

Migrants of the Future – Serbian Youth between Imaginary and Real Migration

Ildiko Erdei, Belgrade

Abstract

One of several opinion polls of the student population in Serbia, conducted in May 2008, revealed that about 78 % of the interviewees is ready to leave Serbia immediately after they get their diploma. Although there are many who declare that they are ready to permanently return to their home country, and certainly a great majority is in one way or another engaged in a widespread public debate about the issue of emigration, the portion of those who have already made concrete plans and preparations for leaving is considerably smaller. Focussing on the wishes and plans of the young for leaving after 2000, I will try to formulate answers to two questions: first, what is the social and cultural context of this fervent debate, supposing that the various discourses on youth, at the particular moment centred on the migration issue, might in fact represent a part of the wider process of reconstruction of youth as a social category in postsocialist transformations; and second, what are the characteristics of the more shadowy process that, in the private arena of family life and family planning, accompanies this more exposed political debate. In short: what kind of home will Serbia become if the young people wish so strongly to escape from it?

Every spring in recent years the streets of Belgrade and many other cities and towns all over Serbia have been full of posters announcing various possibilities of student education and work exchange abroad. Posters have been promoting travel mainly to the USA, but also to other countries in Western Europe, and representing the promoted travel as a possibility to earn not just a decent amount of money for a relatively short time, but also to appropriate what could be termed as cultural and social capital, gained from their encounters with other cultures, experiences, ways of life and being. These programmes are offered to the population aged between 18–28, that is to the young people that belong in the the official category of youth in Serbia.

Although commercial appeals related to the short term travel possibilities of youth dominate the public and semipublic spaces, such as urban streets and faculty halls, there is another, more socially and politically engaged agenda on the national level, that deals with the more alarming aspects of this issue. The object of social worry is the alarming fact, revealed through several subsequent re-

searches done by different authors from 2004 on, that an ever larger number of individuals belonging to the category of youth is considering to leave the country after graduation, ready to never come back to their home country.¹ The percentage of those who declared they were ready to leave varies between 50 and 78, while the rate of those who have already taken concrete steps in that direction is smaller, but still significant. Irrespectively of the fact whether those who say that they are ready to go will actually do so, the number of those who do not see their home country as being capable of offering them a decent life, as being the place where they are going to engage with their future, indeed constitutes an important issue. For politicians it is an alert bell and for researchers a possibility for inquiry into the newest social, cultural, economic and political aspects of the phenomena, brain drain, that has been torturing Serbian society particularly from the 1990ies on. Going beyond disturbing statistical data, I will try to formulate answers to two questions: first, what is the social and cultural context of this fervent debate, supposing that the various discourses on youth, at the moment centred on the migration issue, might in fact represent a part of the wider process of reconstruction of youth as a social category in postsocialist transformation; and second, what are the characteristics of the more shadowy process that, in the private arena of family life and family planning, accompanies this more exposed political debate. Or to put it more simply: what kind of home will Serbia become if the young people so strongly wish to escape from it?

(Im)mobility, travel possibilities and migration

There are two possible frames at hand that could immediately lend themselves to the interpretation of this phenomena – globalization and transnationalism studies on the one hand, and European mobility schemes on the other. Indeed, the urge to leave a parental home, home town, and country may look similar to the recent trend of international and transnational mobility which is one of the social trends of the early 21st century, that is increasingly coming to be an age of travel, transiency and instability. Therefore, various types of contemporary migrations must inevitably be conceptualized within the frame of globalization and can not be detached from the issues of global flows of people, capital, technologies, in-

¹ UNDP Aspiration Survey for Serbia and Montenegro (2004), Izveštaj CPA “Mladi izgubljeni u tranziciji” (CPS report “Youth Lost in Transition”) (2004), Dokumenti za formiranje Kancelarije za mlade Vlade Republike Srbije “Mladi u Srbiji” (Documents for the Foundation of the Youth Office of the Government of the Republic of Serbia “Youth in Serbia”) (2007), Istraživanje “Marketinške radionice” Ekonomskog fakulteta (Survey of the “Marketing Workshop” of the Faculty of Economy, Belgrade) (2008).

formation across national borders. We have approached the age of mobility on the global scale, when, as Appadurai rightly notes, there is always someone around us who came home from a journey and someone who is just about to leave; it is the age, when mobile images meet travelling bodies (Appadurai 1996). The consequence of these social developments is that, due to the globalization of travel and the revolutionized means of communication, objectified in the internet, cell phones and satellite TV, the world of possible life projects is much wider and much more within reach for a growing number of people than ever before. Consequently, we could say that the growing number of young people wishing to leave Serbia belongs to the widespread streams of transnational flows of contemporary “ethnoscapes”. In other words, that this fact represents a declaration of their belonging to the “world on the move”.

