

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM AS A NEW FORM OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF THE YOUTH IN SERBIA

Ekološki aktivizam kao novi oblik političke participacije mladih u Srbiji

ABSTRACT *The aim of this paper is to explore whether the environmental activism is a new form of political participation of the Serbian youth. One of the characteristics of the post-industrial societies is a general citizen withdrawal from the traditional channels of political participation. Political disengagement is thought to characterize all citizens but most of all the young people. However, although young people may have turned away from mainstream politics, they are nevertheless concerned with a wide range of issues that could be considered political in a broader sense of the term. In the post-socialist Europe young people tend to be even less involved in political life than the youth in the established democracies. However, they are also likely to adopt novel forms of political expression. Whether the Serbian youth follow the same pattern of political involvement, we intend to explore in this article. In searching for the answer to this question, we will focus our analysis on the environmental activism, as one of the forms of the new political engagement widely accepted among young people.*

KEY WORDS *youth, environmental activism, new politics, Serbia*

APSTRAKT *Cilj ovog rada je da pruži odgovor na pitanje da li je ekološki aktivizam jedan od novih oblika političke participacije mladih u Srbiji. Jedna od karakteristika post-industrijskih društava je ukupno povlačenje građana iz tradicionalnih kanala političke participacije. Smatra se da političko isključivanje karakterše sve građane, ali mlade ponajviše. Ipak, iako se mladi ljudi sve više okreću od 'mainstream' politike, oni su zainteresovani za različite teme koje se mogu svrstati u političke u širem značenju pojma. U postsocijalističkim evropskim zemljama, mladi ljudi još manje učestvuju u političkom životu nego što je to slučaj sa etabliranim demokratijama. Ipak, oni su takođe skloni da usvoje nove forme političkog izražavanja. Da li omladina u Srbiji prati iste obrasce političkog angažovanja, namera nam je da istražimo u ovom radu. U potrazi za odgovorom na ovo pitanje, fokusiraćemo našu analizu na ekološki aktivizam, kao jedan od oblika novog političkog angažovanja široko prihvaćenog među mladima.*

KLJUČNE REČI *mladi, ekološki aktivizam, nova politika, Srbija*

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One of the characteristics of the post-industrial societies is a general citizen withdrawal from the traditional channels of political participation. Even the mature democracies suffer from the so called 'democratic deficit' as less and less people tend to engage in the political process. Political disengagement is thought to affect all citizens but most of all the young people. Thus, being young is associated with a lower level of electoral participation and membership in the political parties (Verba and Nie, 1972). One of the dominant explanations of this phenomenon is that the perceived decline in the political involvement is the consequence of the changing relationship between political agents and the citizens' disappointment in the major institutions of representative democracy (Norris, 2003, Putnam, 2000, 2001, Kimberlee, 2002, Blais et al, 2004). This change is reflected in growing professionalism and centralization of the modern political institutions and weakening ties with the grassroots, rendering parties and politicians alienated from the communities they claim to represent. The fact that the politicians have become less representative and responsive to the citizen needs, has repelled a large number of people from the conventional politics. Some scholars argue that the political agents have become so distant that the phenomenon of "citizenship by proxy" is emerging (Jones and Wallace, 2002). This had an especially negative effect on the young people due to their specific position in the society. Namely, apart from being less integrated in the political system young people also have to deal with a series of 'start-up' problems, such as finding employment and housing, starting a family, breaking-up with the prolonged dependence of the parental financial support etc. (Robertson, 2009).

However, although young people may have turned away from mainstream politics, they are nevertheless concerned with a wide range of issues that could be considered political in a broader sense of the term. This would include, for example, environmental concerns, animal and human rights, gender equality etc. Therefore, parallel to the process of disengagement in the mainstream politics, studies of the youth political behavior have recorded a shift towards novel patterns of youth engagement in public life. Young people are actively creating new arenas and innovative ways of expressing their views, political claims and particular identities. For example they practice politics through the participation in the various forms of social movements, citizen initiatives, volunteering, internet activism or single-issue politics (Forbrig, 2005). They find these 'low key' forms of participation more inclusive and relevant to their everyday experiences than the mainstream politics (Quintelier, 2007). In other words, it is the 'new social movements' rather than the conventional politics that attract young people. This difference in orientation suggests that young people are not apathetic or disinterested but rather alienated from the exclusive formal politics dominated by the older generations.

