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CROATIAN YOUTH AT THE BEGINNING OF 2000: SIGNS OF NEW POLITICIZATION

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with youth in Dalmatia (Croatia) at the end of the 1990s, or more specifically with the level of politicization of youth. The authors started their research with the premise that Croatian youth has been marginalized in the past decade, both in social life and in official discourse favoring the 'great' national themes (such as population politics, abortion, etc.). They interpret so-called 'apolitical behavior' of young people as a phenomenon which is a consequence of and a typical reaction to their marginal position. Throughout the 1990s, Croatian society was characterized by domination of one - nationalist and conservative - party in the newly introduced multi-party political system, and exposed to attempts of state control by various forms of non-party associations and initiatives. In public discourse, youth was frequently presented as the source of social problems and related to issues such as drug abuse, unemployment, juvenile delinquency, escape from reality and violence. The dominant patriarchal and socially conservative politics were nourished both by postsocialist transition and by war and postwar realities. Unlike at least some of their counterparts in the postindustrially modernized societies, young people in Croatia perceived politics as something completely abstract. This paper is a discussion of results obtained by the empirical research on the students at Split University carried out in December 1999, as well as other similar research carried out earlier in the 1990s. The most recent research results indicate the appearance of a new political consciousness of young people, i.e. their increased politicization. However, this new politicization is not an attempt to reexamine the values of the dominant culture, but rather an attempt to call into question the rituals of the dominant politics/its political rituals. The authors interpret this as - at least partly - an expression of dissatisfaction with the political resources that are available to young people. Young people in Croatia seem to demand a change of behavior of the political elites and new rules of political participation. In keeping with general tendencies toward subjectivization and individualization in postindustrially modernized countries, Croatian youth at the end of the 1990s connected personal interest with collective action, which was initiated by various nongovernmental organizations funded from abroad. An alternative scene with elements of civil society came into being. However, 1999 research results indicate that Split students (mostly Dalmatian youths) do not genuinely support NGO methods of political action and behavior. Young people became a relevant political subject primarily by virtue of their mass participation in the January 2000 political elections. Their votes became important and they are likely to be increasingly attracted by traditional political subjects in the future. To what degree this is going to change the stereotype of 'apolitical youth', and what form this new politicization is going to take, remains to be seen.
Young people are most often present in public discourse as a source of social problems. Drugs, unemployment, juvenile delinquency, apolitical attitude and escape from reality and violence are some of the problematic issues usually associated with the young. One may have the impression that problems about young people will be written only in cases when they will be scandalized. The reasons for this situation do not lay with the young, but, according to the Slovenian theoretician Motnik, should be sought within the mechanisms of the reproduction of the existing relations within the authority hierarchy, the disciplinary mechanisms for continuing authority and submission, as well as within the role of the school system (Motnik, 1989: 5).

Numerous researches confirm that the young introduce new ways of living and warn that the processes of the change of identity connected to a category, in sociology broadly called 'youth', indicatively anticipate social changes. Therefore, it is possible that, under the influence of media and youth culture, the transformations of the subjective youth structures take place even before the changes in economy and politics.

Critical approaches of the young that indicate the disproportion of the already changed subjective structures and identity and as yet unaffected economic and political sphere are particularly noticeable during social and economic crisis. Then each critical approach of the young, which often contains deeper and more radical responses to social crisis, youth being still students, do not have the characteristics of adult age. Therefore, they are not considered as a definite authority. After parliamentary democracy and the independence of media and youth culture, the transformations of the way of life are particularly noticeable during social and economic crisis. This refers to the changes which are connected to the process of the 'cultural modernization' (Ule, 2000: 18) and which are specific for the developed industrialized societies, and refers to everybody, not only to the young.

In our research, the term youth refers to the students at the University of Split who were our interviewees in December 1999. It does not refer to a social group which expresses homogenous characteristics in all aspects of living, but to the persons who are above adolescent age, but being still students, do not have the characteristics of adult age. Therefore, they are not considered as a definite and homogenous social group, but a group of people who, during the late nineties, at the time of parliamentary elections and the demands for the changes in Croatian society, expressed certain common characteristics.