On the other hand, the intention to leave Serbia could be compared with the increasing mobility inside Europe, made possible by the withdrawal of visa regimes within the borders of the EU. Thus, we could conclude, the Serbian youth wants to participate in this “Europe without borders”, to seize the opportunities it offers, and is ready to adopt the European habit of “free movement”, be it for economic prosperity or just for touristic enjoyment. In both cases the interpretation is an optimistic, though not a reliable one. To better understand this recent phenomenon, the specificity of the Serbian case should be pointed out: as the findings of several opinion polls show, the desire to move is not for the sake of movement per se, nor is it related to the exercise of choice between different travel possibilities, and in too many cases it does not even include contemplation over the possibility of return. On the contrary, it is disappointment and bitterness that frames the interpretations and echos from their answers. In the Serbian case at the moment this means that the decision to move away is related more to the lack of possibilities for free and unrestrained movement than to the possibilities it would open. The former has been given an additional dimension by the fact that this kind of restraint exists in the situation where, as Stef Jansen has noted, the “visa-free immediate European inside” is seen and contemplated from the perspective of Europe’s “immediate outside” (BIH, Serbia) (Jansen 2010).

As the document for the foundation of the Youth Department² (2007) indicates, “20 % of youth from 10 Serbian cities had not been on vacation for the

² The idea of founding a Youth Office on the national level was first presented within the Youth Department that has worked as a part of the Ministry of Education and Sport in the first democratic government led by prime minister Zoran Djindjic in 2001. The Youth Office would have been a logical outcome of a long and massive research into the problems and needs of the youth population, whose element should have been the creation of a Strategy for Youth. After the assassination of Djindjic, during the government of Vojislav

last five years. More than 50 % of those under 30 years of age have not visited a single location in Europe in the same period. About 63 % have not travelled for their winter vacations”. According to this research, only 6 % of the youth travel abroad, on average once a year. In their comments on the findings the authors relate the rate of involuntary immobility to the dissatisfaction with life in Serbia in a broader scale, saying that “the data speak in the best way about the degree of dissatisfaction of the young and the population in general, with life conditions in their respective communities, and about the absence of any perspective”. They further support this conclusion with the data on the willingness of the young to leave the country, and state: “72 % of the respondents from 17 communities throughout Serbia would leave if they would have an opportunity, the rate which is much higher if compared with the rest of the population.”³

A previous survey, conducted by the Coalition of Youth in Serbia in 2005 during the preparation for development of the National youth strategy showed that about 75 % of the surveyed people aged 21 to 25 would leave the country, and also that they did not believe that the state and its government would improve the situation for the youth in areas of employment, housing, permanent education and travel possibilities.⁴ As if the pessimistic protest slogan from the beginning of the nineties “Can’t wait to graduate in order to emigrate” became a present day reality for Serbia, just as much as the sarcastic statement given by one of the opposition politicians that Europe does not dare open the borders with Serbia, for this act could empty the country. The youth itself is given proof that this intensive urge to leave is strongly connected with the impossibility to move, embodied among other things in the visa regime, all of which produce a strong sense of entrapment which then produces a powerful desire to escape.

Koštica, the Youth Department was cancelled. Nevertheless, work on the Strategy for Youth continued. At the present, Serbia has completed the document called Strategy for Youth which is but one step toward the creation of an integral youth policy and its institutionalization in accordance with European legislation and political practice. The National Strategy for Youth was accepted by the Serbian Government on May 9th 2008, and on January 22nd 2009 the government also approved the realization of an Action plan based on the Strategy. The importance of the document was underlined by frequent comments by promoters in the public that Serbia was the last country in the region to create and approve this kind of document.

³ Dokumenti za formiranje Kancelarije za mlade Vlade Republike Srbije (Documents for Foundation of Youth Office of the Government of the Republic of Serbia), Koalicija mladih Srbije, Belgrade 2007.

⁴ Dokumenti za formiranje Kancelarije za mlade Vlade Republike Srbije (Documents for Foundation of Youth Office of the Government of the Republic of Serbia), Koalicija mladih Srbije, Belgrade 2007: 15–18.

„We don't wait for passports to travel around the world and spend money in famous tourist destinations. On the contrary, we are waiting to buy a one-way ticket out. If necessary, I am ready to work in a pub or at a local communal company, but in Dublin and not here. People, leave, doesn't matter if you are over 50, it's never too late. Božo (nickname of the Deputy Prime Minister Božidar Djelić, in charge of European integration), put us on the 'white Schengen list'. I guarantee that 500000 people will permanently leave Serbia in the following year.”⁵

There is no clear sign whether and when this situation is going to change significantly for better. This is the main reason why the latest mantra of the young in Serbia has become “to find a way out”, “to go abroad” (“otići napolje”, “preko”, “pobeći odavde”), and the idiom in which this movement is discussed is not one of travel, but rather one of escape.

