of those considered to be "digital natives"⁴, so the way they think, interact, and communicate is particular. In addition, through technology, they are processing a large volume of information and the speed with which they receive and transmit the knowledge is different. As noted by Radford et. al. "Information changes so rapidly for the Digital Native there may be no time to contemplate and if there is, the information may change before the contemplation is completed. Digital Natives must position themselves in an information environment that is unstable and morphing. They must negotiate a constant change in their information landscape"⁵. Hence their perception related to current events might be different and shaped not by reality, but by the way and format in which the information was delivered and received.

From a different perspective, existing studies show that members of this generation are versatile and self-reliant, and have a purpose, entrepreneurial spirit,

¹ Yang Yang, Kenneth Land, *Age-Period-Cohort Analysis. New models, methods and empirical applications*, New York, Taylor&Francis, 2013, pp. 1-2

² Anna Dolot, *New Trends in Management The Characteristics of Generation Z*, in "E-Mentor", Vol. 2, No. 2, 2018, pp. 44–50.

³ *Gen Z and Gen Alpha Infographic Update*, <https://mccrindle.com.au/article/topic/generation-z/gen-z-and-gen-alpha-infographic-update/>, (01.10.2022)

⁴ Marc Prensky, *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*, in "On the horizon", Vol. 9, No. 5, 2001, pp. 1-6

⁵ Marie Radford, Lynn Connaway, et. al., *Behaviours and preferences of digital natives: informing a research agenda*, in "Asis&t", Vol. 44, No. 1, 2007, pp. 1-15

and a concern for financial stability¹. Moreover, they tend to respect and care about individual rights, privacy, and equal opportunity, find purpose in supporting the wellbeing of their communities and make a difference in the world rather than focusing solely on themselves², meaning the core values are different from those of other generations³. The most common social issues for Gen Z are health care, mental health (the least likely generation to report fair or excellent mental health), education (since there is a high interest in acquiring career skills), economic security, civic engagement (activists, volunteer, drivers for change), racial equity and environment. From a political perspective⁴, the main features of Gen Z are represented by high support for protests and change, while wanting an activist government. Similarly, they endorse racial and ethnic diversity, while backing up rights for sexual minorities, things that make them like the previous generation, the Millennials⁵.

All these features and attributes determine individuals belonging to this generation to adopt a specific behavior related to major events that are shaping the socio-political environment. Their reaction is expected to be different from those older than them, considering for example the fact that Gen Z has never lived under the threat of a military/violent conflict (referring to those born and raised in Europe and North America).

Data&methods

As previously mentioned, this study seeks to analyze how Gen Z's perception of security, safety, and freedom has changed in the current security environment, considering the psycho-sociological impact and the changes within the socio-political context.

From a methodological perspective, our study is based on twenty semi-structured interviews conducted in September – October 2022 with Romanian respondents. Romania was selected as a single case study, due to its proximity to Ukraine and the role played in receiving the displaced persons and refugees. Moreover, social media and other news outlets extensively presented the evolution

¹ *Millenials vs. Generation Z: Key differences in the workplace*, <https://www.adecousa.com/employers/resources/generation-z-vs-millennials-infographic/>, (03.10.2022)

² Meehee Cho, Mark Bonn, Su Jin Han, *Generation Z's Sustainable Volunteering: Motivations, Attitudes and Job Performance*, in "Sustainability", Vol. 10, No. 5, 2018, [PDF] *Generation Z's Sustainable Volunteering: Motivations, Attitudes and Job Performance* (researchgate.net), (17.11.2022)

³ *Generational differences chart*, <https://www.usf.edu/hr-training/documents/lunch-bytes/generationaldifferenceschart.pdf>, (03.10.2022)

⁴ Kim Parker, Ruth Igielnik, *On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far*, Pew Research Center, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>, (02.10.2022)

⁵ *Idem*

of events, while testimonials from the battlefield were highly shared to gain support for humanitarian cases. Online mobilization was fast and efficient, and many members of Gen Z got involved in helping those in need.

In Romania, the Z generation represents 2.881.345 individuals out of the entire population¹. They are the first generation that did not experience any authoritarian system or restriction of rights. They are also the ones who became adults in the most prosperous period in Romanian history. Except for the Covid 19 pandemic and the recent conflict situation, members of the Z generation have been part of a free, safe, and flourishing world, which is why studies characterize them as financially optimistic². From a political and management-related perspective, the members of the Z generation are the ones who will take over the leadership of public and private organizations and who will become the leaders of Romanian society. For these reasons, it is important to understand their perception of certain events that marked their development. Their assessment of a certain situation can be an indicator of the way in which the future society is built.

The method of semi-structured interviews was used because the respondent's opinion is the most important concern for qualitative researchers³ as this allows the investigator to understand the experience they have come across. Because of their flexibility, semi-structured interviews are more appropriate in our case.