The change of the 'youth type', which often contains deeper and more radical responses to social crisis, youth being still students, do not have the characteristics of adult age. Therefore, they are not considered as a definite and homogenous social group, but a group of people who, during the late nineties, at the time of parliamentary elections and the demands for the changes in Croatian society, expressed certain common characteristics.

The DOMINATION BY THE PATRIARCHAL POLITICAL IN THE NINETIES

While young people in post-industrialized societies, being the holders of political, cultural, economic and development potential, represent key factors of postindustrial modernization of the societies, Croatian youth, during the nineties, due to their inferior social position excluded from the decision-making and socio-economically dependent, were distant from any sort of power and political authority. After parliamentary democracy and the independence of the Republic of Croatia had been constituted in the early nineties, because of long-lasting war conflicts, some pre-modern socio-political associations were preserved, which prevented the real legitimacy of the institutions, the establishment of a law-respecting society, autonomous public opinion and civilian society. Such circumstances prevented the youth from organizing themselves as social and political factors.

By reason of the war, post-war and transition circumstances, young people were not able to acquire either significant political group experience, which they could express freely, or the interests, which they could defend in confrontation with others. Young people in Croatia broke through their generational ghetto only twice during the nineties: participating in the war at the very beginning of it and participating at a large scale in the elections at the end of the nineties.

Social marginalization of the young and their apolitical attitude as the reaction to it

The war and the post-war transition period in Croatia have impeded and slowed down the processes that could bring Croatian youth closer to their counterparts in post-industrialized societies.

Specifically, social processes of modernization during the mid-nineties in Croatia were obstructed because of the war, and slowed down afterwards. This caused the intensification of the feeling of loss of traditional security (Leburit, Tomic-Koludrovic, 1996: 975).

The traditional model of the young, which considered them as the ghetto of pre-adult age, has now been replaced by the pluralism and individualization of their way of life. This refers to the changes which are connected to the process of the 'cultural modernization' (Ule, 2000: 18) and which are specific for the developed industrialized societies, and refers to everybody, not only to the young.

In the transition period, critical youth groups have claimed that the relationship between them and the adults were not the consequence of postmodernization of Croatian society, but of the war during which the young
Politics based on ideology as the main factor of mobilization in Croatia during the nineties confirmed that it was a stereotype that was created by the traditional, patriarchal and governmental organizations, forming an alternative scene with elements of a civilian society. It was different from the alternative scene in western European countries, because it was started by NGOs, which were financed from abroad. Hence, it meant transferring to Croatian elements of postindustrial societies where similar initiatives are part of politics of common issues. It refers to an "artificial" phenomenon of introducing politics into activities that "are led by all performers who... are pushed into the arena of public life" (Hitzler, 1994: 49).

By leaving out the youth from politics, a new political awareness of the young was created, which doubted the domination of the politics over people. The stereotype of an apolitical attitude and the political apathy of the young in Croatia during the nineties confirmed that it was a stereotype that was created by the traditional, patriarchal politics, that is, it was the narrow conception of politics and the political attitude offered by traditional politics.

In accordance with the general trends towards the subjectivation and individualization, the young related their individual interests to a collective action initiated by non-governmental organizations, forming an alternative scene with elements of a civilian society. It was different from the alternative scene in western European countries, because it was started by NGOs, which were financed from abroad. Hence, it meant transferring to Croatian elements of postindustrial societies where similar initiatives are part of politics of common issues. It refers to an "artificial" phenomenon of introducing politics into activities that "are led by all performers who... are pushed into the arena of public life" (Hitzler, 1994: 49).

Refusing to participate in such patriarchal politics, Croatian youth chose an apolitical attitude. The attitude concealed the critique of dominant politics and the resistance to political manipulation. The youth were not interested in such politics: they isolated themselves in the sphere of their privacy and thus remained politically unrealized personalities. A few of them accepted the adults' ideas about political involvement and, by joining youth organizations of various political parties, participated in the dominant patriarchal politics. Our research from 1999 confirmed that only 4% of youth population sacrificed the qualities of their youth and behaved according to the adults' regulations. In our earlier researches a small portion of young people expressed their attachment to about fifteen political parties that were active in Croatia at the time (Tomčić-Koluđrov, Leburit, 1997: 105).

