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Settling into uncertainty and risk amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the process of navigating instability arising from sudden, co-occurring crises in the 2020s. We focus on the combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine on growing material and relational uncertainty and risk among Polish citizens, accumulating in the loss of ontological security. To showcase the practical and narrative presence of risk at the micro-level, we operationalize the broad theorization of risk society using the categorization of material, relational and subjective dimensions within the ‘unsettling events’ model proposed by Kilkey and Ryan. We reconceptualize the third pillar, positioning subjectivity as a meta-category. Moreover, we extend the application of the framework of unsettling events, treating the Polish situation as a case study for examining societies facing compounding catastrophes. The analyzed qualitative longitudinal data comprised 70 in-depth interviews about the pandemic and conducted with Polish young adults (ages 18–35) and their parents in 2021; and asynchronous responses from 43 study participants collected shortly after the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022. Considering intergenerational and temporal lens, we identify the dominant patterns of meaning that interviewees attributed to the pandemic and war, thereby revealing materialities of unsettlement, relational gains and losses, and the erosion of ontological security.

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Introduction: ‘as everything turns into a hazard, somehow nothing is dangerous anymore’

The COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the war in Ukraine, has undeniably caused a state of emergency, particularly in Central and Eastern

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Europe (CEE) and the Baltic countries. In combination with other escalating risks – such as economic recession, democratic erosion, and climate collapse – these events indicate that the CEE citizens live in an unprecedented emanation of Beck's risk society (1992). The risks encompass all areas of life, and the cumulative effect of their co-occurrence can be thought of through the concept of a 'crisis society', in which 'not only the negative effects, but also the conditions of crisis, are becoming part of our daily lives' (Moralli and Allegrini 2021).

The empirical data for this study were collected in Poland; however, the study's implications are broader, pointing to individual experiences of the global phenomenon, namely a multitude of 'unsettling events' (Kilkey and Ryan 2021) and risks (Beck 1992). We argue that the sudden, unanticipated 'unsettlement' at the individual level is particularly disrupting in the CEE region because the war in Ukraine decidedly ended the three decades of relative peace since the democratic transformation (Micha 2022), awakening the memories of difficult, shared past (Taras 2014). Thus, while the unsettling events and associated risks discussed herein are specific to Poland, the historical, economic, and political interdependencies have resulted in a greater impact of the overlapping crises, explaining the suitability of this country-case example for the broader theorizing of crises and risks in European societies. As the war intersects with other challenges, the study informs global sociological scholarship on individuals in the 'catastrophic society' marked by omnipresent risk, tangible hazards, and anxiety (Beck 1992: 49).

With their scope and scale, the crisis/risk society concepts are difficult to track at the micro-level (Ekberg 2007) of people's experiences and recollections. In this study, the mass events contributing to uncertainty and risk are conceptualized and empirically untangled as 'unsettling events' (Kilkey and Ryan 2021: 234). These are defined as turbulent structural conditions (e.g. caused by economic crises or wars) marked by spillover effects of the changes set in motion by subsequent unsettling events, with implications that need to be 'practically' tackled by those living in the risk society. Specifically, the study investigates the intersection of three dimensions of unsettling events: material, relational, and subjective, combined with temporal and intergenerational perspectives.

The results of this study offer a valuable expansion of Kilkey and Ryan's concept (2021) in three ways. First, a reconceptualization of the subjective dimension is suggested, as we recognize it as an ontological meta-category that overarches material, relational and subjective pillars of unsettlement. This is related to the second aspect of highlighting

Poland as just one possible country-case example while noting that future sociological studies of uncertainty will be needed in the face of subsequent, globally unsettling events marking the 2020s. Relatedly and finally, the analysis demonstrates the broader empirical applicability of the framework of unsettling events beyond the migration contexts, offering a multi-perspective age-based comparison.

Embedded in the broader sociological investigation into navigating dynamic social change in the risk society (Beck 1992), the empirical material stems from a large-scale research project on uncertain transitions to adulthood during crises. Data were drawn from a Qualitative Longitudinal Study (QLS) component of the ULTRAGEN¹ project, realized in a multi-perspective manner (Vogl *et al.* 2018) by (re)interviewing 35 intergenerational family dyads over time. Although COVID-19 was framed as the primary source of uncertainty for interviewees at the study's outset, both young adults and their parents narrated the pandemic as 'normalizing' during Wave 1 data collection in late 2021. When the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, it caused major, immediate fears about the war spreading to Poland (CBOS 2022), and triggered an unprecedented-in-scale influx of refugees. Therefore, an asynchronous exchange technique was used in March 2022 to track interviewees' reflections on the war, so the material could be used to compare intergenerational reactions of the same study participants to different unsettling events.

The main research question of the study is as follows: How are the unsettling events of the pandemic and war in Ukraine unfolding in the narratives of uncertainty and risk in Poland? Because the paper reflects Beck's argument, which states that 'where everything turns into a hazard, somehow nothing is dangerous anymore' (1992: 36), we draw on both the macro-level-oriented concept of risk society (Beck 1992) and the individual-oriented concept of unsettling events (Kilkey and Ryan 2021) to explore how material, relational, and subjective/ontological aspects of the pandemic and war are framed by two generations.

