

MEANS OF GETTING AHEAD IN POST-SOCIALIST SERBIA: PERCEPTIONS AND PREFERENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE²

Načini društvenog uspona u postsocijalističkoj Srbiji: percepcije i preferencije mladih

ABSTRACT *Young people's perceptions and preferences regarding main channels of upward mobility are very important for integration in every society. After one decade of blocked post-socialist transformation, political changes in 2000 unblocked the process of transformation of Serbian society, raising young people's expectations of the improvement of their social position. Modernization and democratization of political system, as well as market reforms of the economic system would definitely make this process more probable. These reforms, if carried out properly, would enable the activation of young people and their inclination towards modern and development-oriented ways of advancement in society. Nevertheless, empirical studies in the last ten years in Serbia have constantly shown large discrepancy in youth's perceived and preferred factors of upward social mobility. Namely, although education and hard work have been emphasized by young people as the main preferred means of getting ahead, wealthy origin and political connections have been, in fact, perceived as the most important factors in this respect in Serbia during the last decade. Political instability, (still) uncompleted reform of political and economic system and economic growth without employment (especially of young people) are the main reasons why half of the young population has had, more or less, a constant wish to leave Serbia forever. The main thesis of this paper is that the above-mentioned discrepancy between preferred and perceived "social order" represents one of the key basis of such a way of thinking of young people in Serbia.*

KEY WORDS *youth, Serbia, getting ahead*

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APSTRAKT *Percepcije i preferencije mladih osoba o glavnim kanalima vertikalne pokretljivosti su veoma važne za integraciju u svakom društvu. Nakon decenije blokirane postsocijalističke transformacije, političke promene 2000. godine odblokirale su proces transformacije srpskog društva, podižući očekivanja mladih kada je reč o poboljšanju njihovog društvenog položaja. Modernizacija i demokratizacija političkog sistema, kao i tržišne reforme privrednog sistema bi zasigurno ovaj proces učinili izvesnijim. Ove reforme, dosledno sprovedene, aktivirale bi mlade ljude i njihove inklinacije ka modernim i tržišno orijentisanim načinima napredovanja u društvu. Ipak, iskustvene analize poslednjih deset godina u Srbiji su ponovljeno ukazivale na veliku razliku između stvarnih i poželjnih činilaca uzlazne društvene pokretljivosti (u percepciji mladih). Naime, iako su obrazovanje i naporan rad istaknuti kao glavna poželjna sredstva napredovanja, bogato poreklo i političke veze su, u stvari, opaženi od strane mladih kao najvažniji faktori u Srbiji u protekloj deceniji. Politička nestabilnost, (još uvek) nedovršene reforme političkog i privrednog sistema i ekonomski rast bez nove zaposlenosti (pogotovo za mlade) su ključni razlozi zbog kojih postoji, manje-više, neprestana razmišljanje polovine mladih da napusti Srbiju zauvek. Glavna teza ovog rada je da upravo pomenuta diskrepancija između stvarnog i poželjnog „društvenog reda“ predstavlja jednu od ključnih osnova takvog načina razmišljanja mladih osoba u Srbiji.*

KLJUČNE REČI *mladi, Srbija, društveni uspon*

Introduction

The social position of the youth in the countries of post-socialist transformation is, without doubt, very interesting (and socially relevant) topic for the researchers in the last two decades (Roberts, 2009; 2003; MacDonald et al., 2001; Wallace, Kovacheva, 1998; etc.). However, that is not the case in Serbia, where such studies have not been conducted for more than fifteen years, during the period of blocked post-socialist transformation. In fact, only one empirical research was conducted in the 1990s on the sample of Belgrade youth (Mihailović, 1994).

Nevertheless, after political changes in 2000 and unblocking of the process of post-socialist transformation (more on this in Lazić, Cvejić, 2004), several research attempts have been made to investigate the social position and orientations of Serbian youth (Tomanović, Ignjatović, 2006a; 2006b; 2004; Mihailović, 2004, Mojić, 2005; etc.). At the same time, the process of political change has raised the expectations of young people regarding the improvement of their position in Serbian society. What are/should be the main channels of this improvement?

Main goal of this paper is to analyze the perceptions and preferences of young people in Serbia concerning the ways to get ahead in the last decade. If there is a considerable discrepancy between these perceptions and preferences, we can say that the social integration of the youth in Serbian society is rather unsuccessful. It can also explain rather well the fact that half of the young people have been thinking about leaving the country permanently, which severely jeopardizes its development

potentials, prolonging the “actual social order” and “vicious circle” of underdevelopment.