However, our researches between 1995 and 1996 showed certain distinctions in the opinion of the youth population, in relation to current social events, so the conclusion is that "significant social transformations that occurred in Croatia during the late nineties led to the increase of political involvement of a segment of the youth population. They are the social group that most consistently create its future by being active in the present" (Leburit et al., 1999: 217).

The everyday life of the youth was excluded from the politics, which caused apathy and the apolitical attitude of the young. Politics was perceived as something abstract, as they felt excluded. Thus, they restricted their social potential to the area of privacy that caused their apolitical attitude (Leburit, Relja, 1999). Just like the youth in the developed postindustrial countries that do not wish to participate in the political life, Croatian youth also had a similar strategy. They did not express their attachment to any political party (21.5%), and almost one third of them did not want to declare whether they were interested in political events in the country (Tomčić-Koluđrov, Leburit, 1997: 150-160).

The data from our latest research (1999) indicate that the attitude towards the young towards NGO activities has not yet developed completely. Only 23.2% of those interviewed expressed their wish to get engaged in NGO activities, although they consider (85.8%) the work to be moral, worthwhile and useful, and recognize the value of similar social activities. However, a considerable percentage of those interviewed (47.3%) wanted to engage in various charity activities.

It has to be stated that the research was performed (December 1999) at the time of an uncertain political situation and expectations of political or other changes that they were latently significant for the choice of political orientation and public atmosphere in Croatia at the end of 1995. It was not only the end of the millennium, but also the period that symbolically imposed different rules of political actions or the period in which new, different and unusual political powers started their activities, for instance, the activities of NGOs and their evident political engagement with the youth, among them and for them. Hence, the young realized that the old political paradigm was not effective in Croatian society. Consequently, young people acquired a new political consciousness and different engagement. Towards the end of the nineties a sensitive scene around NGOs was created in Croatia, which initiated the creation of an independent political public.
The fundamental reasons or explanations which the young gave about their votes were referring to party programs (30.2 %), confidence in the party as a social power which will be able to carry out the election promises (16 %), the fact that the party gathered the most competent politicians (12.4 %) or the fact that the particular politicians and their party could guarantee the achievement of a higher level of democracy in Croatian society (11.2 %).

Accordingly, it was clear that the students at Split and Zagreb University, at the time when the research was done, had already chosen the opposition parties. Besides, their list of preferred politicians confirm the hypothesis: their favourite politician at the time was Ivica Dacic (30.2 %), the fact that the party gathered the most competent politicians (27.9 %), the growth of individualism and insecurity results also in the disaffection of the old, traditional politics.

However, the participation of the young at the elections should not immediately be explained as the manifestation of their confirmed political involvement. It rather refers to the relationship of the young towards the parties that participated at the elections and their opinion that their voting could be successful.

CONCLUSION:

ABOUT THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF THE YOUNG

The growth of individualism and insecurity results also in the growth of risk-taking, for instance, going abroad for work. 48.8 % of the interviewed young people considered getting a job abroad.4

Young people of the new generation consent to the cost of greater freedom of living their individuality with the young people of the new generation. They even place themselves into average categories, while, for example, the lack of wish for the life of the elite or a ‘high life’ can mean a new starting point for the change of stereotype of young people who should be a significant social power. The young are not a social group without their principles. Those who claim that young people are not politically involved, just express another social stereotype. Croatian youth had already shown their activities in Croatia could be significantly expanded. That could be one of the relevant areas for including the young into politics where they would have the opportunity for direct participation in democratic processes. Namely, the development of NGOs has been initiated by real social problems. Participating in the processes, at present, a few young people have already debunked the myth about their apolitical attitude, or as some say: the myth about political passivity and immaturity of the young. They are not an isolated lonely person and know what they want, but do not aim for elitism, because they do not want to act as a leader.