The issue of migration of youth on a large scale and its accompanying feeling of entrapment has attracted the public's attention on many levels of society, being the source of inspiration for the creation of several popular songs, graffiti, proverbs, protest banners etc. At the beginning of the nineties, the first wave of student protests in 1991–92 gave birth to the slogan “Can't wait to graduate in order to emigrate” (“Čekam da diplomiram, pa da emigriram”) that has spread among the student population in the upcoming decade. In the midst of the second wave of student protests in 1996/97 a new slogan was launched and widely circulated through reproduction on buttons worn by the masses of protesters. It said: “Though it's springtime, I am still living in Serbia” (“Proleće je, a ja još živim u Srbiji”); its simple communicational logic was based on the contrasting meanings usually associated with spring – rejuvenation, freshness, blossoming, growing, development, newness – with the lack of change, novelty, movement, transformation, exemplified in the fact of “still living in Serbia”. Even after the democratic changes in 2000 this kind of popular social commentary is still present. In Novi Sad, the capital city of Serbia's northern province of Vojvodina, a building facade was decorated for a long time by the following sentence: “A student's ID card in exchange for a passport with a visa” (“Menjam indeks, za pasoš i vizu”), giving us a glimpse into the actual worries of the youth. The continuity of this preoccupation could be diagnosed by inspecting Belgrade streets at the turn of the years 2008/09 when a series of graffiti in the shape of a typical New Year wish appeared, with political connotations understandable mostly to those familiar with local political context. One of those read “In 2009 I wish not to wish to get out from here”, clearly referring to the widespread dis-

⁵ <http://Forum.b92.net> (topic: Emigration and immigration).

cussions among the young whether to leave Serbia or to stay, where to go, and for how long.

On the other hand, many of those who live and work under the regimes with unrestricted extreme mobility – in the first place driven by the demands of the flexible neoliberal economy – would probably be happy to have more opportunities to settle, start a family, develop close friendships and long-lasting social networks of friends and neighbours. This refers primarily to the USA, and in much lesser degree to Europe where, even after the declaration of free intra-European movement brought in 2004, immobility is more likely to characterize the lives of the majority of the population (Fertig, Schmidt 2002). For most youngsters in Serbia, though, “free movement” still figures as an unquestioned value, something that is priceless in itself. Looked at from the perspective of a European immediate outside, unrestricted movement is more than an idea, it is a political goal to strive for, an ideal to dream about. Thus the lack of free movement is sometimes interpreted as the lack of freedom in general, as in the excerpt from one out of many stories in the collection titled “Best Stories from Visa Queues”. It reflects the same feelings of anger and despair over the restriction of free movement:

“Half of all young people are considering living abroad. That’s all I see. If they let us come and go as we’d like to, everything would be different. We would come back. This way each chance is your last chance. We know it well. That’s why we don’t come back. That’s why we leave for good. That’s why we forget. It’s not just the money and the good jobs. It’s freedom. Which we don’t have. I feel the weight of our doom, of all the people around me, the ones who are desperately going after visas, Europe, freedom. This will never pass, I reckon” (Trebovac 2009: ■).

Considering the intensity of the desire to leave and the lasting processes of dreaming about Europe and imagining the life “over there”, it will be interesting to see how the encounter between the “entrapped youngsters” from Serbia and their “imaginary Europe” will look like after all this.

Other reasons for leaving

Nevertheless, as the survey answers also indicate, we cannot talk about migration without considering the complexity of the Serbian social, economic, and political context as a whole. It is not possible for us to independently understand the youth and their motives for migration or the situations that have both created them in the past and are influencing their present decisions. The same social environment that is claimed to be the reason for migration has also, at least for

the last 15 years, shaped the generation which is either about to go or, at least, is intensively contemplating on the matter. The following “list of reasons” for leaving the country points exactly to that kind of articulation, revealing the social milieu in which the generation of present would-be leavers has grown up, mostly during the devastating nineties in Serbia:

“Because Serbia is a sh*ty country and I live here miserably, because I am 22 years old and have nothing, because I have gone to school and learnt nothing, because I study and live like a poor devil, because I cannot carelessly use the Internet and not think whether I could afford it, because I have never travelled outside of Serbia, because I wear worn out T-shirts and jeans, because I don’t like people from Kosovo, because I don’t have enough cash to pay for drinks for me and my girlfriend, because most of the girls are trendy and boys are feminine, because the clever and wise people are considered fools here, because I am afraid of being assaulted if I walk through the city late at night, because I have no perspective, because I can’t watch the football game and not be beaten up by the cops or the stupid fans, because I have to pay the orgies of the war criminals and their families, because everyone wants to be engaged in dodgy ‘only fools and horses’ kind of business, because no one likes decent work, because Jezda and Dafina have plundered my family, because Bogoljub Karić gained his riches at the expense of whole Serbia, because no matter how hard I will work I will never be able to have enough money for a car, not to mention an apartment, because there are electricity shortages, because there are water supply shortages, because the buses are ruined, because Ceca, Karleuša and Aca Lukas are the idols of the youngest, because there are too many smokers and heavy drinkers, because 12 year-olds drink alcohol in school, because the power plants pollute the environment and no one cares, because no one is interested in their own business, because everyone is interested in someone else’s business, because Kostić is getting rich by cheating, because ‘patriarch’ Koštunica is prime minister, because there have been too many wars, because Toma Nikolić will become the president, because I have lost my nerves by the age of 22, because Zoran Đinđić has been assassinated, because apes are driving by kindergartens at enormous speeds, because the police is corrupted, because everything went to hell long ago, because we will never join the European Union, because no one knows what one really wants, because here everyone can do whatever they want and still escape pun-

