

NEW TEXTS

Aneta Duda

The Phenomenon of Downshifting in Central and Eastern European Countries: Case Studies from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia



DUDA, Aneta —
Professor of Sociology
and Media Studies, the
Catholic University in
Lublin. Address: 14,
Raławickie str., 20-950
Lublin, Poland.

Email: duda@kul.lublin.pl

Abstract

The article introduces discussions of sociocultural post-material practices that are connected with downshifting and with efforts to thrive in the shadow of dominating forms in contemporary societies. The author extends her conceptual framework beyond ecology, sociology, and the politics of sustainable lifestyles and draws from Anthony Giddens's "reflexive project of the self." The introduced notion of "experiencing downshift" is understood as the reflexive experience by those individuals, who reshape their lives to reflect its "authentic" meaning, which is connected to the resignation from high material living standards. The article offers the concept of identity as central rather than peripheral to downshifting research.

Following a longitudinal panel study on the processes of far-reaching and radical changes in the lifestyles of 31 downshifters, five areas were examined: motives for the change, the character of the change, reactions of others, balance of benefits and losses, and decision consistency. Findings suggest that the contested meaning of (material) life success leads to the reframing of value priorities and the reconstruction of personal and social identities. Ideals of downshift move away from productive efforts and consumption-based identities toward practices of being reflective, self-aware, and fostering well-being, which is variously characterized by harmony, pleasure, and creativity. Most of them are not unique to downshifting, but this is not (as I have emphasized) a limitation but simply a chance for the movement to get out of the frame of a politicized, radicalized critique of capitalist growth society and make consumers appreciate that what they already do could be potentially supportive of downshift transformation.

Keywords: downshifting; lifestyle; sustainability; post-material practices; Central and Eastern European Countries; semi-structured interview technique.

The Phenomenon of Downshifting: A Theoretical Background

Modern societies are undergoing social changes that have been described as a post-modern breakthrough. It has also been referred to as uncertain "late modernity" [Giddens 1991], risky "second modernity" [Beck, Grande 2010], or a "liquid modernity" [Bauman 2000]. The following processes are encompassed by globalization, migration, information revolution, a growing scale of multiculturalism as well as changes of the new institutional and normative order following them. The change is also expressed in the emerging innovative social post-

material practices in response to hyper consumption, and the stress, overtime, and psychological expense that may accompany it. Recycling, reusing [Shaw, Newholm 2002], redistributing, and re-localizing are typical keywords used to describe this process. Other words include de-materializing (less use of raw materials and energy) and slowing-down (quiet low-paid work, flexible schedule, self-development, conviviality, communities).

For several decades, the degrowth movement (downshifting is one of its practical manifestations) has been considered as a “sociopolitical framework” reflecting conflicts between globalization or centrality and localism or tradition, utilitarianism and idealism, and technology and nature. It has called for the equitable redistribution of wealth and the deepening of democracy [Demaria et al. 2013]. However, in the last decade, degrowth has been emerging as a frame for a re-politicized and a re-radicalized critique of capitalist growth society by proposing multi-scalar transformations beyond capitalism [Asara et al. 2015]. It endorses new forms of producing, such as eco-communities and cooperatives and new forms of living. In short, degrowth is a frame connecting multiple lines of thoughts and strategies by inviting proposals for a desired social future motivated by social justice and democracy, but also by the meaning of life, well-being, anti-utilitarianism, and respect for nature and its intrinsic value [Demaria et al. 2013].

Whereas the literature on downshifting has grown considerably, there are questions about how the transformation can be achieved. To contribute to this debate, I will first and foremost study the individual agents taking part in downshifting change in the innovative post-material practices in response to hyper consumption and the stress, overtime work, and psychological expense that may accompany them. In sociological literature, these practices are also designated by the term “voluntary simplicity,” “simple living,” and “slow life.”

With reference to Anthony Giddens’s “reflexive project of the self,” this article stresses the importance of the identity concept. Self-identity is thus no longer seen as something that is given but appears as something “that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” [Giddens 1991: 52]. Society and the self are both “in flux,” which is why Giddens writes that “the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change” [Giddens 1991: 33]. This is at least partly in order to respond to the anxieties raised by rapid social change. The reference points for the construction of the self have to be set “from the inside,” that is, “in terms of how the individual constructs/reconstructs his or her life story” [Giddens 1991: 80]. As Giddens explains, the “first loyalty” of the individual becomes a loyalty to himself [Giddens 1991]. The morality underpinning this is a morality of authenticity, that is, being true to oneself, which plays an important part in self-actualization. As Giddens writes: „In so far as it is dominated by the core perspectives of modernity, the project of the self remains one of control, guided only by morality of “authenticity” [Giddens 1991: 225]. By stressing the importance of the identity project, this article offers the concept of identity formation as central rather than peripheral to the development of the downshifting phenomenon.

As a non-conformist attitude, resistance to materialism and relatively high consumer expenditures is not easy to adopt and can often be emotionally and financially costly [Cherrier, Murray 2007]. Furthermore, extensive unbound consumption provides comfort, satisfies physical needs, and ultimately contributes to the construction of one’s self and the communication of the self to others [Ewen 1988]. The increasing diversity of products to choose from facilitates self-expression and creativity [Holt 2002]. Hence, a key question that this article seeks to explain is as follows: Why do some people resist the dominant culture that sustains an economy based on increasing consumer spending?

By looking at degrowth as more than a theoretical debate and as a “frame constituted by a large array of concerns, goals, strategies and actions” [Demaria et al. 2013], my aim is to capture the ways in which degrowth is materialized and practiced. I will investigate downshifting from a subjective perspective, which considers

practitioners, their activities, and the importance of reflexivity in shaping human actions. Giddens' [1991] concept of reflexivity has been focused on green identities and lifestyles, everyday practices, and activism. In studying social responses to climate change, Davidson (2012) focuses on "meta-reflexives," which appear engaged and resourceful. These individuals spend "a great deal of energy on inner dialogue" [Davidson 2012: 620], are value oriented, and tend towards activism. Other studies examine the process of lifestyle change as one of moral identity formation [Lorenzen 2012]. It is essential to emphasise that the notion of reflexivity is not only an inner process. Reflexive awareness is in fact a culturally embedded process [Dawson 2012: 310]. Behavioral practices must be understood as socially embedded and the elements of social practice (e. g., clothing, housing, food, and travel), rather than the individual as a relatively isolated entity, should be at the core of the analysis [Hargreaves 2011].

I propose the notion of "experiencing downshift," which can be understood as reflexive experiences by those individuals that re-shape their lives to reflect that which fits with their 'authentic' meaning of their life, something often linked to resignation from high material living standards. In this context, my paper answers the following questions: What does it mean to "experience downshift"? What are the practices of "experiencing downshift"? The spread of such lifestyles are highly topical for Western countries¹. Are they also significant for Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia? What is certain is that this perspective on downshift remains underdeveloped in CEEc: the "second-class" countries (as they are sometimes referred to) still trying to "get closer"² to Western European economies.

The Social Context: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia

In 1989, CEEc embraced free market capitalism with great hope and optimism. The new system promised a kind of return to integration and wealth. The fall of Moscow rule, reviving the desire to restore the values of democracy and the market economy, brought the policy markets of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia together. In January 1990, the Czechoslovakian President, Vaclav Havel, addressed the Polish parliament and urged the states to coordinate their efforts to "return to Europe" [Poláčková 1994: 117]. Along with the free market, it has become perhaps the most visible feature of global unity, a dominant axis for peace and prosperity. Inflected in all cases, the concept of "democracy" or "free market" became values that did not require justification: They were to demonstrate the moral superiority of Anglo-American capitalism over all other regimes.

The goal was to maintain a management system capable of keeping a high level of profit, raise a work efficiency, and secure a variety of capital accumulation opportunities. This attracted high social costs³ [Aage 1992: 114–127; Griffith-Jones 1992: 92–100]. As Joseph Stiglitz argued, "big-bang," or rapid and deep reforms, greatly harmed the social fabric and should give way to a more gradual liberalization that would ease the pain of transition [Stiglitz 1999]. It was Poland and Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic and Slovakia) that were grouped as rapid reformers, and they remain leading achievers to this day [Havrylyshyn, Meng, Tupy 2016].

¹ Nearly 23% of Australians have voluntarily abandoned high-paid, but highly absorbing jobs. However, the greatest downshifting is taking place in the USA today. It is estimated that over 30% of Americans have already been «doing something» in this direction. In Europe, this trend attracted 26% of English people, 20% of Germans, and 17% of the French. See: [Eckersley 2006; Parkins, Craig 2006].

² The level of GDP per capita is being discussed here. In Poland, a slight increase in GDP per capita was observed: from 67% of the EU average in 2014 to 70% in 2017. The Czechs are also catching up quickly with Western countries: GDP per capita in real terms is 89% that of the EU average and is already approaching the level of inhabitants of Spain and Italy. In Slovakia, it is at 77%. Source: Eurostat.