As empirical findings of a significant number of researches imply, a distinction should be made between the citizen-oriented actions, relating mainly to elections and political parties, and cause-oriented repertoires, which focus attention

upon specific issues and policy concerns (Stokes and Boix, 2007, Norris, 2003). An important characteristic of cause-oriented repertoires is that these have broadened towards engaging in 'life-style' politics, where the dividing line between the 'social' and 'political' is blurred. Cause-oriented repertoires aim at reforming the law or influencing policy process, as well as altering undesirable patterns of social behavior. Following the Ronald Inglehart's post-materialist hypothesis, in the western democracies there is an ongoing shift from dominantly materialist concerns, focused on matters such as jobs, wages and pensions, to the post-materialist values, including issues such as globalization, environmentalism, and gender equality (Inglehart, 1997). These post-materialist concerns are the typical topics of the life-style, cause oriented politics.

Although perceived changes in the patterns of political participation among young people in the recent years have attracted much academic attention in established democracies, they still remain an insufficiently explored issue in the post-communist Europe. In these new democracies, young people tend to be even less involved in political life than the youth in the established democracies (Howard, 2003, Wallace and Kovacheva, 1998, Roberts, 2003). This is a manifestation of a generally low level of citizen political participation in the post-socialist countries, which is believed to be a consequence of the specific socialist legacy (centralized party system without real opportunities for the citizens to participate in decision-making processes, underdeveloped civil society, weak social capital etc.), which was further enforced with the negative effects of the post-socialist transformation (e.g. citizen disappointment with the free-market reforms, impoverishment of the significant number of people, high unemployment rates, perceived political instability and corruption etc. (Howard, 2003, Rose and Munro, 2003). On the other hand, democratization in the post-communist countries has brought opportunities for the development of the new institutional arrangements and mechanisms for political participation - e.g. multi-party system, free elections and civil society organizations. New democratic climate also opened the doors for the whole range of alternative forms of citizen initiatives, largely supported by the foreign donations intended for the civil society capacity building (Fagan, 2010). Along with the financial support for different civic activities, a whole range of different ideas, values and cultural claims, came into the region. These new cultural contents largely imported through the mass media campaigns had the most profound effect on the youngest generations. As a result, similar to their western counterparts, young people in Eastern Europe are increasingly willing to engage in the alternative cultural and political activities. However, once again, on a significantly lower level than recorded in the established democracies (Hearpfer, Wallace and Spannring, 2002).

Whether the Serbian youth follow the same pattern of political involvement observed in the other post/socialist countries, we intend to explore in this article. In searching for the answer to this question, we will focus our analysis on the environmental activism, as one of the forms of the new political engagement widely

accepted among young people (Hearpfer, Wallace, Spanning, 2002). There are several reasons for choosing the 'environmental arena' as a testing ground for the 'new political behavior' assumption. First of all, in the last fifty years of the development of environmentalism, young people were always on the forefront of the environmental movement (Rootes, 2002). This movement started to develop in the late 1960s with the environmental campaigns and protests organized by the youth leftist contra-culture groups in America and Western Europe. In the next half of the century, with the catchy slogans such as "Think globally; Act locally," "Reduce/reuse/recycle/restore/rethink," "Small is Beautiful," the environmental movement infiltrated successfully both everyday lives and political decision-making process. Environmentalism influenced governments, businesses and citizens' organizations worldwide putting environmental protection on the agenda. Although the overall environmental situation did not improve considerably (actually, it even got worse in many aspects), the environmental discourse became widespread. Apart from focusing public attention on the negative consequences of the uncontrolled economic growth, environmental perspective has also opened the issue of wellbeing of the future generations. This 'future' perspective has placed a special emphasis on the role that the younger generations could play in the environmental protection. One reason is that they will suffer more from the future consequences of the present day actions. The other is their expectedly higher knowledge and awareness of environmental risks due to the inclusion of the environmental issues in the schools' curricula and in media reporting. Aside from being exposed to formal education, the present day youth have also lived all their lives in a context where environmental issues are considered important.

The second, more particular reason for choosing environmental activism, is the fact that the 'greenest' decade in Serbia was actually the last one having a major impact on the youngest cohorts. Although the socialist state paid certain attention to the environmental issues, for example a very good legislative framework was developed at the time (Lilić, 2010), those regulations, for the most part, existed only 'on paper'. The priority of the rapid industrialization and urbanization, seen as the crucial basis for the general progress, put the environmental issues aside (Pavlinek and Pickles, 2004). After the collapse of the state socialism, the political and economic crisis that hit the country marginalized even further the environmental issues. It was only after the year 2000, when, with the regime change and the commencement of the EU integration processes, that the environmental questions found their way into the political agenda (as a precondition for the integration into the European community). This is also the period when more foreign donations offered for the environmental capacity building came into the region supporting the environmental public campaigns, education and mass media presentations. This new 'ecological' atmosphere had a stronger influence on the youngest generations going through the schooling process and being largely exposed to the internet and mass media contents.