ishment ... I could add at least 200 more reasons for leaving, but no one will read it, anyway, and it should ...”⁶

Apart from describing the degradation of society in the nineties and after 2000, the above quotations also point to a whole spectrum of reasons for leaving, the majority of which were confirmed in various surveys after 2000. According to the latest opinion poll, conducted by the “Marketing workshop”, an organization of students at the Faculty of Economy in the early 2008, 78 % of students of Belgrade University said they would leave Serbia immediately after graduation.⁷ In the first place among the reasons listed in favour of migrating is “the inadequate living standard”, and in the second is the “poor educational system”. This is followed by the “high level of unemployment” and “lack of opportunities to get a proper job in a decent (‘regular’) way”, meaning without the need to be corrupt or forced to join a political party. As regards the employment issue, 38 % of the respondents believe that they could get a job only if they had good connections, 19 % think that personal qualities are important, and 11 % think that membership in a political party can help them find employment. Taken cumulatively, 68 % of the respondents think that there is something other than their educational qualities important for getting a job, while only 14 % responded that a university diploma counts in finding a job. Political instability is also part of the list of pros to leave.⁸

Having all this in mind it is not surprising that the young are exploring alternative possibilities to engage with their future, and that their social imagination in so many cases includes considerations of leaving Serbia, even for good and all. As Vladimir Glišin imaginatively put it, young people “do not have three lives”, like the popular hero of a Serbian fairy-tale, Baš Čelik, to be ready, as he was, to sacrifice one of these lives on the altar of uncertainty in Serbia (Luković 2009).⁹

Young and educated on the road – history of the migratory pattern

Dealing with issues of youth education, democratization, social development and migration in Serbia reaches back to the end of the 19th and beginning of the

⁶ <http://www.elitesecurity.org/t35033-Anketa-Emigriranje-iz-zemlje-Da-ili-NE>.

⁷ The survey has been conducted on a sample of 1 200 students from five faculties of Belgrade University.

⁸ Research of the “Marketing Workshop” of the Belgrade Faculty of Economy (Istraživanje “Marketinške radionice” Ekonomskog fakulteta u Beogradu), 2008, <http://www.marketing-workshop.org>.

⁹ <http://www.blic.rs/dodatak> (20/1/2009).

20th century, when the young state of Serbia made organised efforts to develop an intellectual and professional elite for the newly emerging nation by sending them to study at distinguished European universities. As historian Ljubinka Trgovčević shows in her study of state-sponsored migrations of the young in order to get the best education, around 70 % of those belonging to the Serbian intelligentsia in the 19th century were educated abroad (Trgovčević 2003). Compared with this rare example of a “brain gain” process in Serbian history, the problem of “brain drain” is a rather new experience. It became most evident at the beginning of the disolution of former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. As this was indeed the case, sociologists did not wait too long to focus their attention on this, as they said, “serious social problem of modern Serbia”. Silvano Bolčić and associates (joined in the project “New Characteristics of Serbian Society in the early 90s from a Sociological Perspective”, at the Institute for Sociological Research) made an attempt to analyze and to make a reliable estimate of the proportions and basic characteristics of the “brain drain” phenomenon. His analysis was based on the data collected and arranged through a survey conducted on a representative sample of the urban population (1400) in Belgrade and 12 communes in Serbia proper and Vojvodina, in April 1994. The central, simple question of the survey was: “Has someone from your close family gone abroad for a longer period (to work, to live) in the period 1990–1994? Participants were able to give information on up to three relatives they knew. The collected information served as a base for statistical calculations, which were to give a reliable account of people who had emigrated, their social and professional background, age, class and area of residence. As a result, some 320000 individuals older than 15 were represented, and from this total number, 62 % (about 220000) were classified as “young”, which means under 35 years (Bolčić 1995: 96–98, Erdei 1998: 28 f.). Ethnic divisions in this aggregate statistics reveal a large portions of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Hungarians from Vojvodina having left the country from the late 1980s on, a trend that increased towards the end of the 1990s.¹⁰