Sociology of unsettling events in the risk society

The development of manmade mega-risks that threaten the very existence of humanity on a global scale is the key pillar of Beck's (1992) theory of risk society. We consider it a well-suited conceptual frame

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for understanding the challenges of social life at the beginning of the 2020s (cf. Nygren and Olofsson 2020). Both the pandemic and Putin's invasion of Ukraine reawakened the idea that 'the script of modernity has to be rewritten, redefined, reinvented' in the face of risk's omnipresence (Beck 1998: 9). Citizens – in Europe and globally – are grappling with a major dilemma over whether to face the risks or avoid them, as they feel disoriented in the risk society, one that is concurrently individualistic and agentic, as well as insecure, ambivalent, and anxious (cf. Carta *et al.* 2022; Chirumbolo *et al.* 2021; Ekberg 2007).

Scholars theorize risks as both real and socially constructed (Ekberg 2007). In the former, risks entail issues that cause actual physical harm or endanger one's psychological or financial well-being. In the latter, within the process of ascribing meaning to structural phenomena, risks can be exaggerated, normalized, or downplayed by those who evaluate them and implement actions (Beck 1992). Both a subjective sense of 'being-at-risk' and living an 'at-risk' identity shape people's judgments about the risks' acceptability.

Losing ontological security stems from being aware of unacceptable levels of risk (Giddens 1991). However, contemporary risks are difficult to grasp owing to the speed of events, obfuscation of threats, and the constant advent of new dangers and fears. Hence, the social, situational, and discursive awareness of risk may equally cause panic, resistance, or risk normalization, which elucidates the trickle-down effect of structural events in individual lives (Elder *et al.* 2003; Ekberg 2007; Nygren and Olofsson 2020).

To showcase the practical and narrative presence of risk at the micro-level (in individual lives), we operationalize the broad theorization of risk society using the three-pronged categorization of dimensions within the 'unsettling events' model. According to Kilkey and Ryan (2021), the multi-layered nature of unsettling events is evident upon an exploration of the material, relational, and subjective dimensions of reported actions and reactions. The 'material' dimension concerns issues of social status and income, spanning the most tangible effects of unsettling events on the individuals' quality of life in connection to resources and finances. In the 'relational' dimension, the focus is on personal lives, and family and social ties that are often re-evaluated and altered during a crisis. The final 'subjective' dimension covers the process of biographical reorientation and meaning-making. It 'captures the affective aspects of the unsettling process' (2021: 234), inclusive of feelings and emotions linked to personal (in)security.

Our main expansion of the existing model pertains to the latter, as subjectivity – being at the center of the third dimension – operates as a meta-category. Both material and relational aspects are subjectively experienced and narrated, which justifies linking the third pillar of unsettling events with ontological (in)security and perceived risks. Crystalizing the points by Kilkey and Ryan (2021: 234), we specify how the three dimensions of unsettlement overlap, are experienced non-universally (e.g. positive consequences of an event in one dimension may co-occur with struggles in another) and individually change over time.

Drawing on both the life-course approach (Elder *et al.* 2003) and the multi-perspective look at family dyads, we can see how unsettlement unfolds concerning age, considering that young people typically experience greater and multifaceted risks (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Comparing age cohorts rather than using the axis of ethnic identity (migration), we expand on Kilkey and Ryan's (2021) proposal by untangling the meanings of unsettling events for specific life stages.

Unsettlement through the global pandemic and the war next door

Much sociological research has argued that COVID-19 is a sudden, unforeseen, and overwhelming event that has drastically changed daily lives, habits, and relationships (Chirumbolo *et al.* 2021; Zinn 2021). Given its multi-layered effects on governance (e.g. restrictions on mobility), institutions (e.g. remote education and work), and interpersonal relations and psychological well-being (e.g. social distancing), the pandemic was profoundly influential (Jones and Grigsby-Toussaint 2021). From the epidemiological and geopolitical perspective, such crises could be referred to as gray swan events: highly probable, capable of turning our world upside down, but nevertheless shocking us in their arrival (Krastev 2020).

COVID-19 can certainly be examined as an unsettling event. On the material level, it exacerbated employment instability, declined job quality, and created new inequalities in the labor market (Chirumbolo *et al.* 2021). In the housing market, this was evidenced by growing property and rent prices and an increase in homelessness (Jones and Grigsby-Toussaint 2021). The relational dimension of the pandemic's implications was expressed in family uncertainty and conflicts, inability to socialize face-to-face, and disruption of daily routines within personal networks. Although the beginning of the pandemic was associated with

flourishing social solidarity, it was soon replaced by disappointments as people noticed egoism and self-servitude (Radzińska 2022). On a subjective level, the pandemic brought numerous negative psychological effects, including anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, anger, and ‘pandemic rage’ (Kubacka *et al.* 2023).