Thirdly, although more important than in the past, environmentalism is not considered to be a priority issue in the Serbian society struggling with serious political and economic difficulties. Being less important for the power-holders, and not regarded as a potential source of a significant political power, environmental field is used as a political "playground" where young people could form their particular identities, express their views and act accordingly. Moreover, as it was the case with some other ex-socialist countries, environmental activism was also attractive to a certain group of young people who, through this kind of engagement saw the opportunity to enter the major political institutions (Fagan, 2004).

In the remaining part of the article we will address the following issues. Firstly, we will present the research hypotheses, data and methods employed. Then we will proceed with the analysis by looking into the question whether there is a difference in the levels of environmental activism between younger and older generations in Serbia. The positive response would lead us to conclude that this kind of engagement is more attractive to younger people. But this still would not mean that alternative politics is typical for the youth. In the next step, we will explore which forms of political engagement are attractive to young people in Serbia. With this analysis we will try to answer the question to what extent young people tend to be interested in environmental issues and inclined to support environmental activities in comparison to the other, both formal and informal, types of political engagement. The third part is dedicated to the comparison of the youth political behavior in Serbia with other European countries. The final section of this paper is devoted to the discussion of the research findings.

Research hypotheses, data and methods

As previously mentioned, the studies of the political behavior of the youth show the rising interest of young people in alternative activism and declining involvement in mainstream politics. However, although this trend is present across Europe, the youth in the established western democracies are generally more politically active, than their eastern counterparts. In order to explore whether these assumptions also stand in the case of the Serbian youth, we posed and tested the following research hypothesis:

1. *Younger individuals in Serbia are more prone to be environmentally active than the older persons.*
2. *Younger people in Serbia opt more frequently for the alternative activism (environmental activism) than 'mainstream' political engagement.*
3. *The Serbian youth is generally less involved in both formal and informal political/social activism in comparison to their western counterparts.*

Exploration of the listed hypotheses is based on the data obtained from the three different sources. The first source is the research conducted on a representative

sample (N=1952) for the entire Serbian population. This is the research on environmental values, concerns and behavior of Serbian population that was a part of a larger research project realized by the Institute for Sociological Research in Belgrade in the spring of 2010. The other source of data is a comprehensive survey which was carried out on a representative national sample of N=1627 young people aged between 19 to 35 with quotas set for four age cohorts 19/20, 24/25, 29/30, and 34/35. This survey was conducted in the year 2011. For the purposes of comparison we also referred upon the data from the World Values Survey database including the representative sample of Serbian population.

Results

Following the findings of the similar studies conducted across the Europe, we assumed that young people in Serbia are more environmentally active than the older generations. Here, *environmental activism* is understood as a political act of individuals and/or groups with the intention to influence public policies in the area of environmental protection. In our research this concept was operationalized as the engagement in the following activities: participation in the public meetings, lectures and educative seminars on environmental issues, petitioning, participation in protests, money donations to environmental organizations, campaigning and meeting local politicians.

As it may be concluded from the table 1, with exception of 'contacts with politicians', young people tend to be more active in all other activities. The exception regarding the percentage of the young people that have had contacts with public officials supports the general claim that young people have more difficulties to reach power-holders and participate in the mainstream channels of political influence and decision-making.

Table 1 Environmental activism – two generations

	18-34 years		35-80 years	
Have you ever participated in the following activities	Yes	No	Yes	No
Public meetings, lectures etc.	23%	77%	12%	88%
Signing petition	31%	69%	24%	76%
Protest	17%	83%	9%	91%
Financial support for environmental organizations	11%	89%	8%	92%
Contacting politicians	6%	94%	7%	93%

In order to get a clearer picture of the environmental engagement of the researched population, we have constructed the composite index of environmental activism presented in the table 2. This index is constructed by calculating the reported frequency of engagement in all aforementioned activities.

Table 2 The index of environmental activism – two generations

Index of environmental activism	18-34 years		35-80 years	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Without	441	56.3	745	64.6
Low	200	25.5	282	24.4
Moderate	90	11.5	81	7
High	53	6.8	46	4
Total	784	100	1154	100

As the data presented in the table 2 suggest, the overall level of environmental activism in both populations is rather low. Only 6.8% of the young and 4% of the older respondents report high levels of environmental activism. On the other hand, a significant majority of both populations have not been involved in any kind of environmentally inspired activity. These data also lead to the assumption that younger generations tend to be more environmentally active, as 43.7% of young people in comparison to 35.4% of older generations show some level of environmental activism. To test whether these differences are statistically significant, we applied T-tests presented in the table 3.