The interview we conducted had eight questions (out of which six with specific follow-up questions) through which we tried to find out, in-depth, what was the subjects' point of view regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine on their security, safety, and freedom. We considered that this method offered us the best chance to understand the complexity of opinions and views related to this matter. In terms of content and approach, the interview started with questions aimed to understand if young citizens are interested in the events taking place in our country and in the world/region and what are their main sources of information. Afterward, questions were related to the amount of information they have about the war in Ukraine and their level of concern about the conflict's progress. To test their perception, we asked them about the way they see the war effects at the personal and community level, and we ended the interview with a discussion about the potential further developments.

Our interview was applied to members of the general population with variations on age, sex, and location. Participants were identified by one simple criterion: persons who are born between 1995 - 2000. The profile of our

¹ *Romania generațiilor*, <https://panorama.ro/romania-generatiilor-puterea-demografica-politica-si-economica-a-fiecarei-categorii-de-varsta-din-populatia-tarii/>, (02.10.2022)

² *Generația Z din România este optimistă. 13% dintre tinerii români până în 25 de ani au deja o ipotecă*, <https://www.profit.ro/stiri/social/grafice-generatia-z-din-romania-este-optimista-13-dintre-tinerii-romani-pana-in-25-de-ani-au-deja-o-ipoteca-19071202>, (09.10.2022)

³Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press, 2012, passim

respondents is diverse. We interacted with young people (aged: 18- 22) that come from several parts of Romania (Cluj, Bistrita, Botosani, Alba, Piatra Neamt, Oradea, Brasov) who are students in various fields. The data collected represents the views of both females and males, with rates of 45% and 55% respectively. The interviews were applied by phone and face-to-face.

The interview respondents were also asked to complete a survey, applied before the interview, that was designed to help us determine the cohort's main features. The results were completed by the open answers and analyzed in the following section.

Findings and discussion

Security, safety, and freedom are elements that can be placed in the same category when considered human values. Their perception is dynamic and, in most cases, context dependent. Among the factors that influence their perception, we can add age, life stage, and historical events. Moreover, when analyzing the perception of members of Gen Z, some general features should be taken into consideration. One of these is the experience and how it is built. In this specific case, we are dealing with first-time experiences, a fact that directly influences the change of perception related to previously mentioned values.

Thus, the war in Ukraine has to be considered as the first of its kind from five perspectives: it is the first military conflict experienced by Gen Z with high proximity (in Europe, if we ignore the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, which happened when they were very young and the annexation of Crimea which was not actually a war from the use of violence perspective), the conflict occurs between countries that are similar with ours (ethnic, religious, cultural similarities can be identified), the event was highly mediatized (both online and in traditional media outlets) and the Romanian citizens had the „chance” to see the humanitarian impact directly. Moreover, the psychological impact was significant – current research shows that „the quality of life of the people in Romania, as a state in the proximity of a military conflict with the potential to escalate, is negatively influenced by the fears of people who believe that the war in Ukraine will escalate into a regional or global conflict, or that the Russian Federation is going to use its nuclear arsenal against Ukraine or another NATO member state”¹.

One of the starting points in data collection was to assess the level of war-related information accessed by the respondents. The findings show a high level of interest and the use of various sources. As such, 18 out of 20 subjects claim a moderate or high level of interest in worldwide events and declare that they update themselves daily or at least once each 2/3days. Moreover, this interest increased by about 60% after the war started. Similar values were registered when assessing the

¹ Flavius Cristian Marcău, Cătălin Peptan, Horațiu Tiberiu Gorun, Vlad Băleanu, Victor Gheorman, *Analysis of the impact of the armed conflict in Ukraine on the population of Romania*, in ”Frontiers in Public Health”, 22 July 2022, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2022.964576/full>, (09.10.2022)

interest for national-level events. Regarding the sources, the vast majority (19 out of 20) affirm that they get informed by using online services (social media platforms – Facebook feed, TikTok, Instagram, influencer's posts, blogs), and 11 out of 20 claims that classical media outlets are also used.

Their interests were primarily motivated by geographical proximity ("Of course, I am carefully watching what is going on in Ukraine. The situation is happening right at our door" (I8¹), or by the uniqueness of the event: "I didn't think that in the times we live in we can witness a war. I only learned about wars in history, so it's interesting to follow one" (I2). Related to sources used for gathering information the respondents argued that: "I often use Tik Tok. In the first days of the war, I saw the opportunity to find out what was happening directly there. There were many videos that helped me formulate my opinion"(I13). Obviously, the live graphic content is more attractive and gives the opportunity to build personal judgments about the events, confirming the appeal of digital tools shown by Gen Z. Although this approach might prove to be very insightful, the risk of manipulation and exposure to fake news should be considered.

Regarding security and how is perceived by respondents, we considered some basic indicators for it, such as well-being², environment stability, predictability, and risk and threats perception. According to collected data, 38% of the answers show a high interest (very interested), while 40% reveal a moderate interest in this topic. Although most of the answers collected through the survey identified an important change in the socio-political environment, no significant worries related to security were registered during the interviews: "At the national level, the security level is good, and at the international level, it is moderate. It hasn't changed in recent months (I3)", "I cannot report anything about national security if we are not directly involved in a conflict, in terms of internal security; Romania is a relatively safe country. (I10)", "The current level of security is moderate as far as Romania is concerned, the threats and vulnerabilities from Russia increasing the feeling of fear and uncertainty both at the level of Romanian society and for the EU as an organization" (I11).

