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Inherited or Authentic Civic Passiveness among the Young People in Macedonia

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Abstract

This paper deals with the values, priorities and political behavior of the young people in the Republic of Macedonia. Data from recent researches are used to show the main specificities of the young generation from the aspect of their political culture. Results show domination of apathy, dissatisfaction, opportunism and civic passiveness, which should not be characteristic for generations born and socialized after the political transformation in the country.

Keywords: Young generations, political apathy, civic passiveness

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1. Introduction

This text will be focused on the values and the priorities of the young generation in Macedonia. It is inspired by one of the most acute problems of this society – large numbers of young people leaving the country. It motivated the analysis of the reasons for it, as well as the basic characteristics of the political culture of the young generation which result in depopulation of the country.

The text will be based on the research data collected in the last two years within a project "Correspondence of the Youth policies and the Priorities of the Young People in Macedonia [1], The project included: a face to face poll with 900 respondents on the age 16-29 (representative for the country), 9 focus groups with participants with different ethnic background, place of living and employment status. Complementary, a content analysis was made of the policies of the Government regarding the young people.

The basic research questions regarded: the priorities of the young people, their values and perceptions of their perspectives.

In analyzing this problem one must have in mind that the context surrounding this topic is quite complicated. Macedonia in the last few years went through intense political turbulences and deep social and economic crisis, which greatly reflected on the young generations, which is apparent in the data to be presented.

2. The Context

> 'The long lasting process of transition of Macedonian society from socialist to liberal model of democracy, bred conclusion that for this passage to be successful it is not necessary to have just declarative intentions of the key actors, but their coordinated and synchronized acting … For these twenty years, Macedonian society did not succeed to create preconditions for democratic consolidation, which influenced the perception of transition as a permanent condition…'
>
> (Jovevska, A., 2012)

This is what the Macedonian society looks like after two decades of slow social changes. In this processes there are several collateral damages. Among other failures, 'during these years the most vulnerable group was the youth that stayed on the margins of the society. The condition in which the young people were situated was deteriorating as the state periodically entered into social, economic and political crises.' (Gaber, K., Zafirov, T., Simoska, E., Atanasov, P., Naumovska, B., Lechevska, K., 2013) The unemployment rate of the youth groups reached above 50%. The youth were neither priority for the state nor they themselves attempted to struggle for bigger participation and influence within the societal mainstream. The young people did not secure equal place in the state processes of decision making concerning their future and consecutively they were not playing any proactive role.

Having in mind the above mentioned position, recent identity research conducted among student population in Republic of Macedonia showed that the personal identity at this age is much emphasized and that is becoming important part of the personality of the young people. The data showing certain generational movement and change from collective identity towards more individualized one. And so far the things look almost straightforward. But in the same research regarding the social context the feeling of huge distrust towards other people dominate even though the self-confidence has still strong presence. And here comes the answer that

[1] Project: "Correspondence of the youth policies and the priorities of the young people in Macedonia", conducted in 2015/2016 by the Institute for Social Analysis – Skopje and the Institute "Progress" from Skopje.

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> '… this distrust combined with the high unemployment rate and system of non-meritocracy prevailing, non-respecting the values as well, as are: honesty, sincerity and hardworking, make young people thinking more often for leaving the country at the first single opportunity.'
>
> (Atanasov, P., Naumovska, B., 2016)

Additionally, in relation to the national identity in Macedonia one can assume some general trends and processes. The Macedonians as a separate ethnicity have stable identification with the state, including the cultural and the political aspects. As a multicultural society, the ethnicity of the smaller communities are politicized and their identity is parallel to the dominant one (Atanasov and Simoska, 2013). The case of Macedonia, in particular, proves that the early life socialization in communist regime could not completely explain the construction of national identity image and the change of identity during the democratic period, because it also includes the multiethnic issue (Voinea, 2014). Among young Macedonians, personal identity has strong intensity, while among young Albanians, besides the personal identity there is a strong expression of religious and ethnic identity. The choice of own life trajectory is impeded by socio-economic crisis in which members of the groups are still facing their cultural barriers and "think" ethnically or collectively, fighting for more resources for their group. Obviously, young people in society live in a context in which collective identities accompanied with socioeconomic crisis not allow more distance from youth creating their own identity as a feature of contemporary democratic societies. If there is no development in the state, the rule of collective identities is more present and will not disappear in a short run, especially on ethnic and religious identity (Simoska, Naumovska and Atanasov, 2016).