Conceptual and contextual framework

The position and orientations of the youth in the post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe are especially important for social integration in rapidly changing social systems. According to influential social biography approach (Roberts et al., 1994), structures set the conditions, possibilities and limitations of action. These structures (institutions, resources and norms) are enabling, as well as restricting, young people in creating their social biographies. Generally speaking, in all advanced industrial societies, transitions from compulsory education to employment have been prolonged since the 1970s, posing serious obstacles to the above-mentioned process. Since then, broader trends towards structured individualization and fragmentation of formerly more homogenous social groups (including the youth) have been widely recognized (Roberts et al, 1994: 31).

Transition risks force young people to create flexible strategies for advancement through education, work, and family relations. Neither life span nor transition paths are fixed any more in a variety of economical, political and cultural changes in post-socialism. The notion of flexibility itself has been at first applied to the explanation of the behavior of work force in the labor market. It explains non-standard forms of employment such as part-time employment, temporary and short-term employment, self-employment, homeworking, work on a contract etc., that involve less formal rules and regulations. Late modernity theories brought about a connection of flexibility with risk, uncertainty, individualization and reflexivity. Flexibilization of work represents a foundation for reflexive and self-creating biography, individual self-realization and creative uncertainty of the freedom (Kovacheva, 2001: 43).

As for the post-socialist societies (including Serbia), what is common to the position of the youth is a disappearance of relatively strongly structured and predictable paths of life transitions and its flexibilization. Youth socialization is taking place in conditions where institutions, processes and social norms that previously used to channel transition in the world of adults now vanished, or they are also in the process of substantial transformation. Although it is logical to state that the youth is a natural winner of transition (since they are oriented more towards, and prepared better for the changes brought about by social transformation), the majority of empirical studies showed that young people are still exposed more to new and greater risks rather than new and more favorable chances of social promotion (Ilišin, 2005: 19).

The main proposition of this paper is that structures (institutions, resources and norms) in Serbia are still mostly restrictive (especially for young people),

mainly based on strong discrepancy between “preferred” and “perceived social order”. These concepts are mostly based on the distinction of Claude Lévy-Strauss between the “order of orders” as it actually functions and the way in which a society (or its particular social groups) conceive of its ordering (Lévy-Strauss, 1963: XV). Rihtman-Auguštin (1984) revealed the existence of these two different orders in South-European traditional family *zadruga*. Also, Županov (1982) emphasized that the discrepancy between the “preferred” and “perceived social order” was much wider in Yugoslav socialism than in most other societies.

As for the post-socialist Serbian society, it is often defined (Antonić, 1993) as a system of “political capitalism”. The concept itself has been introduced in sociology by Max Weber, referring to economic systems based on the use of economically irrational, mostly politically created monopolies, in the various forms of market (in a technical sense, as merchandise-monetary) economy. Political capitalism in Serbia arose, according to Antoniće, after the breakdown of the former socialist system, in an institutional vacuum used by the new-old elite to take over the complete administration of the “social” property and, even more importantly, the possibilities of “irrational” (non-market) profit gains. The war and UN sanctions gave this elite a “perfect cover” for various kinds of abuse, always justified by “higher national interests”. Because of the state-induced hyperinflation, the last remains of the healthy economic “tissue” and normal economic logic have been destroyed (Arandarenko, 2000: 347-348).

The above-mentioned discrepancy between “preferred” and “perceived social order” has been, no doubt, additionally widened during the period of blocked post-socialist transformation. “On the one hand, there was a powerful presence of distributive social norms (produced, as already indicated, by the command (centrally planned) socialist economy, but structurally homologous also to the pre-market agrarian self-sufficient economy, characteristic of a country in the pre-capitalist period); and on the other, the effects of norms derived from the market type of economic operations (arriving not only from the outside, from the capitalist surroundings, but to a certain degree also present in the specific Yugoslav “market” socialism)” (Lazić, 2003: 210).

After the political changes in 2000, however, potential “winners” in the post-socialist transformation (especially the youth) were rather optimistic when asked about the future of Serbian society. Nevertheless, one of the first conclusions of the youth studies after 2000 was that there had been some improvements in this respect, but, according to young respondents, these changes were neither deep nor wide enough (Mihailović, 2004).