As the proliferation of vaccines and advances in the development of effective treatments enabled the ‘normalization’ of the pandemic (Zinn 2021), another globally unsettling event destroyed hopes for return to pre-pandemic normalcy. The military attack of the Russian Federation on Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, sparked a particularly strong response in Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries. The conflict sparked geopolitical, humanitarian, and extinction risks.

The war in Ukraine seems to be a new and exceptional source of great uncertainty for many Europeans, but especially for the CEE countries (European Commission 2022). Primarily because of their physical proximity to the conflict, a sense of personal danger emerged, caused by the erratic and incomprehensible actions of the leader of the Russian Federation, and threats to countries helping Ukraine. Concerns about war escalation seem to be exacerbated by memories of recent history of conflicts with the Soviet Union/Russia in the region, including the Cold War. Polish people aged over 50 years remembered the imposition of martial law in 1981–1983 and often grew up with parents who fell victim to post-World War II Soviet crimes. As of February 13, 2023, over 8.1 million refugees from Ukraine have been recorded across Europe, while over 4.8 million of them have registered for protection schemes on the continent (UNHCR 2023). Most Ukrainians stayed, at least temporarily, in the neighboring states, especially in Poland: over 9.6 million border crossings from Ukraine to Poland were noted (although people circulating were counted multiple times) and 1.63 million officially registered in Poland (UNHCR 2023). The war accentuated Ukrainians’ visibility as the largest minority in Poland, rendering the reactions to the war-caused unsettling worth studying in this context. Exacerbated by rising interest rates due to inflation, as well as growing instability in the labor market (e.g. more short-term and civil-law contracts), competition for resources restricts housing possibilities and limits access to education and healthcare in Poland (Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk 2022).

In terms of relational and subjective dimensions, preliminary studies indicate a strong emotional agitation in mixed responses to the war: anger, anxiety, and perceived threat, but also empathy toward the

victims (Moshagen and Hilbig 2022). Polish citizens were acutely concerned by the war, arguably because of the low psychological distance between them and Ukrainian citizens caused by their sense of cultural similarity (Trope and Liberman 2010). Polish survey data (CBOS 2022) indicated the exceptionality of the attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees in comparison to migration crises in the past. From the very first days of the attack, there was an immense willingness to actively help refugees from areas of armed conflict. It crossed social divisions and political polarization, which typically hinder joint actions.

Shortly after the war began, 68% of Polish people stated that they had been engaged in some form of help toward Ukrainians (CBOS 2022). This is largely a consequence of previous historical experiences reflected in Polish collective memory. Russia is commonly perceived as a violent neighbor owing to its long history of regular, unprovoked attacks on smaller countries (Taras 2014). In a four-country study by Moshagen and Hilbig (2022), Polish people reported the highest levels of perceived threat due to the war.

Upon linking both these ‘unsettling events’ to the risk society, it can be argued that the pandemic and war have altered the spatial, temporal, and demographic distribution of various types of risks. In particular, scientific interest in borderless risks (Ekberg 2007) was revived, as Zinn (2021) argued that COVID-19 was a wake-up call for the rich countries of the Global North that have grown accustomed to crises being located elsewhere. Thus, this fulfills Beck’s premonition (1992: 23) that risk backfires on the key risk-producers during global events. The pandemic and war in Ukraine, together with the economic crisis and climate threat, reflect an ‘uncontrolled multi-crisis of existential proportions’ (Abbasi 2022).

Methodology

In this study, we leveraged a dataset from the multi-perspective Qualitative Longitudinal Study (Neale 2019; Vogl *et al.* 2018) implemented as WP2 of the broader ULTRAGEN project. The study design received all necessary ethical approvals.² QLS data collection consisted of two phases: individual in-depth interviews conducted between May and November 2021, focusing on the pandemic’s experiences and impacts (further denoted as ‘P’), and war-related asynchronous exchanges

²The Ethics Committee of Empirical Research, Institute of Social Sciences, SWPS University.

(emails and recordings) amassed in March and April 2022 ('W'). For this study, the excerpts of the interviews – which were conducted in Polish – were translated into English and underwent professional proofreading.

In Stage 1 (P), 70 participants, which included 35 dyads of young adults (18 women and 16 men, aged 18–35³ years) and one parent of each (21 women and 14 men, aged 41–66 years), were individually interviewed. The recruitment was done through advertisements on the project website and social media, as well as by engaging a professional recruitment company. The purposeful qualitative sampling sought to include individuals with different educational and occupational backgrounds (Neale 2019). First, heterogeneity and balance guided the recruitment process regarding gender, education, and age. Second, in the parents' case, we strived to achieve a representation of both mothers and fathers, as well as parents with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Table 1 in the Appendix lists interviewees' pseudonyms and socio-demographic characteristics.