The lack of wish for the life of the elite or a ‘high life’ can be supported by the data about the least popular leisure activities, which were: participating in a citizens’ initiative, movement and association, visiting restaurants, listening to folk music, doing handicraft etc. The list also includes activities that sum up our typical student as an archetype of teenagers in postindustrial countries, because they do not have a computer, do not do aerobics and fitness, or go jogging. Instead, they prefer and more often perform more unpretentious activities, such as: talking on the phone, listening to music, going for a walk, frequenting bars, window-shopping and shopping, reading (while studying), going to church, cinema and discotheques ...

If we placed the treatise into a realistic, current social context, by the end of 2000 we could expect about 50,000 unemployed people in Split-Dalmatian county, one third of them with secondary education. The situation in Zagreb, Osijek and Lika counties is less alarming. Taking into consideration the intended liquidation of companies, deficit and other numerous problems, it is difficult to consider the prospects of the young. The Croatian government has launched several measures (for instance, lower tax on profit if it is invested in new jobs), but that would probably not be sufficient, because it is necessary to carry out the measures, and respect the law, which means to realize the functioning of the law-respecting society at all social levels.

Lastly, the rehabilitation of political consciousness of the young could mean a new starting point for the change of stereotype of young people who should be a significant social power. The young are not a social group without their principles. Those who claim that young people are not politically involved, just express another social stereotype. Croatian youth had already shown their activities and capabilities before the elections. It seems that, at the end of the millennium, the activities of the third segment in Croatia could be significantly expanded. That could be one of the relevant areas for including the young into politics where they would have the opportunity for direct participation in democratic processes. Namely, the development of NGOs has been initiated by real social problems. Participating in the processes, at present, a few young people have already debunked the myth about their apolitical attitude, or as some say: the myth about political passivity and immaturity of the young.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1. This empirical project was ordered by a nongovernmental organization from Split, and the interviewees were the students of Split University. The choice of the research respondents’ sample was stratified, proportional, representative and random (Arber, 1983: 87-89; Blalock, 1960: 399-404; Guala, 1996: 248-251). It included (N) respondents and was distributed to two sub-samples: Split (n=300) and Zadar (n=200). The applied research method (De Vos, 1990; Dunsmuir & Williams, 1996; Guala, 1996; Henerson and others, 1987; Holstein & Gubrium, 1993; May, 1993; Mayntz and others, 1978; Pawson, 1996) was a structured interview combined with the questionnaire method with 50 questions.

2. The research was done from 15 to 25 December 1995, and data processing and analysis was completed by 10 January 2000. We used Windows program SPSS (Babbie & Hailey, 1995; Fitz-Gibbon & Morris, 1987; Foster, 1998; Norusus, 1988; Procter, 1993). Several research aims were set: a. to analyse wishes, perceptions, views, and opinion of the young; b. to identify current topics which occupy the attention of young people, as well as current political, economic and similar problems, as the young observe them; c. to estimate the future of the young, in view of parliamentary elections in Croatia in January 2000; d. to analyse various cultural and value aspects of the lifestyle of the young in Dalmatia.

3. The majority were 18 to 23 years of age (87%), mainly female (65.8%), almost all of Croatian nationality; exceptionally good pupils in secondary school (91.4%), mostly full-time students (88%), the majority of whom were best students back in school.

4. There are very few students who stated that they were not interested in elections as socio-political factor (5%) or who stated that they will not be able to vote (2.5%).

5. At the time of the elections 22% of the electorate in Croatia were under 30 years of age.

6. 39% were considering the idea of emigration, but did not have an opportunity. 27.2% were waiting for a suitable opportunity, while 3% had already decided and arranged to leave the country soon. Thus we can see that only about one third (31.6%) of the respondents never intended to emigrate.

7. If the expected series of company liquidations do happen in Croatia, the structure of the unemployed will be different, with a larger percentage of women and elderly people. Unfortunately, the government has not prepared any suitable programmes, so the social dimension will detrimentally illustrate the social inability to cope with the crucial problems of today.