

YOUTH AND THE REGIONAL FUTURE IN SEE. ARE WE READY TO MEET THE CHALLENGE?

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Abstract

The paper outlines the youth profile in four SEE countries – Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Slovenia by indicators that impact regional growth and resilience challenges. It contains an overview of the literature that relates growth, regional resilience and youth. The idea is to identify some directions to how youth, with their current vision for values and participation, can shape the socio-economic life of a region. The authors are using secondary data from previous research of Friedrich Ebert Foundation to interpret the youngsters' profiles via regional development perspective and socioeconomic significance.

Key words: youth, youth policy, regions, regional resilience

JEL: E24, J17

Introduction

The paper focuses on youth in four South-Eastern European (SEE) countries and their role for regional development, using the case with the Bulgarian, Croatian, Romanian, Slovenian generation under the age of 29. Most of the youth-related topics in Bulgarian policy practice are included in the educational, economic, and social policy and the respective strategies and legislation. Nowadays, the youth topic is accentuated in the work of human resources university departments, in some of the economic departments (related to young people in business, youth, entrepreneurship, etc.). Also, sociologists have shown a sustained interest in young people from a societal perspective in the media and political science departments. Therefore, we are interested to describe the regionally relevant portrait of the SEE youth. To examine different sources, the chosen group includes young people from average families, with average opportunities for

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socio-economic realization. The leading idea behind this restricted scope is the understanding that this target group plays a significant active role in regional resilience and country development. There may be follow-up research that can further look into these issues.

The goal of the research approach is that the youth characteristics relevant only from the regional development perspective should be identified. However, the selected studies already prepared portraits focused on other theoretical and policy issues regarding young people. Therefore, secondary data analysis from the following surveys and studies is used to outline the youth characteristics that are essential to regional analysis, particularly with regard to their importance for inclusive growth and regional resilience research. The paper's thesis is that the portrait of a specific youth can be drawn that has importance and relevance for regional development, and this correlation should be subject to continuous analysis.

The data used for the outlined profiles are based on sociological surveys made by Friedrich Ebert Foundation about youth by country within the period 2015 – 2019 (Lavrič, Tomanović, Jusić, 2019) and earlier studies 2010 – 2014 (Hurrelmann, Weichert, 2015), Eurostat data about the youth under the age of 29 (Coyette, Fiasse, Johansson and co., 2015).

Three from the chosen SEE countries are categorized as developing – Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia. However, only Slovenia has a GDP high enough to go beyond this group (World Population Review, 2019). Also, Slovenia has been a member of the EU longer (since 2004) than the other three – Bulgaria and Romania since 2007, Croatia since 2013. Nevertheless, the four included countries have similar political backgrounds, including in the newest democratic development, as they share similar political and cultural characteristics, and face similar challenges and problems.

Inclusive growth and youth unemployment

As the keystone of the EU 2020 strategy, *inclusive growth* means “raising Europe’s employment rate, investing in skills and training, ensuring the benefits of growth reach all parts of the EU” (Manafi, Marinescu, 2013, p. 690). The inclusion in employment of the youth below 29 years of age is part of this crucial EU policy. Nevertheless, the research literature concerning youth is divided mainly between politics and economics. Political researchers are analyzing the role of the young people in the development of democracy and, in some cases, their current and future impact on society. Economists tend to analyze youth primarily in the context of employment/unemployment and the labor market. It is our belief that the young people’s societal profile as an integral part of the democratic citizens also influences their behavior in the labor market. Authors conclude that “youth unemployment does not derive from the macroeconomic conditions of a

country but rather from models of transition from education to work” (Refrigeri, Aleandri, 2013, p. 1264). They claim that “present education systems in many European countries are still focused on forming formal human capital, which has little to do with the world of work and increasingly making young people a weak resource” (Refrigeri, Aleandri, 2013, p. 1265). Refrigeri, Aleandri find the reason for youth unemployment in the young generation’s education at the school and university level as the main factor for the EU countries. According to their analysis, the youngsters have a deficit of nonformal and informal work skills because the educational system is not adapted to their needs and those of the labor market, and as a result, our societies are in a situation with a low productivity young workforce. The researchers highlight the connection between the lack of nonformal capabilities for work and the difficulty in finding jobs. They understand this result as accompanied by a long and challenging path starting from school/university and ending up to employment for the young. These circumstances are finally causing high youth unemployment rates on the EU and the national bases.

