Editorial: Young People in the Balkans as Actors of Social Integration

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This thematic issue of Sociologija is a result of co-operation of several youth researchers from the region that has been going on from 2007. After an unfortunate attempt to gain funds for a comprehensive comparative study of the youth that would include all the countries in the Balkans, scholars from Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Serbia have decided to maintain intensive contacts by taking every opportunity to meet and discuss their research findings, thereby forming an informal network of Balkan youth researchers. The workshops and summer school held in Slovenia resulted in a special issue of the journal Annales – Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies dedicated to the youth in the Balkans.

The contacts have been also maintained through the bilateral project of scientific co-operation “Young people as actors of social change – comparative analysis of Serbia and Slovenia” („Mladi kao akteri društvenih promena – uporedna analiza Srbije i Slovenije“). The project was financed by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia and the Slovenian Research Agency, established by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia, and we would like to express our gratitude for their support. This volume, presenting and comparing the results of the studies done by research teams from the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana and the Institute for Sociological Research at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, constitutes the final outcome of the project.

The papers included in this volume resulted from selected presentations at the international conference Young People in the Balkans as Actors of Social Integration held on September 30th and October 1st 2011, at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. The conference was organized by the Institute for Sociological Research at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, within RRPP project Youth – Actor of Social Change. The organizers are grateful for the support received from the Regional Research Promotion Program of the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia.

The presentations at the conference1, as well as the papers in this volume, point to several key issues related to different aspects of status, transitions and everyday life of young people in the Balkan region.

Structural features of global post-industrial society, together with the current global economic crisis and local contexts of post-socialist transformation, impose some rather serious constraints on social integration of young people. This is primarily related to the issues of employment, since unemployment, underemployment, precarious jobs, etc. remain the most prominent problems of young people in all Balkan countries (Tomić; Mojić – in this volume), although they are producing different kinds of uncertainty in different societies.

1 Apart from scholars from Bulgaria, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia, whose papers are included in this volume, there were also contributions from Croatia, Montenegro, Romania, and Albania at the conference.
The above-mentioned structural framework together with cultural factors related to the Balkan cultural circle influence a specific kind of transition to adulthood, which is neither standard nor choice biography. It leads to a demand for developing new socially and culturally sensitive concepts (e.g. transition, independence, uncertainty, stagnating or subjective autonomy, etc.; Kuhar and Reiter; Kovacheva; Tomanović; Dragišić-Labaš and Ljubičić – in this volume). While the postponement of key life events is a common feature in the region, there are also country-specific features of young people’s postponed transitions that are path-dependent and culturally and socially diversified. For instance, cohabitation of young people has different scope, forms and values in different Balkan societies, e.g. Slovenia (Kuhar and Reiter – in this volume) and Bulgaria (Kovacheva – in this volume), on the one hand, and Serbia (Bobić – in this volume) and Macedonia, on the other.

There is an increase in valorization and interest in university education in all the countries. This is related to narrower channels of entering the labour market and trends towards more individualized lifestyles, while postponing family formation. On the other hand, prolonged education makes young people semi-dependent either on family or state support, leaving them in the society’s waiting room – not fully integrated. Nevertheless, the significance and meaning of higher education for young people’s biographies remain unclear, since the quality of education has failed to meet both the labour market demands and interests of the young (Ule and Živoder – in this volume).

Although there is evidence in all the countries of young people’s withdrawal from formal forms of politics, the issue is whether it is political capitulation, confusion or resistance (Korunovska et al. – in this volume) – in the sense that the young are inventing different, more personal and informal means of pursuing their political interests (e.g. ecological activism; Vukelić and Stanojević – in this volume). Furthermore, the increasing use of ICT, particularly the internet, raises questions about its democratic character and whether it is another mechanism for reproduction of inequality, as well as if it could launch new channels and mechanism for civic participation (Stanojević – in this volume).

More generally, all the issues outlined above are related to social integration of young people as a social category into the global society. Low participation in economic and social reproduction, due to high unemployment and postponement of parenthood, together with low political and civil participation, seem to be common features in all the Balkan societies. The structural and cultural features that hinder integration of young people into the society need to be explored further. Another aspect of social integration should be given more attention and research focus – integration of the youth as a social group, in order to search for discovering and understanding the sources and mechanisms for social diversification of young people that places them along the continuum, from socially excluded to the privileged. The combination of the two perspectives could result in exploring the action potential of young people for their integration, as well as various forms of participation in integration processes in the society.