³ The economic and political reform package, one of the fastest adopted acts in the history of CEEc, allowed for mass layoffs and introduced the concept of unemployment. Unprofitable state-owned enterprises began to collapse, which resulted in unemployment rates several dozen percent high.

In time, the exhaustion of modernization enthusiasm became more and more apparent⁴. After the period of “relishing capitalism,” the letdowns and unfulfilled promises of prosperity began to appear. The governments of America and Western Europe ceased to generate passionate support, and everyday life failed to live up to expectations. In 1996, Peter Murrell noted the increased poverty in transition countries [Murrell 1996].

Societies that have experienced socialist scarcity over the years have accepted the social order, which undoubtedly rewarded material success⁵. In addition, the socioeconomic situation of CEEc is still defined by the lower standards of living, working and pay conditions than that in Western Europe, by emigration to Western countries, dependence on EU’s assistance, low investment rates, tolerance for activities in the “gray market,” or running business semi-legally. This feature still determines the level and quality of life in CEEc.

Historically and culturally, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia have strong links. They belong to the West Slavic group of languages and are considered the most sophisticated and highly industrialized of the Slavic nations of East Central Europe [Medevac 1991: 451]. Their cultures share the same roots and determine the same basic interest in independence and democracy. That is why these countries share many common objectives: deeper integration within Euro-Atlantic structures and support for democratization and transformation in the region. Since 2004, they also appear to be undergoing an identity crisis [Kaczyński 2010: 84] that forces them to ask questions such as the following: Who are we? Did we choose the right path?

Therefore, what does the downshift movement in countries with a rich history of dependence and rebellion (Poland), but the rebellion against life controlled by a socialist, not a capitalist state, look like? In countries where a rich, better world was longed for, its offer was eagerly accepted and implemented as soon as possible. For what reason do some Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks decide to give up the pursuit of material prosperity and aspiration today?

Research Methodology

I have not analyzed the traditional narratives of environmental activism but have focused instead on very personal changes in behavior and attitudes. I interviewed people who have achieved professional success and had the opportunity to be promoted but who decided to change their priorities. They live on interest from accumulated savings or started their own business in fields related to their interests and passions. Most often, they moved out of big cities (e. g., Warsaw, Gdansk, Wroclaw, Prague, Ostrava, Bratislava, and Koszyce). Individuals for whom the change was far-reaching and radical were sought for this study:

- having experienced self-imposed resignation from a level of income that was well above the average and that is now currently below it and had not been dismissed.
- changes in the workplace (and not just a reduction in their hours) or lack of employment, which resulted in the resignation from a senior position.
- combining a new job with interests and passions, which had not happened before.

It is necessary to look back at these decisions and describe the motives for the change. If and how difficult this decision was and what hindered its implementation? What does it mean to “experience downshift”? What are

⁴ In 2008, economic forecasts revealed a profound pessimism: Polish (31%), Slovakian (40%) and Czech citizens (46%) believed that the economic situation in their country would deteriorate over the following months; see: OECD Report “Public opinion in the European Union” [OECD Report 2008: 95].

⁵ In the EU, only Greeks (41.6%) and Bulgarians (40.6%) worked more than Poles (40.2%), Czechs (40.1%), and Slovaks (40.1%); see: OECD Report «Hours Worked» : [OECD Report 2019].

the practices of “experiencing downshift”? What is the current life of downshifters when they have to manage a much lower budget than before? Lastly and above all, do they regret this decision? Did they return to their previous lifestyles when the opportunity arose?

Interviews focused on five main issues:

- Motives for the change: *Why did they decide to quit their jobs? What was their previous job? Or What type of job did they previously have? What was unacceptable in the previous job?*
- The character of its change: *What did the change consist of in specifically? What did they have to face first? How did the schedule of their everyday chores, duties, responsibilities, consumption and ways of spending their free time change?*
- Reactions of other people: *How did other people react to the change? Were any of these reactions extremely surprising: negative or positive?*
- General reflections. Balance of benefits and losses: *What were the first impressions after implementing this decision? What seemed completely different? Easy or difficult? In retrospect, would you do the same today, and why?*
- Decision consistency: *Did you return to your previous lifestyle? If yes, what were the reasons?*

The most important criterion used for the selection of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia was the highest transition score (described in the previous section), which was probably historically and culturally conditioned.

The study of downshifting is quite complicated by the fact that its few representatives are in different and sometimes distant places and also because of the vagueness of this concept. Difficulties also arise from other sources. First, downshifting is a dynamic process in which it is often difficult to clearly determine its beginning. The decisions often relate to “extended in time” sequences of certain activities that are related to possible relocations, taking up a new job, postponing dates of termination or delaying employment, or specific “transitional states” (e. g., tourist travel after leaving work and difficulties with starting the new one). Thus, in eight cases, it was only possible to study certain stages of the process.

Czech and Slovak second degree students staying in Poland under the international Erasmus exchange were involved in conducting the interviews. The author of the research conducted interviews with Polish interviewees. In five cases, face-to-face interviews were conducted. In other cases, they were conducted by means of Skype, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp. The first eight people were reached through the forums forsal.pl, GoldenLine.pl (Poland), facebook.com/rustnerust (Czech Republic), and www.wolf.sk (Slovakia), where downshifting was discussed. Then, using the so called snowball method, more people with similar experiences were engaged. First, the contacted interviewees were asked to name acquaintances, who were then approached, interviewed, and asked for additional names. In this way, a sufficient number of subjects could be obtained to provide the study adequate credibility.

The disadvantage of this method was, of course, the lack of randomness, the unrepresentativeness of the sample, and the fact that the participants included people who knew them well. Therefore, the subjects may have similar characteristics, constituting a fairly homogeneous subgroup from the entire population. Efforts were made to make the group of 38 participants as diverse as possible in terms of age (29–52 years), gender, and the nature of reported facts and experiences. However, the subsamples from three countries were the same

in terms of sociodemographic characteristics and the professions of the respondents. All the surveyed participants met the above criteria, and most of them were individuals who “were high achievers in notable corporations.” The study was conducted in May and June 2015 and was repeated with 31 people from this group in June, August, and September 2019. Their characteristics are given in Tables 1–5.

Table 1

The nature of Previous Work: Type of Enterprise And Positions Held

Type of Enterprise or Institution	Previous Professions
International corporations	Sales representative (4)*, marketing manager (3), project manager (3), project assistant (3), system architect (IT specialist) (2), programmer (2), event organization specialist (2), HR manager (2), regional team coordinator (1), IT consultant (1), network administrator (1), web-developer (1), office manager (1), chief information officer (1), sales executive (1), resource optimization team coordinator (1), data base administrator (1), onsite coordinator (1)
Domestic enterprises/culture, media institutions	Marketing and PR director (2), backstage employee (1), journalist (1), PR specialist (1), head of the acoustic workshop (1), dentist (1)

* Number of respondents given in brackets.

Table 2

Non-Profitable Work/Activity after Resignation From High-Paid Position. 2015

Type of Enterprise or Institution	Work/Activity
Own business	IT company (3)*, agro-tourism activity (3), farming (3), online store (2), restaurant (2), hairdresser (2), massage room (1), wellness (1), blogging (2), travel agencies (1), implementation of personal development workshops (1), family advertising company (1), consulting (1), art and craft workshop (1), services: recreation (climbing) (1), confectionery (1), interior design (1)
National enterprises/institutions	Musician (2), teacher (1), dentist at a local clinic (1), distributor of interior items (1)
Miscellaneous	Travel (3), care for children and home (3)

* Number of respondents given in brackets.

Table 3

Work/Activity in 2019

Continuation of Downshifting	Return to Previous Lifestyle
IT company (2)*, hairdresser (2), farming (2), restaurant (2), recreational and cultural services (2), agro-tourism activities (2), online store (1), massage room (1), cosmetics (1), blogging (1), advertising company (1), art and craft workshop (1)	Sales representative (2), Programmer (1), project manager (1), IT consultant (1), web-developer (1)
Musician (1), teacher (1), dentist at a local clinic (1)	
Childcare and taking care of the house (4)	

* Number of respondents given in brackets.

Table 4

Place of Residence*		
Before 2015	2015	2019
Large cities and suburbs (33)**	Large cities and suburbs (10)	Large cities and suburbs (14)
Medium-sized cities (5)	Medium-sized cities (8)	Medium-sized cities (5)
	Small towns (9)	Small towns (5)
	Country (11)	Country (7)

* Small towns — population below 20 thousand inhabitants; medium-sized cities — 20–100 thousand; large cities — 100 thousand and more.