It is a perfectly legitimate question to ask how much of ethnicity can actually be pronounced and articulated without disturbing the cohesion of the society. Negative context and present elements of strong ethnic distance speaks more towards model of ethnic confrontation than model of equilibrium. Civic elements like identities and values can contribute in the process of building new values that will breed signs of social integration. In Republic of Macedonia there is existence of strong ethnic identification, high social distance among ethnic communities and weak cross ethnic elements which could enable social integration. Ethnicity is not solely responsible for the ethnic divisions. There are deeper seated reasons interconnected with ethnicity that interfere in the current social fabric. Overcoming the situation where ethnic gaps hinder the social integration is a condition without which the Republic of Macedonia will not be able to produce a more civic society, greater development and progress, both as a country and as a society. In order to achieve this aim, the citizens of the Macedonian society will have to find more common civic goals and values. Current situation is not promising (Simoska, Naumovska and Atanasov, 2016).

It seems that the lasting social crisis, ethnic gaps, the never ending transition, the overall lack of development do not create perception that this societal space offers some bright future for the young people. If there is no chance for progress or some individual choices in relations to the quality of life, the feelings for the social context are negative, and the process of individualization is not in the positive correlation with the modern way of living at home. The case of escape takes place to the western and northern parts of Europe where the living conditions are much better. The attitude that 'nothing can be done' or that 'no one can change anything' are very strong in the minds of the young 'emigrants' from Macedonia.

3. Research Results

3.1 Results of the poll

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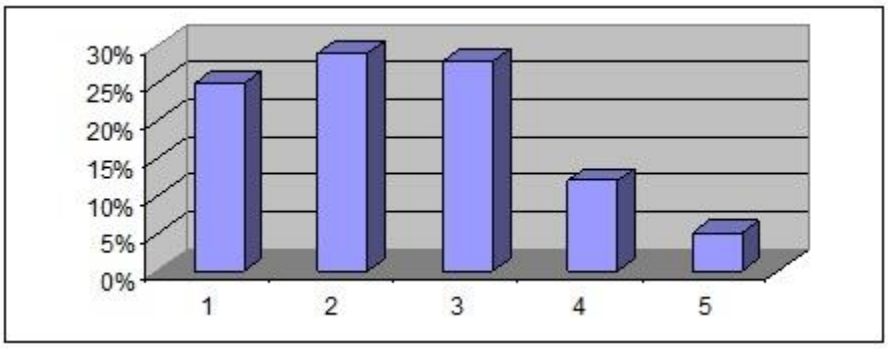
Generally, the research data fully confirm the main hypothesis of the research, that there is no correspondence between the government policies for the young people and their own priorities. Those policies (weather they are in a form of strategies or separate documents) do not resemble at all the needs, nor do they resemble the expectations of the young people. On the side of the young people this results in three general features which dominate among the young generation:

- Ignorance (The respondents in the research are not aware of the youth policies, nor of the different types of organizations which exist with a purpose to promote their status)
- Absence of initiative and activism
- Desire to leave the country

Regarding the first feature, there are over 50% of the respondents who are not familiar with the youth policies of the Government, or never heard that such exist. This concerns also their familiarity with the existing Strategy for the young people and various documents that regard those generations (both on national and local level). Nearly a quarter of the respondents have heard that such documents exist but were not interested to read their contents.

Only 24% respondents believe that the youth policies of the Government relate to their real priorities. All of them are members or supporters of political parties which are part of the Government.

However, regarding the question "*How much is the Government concerned with the young people?"* the results were different. The responses were ranking on a scale 1-5 (1 – being the lowest concern, and 5 – the highest) and the evaluation is the following (see **Figure 1**):



1	2	3	4	5
25%	9%	28%	12%	5%

Figure 1.

The ranks for the concern of the local government were even more negative.

Many of them (over two thirds believe that improvement can come if there is a special committee for young people as part of the Parliament). However, the existent organizations in the country which deal with the improvement of the status of the young generations or various NGOs with the same mission are familiar to **barely a third** of the respondents. This lack of interest prevails throughout the whole research, parallel to the expectation that "someone else" should solve all their problems.