As the significant risk for becoming from promising youth to so-called NEET (not in education, employment or training) is viewed by Refrigeri, Aleandri in the chaotic steps of young people to employment and out, to training and out until the situation is reached whereby the youngster does not have a job nor is he seriously looking for one. The paper, which is given due consideration in this article, argues that not the macroeconomic conditions but the national welfare systems’ organization of the chain *education – transition to employment – work* play a leading role in the development of the youth workforce.

From an economic perspective, different researchers have reached the same conclusions: mainly that the increasing and lengthy unemployment or the chaotic and inconsistent employment among youth is a process non-linear, and the educational level stands out as first among the main risk factors for youth exclusion (Vasile, Anghel, 2015, pp. 65-66). The often delay of transformations in education is the most underlined societal and policy reason for the ruptured relation between youth and employment. The researchers and policymakers define the macro reason as “the context of transition to the post-industrial global economy. On this basis, “the higher unemployment rates were explained through the structural transformations, the divergence between the demand and supply of qualification, competencies, and attitudes” (Vasile, Anghel, 2015, p. 67). These authors assume that the above-mentioned reasons have shifted the focus of youth research to “social models and their impact on the youth unemployment dynamic” (Vasile, Anghel, 2015, p. 67).

Following the understanding that the main policy focus regarding EU youth is education suitable for the transforming world, society, and labor market,

we should also highlight some keystone aspects of the European youth policy. Researchers describe today's EU "youth policy as a system of measures and legislation for the establishment and maintenance of particular social status of the younger generation, and along with it – a certain quality of life and quality of the young people, which in the long term is the economically active population of the country" (Rystina, Kussainova, 2014, p. 654). They emphasize the importance of the "social stratum of the young population for the European societies and the essence of the youth policy in Europe – The quality of the younger generation, as well as the degree of compliance with existing and necessary conditions and standards of the country are due to the efficiency of youth policy. The effectiveness of youth policy ensures the effective implementation of measures of different nature: legal, social, economic, organizational, spiritual, moral, psychological" (Rystina, Kussainova, 2014, p. 654).

From the literature overview, it can be summed up that education transformation amid the changing living and work conditions on a global scale is the main policy issue at the EU and national level in Europe regarding youth. The youth's lack of interest in employment and career development, its late entry into the labor market, its unsustainable interest in the chosen job or profession, etc., comprises the major research focus in policy- and economic-based papers. The researchers from this area seek solutions at the educational policy level (formal and informal education, education on work, lifelong learning, etc). However, the key issue pertains to the transition from education to employment as the crucial idea in science and policy making.

Furthermore, some economists have examined the relationship between a young generation's societal profile and their decisions for work, employment, and career issues. Nonetheless, they see more the system or part of it (welfare state, policy programs) as a field for policy or research interaction to improve the youth's performance and impact on society.

This paper holds the assumption that the youth have the potential and need to be analyzed linked together with regional development. We argue that youth policy analysis can be placed in a regional resilience context. We also share the understanding that youth profiling at the societal level can impact regional resilience policy. All socio-economic transformation challenges, including this in the labor market and in the workforce, and regional economic sustainability and growth are relevant to the regional resilience scope of research. "Based on a systems perspective, regional resilience is conceived both as a process linking a set of adaptive capacities (social, economic, infrastructure capital, etc.) to overcome shock and outcome when region accepted undergoing adaptive changes to its economic structure by transiting into new sustainable growth path" (Palekiene, Simanaviciene, Bruneckiene, 2015, p. 181). The three authors have set up a sys-

tematic and structured methodology for analyzing regional resilience at policy and practical levels. Their approach opens up the opportunity to incorporate the socio-political youth portrait within the tool.