Table 3 Environmental activism compared in two generational groups

Environmental activism	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	29.274	.000	3.253	1936	.001	10.09555	3.10342	4.00916	16.18194
Equal variances not assumed			3.136	1460.301	.002	10.09555	3.21922	3.78076	16.41034

The t-tests for two age groups show a statistically significant difference between younger ($M=28.19$, $SD=74.58$) and older respondents ($M=18.1$, $SD=61.42$), $t(1936) = 3.136$, $p < .001$, regarding environmental activism, which enable us to conclude that young people in Serbia are more environmentally active than their older counterparts.

This assumption finds another confirmation in the data gathered in the World Values Survey (1996, 2006). These data enable us to compare the levels of environmental activism in different time periods. The continuous rise of the level of the youth environmental activism is noticeable. On the other hand, involvement of the older generations remains more or less on the same level (table 4).

Table 4 Membership in environmental organization – World Values Survey 1996, 2006, Serbia

	1996			2006		
	15-29 years	30-49 years	50 and more years	15-29 years	30-49 years	50 and more years
Not a member	98,9%	97,6%	97,3%	96,1%	97,4%	98,0%
Member	1,1%	2,4%	2,7%	3,9%	2,6%	2,0%
	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

The second question we posed was to what extent young people were willing to support or be actively involved in the different forms of alternative and mainstream political activism. In order to answer this question we compared the levels of engagement of the young people in the following organizations: political parties, NGOs, environmental organizations, anti/alter global initiatives and feminist initiatives. At first glance, the data presented in the table 5 may lead to a conclusion that young people are more involved in the political parties (11,7%) in comparison to the other organizations. However, the data collected in previous research (CESID, 2007) suggest that party membership of the youth is just formal, as it is not connected with the higher level of political activism (e.g. voting, participation in political campaigns etc.).

Conversely, the data concerning the level of support speaks more about the real interest in the particular field of action. If we focus the attention on the share of supporters instead of the formal members, we could conclude that the interest in environmental issues is significantly higher (18%) in comparison to the other topics. This finding supports the assumption that the environmental issues are especially attractive to young generations (19-35 ages old) in comparison to other, both formal and informal fields of political action. In addition, if we take into account the share of 'actual' activists, we will see that the level of activism in the environmental organizations is higher than in any other organization, except in other NGOs (but it should be mentioned that this category is much wider as it encompasses numerous organizations).

Table 5 Membership in different political/citizen organizations/initiatives

	Political parties	NGO	Environmental organizations	Feminists initiatives	Anti/alter global initiatives
Non member	77	88,9	79,5	92,1	95
Supporter	11,7	5,9	18	6,9	3,8
Member	10,7	3,4	1,4	0,4	0,4
Activist	0,6	1,9	1,2	0,6	0,9
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Finally, we wanted to compare the level of both formal and informal political engagement of the Serbian youth with their counterparts in the established democracies. For these purposes we have used the data gathered in the World Values Survey (2006/2008).

Table 6 Membership in political parties (15-29 years) in %, WVS 2006/08

	Active member	Inactive member	Not a member	Total
Switzerland	3,9	2,1	94	100
France	1,6	2,6	95,9	100
Great Britain	1,9	6	92,1	100
Sweden	0,5	3	96,5	100
Netherlands	1,9	1,9	96,1	100
Finland	2,6	7,7	89,8	100
Norway	2,1	6,7	91,2	100
Italy	2,6	5,7	91,7	100
Spain	0	5,1	94,9	100
Russia	0,6	3,7	95,7	100
Slovenia	1,8	4	94,2	100
Serbia	1,3	8,6	90,1	100
Bulgaria	0	1,1	98,9	100
Romania	2,6	2,3	95,1	100

As presented in the table 6, the overall youth participation in political parties in Serbia is higher compared to other post-socialist countries and the countries of Southern and Northern Europe (9.9% in contrast to 4.9% in Romania, 1.1% in Bulgaria, 5.8% in Slovenia, 8.2% in Sweden, 8.5% in Norway, 5.1% in Spain, 8.3% in Italy, WVS, 2006). However, as we have previously pointed out, this membership is rather formal (inactive membership is the highest in comparison with other countries 8,6%) and it is usually not linked with the real political activism (as the active membership is among the lowest measured - 1,3%). The higher level of formal party membership could be ascribed to the 'partocratic' character of Serbian society, where the life opportunities (e.g. finding employment etc.) are directly linked to the possession of connections with the ruling parties. Therefore, many young people formally become a party member believing that would improve their personal wellbeing and prospects in life.