** Number of respondents given in brackets.

Table 5

Nationality — Number of Respondents			
Nationality	The Decision to Downshifting (2015)	Continuation of Downshifting (2019)	Return to the Previous Lifestyle (2019)
Czechs	13	9	1
Poles	14	9	3
Slovaks	11	7	2

In the case of researching individuals who are difficult to access and when trying to construct the most complete and detailed picture of motivation, the semi-structured interview technique are considered the most optimal. Such interviews allowed coverage of specific questions prepared in advance (see above). Conversations were audio recorded. Data analysis and interpretation was done using tools of grounded theory and content analysis. The first step of structuring data or tentative coding, a central process in grounded theory, took place after 10 interviews. I gave components of this data different “labels” [Bryman 2008: 542] and developed four preliminary headings that grouped motives and practices of “experiencing downshift.” These four labels became themes for further analysis using a «thematic framework [which] is used to classify and organize data according to key themes” [Ritchie, Spencer, O’Connor 2003: 220]. This operationalized framework included all sources of data (main threads of the all interviews) on one axis and the four labels or key themes on the other axis. By filling in the framework, I obtained a general idea of the data, which led me to identify patterns and develop empirically grounded emergent categories [Williams 2012].

Is it possible that downshifting triggers certain social phenomena, be the *spiritus movens* of the emerging new reality, gradual transformation of the system? The practices are demanding, referring to individual attitudes which are scarce but creative, engaged, and brave, requiring self-discipline and sacrifice. Might they have a key role in transforming the material-economic dimension of individual and collective life? Perhaps it will turn out to be another fashionable, self-tracking practice that glorifies self-realization.

Is it possible that downshifting triggers certain social phenomena, be the *spiritus movens* of the emerging new reality, gradual transformation of the system?

Analysis of the Downshifting Phenomenon

Motives for a Change — Casting off “Golden Shackles”

Several main motives for changing lifestyle from the statements of the participants emerged. They can be ordered from those which were most often mentioned to individual cases. In the discourse of Czech downshifters, personal development and the desire to derive more satisfaction from life stood out. In the case of Slovaks and Poles, it was mainly frustration related to the nature of work in a corporation. People absorbed by

the problem of occupational burnout, fatigue, and conflicts of value in the spheres of an employer's interests and their own beliefs resigned from the absorbing career. They stopped agreeing to such large disparities in the time devoted to professional work and private life, especially family life, as well as to corporate conformity. They also sought stability and professional independence while anticipating problems related to it. Mostly, they were not certain of the decision.

Twenty-two participants indicated reasons similar to what one interviewee referred to as "the corporate work regime." It concerned constant pressure, a too fast work pace ("continuous and needless exertion of pressure"), ever increasing requirements, the need to give up one's own needs for the benefit of the employer's interests, and the stress that goes with it. Such work "causes mental fatigue," and "stretches nerves/toughness to the limit."

The following represent the comments of the interviewees:

My boss slept in the company. He was really cool. He impressed me with knowledge, commitment, ingenuity, but others also had to work 14 hours a day and sleep like he did at work (I 6)⁶.

I felt that I was reaching my limits, that I was becoming a wreck of a man <...> Initially, I thought that the problem was this particular corp, so I changed it to a different one — always with the same or better salary. But it was the same everywhere (I 12).

I often stayed until midnight, the next day I was in the office at 8 am. And I was still deluding myself, because my boss kept saying like a mantra that he didn't saddle me with working hours, I'm free when I finish my work. At first I believed in this 'task system' <...> but I found out that „task” means working from 8am to 8pm. On weekends you also had to be task-oriented when you were responsible for nearly 20 branches throughout Poland. In this business most activity was happening on Saturdays and Sundays. Then you get a promotion and try even harder. They praise you, pat you on the back, and everything seems to go in the right direction. But imagine that your phone rings non-stop for 12 hours a day, laptop signals emails non-stop. And not for days, but for months or even years (I 32).

With this type of work, cumulative stress, and insufficient rest, psychosomatic disorders soon followed. The interviewees repeatedly pointed to "warning signals" sent by the body:

I hit the emergency room four or five times with my blood pressure exceeding all norms. My body signaled, screamed and I didn't want to listen. Or I kept telling myself: later, later, there will be time to rest (I 18).

There were no boundaries between private life and the company according to most of the respondents. They had to be devoted to working almost completely, which initially gave them satisfaction and a sense of security and comfort due to the above average earnings and various types of profits:

The work itself was more and more stressful, but the earnings completely compensated me with work-related inconveniences (I 22).

However, after a few to several years, the conflict between parental and professional roles intensified. In particular, women pointed to the need for constant and stressful maneuvering between professional and family requirements. It was a life of constant guilt, neglecting one or more duties. Women emphasized that working

⁶ Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents were described in the ANNEX.

in a corporation was incompatible with raising children. It was crucial to them, but in order to devote as much time as necessary to it, they had to neglect their family responsibilities. They still made what they viewed as bad choices in deciding what was “more urgent” at particular moments, and as it turned out most often lost what they believe was “really” important:

My idea of quitting a full-time job in a corporation started when my son noticed that someone was doing too much for me. Someone picked up my children from kindergarten, someone helped raise them. I didn't close the day. I didn't have time to think about shopping, dinner, and children. Somewhere I missed it all (I 18).

I was neither a good mother, because I spend too little time with children, nor a good employee. I felt that way. I couldn't get involved like I had before giving birth to children, and when I had to resign from the integration trip once again, I had the impression that they were treating me like an outsider and would soon leave me from work. My husband's role did not go well either, because when we finally got together we both collapsed from fatigue (I 34).

In its general sense, corporationism affects culture and identity and chokes the enjoyment of freedom of thought, uniqueness of privacy, and the sense of self. Corporate and professional development proved too unidirectional and restrictive. Participants argued for the importance of deconstructing currently present social concepts, such as hierarchical, rigid, and corporate career models. They stressed the need for a “radical critique of neoclassical economics,” such as hegemonic ideas in society, which had become „internalized structures” (I 12) and argued for „constructing new alternatives” not only theoretically but also practically. They ceased to be a „cog” in the „soulless machine” (I 27):

I love freedom and partnership, and this is impossible in a corporation. Someone always depends on someone, is subject to someone and those constant masks of 'smiling perfectionists' (I 12).

The prize of success is too high. The corporation fuels you only in one way, in one direction. You have to become a cog, you don't have time to think about things not related to your job <...> It takes away spontaneity, openness, and reflectiveness. Everything goes faster and faster. You stop wondering why and where. If such a reflection comes, you keep pushing it back, rationalizing that you will rest one day, and now you can't. You are afraid of vacation, because then it's difficult to drive those thoughts away, and even harder to come back from this vacation (I 6).

My work was not related to people. Yes, I met them, but the most important were numbers, analyses, estimations, and deadlines <...>How long can you be a slave in a soulless corporation? (I 12).

Here you have to have a very well-ordered life: get up at a specific time, no slips, sit at work until 5 pm or until 8 pm, 9 pm. Clothes - defined by a code, facial expression with a forced smile. I realized that I could no longer fit into such a picture. I wasn't like that, neither neat, smiling nor hardworking (I 4).

After some time, full-time work and prestige ceased to be enough because the sense of such work completely disappeared. One of the women ironically concluded that she could be a violinist and she became a sales visionary:

In the corporation I stopped dreaming. Show me at least one thing, except money that makes sense in corporate work? (I 22).

The motives for a change sounded quite “therapeutic” on several occasions. Undertaking an increasing number of duties or workaholism (which was openly discussed) became a way to compensate for their deficits, strive for respect, and meet others’ expectations:

I gave up the family tradition in the dentist profession. I have 5 years of practice in the profession of a dentist, although I admit, I quit studying dentistry during the first year one hundred times. They kept telling me that it was such a cool profession that I started thinking that it could bring me good money. It brought money, but when I started working, dentistry turned out to be a stress volcano for me. I was sick when I went to work (I 7).

For as long as I can remember, I have been in the highest gear. At first, I gave birth to my daughter quite early, but I did not want to interrupt my studies. Then another daughter — the same <...>I graduated with the highest average. . . . At the highest gear, I had to be the best, and then all my colleagues in the corporation seemed somehow affected, so the race was deadly (I 18).

On the one hand, my parents were happy. They praised me, and on the other, they looked at me as if I had been a freak. They were clearly expecting me to stay in the countryside and stop “daydreaming.” I still felt that I did not belong there. I felt different <...>I left the village, and my parents, sister and brother kept saying that I would regret it, and come back with my tail between my legs. I worked hard to prove them otherwise (I 34).

Another reason for resigning from work in a corporation was the desire to test one’s self in one’s own business at work “on your own terms.” Twelve people indicated that they wanted to “take matters into their own hands” and work in an environment where there were no restrictions and where they could set conditions for themselves outside corporate rules. Therefore, they began searching for opportunities for a different and more balanced professional life. Furthermore, they even wanted to prove to these “inhuman corporations that you can successfully run a business, have high sales, reckon with others, with a sense of responsibility for others” (I 4). An effective motivator was also the desire to earn “on their own” the same amount of money as in a corporation, while reducing work time, which after years of hard work with so much professional experience was achievable in their opinion:

It took me years to get to this model. I now have the right experience. I know who to hit, how the industry works (I 23).