Their definition of the resilience of regions stresses its long-term implications and the leading role of governance for successful policies and strategies in this process. “Region with high resilience does not only achieve short-term economic success, but it is also able to maintain it in the long term, despite (or perhaps in response to) the continuous pressures towards adaptation induced by changes in the international competition, in the consumer behavior, etc. For these reasons, it is a matter of interest regarding the political discourse and the governance capacity and successful implementation of policies and strategies at regional level” (Jordan, Chilian, Grigorescu, 2015, p. 628).

The cited definition can also illustrate the connection between youth policies and strategies, on the one hand, and regional development as a resilience instrument, indicator, or result – depending on the research or/and policy goal and approach.

A significant part of the chosen empirical and desk reports about the generation aged below 29 is published by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung such as the four titled Youth Study 2018/2019 for Bulgaria (Mitev, Popivanov, 2019); Croatia (Gvozdanović, Ilišin, Adamović and co., 2019); Romania (Badescu, Sandu, Angi, Greab, 2019); Slovenia (Naterer, Lavrič, Klanjšek, and co., 2019).

Youth in SEE – regional analysis’ relevant portrait

On focus here is the empirical portrait of the younger generation up to the age of 29 in Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, and more specifically on the age bracket between 25 and 29. The youth characteristics considered are personal values, education, mobility, and employment because they are mainly relevant to the regional development issues. The idea behind the extraction of data and summarizing of information and results from the FES surveys is that their analytical focus mainly concerns youngsters’ societal behavior, their democratic and politically relevant beliefs, and the formation of the citizens from this young generation. Our focus is not on all characteristics but only on those essential for the economic behavior as a generation entering the labor market and choosing where to develop as an economic agent.

Table 1: Bulgarian youth – portrait of relatively significant characteristics for a regional perspective

<p><u>Values:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal independence - Solidarity (with regard to issues such as poverty) - Two children family, but after career placement 	<p><u>Education:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy finding jobs related to the diploma - Partial correspondence between the labor market realities and education - The young people tend to believe that the educational system in their country is poorly adapted to labor-market requirements
<p><u>Employment:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High payment is preferable instead career development - Working for society as a profession is not a motivational option - Prefer to work in the private sector 	<p><u>Mobility:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Most of the well educated are not interested in emigration - Most of the emigrants are looking for a job not relevant to the level of their qualification - Inner mobility from underdeveloped regions to the main cities – the actual dominant trend

Source: Authors formulation based on FES survey “Youth Study Bulgaria 2018/2019” (Mitev, Popivanov, 2019).

From Table 1 it can be concluded that the young Bulgarians aged between 25-29 feel most comfortable with their education. Moreover, they think it is relatively easy to find a job connected with their higher-education diplomas, though the skills do not match the labor market. However, they tend to retain their job only if the payment is adequate. For that reason, they are ready to leave their diploma-related profession and find a better-paid job, mainly in the private sector. He/she do not see in his/her priorities career development connected with the NGO, political and public sector). Despite the growing awareness of society and social problems, permanent personal and professional engagement is not increasing. Nor do they see emigration as a dream. They prefer to live in Bulgaria and, if possible, to work in their professional field (related to payment). Migration to better regions and cities is part of this orientation. In case they do not have higher education, the risk for a poor professional realization motivates migration abroad for money, not for permanent life change. The young Bulgarians value their independence and personal right to make decisions for their development. They

tend to picture a two-children family for their future but only after professional independence and sustainability is achieved. Solidarity is growing but mainly as feeling, position or opinion that does not impact the community yet.

Table 2: Romanian youth – portrait of relatively significant characteristics for a regional perspective

<p><u>Values:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prefer to rely on and trust extended families/family members, then on friends – low level of social trust, according to FES results - Family matters, but after career placement, especially for the youngsters from big cities – those from smaller municipalities prefer to start a family first 	<p><u>Education:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They do not find it easy to start a job related to the diploma - Most of the young people think that the educational system in Romania is well adapted to labor-market requirements (<i>highest % among the four included in the paper countries</i>) - Most of the youth thinks it is very easy to find a job after graduation (<i>highest % among the fourth included in the paper countries</i>)
<p><u>Employment:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High percent of them are working not in the field of their education and are feeling overeducated for their work - Work for the society more during student years (voluntarily work), but the still low percentage from the young Romanians are involved - Living with the belief that acquaintance and even party members are important to finding a permanent and good job 	<p><u>Mobility:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emigration is viewed as a last but not preferable option for the future - Emigration desire is relatively strong, especially for regions with low income but is still lower than in 2014

Source: Authors formulation based on FES survey “Youth Study Romania 2018/2019 (Badescu, Sandu, Angi, Greab, 2019).