The latest data published by the Serbian branch of the International Organization for Migration in 2009 indicate that – according to the IOM estimates – about 500000 young people left Serbia between 1991 and 2001 in search of better lives. Furthermore, they point out that in Pčinjski and South Bačka Counties and in Belgrade Metropolitan Area about 96500 young people, or more than 35 % of the current youth population, have left their communities and migrated abroad in the last five years (2004–09) (IOM 2009). Some other estimates show

¹⁰ Researches show that, unlike the first wave of migration from Kosovo in the 1960s, the second and third waves, in the 1980s and 1990s consisted mostly of skilled, young and educated persons (Vathi, Black 2007: 9; Report on Youth Employment in Kosovo, 2008: 1).

that presently there are about 70 000 young people from Serbia with a University degree in the US and Canada alone. "It is a population of an average Serbian town, and someone in this country has to think about it seriously or Serbia will be left without young brains and without its future"¹¹ (Luković 2009).

Compared with the previous waves of migration, that were mostly economic in character and consisted of unskilled and semiskilled workers, the majority of the new migrants of the 1990s are highly educated persons with urban backgrounds and lifestyles. Therefore it is not surprising that reflexion and heightened awareness of the dimensions and consequences of a decision to leave the country are among the basic features of the 1990s' emigration, which clearly distinguishes it from previous migratory waves. They are linguistically and professionally much more competent and therefore do not aspire the reproduction of ethno-cultural models that were characteristic for the earlier generations of migrants. According to Prošić-Dvornić (1998), unlike the "workers' emigration" young professionals tend to integrate into a society already in the first generation without reducing their social contacts and marital relations to the members of their national communities. They nourish some of the friendships with the people who came from Serbia, but are also willing to make friends (and actually do so) with their neighbours and colleagues from different cultures and nationalities. Just like their precursors did with their family ties, they use existing networks of friends who previously settled in the area, to find accommodation, jobs, and acquire all the necessary knowledge needed in a new environment and unfamiliar situation.

While the migrations in the 1960s and 1970s were provoked by a combination of "push" and "pull" factors in socialist Yugoslavia and Europe, the latest emigrations are strongly provoked by internal difficulties in Yugoslav, later Serbian society, which first resulted in wars between former Yugoslav republics and then in the social devastation of Serbian society for a whole decade. Certainly this kind of social environment could not be stimulating for the young and educated population which has long ago stopped thinking and rationalizing in accordance with the national ethos that places an honourable death over life. Tens of thousands of young boys were literally "pushed" from Serbia in the very beginning of the 1990s trying to stay alive and refusing to fight under any flag. As the situation got more and more complicated, another ten thousand left, looking for a "corner of peace", a place believed to be a "cornerstone of sense" on which to build their lives. Although pull factors are no longer so strong in the countries of immigration, the wholly changed profile of the newest emigrants, their will

¹¹ "Cena odlaska" ("The cost of leaving"), <http://www.blic.rs/dodatak> (20/1/2009).

to somewhere find accommodation, and the European policy toward Serbia over the last decade allows them to find a new place to stay.

Seen from the perspective of the circulation of economic goods and investments, the latest migrations are completely “unprofitable”, even devastating for Serbian society. The preceding generations of migrants went abroad with an idea (which they to different degrees realized) to come home and use all kinds of skills and knowledge they had acquired in the West. They improved themselves in the domain of technological competence, and this became a widespread phenomenon, particularly in the eastern parts of Serbia, where they built very big houses, decorated in a “western” manner, thus investing great amounts of money in Serbia. They also contributed to the refining of the quality of “human resources” in their home country. Unlike them, the newest emigrants poured out of the country with great amounts of money, previously invested into their schooling, improvement and education. Besides that, many took everything they had with them, including funds, with the intention never to come back. In the mid-1990s sociologists warned that, besides an alarming number of already emigrated people, an “atmosphere that nourishes further thinking about possible migration” had been created, especially among young people. The population of “potential migrants” consisted (again) of the younger, well educated, urban strata, more familiar with enterprising activities. It was pointed out that these parts of the population would not see any future or chances inside the Serbian social, political and economic system. Although there was a wave of optimism shortly after the democratic turn of 2000, and there were recorded cases of repatriates willing to invest and start new businesses in Serbia, 15 years later it was evident that the sociological prognosis had been correct. For many youngsters Serbia has once again, today mainly due to an insufficiently decisive turn toward the project of European integration, become a place they want to escape from.¹²

Youth and the State – bearers of future and “lights on the road to Europe”

The implications of a constructivist approach to youth are, as Deborah Durham argues, to consider that youth as a “historically constructed social category, as a relational concept, and youth as a group of actors, form an especially sharp

¹² A detailed analysis of the perceptions of Europe among the youth population in Serbia has been done by Srđan Radović (2009). Radović points out the ambivalence as a main force that shapes the attitude toward Europe among young Serbs and attributes this to the long-lasting dilemma in the political and social elite between “the West” and “the East”, which still misses the breakthrough decision in favour of the “Western type” of modernity (Radović 2009: 59).