What are the main characteristics of a subjective social position of the youth in the first decade of post-socialist transformation? First, young people’s subjective social status findings of 2003 study (Mojić, 2004) will be presented, in order to grasp the views and expectations of the youth after the political change. Namely,

self-perception of social position represents an important framework of reference for understanding the individual and group action, as well as for social integration. Majority of Serbian youth perceived their life in 2003 as average or good, but they perceived the lives of their friends as slightly better at that time. It is interesting that their estimate of their life and their friends' and peers' life had been rather optimistic. In other words, positive political change gave hope for improvement of their social position (as probable winners in the transformation).

However, transition from education to employment in Serbia after 2000 reveals very unfavorable situation of young people. General labor market participation rate is low, since only 75% of the population that completed education enters the labor market. By comparison, more than 90% of the youth after completing education (at all levels) in OECD countries participate in the labor market (Arandarenko, 2008: 271). According to the official data of the National Employment Agency of the Republic of Serbia, youth unemployment rates have constantly been near 50% during the whole past decade. On the other hand, activity and employment rates were very low. Because of different methodology of unemployment survey (i.e. organizing the Labor Force Survey), the figures have been less dramatic in recent years, but still very high in comparative context. In 2011, activity rate of persons aged 15-64 years (contingent work) was 58.9% (inactivity rate 41.1%), unemployment rate 22.9% and employment rate 45.5%. As for the youth from 15 to 24 years old, activity rate was 28.1 (inactivity rate 71.9%), unemployment rate 49.9% and employment rate 14.1. Finally, for young people aged 25-34 activity rate was 77.8%, inactivity rate 22.2%, while employment rate was 54.2% with unemployment of 30.3% (Anketa o radnoj snazi, april 2011) [Labor Force Survey, April 2011].

The obstacles to youth individualization in Serbia are clearly of socio-systemic and cultural nature. Since the former ones have been previously mentioned, the latter will be presented here. Namely, it has often been argued that our culture still belongs predominantly to the group of pre-industrial cultures (Obradović, 1982). Such cultures are based on an implicit and subconscious "Image of Limited Good" (Foster, 1965). By the "Image of Limited Good" Foster means that the behavior of peasant farmers is patterned in such a fashion as to suggest that farmers view their social, economic, and natural universes – their total environment – as one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in a finite quantity and always in short supply, as far as the farmer is concerned. Not only do these and all other "good things" exist in finite and limited quantities, but in addition to this, there is no direct way within farmer's power to increase the available quantities. It follows that an individual or a family can improve their position only at the expense of others (Foster, 1965: 296-297). This "redistribution norm" can be seen as one of the main cultural obstacles to the youth advancement. Instead of meritocracy (based on education, knowledge, skills and

hard work), redistribution is culturally favored in Serbian society for almost two centuries. This pre-modern cultural pattern is particularly unfavorable for young people, mostly pro-market and pro-modern oriented, relying mostly on education and hard work as the main channels of “climbing up” the stratification ladder in Serbia today.

Naturally, experiencing these structural and cultural limitations, the choice of main life strategies of young people in Serbia involves a delay in key life events or “turnarounds”: a delay in completing the education, a delay in living independently, a delay in having a family of orientation, etc. According to Tomanović and Ignjatović (2004: 62), this process can be characterized as “forced” or “pseudo” individualization. Therefore, extreme levels of labor market inactivity and unemployment of Serbian youth represent a kind of flexibilization of work that definitely cannot be a foundation for the previously mentioned reflexive and self-creating biography, individual self-realization and creative uncertainty of the freedom (Kovacheva, 2001: 43).

Methodology

Main goal of this paper is to compare the perceptions and preferences of young people in Serbia regarding the means of social advancement in the first decade of post-socialist transformation in Serbia. Our key hypothesis is that there has been a strong discrepancy between these perceptions and preferences, based on the presented long-term cultural divide between “preferred” and “perceived social order”, as well as on the social context in the last two decades (blocked and, later on, delayed transformation).

Main source for the analysis presented in the text were two surveys conducted by the Institute of Sociological Research (ISR) of the Faculty of Philosophy (University of Belgrade). First survey of a national representative sample was organized as a part of a wider research on socio-economic strategies of individuals and households in Serbia in 2007. Sub-sample of young people (aged 18-35) consisted of 558 respondents. Second survey of everyday life of young people in Serbia was conducted in 2011. The representative sample consisted of 1627 respondents aged 19-35.

