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Exploring the Democratic Potential of Digital Gen Z Workers Across Southeast Europe

From Skopje to Pristina to Zagreb, a growing number of young people are working in the global digital market for international clients, earning Western salaries and building careers on their own terms. Yet far too little attention has been paid to what this quiet escape from conventional employment and clientelism may entail for the democratic realities and futures of the countries in Southeast Europe (SEE). This policy essay examines the lives of Generation Z digital workers in the region, aiming to bring their experiences and potential to the attention of the general public, policymakers, and democracy advocates. By digital Gen Z workers, we mean young people who participate in global digital markets as freelancers, entrepreneurs, or employees of firms serving international clients, and who, in this capacity, are independent of existing national economic and societal structures. While many countries in the region continue to struggle with partisan influence over weak institutions and broader democratic

fragility (Maliqi, 2020; Cvetičanin et al., 2023; Gordy et al., 2025), the democratic capacity of Gen Zs remains largely unexamined by promoters of democratic development in the region. This essay examines how digital market participation shapes their lives and reflects on what policy directions could reinforce their role as agents of positive societal and political change.

The spread of digital Gen Z workers in Southeast Europe is significant, with North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia ranking among the top countries worldwide by number of registered freelancers per capita (Jovanova Stoilkova et al., 2021; Anđelković et al., 2025). In parallel, many companies, drawn by a skilled yet affordable workforce, have established outsourcing branches in ICT, customer support, and logistics services, serving international clients on the global market by predominantly employing young professionals on competitive salaries (Selimi & Shllaku, 2021). This has generated a rise in digital market opportunities, which in turn has granted many young people a degree of economic autonomy that was not available to earlier generations, who grew up under socialism or during the tumultuous transition period, when party loyalty regularly outweighed meritocracy. Yet it remains unclear whether this economic autonomy translates into political or civic capacities to challenge illiberal tendencies and entrenched systems of political and economic power. Therefore, the essay aims to provide some insights on whether and how the economic autonomy of digital Gen Z workers translates into political agency.

This essay is part of a broader study based on a qualitative and interpretative research design.[1] The core component consists of semi-structured interviews with freelancers, digital employees, and entrepreneurs aged 22–30, comparing non-EU contexts (North Macedonia and Kosovo) with an EU member state (Croatia) to capture how different institutional environments shape political imaginaries and democratic agency. Twenty interviews have been conducted – seven in North Macedonia, seven in

[1] The interview findings are presented here in a general, summarized form. A more detailed analysis will be developed into a research article. Interviewee names have been modified to guarantee their confidentiality.

Kosovo, and six in Croatia – with a balanced sample of ten male and ten female participants, of whom eleven are freelancers and nine are company employees or startup founders working in the digital market.

The following findings show how digital Gen Z workers navigate the opportunities and constraints of the Southeast European context. The analysis first explores their pathways into global digital markets and how these opportunities have enabled new forms of professional development, economic autonomy, and social mobility outside traditional power structures. It then turns to the risks and insecurities that accompany digital work. Further, the essay examines how these experiences shape attitudes toward institutions, politics, and civic engagement. Taken together, these insights provide a basis for assessing the democratic potential of this emerging group of young professionals and identifying policy directions that could help translate its economic independence into broader societal and political impact.

Global Opportunities Beyond Local Constraints

The digital workers interviewed for this study come from remarkably diverse educational and professional backgrounds, reflecting the low formal barriers to entry that characterize the global digital economy. Some arrived through highly skilled professional routes, such as architecture, software engineering, and industrial design, while others transitioned from entirely unrelated fields such as hospitality and transport. Atanas (28) from North Macedonia, for instance, abandoned machine engineering studies, spent two years as a flight attendant for Qatar Airways, and then became a sales officer for an American company in Skopje. He describes the lesson he drew from that detour: *"All these experiences and the fact that I don't have a formal education made me realize that I have to be versatile on the market."* What unites digital professionals is not a shared educational trajectory but a shared pragmatic orientation: the recognition, often arrived at through trial and error, that digital markets reward demonstrable skill and output over credentials or connections. For many, the move into digital work was less a deliberate career choice and more a grad-

ual discovery of a space where their abilities could be valued and compensated on terms unavailable locally.