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Regarding the priorities for the young people, according to the respondents, the Government should invest mostly in their education (40%) and the employment (46%), while only 7% think that a priority should be the participation of the young people in the decision making and their civic culture. To a great degree, this is a reflection of the list of their **biggest problems** (see **Figure 2**), as well as the list of their **highest priorities** (see **Figure 3**). According to the respondents, it is the following:

Biggest problem in their life

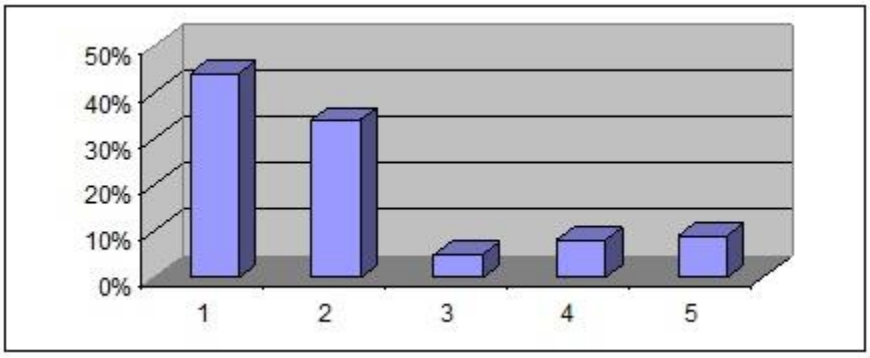

Figure 2.
1-Not having enough money; 2–Not seeing any perspective in Macedonia; 3–Problems with education; 4–Other; 5–Do not have problems.

Highest priority

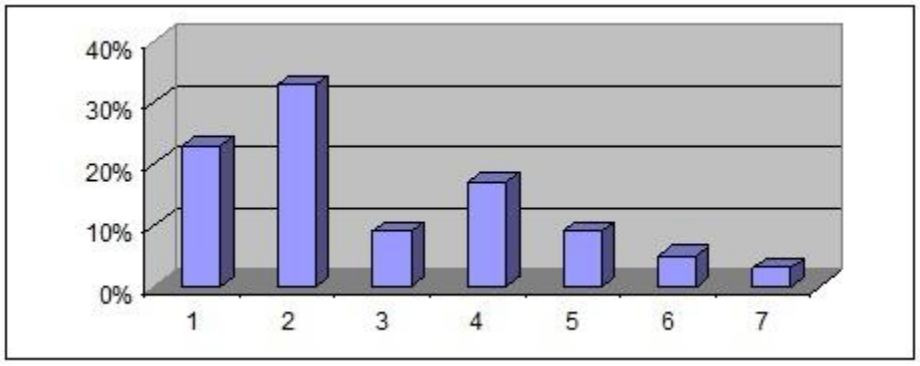

Figure 3.
1- To have enough money; 2- To have good health; 3- To complete the education; 4- To find a job; 5- To move out of Macedonia; 6- To have a family of their own; 7- To travel.

On a first sight, those lists are not very different than the lists of an average young person in many other countries. However, what is specific in this case, is the exhibited lack of initiative, ambition and engagement in the process of achieving those priorities. Many other researches conducted in the past decade show that Macedonian youth is passive and quite apathetic.[2]. According to this research, the young

[2] Project "Political Culture of the Young People in Macedonia" conducted by the Institute for Social Analysis in 2014; Project: "Youth Trends in R. of Macedonia, conducted by the Institute for Sociological, Political and Legal Research in 2014, as well as the projects: "Identities of the Student Population" (2014) and Youth Study Macedonia (2013).

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people mainly do not believe in the idea that they can organize themselves in order to achieve and practice their rights (only 31% share this idea). There are 32% who think that in this process they must ask for help experienced, older people; 8% would prefer help from political parties; 16% from the international institutions; 12% from NGOs and fortunately – only 1% think that young people should not be organized.

In the past few years there were several protests of the university students and high school students against some reforms in the educational system, which were soon silenced or fell apart. The organizations which led the protests, according to the present research, are not known to half of the polled population although there was significant media coverage of those events. It undoubtedly shows lack of interest of this population even when it concerns their own daily problems.

