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**POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND
EMOTIONS AMONG SOUTHEAST
EUROPEAN YOUTH:
WHAT MATTERS TO THEM AND
WHAT THEY STRIVE FOR?**

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Southeast European Youth:
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Political Participation and Emotions among Southeast European Youth: What Matters to Them and what They Strive For?

Summary

This report discusses how young people from EU and non-EU Southeast European countries understand politics, important social issues, how they feel and what they (would) do about these issues. Statistics usually fail to capture young people's motivations to take part in political processes by overlooking their understanding of politics, which we believe is crucial when grasping the perspectives of new generations. This qualitative research report emphasizes that young people from SEE countries understand politics as a process rather than a one-time event. They are disinterested because they find politics difficult and think political discussions should be nurtured from a younger age. Feelings of powerlessness, confusion, and ambivalence about their influence on

decisions are followed by the alternative of going abroad. They have the need for communal support and think small progress is important to achieve the desirable political change. They share optimism about the future, conditioned by more competent leadership and institutions.

Fight for the Future or Flight elsewhere

Recent studies indicate that 54.3% of youth in Croatia, 38% in Serbia, and 80% in Montenegro are *not interested in politics* (Ilišin, Spajić Vrkaš 2017; Western Balkans Democracy Initiative Report 2019; Stojanović, Ivković, Kaličanin 2023). 71.5 % of Montenegrin youth do *not follow political affairs*, and 86% of Serbian youth do not follow or follow them occasionally.

And how could they?

More than 50% of Montenegrin youth *do not even understand* the most important political issues in society; half also think that political news in the domestic media is *boring*.

Moreover, research in these countries indicates that young people are distrustful of politicians and political parties (e.g., 83% in Serbia), dissatisfied with the state of democracy (e.g., 58% in Croatia), and think that all politicians are alike (e.g., 70% in Montenegro).

Therefore, it is no surprise that young people are mostly *not politically involved*. They don't feel politicians represent their values, consider youth issues, or invite them to participate in decision-making processes. They are disregarded in politics due to their *inexperience* but offered *no opportunity* to gain it, especially in local communities outside the capital.

Despite recognizing *urgent issues* in their societies, young people's disinterest and non-involvement might seem puzzling. These issues will undoubtedly *affect their future*, yet paradoxically, they are unmotivated to fight for

change.

The paradox is only seemingly present, as these young people have a literal *exit plan*: to leave the country in the foreseeable future and build their future elsewhere (e.g., as many as 70% of Montenegrin youth think about leaving the country). Why participate in the politics of their country if they can go somewhere better?

Let's Ask Them instead

Previous research shows a general trend of *pluralization* of political participation models to meet new generations' needs and a greater tendency towards *online* modes of participation among youth (Chrysochoou, Barrett 2017). It is necessary to explore in more depth young people's aversion to politics, in connection to their understanding of politics, the meaning of political participation, the issues that concern them, and their feelings about these issues. This research is based on focus groups with **young people, aged 18–30 from both non-EU and EU SEE countries: Croatia (Rijeka), Serbia (Belgrade), and Montenegro (Podgorica).**

Politics that Matters

The youth in all three countries have a wider understanding of politics, both top-down and bottom-up. While for some, "*each person has their own politics of living,*" most of them have a wider, more communal understanding of politics, either as a reciprocal way of "*accommodating conflictual interests*" or institutional/non-institutional "*management and coordination of important collective social issues, or simply the things that need to be worked on which concern the societal majority or society in total.*"

They mostly understand politics as a bottom-up *process*, something gradual and slow, from many wishes to one policy:

"The house isn't built from the roof."

Most of them find political issues and the way they are presented in the media *difficult, exhausting, and boring*, which is why most of them are *disinterested* in politics. It strikes as important that several participants mentioned politics as being "for adults" or "for older people." Two major factors that young people think increase interest in politics are

- nurturing political discussion and
- topics that concern them.

"The consciousness about politics has always been there [in the family], like it's an important thing you need to think about."

The youth think it is necessary to "form political literacy" from a very young age, not only by raising political discussions within families, but also by bringing debate clubs and classes to schools. They need diverse opportunities to *meaningfully* engage in discussion on political issues while growing up and a platform to learn to think and act politically.

In my school, we have many of those formats where we debate and argue. I am usually the one to set my attitude and I rarely give up on it, but if the *discussion is heated* and full of tension, *I will consider* what they were saying afterwards, and more so than if the debate was calm and just based on discussion. (...) the conversation where you feel *tension and drama* is a good conversation because it results in *questioning myself*, what I was talking about, what I actually believe in.