Although the primary focus of the project was on pandemic-related influences on the transition into adulthood, once another unsettling event happened (the Russian invasion of Ukraine), the researchers decided to ask the research participants about their reactions to it. Stage 2 of data collection (W) began by contacting each participant via email, posing the same set of questions related to their emotions, practices, and strategies, as well as predictions for the future in the context of war. We employed an open-ended strategy for data collection (the participants chose to share their answers via email or voice messaging). Those who responded were asked up to four rounds of follow-up questions and decided individually on whether to reflect further. Ultimately, 43 people (27 women and 16 men) aged 18–60 years, who participated in the first wave of interviews in 2021 (P), took part in the asynchronous exchange (W). This involved 20 young adults and 23 parents.

Interpretivist paradigm and inductive approaches to data guided the analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). Employing a thematic analysis approach, methodologically influenced by Braun and Clarke (2022), and theoretically guided by Kilkey and Ryan's (2021) three dimensions of unsettling events, we identified and interpreted the primary patterns of meaning attributed to the pandemic and war by the study participants. Open, inductive coding of the data was used to start the analysis, a coding tree was collectively developed, and then revalidated. The empirical

³The 18–35 age brackets denoted young adulthood in the study. One pre-recruited interviewee had just turned 36.

material was manually coded in MAXQDA software. For each transcript, extended interview summaries and analytical memos were produced. For this analysis, we focused on specific codes extracted from the coding tree. Codes pertinent to ‘P’ (interviews) were: *life plans and concerns*, *worrying future*, *pandemic/emotions*, *pandemic/practices*, *pandemic/meta-reflections* and *pandemic/historical analogies*. The material from ‘W’ (asynchronous exchange) pertained to the following codes: *reactions to war*, *emotions (worries, fears)*, and *war’s personal, political and practical implications*.

All data were systematically organized in the framework grid (Neale 2019) according to the cases, selected codes associated with the key themes, and corresponding quotations. Examination of each participant’s perspectives on the pandemic and war was conducted through a case-by-case analysis. Next, longitudinal case-analyses were conducted to generate main categories representing individual’s recurrent experiences and emotions concerning the pandemic and war. These categories were then classified based on their material, relational, or subjective/ontological dimensions.

Finally, a combined cross-case longitudinal analysis, as well as potential comparisons between the two crises (pandemic and war) and different generations (young adults and their parents) was completed to foster validation and an extension of the interpretations of the findings. All analytical steps were collaboratively conducted and discussed by the research team for intersubjectivity. Because of the awareness of the crises’ proximity and its potential influences on the researchers’ experiences and interpretation, we held reflection sessions regarding methods and ethics (*methics*, Van Brown 2020).

Polish responses to the pandemic and war in Ukraine

While all three intertwined dimensions of ‘unsettling events’ refer to individual accounts, our expansion of the original model views subjectivity as an ontological meta-category in which material and relational dimensions of settling into uncertainty are embedded and feed into the analysis of the risks-laden existential realm (emotions, meta-reflections, and perceptions of risks).

Materialities of unsettlement

The material dimension of both unsettling events spanned three closely connected life-domains of work, housing, and finances. Work-related

experiences altered by the pandemic led to an observable unsettlement caused by a restructuring of the labor market (cf. Gardawski et al. 2022). The interviewees generally adapted to new work circumstances marked by restrictions at the workplace (masks, social distancing) or remote work (cf. Pustulka and Kajta 2023). However, younger workers dealt with greater material challenges:

I only work weekends because I'm also studying. The money I earn would by no means be enough for rent or food. I not only have a non-standard work contract (...) The employer needs to schedule shifts for those who have standard contracts first, which caused my income to drop by 40% (during the pandemic). (Szymon, 23, P)⁴

In the older cohort, the greatest disruptions to the professional situation were found among entrepreneurs and those working in sectors most hit by the pandemic, such as hospitality and tourism:

The number of clients (in our sector) dropped by 90%. When the lockdown hit, we were practically gone from the market. (...) I had momentary breakdowns, wondering what to do next, whether it was worth it to go on. (Malkolm, 45, P)

The pandemic has also deepened the previously existing structural issues in housing affordability. Younger interviewees reported increasing financial challenges of gaining independence by moving out of the parental home:

The pandemic certainly delayed job searches and made me feel like I have to deal with this invisible force. (...) All these initial assumptions I had about what the housing market looks like; (...) none of them turned out to be true. (...) One has to constantly fight against the front wind to be able to live a normal life. (Bartek, 24, P)

All interviewees were keenly aware of the accumulation of uncertainty but some differences regarding their life stage were noticeable. As war broke out, younger people lost hope of the possibility of their achieving financial self-sufficiency. Current 'struggle over resources' due to refugees' arrival coexisted with prospective fears about the economic crisis:

I believe that the situation in Ukraine will greatly affect my future life, both now and in a few years. (...) In the future (I predict) financial consequences, economic crises, (trouble) finding a decent job. Competition in the labor market will increase through the influx of Ukrainian labor (and

⁴For each participant, we provide a pseudonym, age, and indication of whether the excerpt is from qualitative pandemic-related interviews (P) or war-related asynchronous exchange (W).