We were constantly complaining about corporate heartlessness and other nuisances. We just felt it was really the last moment to open our own business. If not now, then when? Who, if not us? (I 27).

There were also conflicts in the sphere of values. For example, in cases where the next advertising campaign that the employee was to implement was cigarette promotion or when decisions regarding the dismissal of several individuals had to be made:

<...> Which are difficult to perform and hit you for many months: I felt responsible for these people, for losing their jobs often overnight. And it was called nicely: resource optimization. I dismissed people who devoted themselves to the limit, so as not to lose this job <...> Nobody upstairs cared. I explained that the crisis would have to pass sooner or later and they would not find such workers anywhere. No, the numbers had to match there so that the summary always turned out to be a big plus (I 5).

Most interviewees made the decision to resign from corporate work slowly. It was the result of a long process of asking questions about life goals and one’s own place in the world’s order:

My departure from the system has lasted since I realized my separateness as a person <...> I already knew that I did not intend to 'earn some extra money' in the material sense or make a 'career' in the sense of social status (I 1).

The process of change, therefore, was not about “switching” from one corporate lifestyle to another calmer one, but it was a gradual deepening of awareness of one’s own development needs, possible to achieve thanks to “other” work, independent time management, and, most often, limiting consumption.

Working in a corporation, it's not like you suddenly experience the dazzle that the goal of your life is to graze sheep in the mountains. The process is progressing gradually. More and more things begin to make you uneasy, you mature, get rid of illusions. This must take some time (I 23).

As another interviewee put it: downshifters were people who sought consistency between their beliefs and behaviors, but usually this is a goal to be worked towards over several years, if not for the whole of their lives.

The Nature of Change — on the Way to Freedom?

The most frequently appearing threads in the description of the experienced change were a sense of freedom, life fulfillment, and an opening field to pursue interests and passions. The descriptions of „the paths to freedom” took various shades here. It was „amazing” (I 3), „moderate” (I 5), but also „demanding” freedom (I 12). In four cases, it was defined as life „outside the system”:

My departure from the system continues <...> It is impossible to calculate time devoted to children, walking in the woods, reading books or artistic creation in money. And that's what the insatiable monster of the system is doing. It wants to take away what is most valuable and true, and in return gives creditworthiness, corrupt medicine, poisonous food, 'exotic holidays' — to maintain efficiency (I 1).

New jobs may not have had rigid working hours, but in 10 cases they were, as it was acknowledged, more time consuming than a full-time job. The interviewees said that when they found their “own way,” they began to devote a lot of time to work again: “The agro-tourism business, and especially its beginnings, is a full-time job,” one of the interviewees explained (I 21). It was difficult to arrange an interview with some because they still did not have time. They postponed the meeting several times and finally cancelled it. Therefore, it is difficult to talk about “downshifting” because work in a few cases still took many hours a day. However, it was their own company and as most of them emphasized that work was connected with passion and was no longer related to productiveness or social status. Interestingly enough, the creative nature of new activities, artistic practices, and the lower income derived from these self-owned business venture were suggested as being a part of downshift living.

Degrowth offers appealed mainly to educated and creative people or at least to those with some financial resources. They did not make decisions rashly. They tried to calculate and plan everything. According to one participant, “Because of caution I haven’t quit my well-paid job yet, because first I wanted to check if it (business idea. — A. D.) works” (I 21). Another claimed that “This drudgery allowed me to put money aside for a start” (I 34). Their new companies did not immediately bring the expected income. At first, they lived “<...> on melting savings and in an uncertain future perspective” (I 13). None of the interviewees achieved earnings similar to those of corporate positions:

Two years have passed since I started the business. We lived only one and a half years on savings and support from our loved ones. Yes, there are already some gains, but not enough. Well, maybe 30% of corporate salaries. I am aware that the beginnings are always difficult. For now, I am not discouraged and go forward. (I 26)

My new earnings did not allow me to close my household budget. I had to live on some loans which was extremely frustrating <...> I limited consumption, which was also frustrating. Today, I wonder how I could have spent so much money.... What will happen when the savings are over? I don't know. I read investment guides, ha ha. I am learning to save and I can see that it makes sense (I 35).

The first months or even years were difficult. “Funds are still unpredictable,” admitted Elizabeth. Interviewees lacked the stability of a full time job, as they openly admitted. “No cash is the price you pay for freedom; the lack of financial liquidity is the most problematic,” added Anna. The respondents felt anxiety and uncertainty as to the correctness of their decisions:

I must honestly admit that the corporation has its advantages. I am not talking about various types of profits, such as bonuses, laptops, mobile phones, integration trips (although it could be useful now). But the certainty that money will come to your account on 10th of every month. When you have your own business, you often have to struggle for that money, and you often fail. You are broke, without a buck for a bread roll (I 17).

At the same time, the interviewees pointed to “great” relief combined with both physical rest. For example, “For a week I did not get out of bed” (I 5); “For a month I ‘was sleeping off’ probably all these years” (I 35). They also made reference to self-therapy and even psychotherapy, which was taken by eight people:

I went to therapy. I decided that I got looped in my life, and I don't really realize the reason. It helped me find myself, understand what I really want, free myself from other people's expectations. It was a beautiful adventure in my life (I 35).

Changing consumption patterns became one of the first necessary steps in this metamorphosis. The interviewees described practices such as consuming consciously and less, sharing in manifold ways, alternative patterns, and sourcing and doing things themselves as practices that create alternative lifestyles. These practices mirror the downshift strategy of “building alternatives” [Demaria et al. 2013: 202]. Lowering the financial level was a consequence of giving up corporate remuneration, but it was also followed by satisfaction with a more rational and “reflective approach to shopping” (I 12). This reflexivity could also be taken, as one of the participants noticed, to an awareness of “consumerism” and “commodification”: “My earlier wantonness was gigantic. Squandering cannot be excused. I also relieve stress in a different way. I do not browse my favorite clothing store websites. I go to the forest, which looks into my home” (I 36). Practices that express such reflexivity were described as making informed decisions and thinking about one's real needs. I interpret this as the awareness that needs can also be created, as Latouche for instance discuss [Latouche 2009]. Guided by the phrase “less means more,” these practices support a habit of consuming less and forsaking certain behaviors:

Shops and shopping malls were my favourite way of spending free time. It was a reward for a hard day at work, the opportunity to let the steam out. I often screwed a screw at work with this reward in mind. I rarely planned a specific purchase in a shopping centre. I had everything I needed: dozens of suits, shoes, bags. The shelves bent from cosmetics, and most of them landed in the bin right after opening, because something usually didn't suit me. As soon as the salary was transferred, I spent it quickly (I 21).

Limiting consumption habits were quite similar for everyone: giving up holidays abroad or meals at restaurants, buying clothes in second-hand stores (I 5, I 12, I 18, I 21, I 34), and avoiding shopping centers. Until now, most of the interviewees were on vacation “to the end of the world” (I 5), participated in trekking, skiing, diving, and safari camps. Often mentioned was the practice of travelling less or travelling slow, for example by train or bicycle:

Holidays are no longer exotic. We use friends's plots, campsites. So far we have cycled around the beautiful Polesie region. Our kids were delighted. It's folding and unfolding tents. Searching for accommodation on maps, they felt like treasure hunters (I 26).

It was a different time from expensive holidays. Even though they were slower, calmer, but still full of adventure. Our daughter became a fan of frogs, and I came to the conclusion that I love this "atmospheric" Poland. There are still so many wild places here. In the end, I felt really rested. Four weeks on vacation! And what's more, I didn't feel guilty about it! (I 7).

Often-mentioned consumer practice strongly related to the role community were various types of sharing, which was practiced regarding food ("Neighbours gave us fruit liqueur, we gave them pickled cucumbers" — I 29), clothes, equipment, toys, and help. Interviewees recommended participation in food cooperatives or the so called *swapping* (exchanging clothes). Expenses for clothing were radically reduced. Even a sort of mocking tone in the assessment of the purchasing practices of former colleagues appeared in the statements on this topic:

I could spend a few thousand on clothes in a month. Take into account that corporate clothes cost. You will not go to work in the same suit every day. These corporate types read directly your value from the value of your clothes. Saving is simply not allowed there. And now I've bought maybe five things for the last four years (I 12).

Today, after these years, I have maybe one-tenth of those things. I have carefully chosen what was extremely nice, useful, good quality. I have worn it to this day, I buy almost nothing. It turns out that at a shoemaker you can change soles for 10 PLN, zipper in a jacket for 15 PLN. I used to throw it all away, even though I liked my clothes, I had a "real" reason for a new purchase. <...>Clothes? I still have too many of them. The process is not finished (I 21).