From Table 2 can be concluded that the young Romanian between 25-29 feels that he/she can find and start and can easily find a job upon graduation. He/she thinks that starting a job is not a problem, but finding a job related to the diploma is more complicated. However, he/she believes that the educational system in Romania is well adapted to the labor-market requirements. According to the data

from the used survey, the Romanian is most confident among the four nationalities included in this paper about two things: he/she cannot stay without a job, and the education system is preparing him/her for the labor market properly. The paradox in these results comes from the statement that he/she rarely starts work, relevant to his/her diploma, and often feels overqualified for the quickly found work position.

Engagements with voluntary work are typical of the Romanian in formal education (school/university). The young Romanian relies on acquaintances, and even on political party membership, to find a high-profile job that is most relevant to the university diploma and to the career development. In the least the Romanian lives with the belief that this is the road that leads to a satisfactory workplace. Perhaps therefore they trust family more, than friends. They also tend to set up a family, but mainly after career placement. Interest in emigration is relatively high – nearly every third Romanian perceives emigration for work as a secure option for the future. However, in the short run, they prefer to think of mobility options inside the country.

Table 3: Croatian youth – portrait of relatively significant characteristics for a regional perspective

<p><u>Values:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Their success is more likely to depend on family support and resources than on a social environment - Respondents from lower social backgrounds were more supportive of notions of social justice and more sensitive to social inequality 	<p><u>Education:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are significant differences in educational quality in different living areas and between youngsters with different living standards - Youth being satisfied with the quality of education in Croatia, but the country’s educational system was for the most part considered ill-adapted to labor market needs
<p><u>Employment:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High youth unemployment rates in Croatia pose obstacles and challenges in their daily lives, particularly in terms of transitioning toward emancipation. - Less than half of young Croatians were working in their profession. - Influential friends and acquaintances were deemed to be the essential factor in finding a good job and being successful 	<p><u>Mobility:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Almost two-thirds of Croatian youth do not wish to emigrate - But one-tenth of the youth did express a strong desire to leave the country, mainly for economic reasons, even in the next six months.

Source: Authors formulation based on FES survey “Youth Study Croatia 2018/2019” (Gvozdanić, Ilišin, Adamović, and co., 2019).

From Table 3, we see a profile of a young Croatian, who has strong family bonds, prefers to rely more on family than on friends, and to a certain degree, is sensitive to social inequalities. They are satisfied with the education, though there is a significant difference between the quality of education of Croatians from different regions of the state. Both, youngsters from a small town and from the capital receive diplomas with low relevance to the labor market needs.

The biggest challenge to them is the lack of available jobs on the labor market, making the young Croatian family dependent. In most cases they are not interested in emigration, and yet, economic reasons can possibly lead to an interest in mobility. Among all factors, unemployment is the leading disturbing issue for the young Croatian, regardless of whether the job is related to education.

Table 4: Slovenian youth – portrait of relatively significant characteristics for a regional perspective

<p><u>Values:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Young people in Slovenia dedicate much time to their friends and their families, both of which are particularly important to them. - Most young Slovenians also expressed a desire to have a family of their own - Solidarity and sensuality to social injustices 	<p><u>Education:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Young Slovenians are generally satisfied with the quality of education and have relatively high levels of confidence in the educational system. - But they also want more practically oriented contents that are related to their future field of work. - The skill-job mismatch has weakened
<p><u>Employment:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fear of unemployment has been steadily increasing - For young Slovenians, the essential work-related factor is income - Besides education and expertise, connections, acquaintances, and luck are identified as critical factors in finding a job 	<p><u>Mobility:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In Slovenia, the emigration potential among young people is increasing as well as the preparation of the most educated for it - And more often intend to return home after some period in emigration (highest level in SEE countries for this intention)

Source: Authors formulation based on FES survey “Youth Study Slovenia 2018/2019” (Naterer, Lavrič, Klanjšek, 2019).