so will) the difficulty in finding an apartment for rent and (...) buying a flat. (Dominik, 22, W)

Inflation, prices, and mortgage rates have all greatly increased in Poland between 2021 and 2022. Thus, the war has strengthened the image of a worse-to-be material future. During the pandemic, the interviewees hoped for the financial strain to be temporary. As for the war, financial-related concerns became more common and future-oriented. Unlike the pandemic-related provisions (food, hygiene products, medicine), war preparedness focused on filling up gas tanks and withdrawing cash from the bank. This indicated that the interviewees did not reject the possibility of the war reaching Poland:

My knee jerk reaction was to get a full tank of gas. I went grocery shopping and withdrew some more cash as a backup. I also coordinated with my immediate family about what we'd do if the conflict erupted in Poland. (Danuta, 44, W)

The life-course lens (Elder *et al.* 2003) should be considered here, as older respondents started to imagine the war reality, drawing on World War II survival stories recalled by their parents, as well as their own struggles with limited financial resources during the Polish martial law of 1981–1983:

My everyday life changed because of the very high prices (...) We go to work on foot every day because, first, gas is expensive and, second, it might be needed for the army (...) Of course, we've made food provisions (...), got candles and matches, and refilled gas canisters. (...) We don't know what this future might be but we are preparing accordingly (...) My mum is still alive and she tells us what it was like during the war. (...), while my husband remembers what his parents and grandparents recalled. (Maria, 58, W)

The interviewees' stories suggested the fragility of material (un)settlement in Poland. With overlapping crises, the younger generations feared not being able to begin the process of saving for personal independence, while the older generations dreaded losing capital that they have spent a long-time accumulating:

At my age, a man wants to have stability, to have certainty about the future. In the situation we have now with inflation, and the current bad governance by politicians—one does not have any certainty. (Edmund, 55, P)

The pandemic increased – and the war in Ukraine further amplified – actual and anticipated material concerns for both age groups. However, the stage of life, life experiences, and professional and financial situations

before the unsettling events differentiated the scope of materiality-driven worries and actions.

Relational gains and losses

The interviewees reported focusing more on interpersonal relationships in their initial responses to both unsettling events. The beginning of COVID-19 outbreak invoked a wave of solidarity and support:

People were more caring. They asked if someone needed to get their shopping done and were more interested in whether someone was doing alright.
(Igor, 31, P)

Here it is important to point out the paradoxical benefits of unsettling events that can be observed in the appreciation of relationships. The axiological reflector is set on non-material values, which, for some, revolved around peace and hope:

The current situation (in Ukraine) makes me more focused on the here and now. (...) I invest a lot in bonding with people I consider important to me.
(Aurelia, 60, W)

In time, with the prolongation of the crisis and depletion of emotional and material resources, the interactions gradually narrowed down to the circle of family and friends. Many became interactionally and relationally unsettled owing to forced coexistence in spatial confinement:

I felt as if I was bound by something, with the two of us sharing (a flat which is) just 30 square meters, working remotely. (...) Last winter was really very hard.
(Luiza, 28, P)

COVID-19 has been arguably perceived as a more 'personal' threat than the war in Ukraine, given that it could cause tangible health implications. Moreover, from a life-course standpoint, the interviewees nominated different loved ones for protection in the context of the two unsettling events:

We didn't want (grandma) to leave the house, especially at the beginning. We didn't want her to get infected. (...) Whatever she needed, we placed it at her doorstep. (Eryk, 23, P)

I'm afraid that the conflict will spread to Polish territory (...) I'm most afraid that my son, who is of military age, will be forced to participate in protecting the country. (Danuta, 44, W)

Therefore, generational differences entail that the pandemic called on young interviewees to deprioritize their needs in favor of older adults,

while the war was primarily an impetus for concern over the situation of young men.

Generally, emotional support from family relationships played a relevant role in dealing with the unsettlement brought by war. In this context, the material and relational reactions to unsettlement tended to be narratively interlaced in worries over military escalation and one's relatives:

This situation means constantly having these 'what if' thoughts in the back of one's mind. God forbid this conflict starts spilling over ... (We debate over) how to protect one's loved ones, pets, what to take with us, how much to take, where to go (...), whether to stay and fight. (Witold, 46, W)

Beyond the context of family, an important type of relational reaction to the unsettling event of war was connected to the actions aimed at supporting Ukraine. Despite the sense of material uncertainty, the interviewees provided financial or material assistance, engaged in volunteering at reception centers, and offered accommodation and psychological assistance to refugees:

I take part in collections, try to save money and prepare some rooms in my house, so that I can – if it is needed – accommodate some people. (...) At work, we are trying to get funding for post-traumatic support for refugee women. (Klaudia, 52, W)

Ultimately, in the early period of war-driven unsettlement, nearly all interviewees expressed sympathy toward refugees and willingness to help.