Downshifters did not eat out much, which once used to be an extremely common practice among them. If anything, they looked for inexpensive restaurants recommended by friends, where they knew what they "were paying for" (I 28). In terms of how food was manufactured, participants described processing food themselves (producing homemade food, such as bread, butter, and dried fruit cakes) and cooking themselves. Eating together was mentioned as a social-enriching practice. They became much more attentive when shopping for food. This was partly influenced by their limited budget but also by their interest in healthy eating. Degrowers highlighted the importance of consuming local food, preferably vegetarian and ecologically produced food. Nine of them set up their own vegetable gardens:

The garden is a direct translation of creative work consistent with nature into absolutely fantastic, pure, and top-class food. It's expensive if you buy it in a bio-specialized farm. It is a time that pays off both financially and healthily (I 1).

Another set of practices alternative to mainstream consumerism include do-it-yourself (DIY) activities. Several downshifters experimented with low impact lifestyles. They repaired things themselves, fixed clothes, upcycled old materials into new clothes, worked on housing design. Among this group, I found that the most challenging aspects arise both from practical efforts to consume less and in attempts to rethink and live social values, personal identities and relationships not bastioned by the moral virtue of productiveness.

Lower living standards were compensated by "living in harmony with oneself" (I 29), an expression that was often repeated. In fact, experiencing downshift often entails practices concerned with the individual self. The practice of knowing yourself or being self-aware plays a crucial role in downshifting, as it probably does for many

other practices. Well-being and happiness also mattered to most participants, or to use a quote, “feeling fulfilled in life” (I 21). The practices that helped people to foster well-being were described in several ways. First, it was the process of becoming self-aware. Second, it meant “living more slowly.” Lastly, it meant not simply doing less but doing what they were passionate about. Money, as they declared, was no longer a priority.

The thread of passion running in these stories was crucial. Professional life was closely associated with it, which is why it was so satisfying. Karolina became a climbing instructor:

Now work gives me energy to live. In the past it took it away. I would love to work even for 14 hours a day. This is my passion. I rest while working. Earnings are not the same, but they are enough for everything. I don't have debts, but I have freedom of action (I 28).

Alexandra established a restaurant with organic food and “fell in love with this business.” Emilia sold “wonderfully scented candles, soaked in natural oils.” Patricia bought an old habitat, which she adapted into an agro-touristic farm, and decorated it with hand-painted furniture: “the color, shape, and detail was magic, which I am lucky to deal with every day.” Hana established an “awesome” and small barber shop, which completely absorbed her.

While acknowledging these various methods, an overriding pattern could be observed: finding balance. In most responses, there was satisfaction with “changing priorities for living in balance: work, life, hobby” (I 38) or regaining control over one’s own life (“I became a helm, a sailor, and a ship”, I 36). Most of the interviewees somehow “regained” time for their children and spouses:

I replaced company events with trips to a colorful vegetable market, work in the garden, and walks with my son to school. We have time for shared walks, shopping, trips. And although we do not have a car, and shopping was sometimes carried in a cart from a nearby supermarket, we live in a rented cottage instead of our own. We are really happy (I 18).

Twenty-five of the 38 stories heard were stories with a *happy ending*. It would seem that this radical change of work had only good sides. For the vast majority, this was how the discourse sounded. Sometimes, it appeared to be too idealistic. All the inconveniences following the new experiences were re-evaluated in such a way that they almost did not seem severe at all. To what extent, however, were these only seemingly rational justifications? How did downshift flow from a deep, conscious view of the self? How durable would this identification prove to be? Furthermore, perhaps it was the effect of a certain identity crisis, because one’s knowledge of one’s self, so far based on one’s career determination in a corporation, revealed externals. Will the next recognition of the self in this new downshifter identity also turn out to be ostensible, or will it allow for real and lasting identification? Whichever is the case, the need for reflective self-consciousness appears to be an undeniable value here.

Others’s Reactions: “You Can’t Live Like That”

In most cases (24 interviewees), the reactions of others to the news of their decision were unfavorable. Friends from the corporation, but also families thought “I’d been knocked on the head” (I 29), “stated that I was a psycho” (I 14), and “they were shocked” (I 37). They warned them that it was necessary to “start everything from the scratch, that here I have already paved the way, established contacts, have achievements” (I 16). They assessed that it was a fad, a whim, a consequence of “a difficult period in life” (I 14). There were instances of gossiping “behind the back,” a suggestion that it was a mid-life crisis or an explicit opinion that they “suddenly grew stupid.” Friends predicted that downshifters would return very soon “with their tails between their legs” as soon as they come into contact with the realities of life.

These non-corporate “realities,” somewhat worse than reality, appeared to be something to be feared. Only by staying in a corporation could one feel safe. Therefore, it was a sign of strength to internalize the significance of material values, security, and financial freedom: “Now you can be sure that you will receive a considerable amount into your account every month. You work hard but not for free. Where could you get such earnings and a sense of security over the next months?” one friend tried to convince Emilia. Friends argued that without these corporate benefits, it would be impossible to live at all or to live at the “appropriate” level:

Friends from work laughed that I won't make it far on homemade bread. They said that sooner or later I would return to stable work in the capital city (I 15).

Quitting a corporate job was also seen as a consequence of a lack of ambition (material or professional) and problems with self-esteem. Colleagues strongly criticized the interlocutor for staying at home, choosing a standard of living that “even a dog would not wish for” (colleague of I 5) and agreeing to be used by her husband and children:

I heard from my friends that I was giving up my career for my husband, which proves my lack of self-esteem and that I will regret it. For me it means real marriage and love (I 15).

Another participant claimed:

My friends see me as a stay at home mom with a professional failure. But I feel like a winner (I 36).

In addition to surprise, pity, misunderstanding, disbelief, skepticism, and emotional grievances, there was also indifference:

There is a considerable fluctuation, so they only shrugged. If not this one, then the different one. If they were in my shoes, they would quickly find someone else. That's how it is in a corporation. People come and go, and it's all the same to anyone. It's like changing a desk in someone's room to a similar one (I 29).

Some parents also resented their children for giving up their careers. Catherine heard from her mother:

You graduated such difficult studies and you are going to entertain children now? Extremely developing (sarcasm—A.D). What was the purpose of your studies? You can have children, but you can hire a nanny during your working hours (I 16).

It was difficult for parents to understand giving up a standard of material comfort that was unattainable for them. The children, in turn, found it difficult to explain the reasons for this decision, regretting that they would still be misunderstood. One participant explained:

There was no point explaining it. My parents lived in a different reality<...> They were proud of my career, home—almost a mansion, a luxurious car. <...> Once they visited me in a hospital during my pre-cardiomyopathy, they shook their heads that I had to take care of myself, and when it came to that they considered me an idiot, why? <...> Poor people, as they confess to their friends that their daughter no longer have a house near the capital and moved to the countryside. Such a shame (I 16).

Downshift was also associated with egoism, which was followed by a lack of responsibility for the family, especially children. The need to give up private kindergartens or schools and the inability to send a child to

study abroad were provided as further arguments in favor of the irrationality of this decision. The interviewees argued that their decisions were based on the need to spend more time with the family and a desire for greater parental involvement. In turn, critics pointed out the following according to one interviewee:

They told me that it is necessary to invest in the future of my children, to open their windows to the world, ensure the future, and for that you need money. The time devoted to the child can be beautiful, evenings spent together, not standing next to the pots and cleaning the floors. I told them that I didn't have such evenings because the kids were already asleep when I came home, so I heard them reply that I was disorganized, that it was enough to manage my time better (I 30).

Therefore, the majority of people leaving the corporate environment could not count on the support of former friends in this new situation. Even if these acquaintances were maintained for some time, both sides felt more and more uncomfortable in their company. The differences of interests and values underlying their relationship became too clear:

I invited girls. I was invited for some time, but conversations about work and promotions were no longer my story. When I said something to change the subject, there was a strange silence (I 5).

When interviewees described awkward encounters with friends from previous corporations, they alluded to the lack of conversation and the feeling that their colleagues would rather the meeting had not happened:

I met an old friend on a skating rink. We spent several holidays together. It seemed to me that our relationship was serious. First, she pretended not to see me, and then, when we bumped into each other, we almost collided. Finally, she asked how is it going on, and that's it. She said "take care" on parting and left the ice rink, even though she was on it maybe a quarter of an hour. I felt like a leper (I 20).

It was difficult to get others to accept these types of decisions, because, as the interviewees emphasized, it took courage to make a change in this respect, and some did not have enough of it (I 2). Such a moralistic and critical tone appeared in their statements quite often. They admitted on several occasions that their friends reprimanded them for showing their superiority and disregard, claiming that they did not recognize the circumstances that prevented them from making similar decisions. Interviewees accused their friends of a lack of understanding, but they themselves did not accept the choices of others, convinced that their lifestyle was the only correct one:

Yes, sometimes I exaggerate in these discussions. When I accused my friend of having corporate blinders on, she said that I was arrogant <...> I have to be more careful not to tell others what to do or what they do wrong (I 2).