lens through which social forces are focussed (...) Through this lens, relations and constructions and re-constructions of power are refracted, recombined and reproduced ..." (Durham 2000: 114). Through the discourses made and used in various debates, youth is again being constructed and reconstructed as a salient social category. From anthropological research we know that social categories are culturally constructed and that they are a product of historical processes. Historians have revealed the particular context of the emergence of children and youth as distinctive social categories in Europe, showing that they were constructed within a general modernizing turn in the history of European society. As Durham notes, historians have traced "how throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, changes in the structures of economy, family, local community and state were refracted in childhood and youth, and how these categories became at once more ambiguous and more the focus of moral, community, state and indeed disciplinary attention" (Durham 2000: 116). In more recent contexts, we can note the importance of the idea of youth as the bearer of change in the socialist modernization project in former Yugoslavia. Youth, children and the "happy socialist childhood" were exemplified in disciplinary projects of the Foucauldian kind brought about through a wide range of activities in the Yugoslav Pioneer Organization and Youth Organization (Erdei 2004).

The latest transformation of Central and Eastern European societies, that from socialism to capitalism, brought to the fore the need to reconceptualise the category of youth: from its "socialist" frame, characterized by passivity, lack of democratic potential, and closedness, into "democratic" forms characterized by activity, initiative, social engagement, self-responsibility, and openness. The transformation of societies and their negotiations with European institutions, values and requests could be refracted through the latest re-construction of youth as a salient social category in the former socialist countries, Serbia included. Thus after the 2000 democratic changes in Serbia, the category of youth has been re-constructed through various state-initiated and sponsored measures, following the recommendations of the European Council on the creation of European Youth Policies. Youth is again, like in the socialist past, conceptualized as a bearer of a prosperous future. This is visible in the "Proposals for a new Youth Agenda for the EU: The YFJ's main expectations of the next mandate of the European Parliament and European Commission (2009–2014)": "As young Europeans, sharing a vision of Europe based on the values of democracy, peace, solidarity, sustainability, equality, human rights and freedom, and recognizing the success of European integration, we stress that we can successfully face future challenges only if the EU is able to speak and to act as a real Union. We expect brave and innovative decisions from our national and European leaders and institutions and we want concrete benefits from the EU in our everyday

lives”.¹³ This Proposal in a way represents a kind of structural inversion of the former “Pioneer Oath”. Contrary to the text of the “Pioneer Oath” members of the youth in their Proposal do not declare their obedience to the State, but act as active subjects and citizens that pose requests to their political representatives and to the institutions of the EU. On the other hand, the solemn tone of the address and the fact that it reveals the connection between the state, its institutional power and the social category of youth offers room for comparison.

The founding documents of the Serbian national body in charge of youth policy declare that “systematic care for the youth should be an integral part of any state strategy, for youth are the bearers of the future development in society. Therefore, it is important to consider youth as the necessary participants in decision-making processes. The Youth Department will be dedicated to the development of an integral, comprehensive and inter-sector youth policy which will be realized in accordance with proclaimed goals and activities.”¹⁴

The focus on the youth, the social intervention in their favour, the creation of a youth policy has several important dimensions. First, it was a way through which a new, “unique” political generation is to be produced, as was stated in one of the workshop manuals aimed to disseminate ideas and practices for this new disciplinary project.¹⁵ The vital importance of the “first generation of youth growing up in 27 transition countries is pointed out, and it is stressed that a manual should be used as a “tool for activation that will contribute to the better understanding and development of the so called generation of transition”¹⁶. Some parts of the manual are particularly explicit in explaining the political role of the new generation in the creation and reproduction of a new political order:

“Enthusiasm, energy and new ideas make young people a vital resource for any country, and particularly for the countries that are going through substantial social and political changes (...) It was not like that in the past where we had ‘children’, ‘grown-ups’ and ‘old people’. Today, the young are recognized as an important group of people that has its own rights. This is a worldwide trend, but it has particular significance for the [post-socialist] countries ... Broad changes happened in your countries, since they try to implement democracy and economic reforms. That was not easy. From eight countries, 27 new countries have been born, with com-

¹³ <http://www.youthforum.org/en/node/202>.

¹⁴ <http://www.mos.sr.gov.yu>.