Losing ontological security and managing future risks

Unlike the previous sections on material and relational dimensions, which were quite closely aligned with Kilkey and Ryan's (2021) premise of unsettling events, the final analytical argument proposes a modification of the third, 'subjective' realm. Subjectivity transpired from the narratives across all aspects of our dataset; hence, this section examines it as a loss of ontological security (Giddens 1991), most directly connecting personal unsettlement to living in the risk society (Beck 1992). Thus, we showcase the presence of ubiquitous, fundamental, and existential risks connected to the crises of the pandemic and war.

Initially, the restrictions related to COVID-19, such as the 2020 lockdown, were perceived as ontologically impossible to understand or anticipate, as well as unprecedented:

Would you have thought, half a year or a year ago, (...) that it would be impossible to go to a bar, to the movies? That children will be imprisoned at home, that school will be online? I'd have ridiculed it as impossible (...), so now I think anything is possible. (Kamila, 21, P)

COVID-19 was, with time, considered less of an existential threat during the data collection in late 2021. By then, the interviewees testified to the normalization of the pandemic and even expressed doubts about its 'realness':

It was hard in the beginning but we got used to the situation (...) People will always die, this is the truth. (...) We had bird flu, regular flu, diseases were always here and will continue to be here. I just think that the world's gone crazy. (Magda, 20, P)

The interviewees reflected on similar past crises and the accumulation or widening of risks. The growing perception of the macro-level actors becoming incapable of offering protection during multi-crises resulted in a 'systematic loss of trust' (2008: 136). Young interviewees in particular pointed to political responses to COVID-19 that heightened their awareness of democratic erosion in Poland:

Anxiety and a sense of destabilization of the system were there before (...) What is politically happening in Poland, which is correlated to the pandemic, (...) not only are the economic consequences connected, but also the effects on people my age and their sense of safety being taken away. (...) There's such a feeling of insecurity and destabilization of the entire system that you don't know what will happen. (Ala, 28, P)

The fears related to military conflicts appeared in pandemic-related interviews only incidentally and concerned geographical areas other than Ukraine. From a geopolitical standpoint, the conflict in Europe was inconceivable for them:

It seemed very unlikely, it felt very improbable here and now, for the fact that we lived in the times when a conflict of this kind in Europe was not really a threat. Or maybe that's what I just wanted to believe. (Witold, 46, W)

This last sentence shows precisely why the war in Ukraine can be defined as a gray swan event (Krastev 2020). The conflict, which had been going on in the neighboring country since 2014, carried a real threat of escalation throughout this period, but most Polish people did not want to believe that war in Europe was possible, which is why their surprise was so great and emotional:

I constantly have this feeling that this is not happening, that this is something absolutely unreal: it's so close, and it's the twenty-first century! (Kaja, 44, W)

I felt flabbergasted, surprised. (...) One is ready for various things, tensions, but war ... All wars in recent years were far away from us. (Luiza, 28, W)

Both the pandemic and the war in Ukraine were considered events that 'have no right and no place' in twenty-first-century Europe, which confirmed the arguments about the specificity of the current risk perceptions in Poland. Because the war appeared somewhat subjectively unreal, the interviewees also reported coping strategies based on denial and withdrawal:

I don't think this situation will affect my future life. I don't feel like it applies to me. (...) I hope Ukraine will defend itself and other countries won't be affected. (Nina, 18, W)

These defensive mechanisms in response to the war corresponded to additional risks that threatened the ontological security of the interviewees. They decided to keep the matters of life and death at bay:

I'm certainly concerned about a global conflict but I'm sincerely hoping that after these initial, mutual nuclear threats, we won't move any closer to a nuclear launch. (Weronika, 30, W)

On an existential plane, the interviewees had difficulty judging the real military threats for Poland, often worrying about the possibility of Polish men being called upon to fight. There were very few references to the protective umbrella of NATO, which reinforces the ideas about how Russia is perceived in the CEE:

I'm not sure what tomorrow will bring. It's not impossible for a rocket to be lost and get here, as we live in the (border region). Our men might be called to fight, there might be an alarm and so on, we live with this uncertainty. (Maria, 58, W)

The effect of the unsettling event in Ukraine rendered personal safety, relational resources, and material possessions easy to lose for the Polish interviewees. Again, this testifies to the universal, age-independent lost sense of existential certainty that one's own material and subjective well-being can remain at the current level:

This situation means that a person re-evaluates everything. I changed my way of thinking, I appreciate what I have, things that I previously considered normal: a warm flat, food on the table, running water. (Ilona, 52, W)

I've experienced a mental shift seeing how everyday life was just taken away from people in Ukraine. I'm trying to appreciate my life more, enjoy it, because I don't know for how long it has been given to me. (Julia, 20, W)

Using a generational lens, the data also demonstrated that the threat to ontological safety meant the loss of hope for a 'normal' future among the younger interviewees. This permeated 2021 interviews, as the pandemic's implications have solidly shifted from health, life, and death, and have instead centralized broader systemic worries about capitalism of the future:

