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GUEST EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE *BALKAN YOUTH IN THE AGE OF POLYCRISIS*

For successive generations of young people in Southeast Europe, growing up has meant finding their place in societies that were themselves being reshaped. Since the early 1990s, the region's post-socialist societies have undergone economic and political transitions, sociocultural transformations, and demanding and uneven processes of democratic institution-building. Some have also experienced wars whose sociocultural and economic consequences in various forms are still felt today. These local social and political changes, often accompanied by crises, have been compounded by global and European crises that have shaped, to varying degrees, the experiences of growing up among the current generation of young people. These range from the financial crisis and the crisis in the reception and protection of refugees and migrants to the COVID-19 pandemic, the democratic backsliding and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, alongside the increasingly pronounced consequences of the climate crisis. The concept of polycrisis emphasises causal interconnections between crises across different systems. These interactions can generate new forms of harm and intensify their combined impact beyond the sum of their separate effects (Lawrence et al., 2024). Their effects on young people's lives also depend on contemporary circumstances on a national level, which can mitigate or deepen existing social problems and insecurities. For many young people, even without the pressures of interconnected social crises, the transition to adulthood is often a demanding, uncertain and dynamic process involving taking on long-term roles and responsibilities in work, family and public life (Ilišin, 2007).

Research on young people during the transition period had already highlighted the importance of social position and family resources for opportunities in education, employment, and generally their prospects for achieving independence. It also showed that young people's life chances depend less on individual effort than on their position within the social structure, which constrains the choices available to them (Ilišin and Radin, 2007; Lavrič et al., 2019; Hasanović et al., 2024). Although young people constitute a socially and economically heterogeneous group and are socialised in different societies of the region, the research shows that they continue to share common problems, including difficulties in achieving economic independence, particularly employment insecurity and housing difficulties, while their parents remain an important source of socioeconomic support (Hasanović et al., 2024). At the same time, young people expect the state to provide social protection, even though their trust in national social and political institutions is often limited. These expectations raise questions about whether institutions can provide accessible support and enable young people to participate in decisions that affect their lives (Hasanović et al., 2024).

Understanding social inequalities and limited social mobility, particularly among young people

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from disadvantaged backgrounds, requires examining both how public institutions function and how their performance is perceived across different spheres of public life, from politics to healthcare. Across the region, institutions eroded by corruption and developed clientelist networks contribute to unequal access to public services and employment opportunities (Gordy et al., 2025), thereby affecting young people's quality of life and their prospects for economic independence.

Demands to combat deeply rooted corruption and establish accountability for the deaths of 16 people following the collapse of a canopy in Novi Sad in November 2024 mobilised young people, particularly students, in Serbia, and subsequently other segments of society, into a mass social and political movement. Beyond their immediate political objectives, these mobilisations demonstrated how, in a severe social and political crisis, solidarity, intergenerational dialogue and innovations in political action can make young people drivers of social and political change.

The Serbian example raises broader questions about young people's opportunities and potential to exert greater influence over the circumstances in which they live, and the conditions required for them to do so. Polycrisis provides the socio-historical context for considering the constraints young people encounter, the support they can draw on, and their opportunities to realise their own plans and visions of society.

This special issue brings together articles on young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Romania, North Macedonia, Slovenia and Serbia. The contributions examine educational inequalities and the transition to employment, value priorities and ethnic identity, political orientations and the meaning of political participation, and primary ties and coping with the developmental challenges of emerging adulthood.

Marija Topuzovska Latkovikj, Mirjana Borota Popovska and Nita Starova Spiroska examine changes in the situation of young people in North Macedonia by bringing together findings from the 2018/2019 and 2024 studies with complementary sources. Labour market indicators have improved, while educational dissatisfaction, limited political representation and strong migration aspirations have persisted. The article shows why employment opportunities need to be considered alongside institutional inclusion and young people's expectations of a fair and attainable future.

Lejla Osmić examines young people's transition from education to employment in the Sarajevo Canton, situating the findings within the wider context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. She considers how well education prepares young people for work, what opportunities they have to apply the knowledge and competencies they have acquired, and the extent to which career guidance is available to them. The transition to employment is thus considered a matter of social inclusion, connected to the support young people receive when making educational and occupational decisions.

Dejana Bouillet examines the institutional conditions of education from the perspective of teachers in Croatia. The teachers interviewed associate barriers to inclusiveness and equity with weaknesses in pedagogical practice, insufficient and uneven support, and insufficiently effective forms of professional development. At the same time, examples of their engagement and high-quality practice show how they can compensate for certain structural deficiencies. The article raises the question of the education system's responsibility for creating conditions in which support for students and teachers is systematic, rather than dependent on individual efforts.

The school as a space of belonging and identity formation is central to the article by Marijana Vitorović, Danijela S. Petrović and Nataša Simić. Using a sample of secondary school students in Serbia, the authors examine the associations between school-based ethnic socialisation approaches and students' ethnic identity exploration and commitment. A positive association between

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cultural socialisation and both dimensions of identity was confirmed among majority students, but not among minority students. The findings raise questions about how schools support identity development among students of different ethnic backgrounds and the extent to which their practices acknowledge different experiences of cultural diversity.

Miomirka Rakonjac, Bojana Miletić and Nataša Krivokapić explore the value dimension of growing up using European Social Survey data from Montenegro. Their analysis reveals a negative association between the relative priorities of openness to change and conservation, consistent with Schwartz's model of basic human values. The clearest differences concern gender: on average, young women attach greater importance to universalism, while young men place greater emphasis on power. The relationships between value priorities identified at the sample level do not, however, rule out the possibility that opposing values coexist within individuals, which remains a question for future research.

Dragan Stanojević and Božidar Filipović critically examine how young people's institutional political participation is measured and interpreted in comparative research. Using the examples of contacting politicians and membership or involvement in political parties, they show that understanding behaviour requires knowledge of its underlying motivations, substantive content and expected effects. In contexts characterised by clientelism, the same indicator can encompass different relationships with political actors. The authors propose developing indicators that capture the motivations, substantive content and expected outcomes of participation alongside behaviour, drawing on qualitative methods such as cognitive interviews. Such an approach allows a more precise distinction between recorded participation and opportunities for autonomous political action.

Andrej Naterer and Danijela Lahe compare political orientations and relational well-being among young people in Slovenia surveyed in 2018 and 2023. Greater political interest and stronger support for strong leadership were recorded alongside lower satisfaction with family life and friendships, while changes in interpersonal trust displayed a mixed pattern. Focus groups provide further insight into experiences of the pandemic, during which governmental decision-making became particularly salient in everyday life and restrictions on social contact altered everyday relationships. The contribution raises questions about the relationship between young people's political expectations and their experiences of family and social life.

Roland Gergely, Eszter-Eniko Marschalko and Kármen Sulyok examine the developmental dimension of uncertainty among emerging adults from the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, Romania. Their article explores the associations between proactive coping, psychological resilience and quarter-life crisis, which encompasses uncertainties concerning identity, relationships, employment and the future. Proactive coping is associated with lower quarter-life crisis severity even after accounting for psychological resilience, whose mediating role was not supported. The findings suggest the potential relevance of proactive coping for counselling and preventative support for young people navigating the challenges of emerging adulthood.

The articles contribute to a deeper understanding of various aspects of young people's social position in Southeast European societies, while opening up new research questions. We hope that the insights presented in this special issue will also encourage discussion of whether, and under what conditions, crises can become opportunities for social change, with younger generations recognised not only as participants in debates about the future of their societies but also as partners in shaping that future.

Anja Gvozdanović

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