Results and discussion

After the political changes in 2000, education has been perceived by young people as the single most important factor of advancement in Serbian society (Mojčić, 2004). In ranking the different forms of capital (cultural – education, economic – wealthy origin and social – knowing the “right people”) and personal traits (ambition, hard work, readiness to take business risks), young respondents preferred

cultural capital (good education), but also the above-mentioned “market” individual traits. In spite of rather unfavorable “transitional” social context, they showed a strong conviction that they themselves have a major influence on their life transitions (or, in other words, an internal “locus of control”).

However, between 2003 and 2007 (and the two youth studies – Mojić, 2004; 2010), young people have shown less firm belief that education, ambition, hard work and risk-taking can move them up the stratification ladder in Serbian society, admitting the common fact that “knowing the right people” (including holders of political power) has become far more important. On the other hand, they were still convinced in 2007 (more than half of them) that good education should be the most important advancement factor in Serbia in post-socialism. Next on the list was hard work (one quarter emphasized it), while other factors were mentioned less than 10%. Nevertheless, it is interesting that, when asked to choose one “life strategy”, young respondents chose education more often in 2007 than in 2003, still having faith in the most common modern factor of the upward mobility in the (post)modern societies – cultural capital. Finally, next section of the paper introduces a comparative analysis (ISR studies in 2007 and 2011) of Serbian youth’s perceptions and preferences regarding the means of getting ahead in post-socialist Serbia.

Table 1 “Real social order” – the youth’s perception of the most important factors of advancement in Serbian society (ISR 2007 and 2011 study)

Factors of advancement	Rank							
	I		II		III		Σ	
	Year of study		Year of study		Year of study		Year of study	
	2007	2011	2007	2011	2007	2011	2007	2011
Good education	27.5	15.2	11.5	10.0	9.2	8.6	48.2	33.8
Knowing “the right people”	20.6	24.2	21.5	29.4	16.8	15.2	58.9	68.8
Wealthy origin	15.9	19.2	6.2	9.9	8.9	13.4	31	42.5
Political engagement	12.5	16.3	15.6	16.5	10.2	16.7	38.3	49.5
Ambition	8.5	10.4	17.2	13.0	12.1	11.2	37.8	34.6
Hard work	8.0	10.7	15.8	13.2	14.8	11.9	38.6	35.8
Readiness to take a business risk	3.5	1.5	6.4	3.8	12.5	11.0	22.4	16.3
Obedience	2.8	1.6	3.2	2.6	10.3	8.8	16.3	13

Table 1 presents ranks I, II and III, as well as the sum of all ranks of the perceived factors of advancement (“Real social order”). As for the first rank, good education has dropped drastically in ranking: from position one (27.5%) in 2007 to place number 4 (15.2) in 2011, after knowing “the right people” (24.2%), wealthy

origin (19.2%) and political engagement (16.3%)! In sum (all three ranks together), education dropped from 48.2% to 33.8% from 2007 to 2011! On the other hand, knowing “the right people” rose from 58.9% in 2007 to 68.8% in 2011, similar as wealthy origin (from 31% to 42.5%) and political engagement (from 38.3% to 49.5)! In accordance with the observed “pattern”, ambition, hard work and readiness to take a business risk were perceived as much less important in 2011 than in 2007 (34.6% vs. 37.8%, 35.8% vs. 38.6% and 16.3% vs. 22.4%, respectively)!

Table 2 introduces Serbian youth’s choice of one preferred factor of advancement (“Desired social order”). Good education experienced a huge drop here too, from 51.7% in 2007 to 43.7% in 2011, while the importance of hard work (from 27.8% to 29.4%) and especially ambition (6.8% in 2007 and 12.2% in 2011) increased.

Finally, when asked about their own “life strategy”, young respondents chose hard work first of all, (43.5%), followed by good education (24.3%) and ambition (16.9%). The remaining factors were singled out by less than 10%. We can see clearly that the youth in Serbia lost faith in education as the main “realistic” channel of getting ahead, one decade after the beginning of unblocking the post-socialist transformation.