Table 4 portrays a young Slovenian generally satisfied with the quality of education and with relatively high levels of confidence in the educational system. Nevertheless, the young Slovenian voices a need for a more practice-oriented educational program and more related to the labor market requirements. At the same time, for him/her, the current diploma and skill are already more relevant to the market than was the case before 2014. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the higher emigration potential of a better-educated Slovenian. He/she is also ready for emigration and get ready for it with work skills but is also ready to return home after some years of career pursuit abroad. The emigration profile of the young Slovenian is specific because a highly educated youngster rather than a less educated one is the likeliest emigrant. Regarding employment, the Slovenian below 29 years of age is worried about unemployment risks in the country, believing that good work positions are attainable with skills, though the latter should be combined with acquaintances or other subjective factors. Furthermore, they define income as the most critical factor for job seeking and career development.

Conclusion

The substantial part of South-East European Youth presented in these pages allows for the following results:

First, we assumed that there should be a significant difference between Slovenia and the three developed countries – Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia. However, the youth's characteristics in the four states and the system-related problem that affect them are similar.

The second assumption was that there should be differences in the identified youth-related issues before and after the EU membership of the particular state. There are some differences between Slovenia (member from 2004) and the other three countries, even though they are not significant in the above topics. What is more, Croatia as the youngest EU member state does not differ significantly with regard to the identified problems and challenges among the youth and concerning youth policies.

Based on the presented evidence the average picture of the Youngers in these four countries looks like as follow:

This average and a typical representative from the SEE region has strong family bonds and relations. They tend to rely on family support, especially for a living, early in their career development, and during unemployment or a part-time job. At the same time, they are open to some varieties of emigration, and therefore can be described as looking for personal independence and because they are considering the option of setting up their own family. Solidarity and attention to inequalities are the most practical social issues for our average SEE person.

They tend to appreciate their education and think it is partly relevant to the job market, and they see the tendency towards an improved relation between skills and labor market needs. However, the average young man is driven by money in job seeking, so quite they prefer work not relevant to the diploma. The lack of appropriate jobs is the reason why they tend to choose different sectors than those in which they qualified. Because of the shortage of workplaces in the sector, among the youngsters dominates the feeling that the most promising workplaces are reachable only with informal connections whereas skills are seen as a factor of minor importance. The aspirations to emigration are based on different reasoning. It includes the lack of choice, especially for the under-qualified, or on the pursuit of the most promising opportunity, which naturally is the case with the highly qualified.

Decision-making related to mobility is the most significant difference. In Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia (developed states), most well-educated young people prefer to stay in the country and they tend to see emigration as a backup option. Particularly in Bulgaria in the last several years, young emigrants are primarily under-qualified whereas highly qualified individuals tend to seek career development in the country. In Slovenia the situation is just the opposite – the best skilled or educated tend to organize their future abroad. However, after some years, they often return from high-rank positions and settle in their home country. We assume that this situation typically dominates in the other three countries. The most educated in Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia are well prepared for the home labor market but still not trained enough for more competitive markets. Slovenia has more years in the EU, but the other similarities in the socio-economic profile in the four countries come to show that it is mainly a matter of time before the best youngsters in Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia should prepare themselves solely for the EU market. Perhaps they will also follow the Slovenian pattern of returning home after some high-profile work abroad. This issue is yet to be subject to closer examination time.

Nevertheless, from the average SEE youngsters and the national specifics, the socio-political and economic characteristics of the population are as significant for the regional analysis as are the economic statistical data for country performance in different spheres and policies.

However, more often answers are to be sought to the question of why a specific target group, valuable for the region, is behaving in a particular way. The question for the policymakers is how will these specifics of the youth in a particular region correspond to the planned policy measures? Will they help keep the youngsters in the region or else, will youngsters prepare to enter other labor markets abroad, and how will a specific region benefit from such a process. The

socio-economic and cultural profile of youth or other relevant groups is promising not only as resources but even as an instrument for a resilience policy.

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