Otherwise, politics becomes *"something you watch on TV."*

But why would a young person who has not learned about the relevance of politics from childhood become interested? As it is stated, at some point *"simply, a person*

must inform themselves, they must know their rights, what and how to do, what are their possibilities, stuff like that in general. That is why I started entering and reading more about it, and because I plan to go abroad, which is sad, almost all young people plan to go abroad, but maybe it is also because of that – that is one reason I do not want to enter politics more deeply.”

Even though many of them *grew up thinking* they will leave their country one day, most of them realize the relevance of politics for everyday life, because they have an interest in their salary, promotion, health care system, and how things work or don't work in society. They seem rather *ambivalent* when it comes to going abroad, and even those who consider leaving think they will come back eventually. While Montenegrin youth appeared the most inclined towards leaving, many among them expressed a pronounced communal and historical sensibility:

F: I would like to stay here and give my political contribution to this country, and I cannot, I will end up on the bureau for the next 50 years and my grandchildren are also going to stay on the bureau.

F2: I think we all have the power in our hands and, I don't know, you can always decide upon your own life, that is, what are you going to do and think.

F: Well, I cannot decide on my country from another one.

The youth see the gap between the descriptive (how it is) and normative (how it should be) state of affairs. The difference is made between *those who accept and those who oppose the status quo*, based on what concerns them.

Some people's existence is inherently politicized, and their bare existence directly depends on politics, which is how I realized that I cannot afford not to deal

with what is happening in my country because if my friends are not safe, then I simply cannot exist normally and then, like, I think that also drew me deeper into all that [politics].

Nobody trusts their government and the politicians, and they want political change. They don't feel represented by their respective governments. The problem is not in democracy itself, but rather in the *lack of basic civility and respect*, which they see as conditions of representative democracy. They think the feeling of efficacy (*I can make a change*) also needs to be nurtured from a young age by *participation and active research*.

INCREASE IN FUNCTIONAL KNOWLEDGE ON POLITICS
INCREASE IN SUBJECTIVE EFFICACY
INCREASE IN PARTICIPATION

But what do they feel they can do? They either feel unable to have an influence on decision-making processes or be prevented from it; many are ambivalent, stuck between having no possibility and having too much of it.

When you start solving something, and you see just how much you don't understand; I often feel *powerless*, and on the other hand I feel *overwhelmed*, now I have to disentangle my possibilities from all that, and, what you say, to argument and choose the best option, while I don't even know what options exist, I don't even know what factors influence each option.

Despite that, the processual understanding of politics helps to realize that the *struggle is also gradual* and begins with small steps:

Even though 100 times we run into closed doors and rejections and threats, like, but maybe the 10th time something will open up, even something small and,

like, still, we don't need to question ourselves that much, I think, before we step into, but first step into and then build something along the way.

“Something has to change”

What do the youth care about? What are their concerns and wishes regarding their countries?

concerns	wishes
<input type="checkbox"/> corruption in the political institutions	✓ competence-based system organization (meritocracy)
<input type="checkbox"/> wars and immigration	✓ better legislative regulation of private investments (against big companies exploiting the country, bet shops, etc.)
<input type="checkbox"/> capitalism-related issues (consumerism, financial instability, precariousness)	✓ civility and the culture of responsibility
<input type="checkbox"/> human rights violations	✓ high-quality education and better cultural upbringing
<input type="checkbox"/> women's rights hypocrisy around questions such as abortion	✓ economic investments in culture and sports
<input type="checkbox"/> low-quality healthcare	
<input type="checkbox"/> low-quality education	

They also single out the problem of *small towns and local communities* with regards to economic investments in infrastructure (traffic lights, libraries etc.) and with regards to political participation and activism:

The young people in local communities do not have opportunities at all. I had waited to come to Belgrade to be able to actively involve myself.

This might be what they think, but how do they feel? There are motivating and debilitating emotions. While some feel discouraged, helpless, disappointed, and

melancholic, others feel frustrated, angry, and in panic (*what if*), but they all share the sentiment that *something must change*.

Discouraged. I think we don't have influence on any of that and it bothers me because I think about how the state will look like in 20 years while I was watching and doing nothing. So, I feel like I don't have the power to influence that;

I believe each of us makes an influence, because that society is precisely us, all of us, so if we can criticize, we also need to know that we are part of it, we helped it.

The activists among them say they feel unsafe at the protests because of the *police brutality* and emphasize the importance of *non-naïve activism* and *taking care of oneself* not to get hurt, burn out or give up too soon.