Table 2 “Desired social order” – the youth’s preference for the most important factors of advancement in Serbian society (ISR 2007 and 2011 study)

Factors of advancement	Year of study	
	2007	2011
Good education	51.7	43.7
Knowing “the right people”	4.3	5.3
Wealthy origin	1.1	2.1
Political engagement	1.3	2.6
Ambition	6.8	12.2
Hard work	27.8	29.4
Readiness to take a business risk	3.8	1.6
Obedience	1.5	1.3

How can we explain these findings? The concept of normative-value dissonance (Lazić, Cvejić, 2007) can help as in the analysis. Namely, this dissonance is most commonly seen in situations that include a radical change of the dominant social context, when new forms of basic social relationships are being established, including the new normative system. In the “transitional” period, new normative system becomes dominant; some elements of the “old social order” still persist. The same duality can be observed in the sphere of values. Since values have cultural-historical foundation, this duality lasts even much longer. This parallel existence of a new dominant and an old normative system, as well as the new and

old values, can bring about a situation where a large number of individuals act within the specific normative system, keeping or adopting some conflicting value orientations. This contradiction is called normative-value dissonance and it is common in situations where the social order (mainly through its normative system) confronts active individuals with requirements that are dissonant or even conflicted with their own value patterns. Furthermore, in such historical circumstances when the whole dominant system of social relations is changing, normative-value dissonance can exist on the level of entire social groups (Lazić, Cvejić, 2007: 56).

In our view, young people belong to the very few social groups in Serbia that do not show this normative-value dissonance or, to put it better, which express normative-value consonance. In fact, as potential winners in the transformation process, they showed a very strong conviction that, with modernization and democratization of the political system and the society in general, education and hard work will be realistic and attainable channels of vertical mobility in Serbian society. However, one decade after Serbia's "October Revolution", the youth learned the hard way the reality of knowing "the right people", wealthy origin and political connections (all in a pre-modern sense). Namely, in the "real social order", they are well-educated but predominantly unemployed, still living with their parents, and having even worse prospects or the future.

Main aim of this paper was to compare youth's perceptions and preferences regarding the main channels of advancement in contemporary Serbian society. Although education and hard work have been emphasized by young people as the main preferred means of getting ahead, knowing "the right people", wealthy origin and political connections have been, in fact, perceived as the most important factors in this respect in Serbia during the last decade. What is especially unfavorable for the social integration in Serbia today, this distance between the youth's perceived and preferred "social order" is constantly increasing as time goes by.

**Table 3 Thinking about leaving Serbia on the part of young respondents
(ISR 2011 study)**

	%	Cumulative % (two categories)
I have not been thinking about that	23.5	
I do not want to leave Serbia	23.6	47.1
I want to move abroad, but I do not stand a chance	4.8	
If an opportunity emerges, I will take it	36.2	
I will try to leave, but I do not know if I am going to succeed	5.8	52.9
I have a firm plan to go abroad	3.4	
I am taking decisive steps to move abroad	2.8	100.0

This discrepancy can, in our opinion, explain to a large extent the findings presented in Table 3. Namely, less than one half of youth (47.1%) in Serbia today have not been thinking about leaving Serbia (23.5%) or say clearly they do not want to leave (23.6%). On the other hand, the majority of young people had some thoughts or actions in this direction. Facing strong structural and cultural obstacles to their structured individualization, the youth's personal strategies and identities are themselves very fluid and unpredictable. However, one thing has not changed in Serbia in the last decade – the fact that half of its youth have been constantly thinking about social integration – but elsewhere.

Conclusion

What are the consequences of the above-presented findings for the social integration of young people in Serbia today? In the late 1960s, the very system was brought into question by young generation of an educated, urban, well-informed, individualized, mostly middle-class (“modernized”) population. Again, in the 1990s, this stratum was very persistent in resistance to the Milošević regime and cultural regression to traditionalist patterns (anti-individualism, authoritarianism, egalitarianism/ redistribution, etc).

After the political changes in 2000, this social group was supposed to become one of the social and cultural “pillars” of the new “social order”. However, the youth's perceptions of “desired social order” in 2011 are still very far from the “real social order”, mostly because “the factors leading to normative-value dissonance are still very firm, both owing to the delayed transformation and the processes of long historical duration” (Lazić, 2003: 211).

Also, when talking about the division between traditionalistic and modernistic oriented segments of the Serbian population, Lazić (2003: 2006) rightly reminds us of the frequently mentioned fact that the “new emigration” in the 1990s was young and well educated. Two decades later, young and well-educated people in Serbia are still ready to “vote with their feet” – half of them still think about leaving the country. This is, perhaps, the strongest evidence that the Serbian youth seriously question the legitimacy of the “new (old?) social order” and that social integration into such a society is not very high on the list of their priorities.

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