I believe that a flat is something very basic that everyone should be able to afford sooner or later, as long as they work, earn a salary each month and save. However, this is not the case: one cannot really buy a flat unless taking out a mortgage for 50 years (Kamila, 21, P)

As the war was acknowledged as a major political event expected to have full-scope impacts, those worries continued beyond material or relational fears:

I'm afraid of everything, mostly I am paralyzed by fear of uncontrollable change, the loss of certainty and stability in my surroundings, being overwhelmed by information and negative forecasts. (Zofia, 29, W)

Here, we can denote evidence of 'at-risk identity' (Ekberg 2007: 351), which is particularly expressed by the young generation (cf. Furlong and Cartmel 1997). The intertwined major risk events at the beginning of their independent lives were often interpreted in a totalizing way and generalized as a prediction for a risky future overall. This led to a sense of dread about the future marked by an unacceptable level of risk, a 'constant threat of disasters on an entirely new scale' (Beck 1999: 93). Both generations, at least during the first weeks after the war began, felt an overwhelming sense of uncertainty and powerlessness regarding the world and future risks.

Discussion and conclusions

This study contributes to a theoretical expansion of Kilkey and Ryan's (2021) model of unsettling events. Exploring the applicability potential of the dimensions of unsettlement beyond the field of migration, the analysis links the subjective dimension more directly with the loss of ontological security in the polycrises era, alongside explaining how material and relational losses operate within the third pillar of subjective unsettlement processes.

By exploring intergenerational comparisons through the identification of the temporal scheme of people's reactions to these events in the broader context of the risk society (Beck 1992, 1999), we have shown how responses to unsettling events evolve. People's initial reactions included intensive communitarian engagement and solidarity as ways to tackle perceived personal and social risks, both in the face of the pandemic and at the start of the war (Radzińska 2022). However, in the context of long-term COVID-19 risks, this has shifted to the foregrounded awareness of the material risks and fears centered on individualistic aspects of economic instability. Contrary to the prediction about the societal wake-up potential of the pandemic (Zinn 2021), COVID-19 has become normalized and is narrated as an event that may have caused certain risks but is mostly in the past.

The data show that we are globally living through interconnected 'unsettling events'. As argued by Abbasi (2022), this means that 'In the heat of the pandemic, we parked our response to climate change. In the heat of Russia's war on Ukraine, the pandemic and climate change now take a back seat worldwide. Using the Polish case as an example hinges on both its checkered history with Russia/Soviet Union as the known aggressor in people's memory, and the fact that the country became home to the greatest number of refugees from neighboring Ukraine. Thus, it serves as an apt example of the current and future processes that are caused by political crises but comprise unsettlement in personal/individual lives for people elsewhere.

Answering the research question, we conclude that there is a cumulative effect found in the interviewees' perception of threats as totalizing and undefined (cf. Zinn 2021). The analysis demonstrates that both the COVID-19 outbreak and the war in Ukraine have a considerable trickle-down effect on the everyday lives of the research participants. The Polish interviewees generally experienced what Beck (1992) called the omnipresence of risk. Some narrower types of uncertainty could also be uncovered (cf. Ekberg 2007) as closely related to the dimensions of the unsettling events (Kilkey and Ryan 2021).

The 'unsettling events' could be detangled through the life-course lens, as the pandemic and the war affected younger and older generations differently. The younger cohorts, being less rooted in the labor market, the housing market, and interpersonal relationships, are more exposed to uncertainty. Undergoing transitions to adulthood, which represent a highly unstable life period (Furlong and Cartmel 1997), renders them more vulnerable to crises. Sharing a certain similarity with migrants

who felt significantly unsettled by Brexit in Kilkey and Ryan's study (2021), the young people were dejected by the examined events. Both their present lives and imagined futures were often shattered on the material, relational and subjective levels. An uncertainty of embeddedness thus characterizes both migrants and native young populations when compared to the established, native adults. This broadly explains the identified cohort and generational difference, because the older interviewees can use financial and non-financial resources accumulated in the period of lesser instability to offset some of the perceived risks.

Summarizing the findings regarding the three-pronged model of 'unsettling events', in the material dimension, the interviewees acknowledged personal risks in the realms of housing and work. The conditions of these two spheres play a significant role in entering adulthood and were more commonly seen as risks by younger interviewees, revealing direct consequences of COVID-19 on personal finances, career development, and housing satisfaction (cf. Chirumbolo *et al.* 2021; Jones and Grigsby-Toussaint 2021). The extended timeframe of COVID-19 had a dual effect. First, the interviewees already spoke in 2021 of these changes as situated in the past. Second, they were able to normalize and accept the known risks to a greater extent (cf. Ekberg 2007; Nygren and Olofsson 2020).

Given that the invasion had been going on briefly before our war-related data collection, the indications of its material impact were predominantly embedded in the dailyness, such as routinely noticing the gradual increase in gas or food prices. Compared to the pandemic, the war seemed to trigger a more comprehensive revision of the careful management of finances, with long-term financial and survivalist planning being centered around storage and supplies. The younger cohort's narratives hinted at growing concerns over anticipated 'struggles over resources' within employment and housing in the face of the influx of Ukrainian refugees (cf. Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk 2022).