These attitudes might be explained by the fact that subjects did not feel "on their own skin" the atrocities and violence specific to a military conflict. Thus, the experience was an indirect one and since no previous similar experience was recorded it might be difficult for those interviewed to clearly understand the threat represented by a large-scale military conflict.

Moreover, regarding the further evolution of security, the average rating was 5,74 (0 – very worried/10 – very optimistic) showing a reserved attitude and certain concerns: "In particular, economic and military security suffered the most following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The change has suddenly occurred in a negative way on all levels of society, and the future does not seem to bring improvement. (I20)" "The regional situation was destabilized by the start of the

¹ Interview 8

² According to the work of Ed Diener

war in Ukraine, and the European and American armies were put in a new state of alert. At the global level, the situation has worsened from the point of view of promoting democracy and peace (I5)". As such, security perception did not change significantly in the observed context and we consider that this can be explained by the fact that the subjects were not directly affected by conflict, the negative indirect impact (psychological, economic, societal) is not yet at the highest and the daily life of those questioned did not change much. On the other hand, justified concerns were expressed and we associate them with a higher level of awareness, not with a fundamental change in security perception.

Safety, on the other hand, was assessed by using the following indicators: lack of physical threats and lack of risks of injury or destruction. Compared with the perception of security, the respondents showed a higher concern related to this item. 85% of them declared a high interest in their personal safety, while there is a significant concern related to further evolutions. Two major attitudes can be identified: "I believe that I am in maximum safety in Romania, the nearby war does not involve us directly, so it does not put us in danger (I13)", "Romania is still a protected country, and its citizens are safe (I2)" vs. "If we talk about individual and community safety, it has degraded due to several factors such as inflation, gas and basic food prices. Also, the extremism of the population was facilitated by the new war in Ukraine, many people simply feeling much more paranoid and worried about a conflict on Romanian territory (I6)", "the level of safety in the last 12 months has decreased and the citizens have become more scared/alert. The media factor certainly contributes to this phenomenon, which by spreading fake news can create a state of panic/chaos among the population (I19)", "It is important that we adapt to what is happening and realize that we can be in danger at any moment (I9)".

All the previously presented attitudes show a relative anxiousness regarding further developments related to safety. Since security is a more complex value, safety has more tangible components, thus the perception change is higher in this case. According to data, the further evolution of personal safety was rated 4,74 on average (0 – very worried/10 – very optimistic), supporting the positions presented above. The last tested item was freedom, and it was operationalized through freedom of choice, freedom of speech, and freedom of movement. Similar to safety, the interest in this element was very high (95%). Not surprisingly, freedom of movement was placed above freedom of speech, a fact that might be correlated with the previous experience given by the Covid-19 restrictions. This aspect proves the role played by past encounters that are used to evaluate present and further unfamiliar situations.

Overall, the perception related to the further development of personal freedom recorded an above-average score – 6.74 (0 – very worried/10 – very optimistic), proving a certain level of optimism. The results were confirmed through the interviews: "I consider that the current level of freedom is a great one. In my opinion, in the last 12 months, the level has gradually increased because the right to freedom, which was rightly restricted due to the Covid-19 pandemic, has

returned to its normal status provided for in the Constitution. (I7)”, ”My opinion is that the level of freedom has not been affected to a great extent. Of course, new situations require new rules (such as the ban on Russian state media), but these are necessary to combat fake news and ensure internal order. (I6)”, ”The current level of freedom is very good”.

The general attitude was a favorable one, although some of the respondents considered that freedom of speech is restricted (not as expression, but as being heard) due to the current political context and freedom of choice is limited (due to economic/financial capabilities). These specific positions are in accordance with the general features of Gen Z, being known that they show high support for protests and change while wanting an activist government.

Conclusions

This study represents an analysis of how Gen Z’s perception of security, safety, and freedom has changed in the current security environment, considering the psycho-sociological impact and the changes within the socio-political context generated by the war in Ukraine. The main findings show that the ongoing military conflict did not significantly affect the perception of security, safety, and freedom. Since security is a complex concept, the general population might have different perceptions of it and difficulties in assessing the current status or the potential developments (it is unclear how to differentiate between security as feeling vs. reality). Moreover, those belonging to Gen Z have no comparison capacity since their experience is limited.

Out of the three variables, only perception of safety has changed in the last months (since the war started) and we assume that it is due to a higher level of awareness and not to some direct negative effects of the war. Except for the refugees and associated humanitarian cases, no other elements provided a direct experience of the conflict within national borders.

Freedom instead is perceived in a different way. This change of perception (generated by the war) is hard to assess since the beginning of the war overlapped with Covid-19 restriction elimination. Therefore, further research is needed to address this issue.

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