The advantages respondents associate with digital work cluster consistently around freedom and flexibility, typically the ability to structure their own time, choose their gigs and clients, and work remotely from wherever they want. Salaries represent perhaps the most immediate and tangible benefit, with digital workers often earning multiples of what equivalent roles on local markets offer, fundamentally improving their material well-being and life opportunities. Beyond income, respondents describe exposure to international business cultures characterized by greater professionalism and meritocracy than what they typically encounter in local employment, an experience that reshapes not only how they work but how they expect to be treated. As Elena (29) from Skopje observed while working in a foreign outsourcing company, *"There is no micromanagement and the primitive mentality of our typical (local) bosses,"* which stands in sharp contrast to her earlier hospitality employment. Working with clients across Europe, North America, and beyond broadens their horizons, expanding both their professional networks and their sense of what is possible. Perhaps most meaningfully, the digital economy is experienced as a space where competence is genuinely rewarded: as mechanical design engineer Avni (28) from Kosovo notes, *"If you are dedicated and work hard, you are instantly rewarded*," a principle that sits in stark contrast to local environments where advancement typically depends on whom you know rather than what you can do.

Further, participation in the global digital market has been a powerful driver of continuous learning, with most respondents describing self-directed skill acquisition driven by market demand rather than formal instruction. The dominant mode is learning by doing: taking on projects that stretch existing capabilities, encountering new tools and methodologies through client requirements, and investing personal time in keeping pace with a rapidly evolving professional landscape. Formal education appears largely as a background framework, useful for initial orientation but insufficient on its own, as the most commercially rel-

evant knowledge is accumulated through practice, curiosity, and the competitive pressure of the global marketplace. Croatian digital marketing specialist Mario (22) is one of the few who credited his university studies for providing him with the essential foundational knowledge: *"[My] basic knowledge was due to university, but it's important to remain active in the industry as work relationships, communication skills, speed, and finesse are gained through concrete work."*

Social Mobility Outside Traditional Power Structures

Entry into the global digital market creates real opportunities for professional growth and transformative upward mobility. Several participants mention rapid career progression, such as taking the lead on more complex projects, securing better-paying clients, moving from platform-based freelancing to longer-term contractual relationships with foreign firms, within relatively short timeframes. They often mention a sense of confidence: the experience of being selected, promoted, and well-compensated by international clients has strengthened respondents' sense of professional self-worth in ways that local employment rarely offers. For some – particularly those from Kosovo and North Macedonia, where local market options are more constrained – access to the global digital economy represents not merely a career upgrade but a fundamental expansion of what they could realistically aspire to. As Fidan (22), an SEO specialist and start-up founder from North Macedonia, notes, *"Macedonia is a small market, but when you work digitally, the whole world is the market."*

Across the board, respondents describe themselves as materially and socially better positioned than their parents were at a similar age, and considerably better off than peers who remained in offline sectors. The digital economy has accelerated their path to financial independence, allowing young people in their mid-to-late twenties to achieve living standards and professional standing that previous generations reached, if at all, considerably later. When respondents compare themselves to childhood friends who work in public administration, retail, or traditional services, they note substantial differences in both income and profession-

al advancement. As Ines (29), a creative strategist from Zagreb, puts it, *"In terms of financial and social status, I am better off than my parents and considerably better off than most of my peers."*

Lastly, respondents are consistent and emphatic on one point: partisan and clientelist influence is, in their perception, a problem now limited to the public sector and to those whose livelihoods depend on state employment or public contracts. As Pristina-based customer support specialist Ermira (28) notes: "*Young people can achieve a lot without party affiliation – but at a state institution, there is no good job without party support.*" Working in globally oriented digital markets, they regard themselves as structurally insulated from party pressure. Their professional advancement depends on the quality of their work and the reputation they build with international clients, not on political connections or institutional favor. They describe this independence as both a practical advantage and a point of personal pride, associating it with a meritocratic logic that contrasts sharply with the patronage-driven dynamics of the local structure around them.

The Other Side of Digital Freedom

While it does provide global opportunities, digital market participation also exposes workers to global volatility in ways that local employment does not. Respondents are aware that the conditions enabling their current livelihoods are not guaranteed: both freelancers and employed digital workers point to the rapid rise of AI as a potential disruptor of precisely the kinds of tasks, such as graphic design, content writing, coding, customer support, have provided many of them with their professional footholds. Some also point to competition from lower-cost workers in other global economies, particularly in Asia, which creates persistent downward pressure on rates and forces difficult choices between price competitiveness and professional standards. Others note the potential risk of regulatory and fiscal changes in major client markets, particularly the United States, where potential restrictions or taxes on foreign labor could significantly alter the economics of remote work for the region's digital workers.