The two unsettling events appeared to share certain similarities in the relational sphere, although their risks were differently distributed (cf. Ekberg 2007) and dependent on a person's age and, in the case of war, gender. First, both crises triggered interviewees' concern for their loved ones; the difference existed in who the attention was directed toward – seniors (during the pandemic) or young men (during the war). Relationally, the lockdowns might have caused temporary discomforts or even pandemic rage (Kubacka *et al.* 2023), but bonds were mostly restored thereafter. Second, the interviewees reflected on social solidarity as

being tested by COVID-19 and changed their perspective from initial enthusiasm to ultimate dismay over individualism (cf. Radzińska 2022).

The war built a different kind of solidarity and empathy among the interviewees, who significantly engaged in supportive actions and sympathy and sought interactions with the Ukrainians in need (cf. Moshagen and Hilbig 2022). Initially, the ‘fears of war seem to erase fears of the pandemic’ (Carta *et al.* 2022). However, in the following months, the more skeptical voices of those who feared migration rose in prominence, when relational openness became weakened by the deteriorating economic position of the Polish citizens (CBOS 2023).

The subjective dimension of unsettling events can be conceptually connected to the ‘catastrophic risk society’ (Beck 1992) and the subjective sense of living an ‘at-risk’ identity (Ekberg 2007) after losing one’s ontological security more permanently (Giddens 1991). The interviewees experienced an omnipresent uncertainty corollary to the loss of agency. They referred less to particular processes (e.g. recession), and instead, exhibited a broader conviction that the entire world around them ceased to be understandable or predictable. The domino effect of unsettling events turned into a mega-risk that threatened the very existence and possibility of a future (Beck 1992). Because these risks were often abstract or even unrealistic, they could be pushed away and engendered no transformative action. Instead, adaptive strategies – such as ‘waiting out the storm’ and psychological coping mechanisms – were observed. Hence, the data support the idea of risk-driven disorientation, wherein the risk society simultaneously encourages citizens to exercise agency and fires subsequent threats (Ekberg 2007), ultimately producing apathy and escapism (cf. Beck 1998).

The data illustrate how the initial (emotional) shock of gray swan events (Krastev 2020) fizzles out and evolves (cf. Ekberg 2007). We argue that, in the risk society, the material and relational dimensions of unsettling events must be viewed as mutually influential and difficult to reconcile. While they are considered ‘real’ risks with the power to harm, relational risks inspire individuals to counter unsettlement with solidarity and appreciation for the community, whereas material ones may trigger more individualistic attitudes connected to personal losses and decreasing quality of life.

In terms of the third dimension, the overlapping of the pandemic and war can be considered a ‘crisis domino’ in the arena of existential uncertainty. This is especially noticeable in the narratives about the future, which is seen as equally individually uncertain and societally worrisome,

if not catastrophic. Here it is important to account for the CEE and Baltic regions' position in geopolitics – particularly the historically motivated fears of Russia (CBOS 2022; Michta 2022; Moshagen and Hilbig 2022), which resulted in the interviewees perceiving Poland as a fragilely stable state and society. Therefore, the proliferation and dynamism of risks rendered them 'unreal' in people's minds (Beck 1992). The individuals became captives of the risks-ridden present that strongly influenced their thoughts about the future as being marked by all-encompassing, and often unimaginable, existential risks (Beck 1999).

The process of settling in uncertainty is neither exclusive nor bound to the studied context. Rather, Poland's (and CEE's) geopolitical positioning renders the historical, economic, and political interdependencies in the context of the Ukrainian war more ontologically pronounced. Contrary to the previous forecasts toward postmodern cardinality of socially constructed, virtual, and technological risks (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Ekberg 2007), our study revealed the continued importance of 'old', premodernist fears around a plague and a war. The interviewees, just like society, were convinced that these risks were under control, which produced the narratives of shock and disbelief that resulted in the loss of ontological safety among study participants.

When one is surprised regarding one's inability to control the future, it engenders a sense of being 'attacked' by the past: instead of 'unpredictable, unfamiliar, and unprecedented risks manufactured by modern science and technology' (Ekberg 2007: 345), the pandemic and war should be seen as familiar and actually precedent events ('gray swans') with 'natural' origins. This seems to be the very root cause of the extreme uncertainty expressed by the interviewees. Considering the longitudinal character of the project presented in the paper, the next wave of interviews (summer 2023) will let us add a temporally and generationally comparative perspective to the presented results.

We pertinently argue that the current findings surpass the local setting and need to be discussed in the broader, universal context of unexpected, large-scale, and co-occurring crises that end periods of relative security worldwide. Increasingly frequent events linked to ongoing wars or climate change – such as the 2023 wildfires occurring from Rhodes to Maui – exemplify the sociological need for revised frameworks usable for tracking and understanding unsettlement and risk.

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