The interviewees appeared to be emotionally prepared for the negative reactions of others and their arguments and also appeared to be quite resistant to attempts to make them feel guilty. Anna felt like a winner despite the fact that her friends perceived her as a housewife. Marta found "true marriage and love", while her friends accused her of a lack of ambition, other women talked about their happier children who "have more mother's time" despite hearing from friends that they do not care about their future. Other interviewees said that they did not pay attention to hate and pressure from others or tried to understand this criticism:

In fact, if you have a big debt, three kids attending school, including rebellious adolescent teenagers, and a dependent mother, one day it would be difficult for them to say: 'My sincere apologies, we're moving to the countryside' (I 25).

Interviewees claimed that the critical opinions of others already ceased to be significant for them. They emphasized building new friendships and relationships based on respect. A fundamental element was cultivating deep interpersonal relationships. For participants, this meant enjoying and fostering these relationships. For example, by having regular chats or going on leisurely walks. Practices that described ways of relating included being empathic, showing appreciation, and listening and communicating in different ways, which can be summarized by the attitude of care [Brossman, Islar 2020]. Moreover, the decision to change allowed them to “verify” existing friendships. Only then could they discover who their “real” friends were:

What surprises me most is that only one or two of our old acquaintances have survived. And it seemed that we understand each other well and create a harmonious group. It was enough to move a few dozen kilometers further and everything fell apart. Nobody wants to move their ass “so far, ” but then they fly to Africa or America twice a year (I 33).

Twelve interviewees experienced positive reactions, including from the family. They were especially the closest members who saw how much sacrifice the work required. The (younger) children seemed particularly grateful:

My children were delighted. They don't have fond memories of going to the kindergarten first and going home last. My son said that he only saw a smiling mother sometimes on weekends, now he can see me smile every day (I 15).

Different attitudes towards people who decide to make such a radical change in their lives could be deduced. It seems, however, that Poles, Slovaks, and Czechs remain unlikely to accept this type of decision, perhaps because, taking into account the standard of living, they are at least one generation behind the most developed countries. Comparison between the eastern and western proportions of wages and living costs should be enough to indicate differences. Hence the fear that what is becoming popular in the West may be foolish in CEEc, and in the end, the fool is not the one who works too hard, but the one who refuses such work. Although tired of work, Poles, Slovaks, and Czechs do not decide for themselves a low-budget lifestyle. Recognition for such decisions appearing (rarely) is still mixed with doubt about their righteousness.

Profits and Losses Balance

Self-related practices might appear to be oriented towards pleasant experiences, happiness and positivity. However, my research suggests that experiencing downshift is also about facing troublesome situations. Practices were described as initially dealing with uncertainty, inner conflicts, and challenges. Ten interviewees had many doubts as to the correctness of the decision. The newly founded businesses did not immediately start to bring the expected profits. Furthermore, the corporate job with its fixed salary was remembered with fondness, and the experience gained there was appreciated:

I was very afraid of this change. I had a good position, good salary where tasks are strictly defined. It's easier to live like that (I 16).

Furthermore, one participant claimed:

Everything was uphill at first. I doubted if it made any sense. When I started looking for suppliers, I realized that the matter is not that simple (I 11).

Financial instability and the need to pay for future care were the most frequently mentioned problems:

The only thing that worries me today is what would happen if I got seriously ill (I 34).

They mentioned times when the spontaneous purchase of an expensive gift for a child, spouse, or friend was not a problem, where now it would be impossible. Each expense was now carefully considered. The spontaneity of previous spending had been replaced by greater financial discipline. Downshifter appeared surprisingly unconcerned by a reduction in income given the exceptionally strong emphasis that modern society places on financial security. A change in material status was not severely felt. It was connected with a change in the way of thinking about finances, a kind of psychological transformation in which money and material things fell to a much lower rank in their life priorities:

My worldview has changed. I feel really good without all these comfortable 'additions to life.' I have a healthy family, a forest, a field and a loan I have repaid thanks to the decision to move out and sell the house. I can breathe fully. I'm not in a hurry anywhere. I am not bound by ever-increasing obligations. I feel like I can breathe again (I 21).

Eleven interviewees had problems with getting used to new and completely different ways of everyday functioning. One person lacked regularity in his work schedule. Another lacked contact with people, "a sense of power over the world" (I 13). Another interviewee missed the challenges that followed the implementation of subsequent corporate projects (I 10) or "the pace of life in which so much happened" (I 36). Many interviewees also felt guilty that they had too much free time:

It was strange that at noon I could just sit down with a coffee and look through the press (I 12).

There was a subconscious desire to return to work:

The buzzer was still ringing and saying I was wasting my time. I just couldn't rest. I missed this corporate routine and haste. Eventually, I started the day in the afternoon, the night, in the morning. Everything fell apart (I 5).

"Being yourself" turned out not to be easy at first:

You have all these social expectations in your head. You begin to doubt your decisions. Maybe they are right, since so many of them say differently than you do (I 21).

However, after some time, even the ones who were most doubtful gained confidence that it was the right choice. Satisfaction was brought both by better functioning business ("I did not give up then and I succeeded. I will go further"— I 8), faith found in oneself ("I started to believe in my dreams, I believed in myself" — I 2), "regained" peace, joy, and control over one's own life, which began to happen on one's own terms (I 12).

According to I 1:

Fishermen on the shores of the Pacific Ocean still fish every morning. They do it when the weather permits and when there is a shortage of fresh and dried fish. They decide how much to fish to their families' or cooperatives' needs. I try to live this way.

Some of their favourite downshifting practices were nature related:

I regained the sense of smell, hearing. I distinguish birds' trills, the smell of French, Damascus roses (I 18).

Long walks with children in search of frogs and butterflies (I 29), bicycle trips, climbing as well as undertaking creative activities such as molding from clay (I 34), painting (I 18), the violin (I 34) or saxophone (I 37), were highlighted as examples of these nature-related activities.

“Everything slowed down,” said Kazik. “Despite the fact that while living in the city, I avoided rushing because I hate it organically. I still slowed down in the countryside. My tendency to worry has found a natural remedy here.” Jack added, “When I get on the bike, the time in which I cover a given distance no longer matters. I began to discover places that I have avoided so far in the rush of my own speed records. I finally stopped racing myself.”

The need for material security, once so important, now gave way to the affirmation of life and the willingness to search and take risks. Most interviewees were quite optimistic about the future, pointing to emerging new opportunities and challenges that would have been beyond their reach in corporate positions. However, they emphasized that responsibility for this “regained freedom” would not be manageable for everyone. It was much easier for creative people to assimilate to it, but also those who were not responsible for others were financially secured and had high competencies necessary to run their new businesses:

I know that not everyone is suitable for such work, because you need to be consistent, disciplined, and determined, constantly educate and develop, inspire others, and face many daily challenges. The corporation dragged me through this well, but now I reach out for its tools to do sensible things (I 15).

Everyone who is considering such a change should get to know themselves and consider their needs and expectations. Otherwise, the new reality will be another disappointment for them:

You must know what you want, finally grow up to do it, not run away, because you will end up in another toxic environment (I 13).

Most of the respondents did not regret that they decided on this change. Today, they would do the same. The decision was described as “the best” in their life (eight people), “the most appropriate,” connected with “getting back together, life for themselves not Excel products and emails” (I 23), “changing lives” (six people), teaching that “you can make your dreams come true, not clinging to the not always satisfying reality” (I 33).

My interviewees expressed some concerns regarding financial resources and loss of comfort and material stability. Nevertheless, the current focus on money appeared to be diminishing, and instead there was a sharp criticism of this type of behavior. The change was holistic here, and it was associated with a sense of breaking the continuity with the previous stage of life. Downshifters appeared ready to tame the uncertainty that followed this new lifestyle. Risk was treated as a necessity, it was taken despite of social expectation (perceived as limiting). The change was associated with their high self-awareness.

As consumers, they were more aware of the choices made and their consequences. Furthermore, there were also more critical of market offers or, more broadly, of capitalist reality. As Jerzy emphasized several times, “people do not satisfy the needs, but the whims, are subject to the imperative of economic growth, which is a deceitfully created myth.” Almost half of them were involved in the activities of ecological, social, and voluntary organizations, repeatedly emphasizing the role of grassroots mobilization in social change: “We are qualitatively crazy,” they said. “There will never be room for this in a corp” (I 32).

The more of us, the better. The world may become more normal: higher quality relationships, that is, the presence of another human being for himself, not what can be obtained from him. You just start living and not constantly investing (I 7).

In CEEc, this phenomenon is still marginal, but just like any outsiders contesting the existing reality, they also indicate the directions in which it could change. Downshifting appears to be one of many attempts to respond to contemporary problems. Being such a cultural periphery, it may, however, provoke, even to a small extent, public debates by constantly introducing new, alternative content and values to social discourse. Downshifting provides opportunities for alternative lifestyles to thrive in the shadow of those that dominate contemporary societies.