Interesting results can be found regarding the question how the young people would engage themselves in gaining and promotion of their rights. The answers to this were as follows:

1 By lobbying in the state and the local institutions	34%
2 Through NGOs	26%
3 Through protests, boycotts	14%
4 They would not be engaged at all	25%

A quarter of the young generations who admit they are not interested in their own problems is a disturbing figure (and, probably, even higher in reality!).

The actual engagement of the young people shows that organizing through political parties is the preferred way of participation. Even 62% of the respondents declared themselves as members of some political party and their youth organizations. Contrary to that, only 15% were active in an NGO, while there are 25% who were engaged on any kind of project (outside the educational institution they attend).

Those results are quite logical with respect to the actual and biggest division of the Macedonian society at this moment, which is based on belonging or supporting either a ruling or an opposition party. The view of a political party as a "keyword" is an obvious view in this research as well, if we look at the different groups of respondents. Regarding the previous questions, the differences among these groups are not related to their age, ethnic background, gender or place of living. These groups differ **only from the aspect of political affiliation**. The ones supporting a ruling party are more content with the policies of the Government and feel they **do not need** to be active and change anything. The others are not satisfied, but are equally inactive because they **do not believe they can** change anything.

In such a context, it is not surprising that the easiest way to solve their problems for many of them is to leave the country. Thus, only 26% of the respondents declared they would not leave the country and 11% would like to complete their education abroad but to come back. The rest of them – even 62% would leave Macedonia.

A similar question – "*Do they see their future in Macedonia?"* – provided for the following answers:

1 Yes they see their future in Macedonia	13%
2 Yes at the moment, but it could change	38%
3 No, but it can change if the society changes	32%
4 No future definitely	17%

There is one difference which is apparent regarding the last two questions, and it relates to the ethnic background of the respondents. Ethnic Macedonians are less satisfied with the conditions in

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Macedonia and the number of them who would leave the country is almost twice as big as compared to the ethnic Albanians.

The official statistical data confirm those trends.

3.2 General Findings from the Conducted Focus Groups

The results of the focus groups confirmed and explained in more detail the ones gathered with the poll.

Dissatisfaction and feeling of neglect dominate among almost all the participants. What is most disturbing is their belief that there is nothing to be gained by investing in the education, because the best students are most often unemployed. They are disappointed by the complete dependence of the employment from the political parties.

Macedonia is – according to the participants – a wonderful country, but is not a good place to live in. The pointed reasons are: the low standard of living, high unemployment, the fact that education is not appreciated, there is mobbing, no justice, no rule of law…

Those are the main reasons for the young people' wish to leave the country. The desire to leave the country is bigger among the participants from the smaller towns and the ethnic Macedonians.

Those who prefer to stay have only two priorities: to complete their education and to find a job. There are no higher ambitions.

Consequently to this, the participants think that it is very difficult for the young people to organize themselves. They are aware that they are not interested enough and that they experience many pressures from the political parties each time they try to do something. Many specific examples of political pressure were given.

The young people admit their opportunism, apathy and lack of interest. Only a smaller part of them declared that they would like to take part in the decision making on issues of their interest. But they had no idea how to achieve this goal.

4. Concluding Points

It is a well-known fact that the future of a society in a great deal depends on the youth of the country. In a theoretical debate, one would relate it to their political culture, to their values, their potential to change and advance the social processes. This can also be recognized in the rhetoric of the politicians, but only in the rhetoric. Unfortunately, in the real view of the political parties in Macedonia, but not only there, young people are perceived as numbers, votes or future obedient members. Such a mission is in a great deal accomplished, according to this case study. A turbulent political scene has resulted in a most numerous social group which does not believe in the society, nor in themselves. Fear, apathy and opportunism dominate, which is definitely hard to relate to their age. In addition, there is a very "sad figure" of young people (over 80%!) who envy their parents, because "they had a better life".

The most discouraging fact is that we are talking about the generations born after the transformation of the political system in the 1990s. These are the ones which benefited from civic education incorporated in all their education and went through numerous trainings for civic activism and participation. Apparently, the problem is not in re-socialization and re-valuing (as their parents had to go through). The values of those young people are newborn and authentic. And those values can be summarized in two words: passiveness and mistrust in their own potential.

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For a conclusion and a good illustration of the above data, we can quote a participant in one of the focus groups: "*We, the young people, cannot change anything. We are not capable and maybe we do not want to. However, there were not us to spoil this society. Let those who spoiled it – fix it now."*

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