The vulnerabilities embedded in the employment arrangements themselves are equally significant, even when respondents maintain a relatively relaxed attitude toward them. The absence of formal contracts, social insurance, and labor protections leaves many exposed in ways that will become more consequential as their life circumstances evolve. Avni (28), for instance, had been working for a company without a contract for ten months. In his words: *"It's not secure at all... they can dismiss you at any moment, and you must be prepared for that*." Moreover, the absence of formal contracts also undermines creditworthiness, making it difficult for freelancers to access mortgages, loans, or other financial services. Blerina (25), an architect from Mitrovica, describes the psychological texture of income volatility, with periodic "quiet" periods creating real anxiety. She admits, *"Sometimes I wish I had a base salary to sleep soundly at night*," as one of the top-ranking freelancers in the region on Upwork. In other words, while the global digital market provides opportunities, it is also marked by structural dependency, platform rules, technological shifts, and precarious labor practices over which individual workers have no control.

Finally, several respondents critically reflect on the broader social and economic implications of their professional choices. Many engagements are project-based and one-off, generating personal income while contributing little to the productive or innovative powers of local economies, a dynamic that sits uneasily with respondents who retain a sense of attachment to their communities and countries. The brain drain dimension is acknowledged most honestly by Ana (30): "*As someone born in Macedonia, I'm not happy I give my labor to a foreign country. I think our capacities shall be materialized here [at home]. Still, I have some hope that one day I'll open my own company and provide opportunities to young people that I didn't have*." At the same time, many say that if there were no access to the digital market and no opportunity to earn at Western rates, they would have already emigrated. "*I'd definitely move abroad! I must work for an American or German company, because one here that can pay you that well,*" says Naum (28), a software engineer from Skopje. For many young people,

digital work has delayed or prevented their potential departure, channeling their ambitions and energies into the local economy by other means. It is also worth noting that despite directing their labor toward foreign markets, digital workers contribute to their local economies by spending their foreign-earned income domestically and, in some cases, reinvesting in local businesses or communities.

Empowered But Disengaged

Respondents show markedly different levels of institutional satisfaction depending on their country, with Croatian respondents generally expressing greater confidence in public institutions than their counterparts in North Macedonia and Kosovo, where frustration is more pronounced, and expectations are correspondingly lower. Across all three contexts, however, dissatisfaction converges around a common set of concerns: institutions are seen as slow, unaccountable, and not oriented toward the needs of citizens and businesses. Respondents particularly criticize the limited digitalization of public services, which they see as a jarring contrast to the seamless, technology-driven environments in which they work professionally. Taxation and administrative complexity also feature prominently as sources of frustration, with many feeling that the current regulatory environment obstructs rather than supports economic initiative.

Respondents vary considerably in how closely they follow political developments, ranging from those who engage attentively in current affairs and civic debates to those who deliberately maintain distance from politics, which they find unedifying and largely irrelevant to their daily lives. What is striking, however, is that virtually all respondents vote, not out of enthusiasm, but out of a sober conviction that electoral participation is the minimum available mechanism for influencing the direction of their societies. Lovro (24), a web designer from Zagreb, captures a widespread mood: *"I vote for whoever I think will rob me the least."* Beyond voting, their civic engagement is moderate and selective: most do not belong to political organizations or civil society groups, though several have participated in protests on issues

they considered important, and a smaller number are involved in NGO work or local community initiatives.

Most respondents express limited interest in political engagement. Having built professional and personal lives that function largely outside the reach of the political system, many see little immediate reason to invest energy in reforming a system from which they have already, to a meaningful degree, escaped. Politics is widely perceived as a domain populated by those who lack the merit-based qualities to succeed in competitive markets, a view that reinforces disengagement by framing civic withdrawal as the rational choice of the capable. Naum expresses this with a characteristic bluntness: it is "possible but unlikely" for digital Gen Zs to take on greater political roles, because "*that's not their call; they don't feel the urge – when you see who you have to deal with, it doesn't seem worth it*." Matea (30), a UX/UI designer from Osijek, has a more nuanced observation: "*The more people are independent, the less interested they are in politics... because they are already accomplished in their lives and don't need politics. (...) They'd only react to issues that concern them personally*." She notes that political or social engagement is often perceived as costly: "*You'll probably get hurt... It's simply not worth it*."