"I will show up at the protest"

Youths in SEE countries think that politics is badly advertised; it is never positive, it is always about something bad happening. They find previous generations disappointed due to failed revolutions and, by wanting to protect them from politics, did a disservice to them. The young now *do not want bandages*, or to treat symptoms anymore; they want *thorough societal change*. They think it is their civic duty to engage for "other's concerns" as well, not just their own because they consider society to function like a *domino* effect. Once, bad healthcare impacts you, but tomorrow it will impact me because society is interconnected.

However, unlike a few activists, most of them are more inclined to *support but not initiate* political activism:

I will show up at the protest. But to organize something from scratch, out of the blue, probably not.

They need *communal support* or a charismatic leader of the protests. Some of them, e.g., boys from Montenegro,

would engage in informal but not formal politics because it corrupts people (“sneakers and sweatsuit, but not a suit and a chair”). It is their way of moving away from ‘bad politics’ into politics that matters. Almost all of them are inspired by *even small* acts (“trying to cheer me up”); they would participate in civic protests, some are vocal on social media at least sometimes for political issues, most of them go and would go to elections, and some are more directly involved in non-institutional politics (through civil society organizations, movements, or student parliament). Others, who don’t participate in any way, not even in elections, are not passive but *passivized* by the perception of the futility of struggles due to personal connections and corruption that drive politics.

What would motivate you to engage more?

F: Maybe to see some bigger change, to see that *we too have some impact* on things. Bigger change makes me more motivated.

M: To see that *it can be done*.

F: That *it’s not futile*.

F2: Or, like, that more people are going, not just, like, I go and nobody else from my generation does; I mean, *it is futile if I am alone for years*.

Back to the (Shared) Future

Where do young people from SEE countries stand on imagining the (shared SEE) future? While there are those who will most probably leave their countries, most of them actually care about the future of their countries and think it is *possible for it to be better* than the current state. ‘Better’ means more financially developed and stable, non-corrupted, culturally unified, democratized towards substantial multipartyism, less violent and polarizing, more empathetic and respectful, more ecologically consciousness and actionable, more media bright (not

dark), both politically free and more responsible for speaking.

That simply we are all in this together. and that simply we should work together to make all this good for everyone.

However, they don't see any of this without political change and instilling a new system and new people in the government. Non-EU countries see these as conditions for entering the EU, and they all think *regional collaboration* is of pivotal importance, but "a successful state is a condition of good international collaboration." Even though they acknowledge the impact of recent or current conflicts in the region on the possibilities of regional collaboration in the foreseeable future, they do not understand the collaboration in interethnic terms:

I am talking about some global higher good, which we all strive towards. That it is not important whether you are a Serb, a Croat, or a Montenegrin, Janko, Marko, but that, simply, we should create some sort of community which could really function with, as she said, competent and expert staff.

Tko je Nina Skočak? Recommendations for SEE youth's political socialization

Problem: towards changing the culture of youth politicization

△ Recommendation: Scaffold political interest by encouraging participation in political discussions and forming political literacy from childhood. Discuss news, and discuss social issues in a politically potent way (raise awareness of the policies and their changeability to combat the naturalistic view of the status quo). Do not protect them from politics and do not teach them that politics is bad. It is okay to ask your family members who they vote for and why!

Addressees: parents and relatives

Problem: towards better policies of youth engagement in formal educational settings

△ Recommendation: Introduce platforms for more formal institutional debating and discussion of political issues within the school curriculum, such as obligatory courses and debate clubs. Bring politics closer to pupils and students, make it more interesting and creative, and explore societal topics in a polemic way, by raising constructive tension instead of dulling rationalistic discourse. Engage them more. Listen to them, do not impose solutions and do not imply they are infantile. Young people have much more to say than we give them credit for.

Addressees: Ministry of education, school officials, teachers and pedagogical staff

Problem: towards better practices of youth engagement in their local communities

△ Recommendation: Since successful action fosters further motivation for civic/political engagement, while repeatedly unsuccessful action discourages it, it is important that activists pay attention to how they communicate about their actions. Small victories should be celebrated. Also, since there is growing political repression of protests and other forms of civic mobilization, accompanied by police brutality and other, uncivil protesters attacks, activists should take care of each other, prepare better for possibly unsafe situations, talk to each other about how they feel to combat the burnout feelings of exhaustion, melancholy, and eventually apathy.

Addressees: social activists, politically engaged and hesitant citizens

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