¹⁵ Youth in Transitional Societies, a guide for discussion (Mladi u društvima u tranziciji, vodič za diskusiju), UNICEF 2007; <http://www.vscout.org.rs/files/biblioteka/publikacije/knjiga.pdf>.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

pletely new governments and legal systems. There is also more poverty and inequality than in 1989 and we are faced with new dangers, such as AIDS. On the other hand, there are many new possibilities and new freedoms – freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, self-expression and freedom to choose and create a life-path of your own. Your opinion is important because you are one among those who will put this world to the test. You will be one among the first who will complete education, look for a job, or decide about marriage and starting a family, in this different world after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Whatever you do, the world you are entering is not the same as the one that has waited for your parents when they were your age. Unicef thinks that you have to play an important role in the building of this new society in the present and in the future.”¹⁷

Second, it has been calculated that through constant “brain drain” and “brain flood” Serbia has lost enormously in economic terms: the education costs of those estimated 500 000 with university degrees that have already left the country and those about to go. Or, if we turn the argument around, we could also calculate the potential loss generated by disabling the whole generation of young people to seize the life opportunities in time, thus creating an amount of lost chances both for themselves and for society. Reflecting on this in a more philosophical way, the economist Vladimir Gligorov noted:

“This is, in my view, a great expense – can you imagine how much it costs in terms of life opportunities, in terms of career decisions and, finally, decisions related to starting and maintaining a family. It concerns millions of people. Now you can blame different people for that, but it seems pointless to me, for what matters is that you have a whole generation that has lost an enormous amount of life chances, and it is a huge expense” (Gligorov 2009).

Third, on the social-symbolical level, the young represent a category that both symbolizes (as a social category) and embodies (as social actors) a transformative power in society. Youth is conceptualized as a transitory and transformative period of life, therefore it is logical that the young are also conceptualized as “bearers of change”, and its agents, be it in political, social or economic terms. The population of the young is considered to be an appropriate indicator of various aspects of change, from its nature and value-orientations to its pace and tempo. It is imagined that, if treated properly, they would in result make a literal embodiment of the society as it is imagined to be.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 11.

In Serbia, the process of the social and political reconfiguration and reconstitution of the youth went through similar stages as in a number of neighbouring countries (Croatia, BiH), including the creation of a national plan for the youth, research on the basic problems and needs of the young population, the creation of strategic documents (and plans for concrete activities). The implementation of these policies should help the integration of the youth into the new society, and at the same time would help the integration of the society as a whole in to the “European family”. Nevertheless, after all these attempts to create institutional support for the young generations and to strategically consider their future in Serbia, it seems that these efforts of the state have proven valueless. As was shown at the beginning of the paper, the facts reveal a high rate of the young and educated wishing to leave the country. What could be the reason for that, after all?

Migrants “self-made” – families in search for a “tangible” future of children

Although the state has initiated a comprehensive, wide ranging programme aimed at creating a Youth Policy in accordance with European initiatives, it is evident that in spite of that many of the young still opt for leaving their country. There are many voices that point to the “virtualist” character of the government’s youth policy. The concept of “virtualism” was originally used by Daniel Miller and James Carrier to point to the overwhelming power which the discourse on consumption and consumers has over social experience, expectations and practices of the real consumers. Miller and Carrier argue that the institutionally produced discourse on consumers tends to monopolize the production of meaning, thus replacing the real social production conditions of consumption experiences and practices (Carrier, Miller 1998). In the context of Serbian youth policy and its relation to the issue of the migration of youngsters, this could be translated as a surplus of “discourse” compared to the lack of real, experienced change. Moreover, the higher the promises and plans of the state and its ministries were (and, consequently, the obviousness of their failure to achieve them) the deeper the discontent of the young was. It is evident for the young that their problems are embedded in a social and political context, and that they cannot be dealt with successfully without considering this fact. Therefore, many of the young started to conceptualize their personal future as being separate from a common future, the future of the community, and realized that in order to provide a safer future for themselves and their families they are obligated to find personal solutions for what they see as systemic failures of society. This situation has shaped the profile of the latest migrants and migrants-to-be. Their motivation for leaving stems from dissatisfaction with the developments in Serbia

after 2000 and they are actively engaged in the imagining, discussing and planning of future migration. In that way the young and their families are trying to avoid the pitfalls of ideological and political promises and to ensure a real, “tangible” future instead.