Lastly, opinions on personal capacity to influence society are genuinely divided. Some respondents believe that if they chose to become more active, their professional skills, networks, and economic independence would position them to make a real difference; they generally frame disengagement as a choice rather than a structural constraint. Others are more skeptical, pointing to the unchanging nature of entrenched party structures and the difficulty of translating individual capability into collective political impact. A notable thread across several interviews, however, points to a form of civic engagement that bypasses existing political and social channels. For instance, many respondents express willingness to contribute through knowledge transfer and mentorship, sharing their professional experience with younger people who lack the guidance they themselves had to do without. Pristina-based graphic designer Elvis (29) expresses a desire to go into schools and "*advise young people on how to start a digital*

job for free ... what's good and what's bad," adding *"when I started this journey, I was alone, no one helped me... and now I would like to bring something to the community and help."*

Looking Forward: Unleashing a New Middle Class

To summarize, across North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Croatia, respondents consistently highlighted the opportunities for professional development, higher incomes, merit-based advancement, and social mobility that digital work creates. At the same time, they identified a range of vulnerabilities, including employment insecurity, platform dependence, and exposure to global market fluctuations. While most expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of public institutions and maintained a certain distance from formal politics, many also demonstrated a strong sense of personal responsibility, community attachment, and willingness to contribute to society in the future through various forms of civic engagement.

Digital Gen Z workers represent something genuinely new in the political economy of Southeast Europe: a generation that has achieved meaningful economic independence outside the conventional social structures, without the need for family connections or political party affiliation. Their livelihoods are built on skill, reputation, and access to global markets, a combination that places them structurally outside the clientelist networks that have historically bound citizens to political machines and suppressed independent civic life. Democracy requires a vibrant, capable, and genuinely independent middle class to function. These young digital workers are, in many respects, the first generation in the region for whom that independence is a lived reality rather than an aspiration. Yet as this study has shown, economic autonomy does not automatically translate into democratic agency. These folks remain largely disengaged from formal politics, skeptical of collective action, and ambivalent about investing civic energy in institutions they have learned to distrust, some through direct experience. Their democratic potential is real and significant, but it is latent, individualized, and at risk of remaining permanently untapped. Unlocking it will require deliberate effort from policy-

makers, democracy promoters, and the emerging leaders among digital professionals.

The most immediate task for policymakers is to create an enabling environment in which digital workers can operate without unnecessary frictions, and in doing so, signal that the state regards them as an asset rather than a nuisance. This means simplifying and digitalizing administrative procedures, reducing bureaucratic red tape, and retraining public administration to be genuinely client-oriented rather than adversarial toward small businesses and independent digital professionals. Business support instruments need to be better calibrated to the actual cost structures of digital and creative sectors, moving away from one-size-fits-all grant schemes toward differentiated support that reflects the diversity of the digital economy. More broadly, governments should invest in structured pathways, career mentorship, digital skills training, and co-working infrastructure to encourage young people who have not yet discovered the digital economy, ensuring that its benefits are more widely distributed across the population.

For democracy promoters in the region, this study suggests the need for a fundamental reorientation in how Gen Z is understood and engaged. The dominant framing of youth as apathetic, vulnerable, or politically ignorant underestimates a generation that thinks independently and has already, through the simple act of building merit-based careers outside party structures, begun to erode the clientelist foundations of the illiberal equilibrium. Democracy promoters should work with this grain rather than against it: supporting the associational infrastructure, professional networks, sectoral organizations, and co-working communities within which the social trust necessary for collective civic action can develop organically. Initiatives that connect economic empowerment with civic engagement, rather than treating them as separate domains, are likely to be more effective than conventional political participation programs. Crucially, democracy promoters should also invest in amplifying the informal civic contributions that this generation is already making: mentorship, knowledge transfer, NGO work, and everyday professional conduct that represents their country well on the global stage.

Finally, the most powerful tool available to both policymakers and democracy promoters is the positive example of those who have already chosen to reinvest their digital success into their communities. A telling illustration is the case of digital entrepreneur Ivan Ivanovski, whose virtual masterclass platform for stock trading has equipped hundreds of young people with financial literacy that formal education rarely provides. Together with his network of young digital professionals, he also helped establish the *Support Kočani* crowd-funding initiative, launched in quick response to the tragic nightclub fire in 2025 to provide rapid and meaningful support for the affected local community. Similarly, Gorjan Jovanovski's *Moj Vozduh* mobile app, developed to monitor and visualize air quality data for citizens across North Macedonia, has significantly raised public awareness and catalyzed civic activism against air pollution in his home country. These examples demonstrate how digitally skilled young people can deploy their professional competences directly in the service of the public interest, translating technical expertise into tangible civic value. They also send an important message: that staying, contributing, and building something at home is a viable and admirable choice. Highlighting and promoting such models of engagement in media, schools, and policy forums can help shift the civic imagination of a generation that too often sees emigration as the only rational option, reminding everyone that the democratic renewal of this region may already be underway.

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