As it may be concluded from the data presented in the table 7, signing petitions among the Serbian youth has not reached the levels recorded in the more developed democracies. However, this practice among the youth is more common in Serbia than in some other ex-socialist countries (e.g. Rumania, Bulgaria, Russian Federation).

Table 7 Signing petitions (15-29 years) in %, WVS 2006/08

Switzerland	61
France	65,5
Great Britain	52,3
Sweden	81,5
Netherlands	32,8
Finland	48,1
Norway	65,1
Italy	48,2
Spain	28
Russian Federation	5,4
Slovenia	42,2
Serbia	31,9
Bulgaria	13
Romania	3

Table 8 Membership in environmental organizations (15-29 years) (%), WVS 2006/08

	Member	Not a member	Total
Switzerland	25,9	74,1	100
France	15,8	84,2	100
Great Britain	12,2	87,8	100
Sweden	11	89	100
Netherlands	10,3	89,7	100
Finland	9,1	90,9	100
Norway	7,9	92,1	100
Italy	7,8	92,2	100
Spain	6,2	93,8	100
Russia	4,9	95,1	100
Slovenia	4,4	95,6	100
Serbia	3,9	96,1	100
Bulgaria	2,3	97,7	100
Romania	0,7	99,3	100

Regarding the membership in the environmental organizations, the situation in Serbia is similar to the other post-socialist countries, in the sense that the level of the youth participation in these organizations is lower than measured in established democracies (table 8).

Discussion

To much greater extent than their counterparts in the West and in some more developed ex Yugoslav republics, young people in Serbia face serious social, political and economic difficulties. One of them certainly is the extremely high rate of unemployment of the youth, which makes this group extendedly dependent upon

parental support and generally vulnerable in economic terms (Stanojević, Tomanović, 2012). Apart from being in an unfavorable economic position, young people are also marginalized in political terms (Jaric, 2003). Consequently, young people tend to be politically (in the narrower sense of the term) passive - which could be illustrated with a very high level of electoral absenteeism among the Serbian youth (Lutovac, 2007). In addition, they do not trust major social and political institutions and tend to exclude themselves from the formal political structures. However, although being excluded from the mainstream politics, a certain number of young Serbs chose to become a (inactive) member of political parties. This choice can be interpreted rather as a strategy for improving their prospects in life than the actual interest in politics.

On the other hand, a growing part of young people in Serbia seems to be concerned with the lifestyle politics. They are actively trying to find their way to act out through the alternative channels. Environmental activism tends to be one of them. As it has been documented, young people in Serbia are more environmentally active than the older generations. Moreover, they above average sympathize with the work of environmental organizations in comparison to the other both formal and informal political/civic initiatives. Although on a low level, with still a majority of population disengaged, environmental activism seems to be new and popular form of political engagement of the youth in Serbia.

For various reasons young tend to be interested in environmental issues. One of the reasons, for sure, is its less conventionally political and more cultural and lifestyle character. Also, not being among the most important political issues, environmental arena is not very attractive to more powerful generations, thus making this field a 'playground' for young active citizens. On their part, some of the young environmental activists see this engagement as the opportunity for the later admission to the formal political institutions with greater power involved. The rising interest in the environmentalism could be attributed also to the popularization of the ecological issues in the mass media, public campaigns and education specially targeted on the youngest generations as well as the incorporation of ecology in the school curricula in the last decade. Another possible reason is the politically neutral form in which environmental issues are generally presented which makes this field of action attractive to those who are not interested or who are skeptical about the mainstream politics.

In comparison with the experiences of other European countries, young Serbs tend to be more frequently members of political parties (because of the dominant character of the system), but less politically active (e.g. signing petitions). As it was expected, although the environmental issues are gaining attention among the youth in the country, on the international scale, Serbia is still lagging behind the established democracies (measured through the membership in the environmental

organizations), displaying similar patterns of environmental engagement to the other ex-socialist countries.

These findings open a dilemma whether the patterns of political participation of the youth in post-socialist countries are a product of specific socialist legacy and general marginalization of young people and their exclusion from the mainstream politics by the older generations, or there is an ongoing convergence with the trends noted in established democracies. We suggest that the truth lays somewhere in between. Many young people in post-communist democracies choose to opt out of traditional forms of political participation because, as in established democracies, they feel alienated from the formal political agents. However, this exit from formal methods of participation is not always coupled with active participation in informal political activism. In spite of their sharing of some important characteristics with young people in established democracies, legacies of communism and the rapid nature of post-communist political and socioeconomic transformation continue to exert adverse influence on political participation of the youth in Serbia. However, further examination of this phenomenon is required for the exact answer.

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