Summary

In the degrowth literature, practices concerning well-being, creativity, mindfulness, and social conflicts are hardly visible [Demaria et al. 2013; Sekulova 2015]. My research suggests that the literature should discuss degrowth practices, that is, downshifting related to the self, more notably. This suggestion aligns well with Ives' et al.'s analysis that "sustainability science has neglected an important dimension of human experience — the inner worlds of individuals" and the call for their recognition in future research and practice [Ives Freeth, Fischer 2019: 215].

As has become clear during my research, "experiencing downshift" involves practices concerned with Giddens's "project of the self" [Ives Freeth, Fischer 2019: 225]. Developing self-awareness and becoming "authentic" seems to be crucial for downshiffters, and it feeds into many of their practices. Interviewees described how the practice of "regaining peace, joy, control, [and] real needs," which could help individuals discover what truly matters to them. This self-awareness, authenticity, and meaningfulness [Giddens 1984: 2–7] could be seen as a precondition for what most of them described as "finding balance." Practices related to the self that help people in balancing work and life appear to vary widely, including practices from different spheres of personal and professional growth.

A reoccurring term of "the project of the self" was consciousness. In the words of Giddens, this appears as "being aware of the reasons and effects of your actions" [Giddens 1984: 4], which interviewees related to new professional activities, family relations, the environmental, and social impacts of consumption or, as six of them suggested, to an awareness of "consumerism." In other words, practices that express Giddens' ideas of consciousness were described as making informed decisions, considering their personal needs, consuming less, sharing in manifold ways, sourcing and consuming food ethically, and doing things independently.

The above self-related practices might appear as oriented towards pleasant experiences and positivity. However, my research suggests that "experiencing downshift" is also about facing and unveiling unpleasant experiences of inner conflicts, uncertainty, and contradictions that seem to be inevitable parts of "a new life." Looking at this sphere of demanding practices, I see it as dealing with the self in a manner more related to Giddens's than Mouzelis's theoretical framework. Downshiffters are involved in "cognitive situations, trying reflexively and rationally to choose their broad goals as well as the means of their realization." They are not only "easy-going", less cognitive ways of navigating reflexively in a world full of choices and individual challenges" [Mouzelis 1999: 85]. Downshiffters's reflexivity means focusing on the increasing importance of "the inner life" or the increasing necessity to create one's own goals (or to construct one's own biography) through the ongoing negotiations of the various internal and external obstacles to the genuine search for a meaningful existence. Moreover, downshifting is dictated by planning, cognitive factors, rational calculations: something that Mouzelis strictly criticized as hardly ever "freely allows for broad life orientations, projects, agendas and goals to spontaneously emerge" [Mouzelis 1999: 88].

"Experiencing downshift" concerns the change of habits consolidated over years, shaped preferences, and resignation from achieved statutory benefits. Under the current conditions of the propagated increase in wealth, it is difficult to convince yourself and others that the consequence of downshifting will not be social rejection.

All the more so because, Poles get richest in the world the fastest [Report of Credit Suisse 2019], but also, according to the data from 2019, they had loans worth over PLN 818 billion (\$208 billion) to be repaid⁷. For years, they have been at the forefront of EU countries whose citizens spend most time at work [OECD Report 2019].

Downshifters stopped agreeing to such conditions. Their professional successes, achieved at the expense of self and family sacrifices, turned out to be fragile and not very satisfying. Therefore, it was not about unfulfilled ambitions within their careers but about the price they had to pay for it. They did exactly what was expected of them. They worked very hard consuming their high income and contributing to economic prosperity. They failed to combine it with building a family and meeting their own needs. This was not necessarily because they succumbed to exaggerated professional ambitions and consumerist temptations, but because the whole system, with its expansion of persuasive economic rationality popularized in public discourse, was geared towards economic growth.

Downshift philosophy appears to reach mainly educated people, successful people who, while resigning from work, most often already have an action plan and have accumulated funds at least to start it. Therefore, it concerns people who are ready mentally and financially to make changes to their current lifestyle. Therefore, this is not a craze of richer eccentrics but the process of a difficult change associated with several moral dilemmas and social costs.

Breakspear and Hamilton [2004: 31] ask why it is that in societies that celebrate the freedom of the individual so much, the decision to limit the time devoted to making money still appears as an act of courage or stupidity. If people, according to Giddens, are the authors of their own lives, why do they hesitate to make changes in it, if they have long seen such a need? Maybe that is why, the researchers suggest, that despite all this rhetoric regarding individualism and pluralism, only certain choices are socially accepted: namely, those that relate to ways of becoming rich and achieving a comfortable living. In fact, the interlocutors, along with the decision they made, had a sense of breaking the continuity with that reality. They had to rebuild friendships with those who accept and support them in this other life. Their new life appeared to be more satisfying; however, it required a lot of self-denial and determination.

Is downshifting another short-term trend, allowing individuals to introduce ‘self tracking’, narcissistic projects into their own lives? Experiencing downshift largely points to their non-centric nature: the desire to enlarge the family, the implementation of a „socially sensible” business where „money is not the most important” (I 15), as well as involvement in ecological or voluntary activities. Practices described by interviewees suggest that the good life, not centered in growth, requires different kinds of relationships between citizens and the spaces they construct and inhabit. Ideals of downshift value and desire away from productive achievements and consumption-based identities towards the attainment of genuine happiness, visions of the good life being characterized by health, harmony, pleasure and vitality. These values have become more important than status benefits. Some admitted that sometimes they miss material stability, but they added that new activities allowed them real development, a realization of a „sensible” goal or “satisfaction” resulting from the fact that “something good” (I 24) or significant is being done. This was their new “status.” The idea of this change did not resonate in the discourse of the respondents as an end in itself but as a means to achieve social goals. This kind of non-centric orientation of this decision protects the downshifters against narcissism or pretentiousness and is not a defensive self-deception or an escape from problems. An outward-oriented change, outside of oneself, can lead to truly pro-developmental projects in such cases.

Experiencing downshift for some participants was connected to practices of being reflective, self-aware, fostering well-being, and facing conflicts and challenges. Most of them are not unique to the downshift move-

⁷ The value of mortgage loans — doubled in 10 years; see: [Report of Credit Suisse 2019].

ment but rather shared with several other social activities related to sustainability and social justice. To me, as with Brossmann and Islar (2020), this is not a limitation but a chance for the downshifting movement to reach out and show others that what they already do could potentially be in favor of a downshift transformation.

In CEEc, downshifting is marginal. In Australia, the United States, and Great Britain, its social, if not necessarily political significance, is growing [Eckersley 2006: 11]. Downshifting is not only a theoretical questioning of the legitimacy of the main ideological discourse deliberating on what needs it does not satisfy and which values it does not refer to. Downshifting authenticates the ideology of anti-corporatism by consistently implementing it in their own lives. As Breakspear and Hamilton [2004: 31] predict, downshifting will soon cease to be perceived as a manifestation of rebellion, the frills of the rich developing useless business ventures, and will become a „normal” life choice, not burdened with today’s risk and social misunderstanding. This would indicate that in modern society, there have been profound changes and significant re-evaluations of sociocultural meanings and attitudes.

Appendix

Table A.1

The Characteristics of Interviewees

No.	Name	Age	Previously Performed Professions (the type of enterprise, institution)	Current Job	Current Place of Residence
1	Jerzy (PL)	51	Stage service employee (national culture institution)	Art and craft workshop	Country
2	Alica (SL)	29	Project assistant (a corporation)	Own business — hairdresser	Large city
3	Andrej (SL)	36	System architect (IT specialist) (a corporation)	Own business — IT company	Small town
4	Beata (PL)	—	Region team coordinator (a corporation)	Own business — massage room	Large city
5	Eva (Cz)	40	HR manager (a corporation)	Childcare and taking care of the house	Large city
6	Hana (SL)	36	Resource optimization team coordinator (a corporation)	Childcare and taking care of the house, hairdresser	Small town
7	Lukáš (Cz)	38	Dentist (nationwide networks of clinics)	Musician, blogger, designer	Country
8	Marta (PL)	32	HR, Office manager (a corporation)	Own business — cosmetics, Child-care	Large city
9	Bara (Cz)	43	Marketing manager (a corporation)	Own business — shop	Small town
10	Kazik (PL)	55	Head of the acoustic workshop (public culture institution)	Musician	Country
11	Kryštof (Cz)	49	Programmer (a corporation)	Own business — restaurant	Large city
12	Josef (Cz)	52	Marketing and PR director (a corporation)	Own business — personal development workshops	Large city

Table A.1. Continuation

No.	Name	Age	Previously Performed Professions (the type of enterprise, institution)	Current Job	Current Place of Residence
13	Emilia (SL)	46	Project manager (a corporation)	Teacher; distributor of interior items	<i>Large city</i>
14	Peter (SL)	34	Data base administrator (a corporation)	Own business — cultural services	<i>Large city</i>
15	Kateřina (Cz)	29	Journalist (an international media concern)	Childcare and taking care of the house	<i>Large city</i>
16	Agnes (PL)	37	PR specialist (polish IT enterprise)	Own business — services: recreation (climbing)	<i>Large city</i>
17	Matthew (Cz)	34	Webdeveloper, network administrator (a corporation)	Own business — blogging	<i>Large city</i>
18	Zuzana (SL)	37	Chief information officer (a corporation)	Farming; Child-care and taking care of the house	<i>Country</i>
19	Martin (Cz)	32	Sales representative (a corporation)	Dentist at a local clinic	<i>Medium-sized cities</i>
20	Elizabeth (PL)	41	Event organization specialist (an international PR agency)	Own business — family advertising company	<i>Medium-sized cities</i>
21	Alexandra (PL)	39	Onside coordinator (a corporation)	Travel; agro-tourism activity; restaurant	<i>Country</i>
22	Radovan (SL)	42	Sales Executive (a corporation)	Own business — farming	<i>Country</i>
23	Patricia (PL)	41	Marketing manager (a corporation)	Own business — agro-tourism activity	<i>Country</i>
24	Karolina B. (PL)	—	Copywriter specialist (a corporation)	Own business — services: recreation (climbing)	<i>Large city</i>
25	Amber (SL)	46	Marketing manager, Sales representative(a corporation)	Own business — online store	<i>Large city</i>

Table A.2.