The profile of the latest wave of prospective migrants could be sketched out to consist of highschool pupils, university students and young academics of mainly middle class backgrounds. This means that their families have sufficient amounts of economic, cultural and social capital to see the benefits of education abroad and of being able to provide it for their children. Furthermore, the prospective migration of the children has become a process that includes thoughtful planning, browsing for appropriate information, establishing and maintaining supportive networks in Serbia and abroad that will be activated in the appropriate moment. Cultural capital is performed through an active engaging of the social imagination related to the ideas of a “better life”, a “decent way of being”, a “European (Western) way of thinking”, “cosmopolitan identities”, and ideas of who “we” and “they” are and would like to be. From several interviews I have conducted with parents who either make arrangements for the migration of their children or have already done so, the emphasis they put on education as both a channel for mobility and a goal/value in itself, was evident. Considering the politics of time of the latest migrants and their families, they could be characterized as “time-buyers”. This is mainly due to the destinations they usually choose – neighbouring countries, closer to home – where they want to gain from stimulating social environments until the eventual decision whether to return or to go further. Many of the explanations stress the temporary character of their current migratory status (though the parents indeed realize that by leaving home at one moment, the young might start a more wandering journey that could, but not necessarily does, include eventual return). One of the most popular destinations at present is Hungary, where a growing number of high school students try to enroll in the Budapest Serbian Gymnasium, getting themselves a ticket for experiencing the “European way of life” and unrestricted intra-European mobility (on Schengen visas valid for three years). Various faculties in Graz, Austria, have attracted tens of thousands of students who, due to agreements between Austria and former Yugoslavia (now with Serbia), have an opportunity to obtain an Austrian state scholarship after they have successfully enrolled in a Serbian state university first. Ljubljana and Maribor are also among the destinations that are increasingly gaining in popularity. From this follows that, contrary to the declared intention to leave the country immediately and the strong expression of readiness to never look back, the latest young and educated migrants thoroughly reflect on the pros and cons of the opportunities opened by (prospective) migration and act more strategically in their decision-making. They differ from the previous generations of “brain drainers”, particularly their

counterparts from the 1990s, in that they are not prone to making final decisions but rather leave their options open as long as possible to be able to adjust to various circumstances and maintain a space for negotiating different personal and family needs, wants and obligations. A growing number of youngsters is getting familiar with the idea that they need not settle abroad for good, and see their future life trajectory as a constant search for better opportunities and for their well-being which can be accomplished in different places – far away from home, but not exclusively.

Towards the end: negotiating between home and hope

Youth is an important social category in all societies because it is seen as the representation and embodiment of the future. Therefore every society takes particular care of the young, develops discourses about its place, functions and meanings in society, and stresses their social role and importance for the development of society. The aspirations of the young, their attitudes towards society and their plans for the future can be considered a better indicator of life quality in a society than official state and institutional proclamations and promises of “what is to be done”. The experience of many underdeveloped and developing countries shows that the young “vote with their feet”. This means that the rising number of those imagining, wishing and longing to leave gives a rather gloomy picture of Serbian society and its prospects.

Serbia has the experience of its socialist past when the youth was pictured and dealt with as an objectification of a “future oriented” communist ideology. In the same way, the contemporary Serbian society wants to embrace its young generation that is growing up in a different social, political and ideological context of the post-socialist and post-Yugoslav world, as tokens of the democratic transformation society is supposed to go through. The question is whether Serbian society is capable of providing a concrete, tangible better future for the young (and particularly young and educated). Since the answer is not clear and satisfactory enough, the new generation actively engages in creating alternative plans for their future, including migration. Members of the youth population try to postpone the final decision to go, moving back and forth between their homes and neighbouring countries, thus acting strategically to achieve better control over their lives. In that way they actually give themselves more time to be able to optimize their chances for a “normal life” wherever they think they can realize it.

As the mother of one of the Serbian students in Graz put it, four years of studying abroad, the experience of European student life, a need to provide for himself and to take responsibility for many decisions related to maintaining eve-

ryday life, have profoundly affected the way her son is looking at his future. The imagined future for this young man is no longer related to the idea of “coming back home” after studying abroad, nor is it necessarily connected to considerations about his home society’s common future. Being on their own from the very beginning in imagining, planning, organizing and in most cases providing financial support for their education abroad, many of the young people do not feel any obligation to invest their newly acquired knowledge, skills and experience into the development of their home society. Or, to put it differently, if they do so they have high expectations regarding the economic, social and cultural standards of living and working that they got used to while living and learning abroad.

Both the young people and their families say that they have difficulties in handling their separation and overcoming feelings of longing and homesickness. This is particularly evident in the first months after leaving, and I have been given a lot of illustrative examples of the ways through which the „spirit of home” has been recreated in the new environment. These include decorations of the dormitory rooms in order to make them more “home-like”, filling them with objects and things that will offer comfort, and also bringing in “tastes of home” through domestic food provided by visiting parents. Nevertheless, all of them are aware of the fact that leaving the parental home and distancing themselves from their family of birth contributes to opening up other, more promising life perspectives. This is a kind of “sacrifice” all of them have to make in order to create space for imagining their future, an act that is in itself of great importance for the creation of identities. In that way, as they all hope, they will beat the feeling of “entrapment” palpable in many Serbian youth narratives about the motives for migration. In other words, if they want to create real opportunities for themselves, to be able to seize life’s chances, to realize life-projects whose elements and contours are revealed through the constant flow of narratives, experiences, images and mobile subjects, they should move in search of a “better home”, at least for some time until, they hope, things change for the better. Or they can turn to a different scenario and altogether reconceptualize the idea of home, working out some kind of post-traditional identities, and discovering the potentials of cosmopolitan being, learning how to be “at home in the world”.

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