**The Characteristics of Interviewees Who Return to the Previous Lifestyle
or Cannot be Contacted in 2019**

No.	Name	Age	Previously Performed Professions (the type of enterprise, institution)	Job in 2015	Place of Residence in 2015
26	Barbara PL	41	Sales representative (a corporation)	Farming business	<i>Small town</i>
27	Michal (Cz)	37	Programmer (IT enterprise)	Online store	<i>Large city</i>
28	Karolina (PL)	37	PR specialist (polish IT enterprise)	Own business — services: recreation (climbing)	<i>Large city</i>
29	Sofia (SL)	50	Sales representative (a corporation)	Agro-tourism activity	<i>Suburbs</i>
30	Magdalena (PL)	52	Project assistant (an international advertising agency)	Wellness	<i>Suburbs</i>
31	Vikex (SL)	47	IT Consultant (international PR agency)	Blogging	<i>Large cities</i>
32	Konrad (PL)	37	Onside coordinator (a corporation)	Confectionery; travel	<i>Medium-sized cities</i>
33	Petr (Cz)	45	Sales representative (a corporation)	Consulting	—
34	Michaela (SL)	39	Event organization specialist (nationwide IT enterprise)	Own business — travel agency	<i>Small town</i>
35	Jack (SL)	51	Marketing director (a corporation)	Interior design	<i>Large cities</i>
36	Anna (Cz)	—	Webdeveloper (a corporation)	Musician; childcare and taking care of the house	<i>Medium-sized cities</i>
37	Wojciech (PL)	49	Project assistant (a corporation)	Distributor of interior items	—
38	Antonin (Cz)	44	Sales representative (a corporation)	Traveling	<i>Suburbs</i>

References

- Aage H. (1992) Poland. *Reform in Eastern Europe and the Developing Country Dimension* (eds. Ch. Stevens, J. Kennan), London: Russell Press, pp.114–127.
- Asara V., Otero I., Demaria F., Corbera E. (2015) Socially Sustainable Degrowth as a Social-Ecological Transformation: Repoliticizing Sustainability. *Sustainability Science*, vol. 10, no 3, pp. 375–384.
- Bauman Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck U., Grande E. (2010) Varieties of Second Modernity: The Cosmopolitan Turn in Social and Political Theory and Research. *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 61, no 3, pp. 409–443.
- Breakspear C., Hamilton C. (2004) *Getting a Life Understanding the Downshifting Phenomenon in Australia*, Canberra: The Australian Institute.

- Brossmann J., Islar M. (2020) Living Degrowth? Investigating Degrowth Practices through Performative Methods. *Sustainability Science*, vol. 15, pp. 917–930.
- Bryman A. (2008) *Social Research Methods*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cherrier H., Murray J. B. (2007) Reflexive Dispossession and the Self: Constructing a Processual Theory of Identity. *Consumption Markets and Culture*, vol. 10, no 1, pp. 1–29.
- Davidson D. (2012) Analysing Responses to Climate Change through the Lens of Reflexivity. *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 63, no. 4, pp. 616–640.
- Dawson M. (2012) Reviewing the Critique of Individualization: The Disembedded and Embedded Theses. *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 55, no 4, pp. 305–319.
- Demaria F., Schneider F., Sekulova F., Martinez-Alier J. (2013) What is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement. *Environ Values*, vol. 22, no 2, pp. 191–215.
- Eckersley R. (2006) Progress, Sustainability and Human Wellbeing: Is a New Worldview Emerging? *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, vol. 1, no 4, pp. 306–317.
- Ewen S. (1988) *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*, New York: Basic Books.
- Giddens A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Griffith-Jones S. (1992) *Czechoslovakia. Reform in Eastern Europe and the Developing Country Dimension* (eds. Ch. Stevens, J. Kennan), London: Russell Press, pp. 92–100.
- Hargreaves T. (2011) Practice-Ing Behaviour Change: Applying Social Practice Theory to Pro-Environmental Behaviour Change. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 11, no 1, pp. 79–99.
- Havrylyshyn O., Meng X., Tupy M. L. (2016) 25 Years of Reforms in Ex-Communist Countries: Fast and Extensive Reforms Led to Higher Growth and More Political Freedom. *Policy Analysis*, no 795. Available at: <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/25-years-reforms-ex-communist-countries-fast-extensive-reforms-led> (accessed 1 October 2020).
- Holt D. B. (2002) Why do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 29, no 1, pp. 70–90.
- Ives C. D., Freeth R., Fischer J. (2019) Inside-Out Sustainability: The Neglect of Inner Worlds. *Ambio*, vol. 49, pp. 208–217. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-019-01187-w> (accessed 7 October 2020).
- Kaczyński P. M. (2010) Reinvent Yourself. On the Polish-Czech Relations in the EU. *The Czech Republic and Poland in Contemporary International Politics: Partners or Rivals?* (ed. V. Dostál), Praha: Association for International Affairs, pp. 81–87.

- Latouche S. (2009) *Farewell to Growth*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lorenzen J. A. (2012) Going Green: The Process of Lifestyle Change. *Sociological Forum*, vol. 27, no 1, pp. 94–116.
- Medevac S. (1991) Poland and Czechoslovakia: Can They Find That They Need Each Other? *The Polish Review*, vol. 36, no 4, pp. 451–469.
- Mouzelis N. (1999) Exploring Post-Traditional Orders: Individual Reflexivity. “Pure Relations” and Duality of Structure. *Theorising Modernity: Reflexivity, Environment and Identity in Giddens’ Social Theory* (eds. M. O’Brien, S. Penna, C. Hay), London: Longman, pp. 83–97.
- Murrell P. (1996) How Far Has the Transition Progressed? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 10, no 2, pp. 25–44.
- OECD Report (2008) Public Opinion in the European Union. *Eurobarometer 70*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_full_en.pdf (accessed 10 November 2020).
- OECD Report (2019) *Hours Worked*. Available at: <https://data.oecd.org/emp/hours-worked.htm> (accessed 11 July 2020).
- Parkins W., Craig G. (2006) *Slow Living*, New York: Berg.
- Poláčková H. (1994) Regional Cooperation in Central Europe: Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia: from Visegrad to CEFTA. *Perspectives*, no 3, pp. 117–129.
- Report of Credit Suisse (2019) *Global Wealth Databook*. Available at: <https://www.tvp.info/34885205/polacy-bogaca-sie-najszybciej-na-swiecie> (accessed 13 July 2020).
- Ritchie J., Spencer L., O’Connor W. (2003) Carrying Out Qualitative Analysis. *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (eds. J. Ritchie, J. Lewis), London: SAGE, pp. 219–262.
- Sekulova F. (2015) Happiness. *Degrowth: A Vocabulary For A New Era* (eds. G. D’Alisa, F. Demaria, G. Kallis), Routledge: Abingdon, pp. 63–66.
- Shaw D., Newholm T. (2002) Voluntary Simplicity and the Ethics of Consumption. *Psychology & Marketing*, vol. 19, no 2, pp. 167–185.
- Stiglitz J. (1999) *Whither Reform? Ten Years of Transition*. World Bank Economic Review, Washington: World Bank, pp. 127–171.
- Williams P. (2012) *Emergent Themes. The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (ed. L. Given), Thousand Oaks: Sage Online. Available at: <https://sk.sagepub.com/ludwig.lub.lu.se/refer ence/research/n129.xml> (accessed 2 October 2020).

Received: March 26, 2020

Citation: Duda A. (2020) The Phenomenon of Downshifting in Central and Eastern European Countries: Case Studies from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. *Journal of Economic Sociology = Ekonomicheskaya sotsiologiya*, vol. 21, no 5, pp. 112–137. doi: 10.17323/1726-3247-2020-5-112-137 (in English).