

THE GENERATION OF TRANSITION IN EASTERN EUROPE

A CLOSER LOOK

Research Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The generation of transition – a generation of uncertainty – a generation of distrust

A recent Financial Times article called “Brexit, Trump and a generation of incompetents” reminds us of the importance of the formative nature of adolescence. The incompetence of some Western leaders of today, so the argument posits, is largely a result of no experience of turbulence and war as part of the “well-off baby boomers”¹ generation.

The generation of transition, analyzed in this paper is anything but a well-off generation. We define it as the generation born between 1975 and 1995 in post-communist Eastern Europe. This is the generation witnessing the collapse of a totalitarian regime with an omnipresent ideology, the breakdown of economies, the dissolution of their countries and war. And if the generation of their parents had to reinvent themselves at an age when one’s worldviews are rather stable, the generation of transition was born and lived in times of constant transformation. If anything, the generation of transition is a generation of uncertainties. Basic goods disappeared, money wasn’t worth even the paper it was printed on, states went bankrupt or dissolved. The only rules that mattered were the rules of the strong of the day.

Many stories reveal the scarcity of the 90s. At the same time, opening up to the world also meant the sad realization that one wants and needs to catch up with the West. The feeling to be a second-class citizen was both a self-inflicted and an imposed categorization. After all, the West assumed for a long time that the East could not handle democracy. The moment travel became possible and borders more open, many sought their luck somewhere else, so brain drain started becoming a real impediment for the young democracies.

The generation of transition is not cohesive across the region, especially when it comes to defining whether and how this generation engages civically and politically. However, there are common factors that impacted their (dis)engagement and common, even though not unified, patterns of civic and political actions.

The literature derived from the psychological research² suggests three levels of contextualized factors that have an impact on political socialization: micro-factors including values and ideologies, meso-factors, which include the closest social environment like family, friends, schools and the neighborhood and macro-factors like institutional, political, social, cultural and technological dynamics.

In this study we looked at the generation of transition, analyzing their values, the levels of trust in their immediate circle and have tried to explain those with the macro level, i.e. the major transformation after the collapse of communism which left no area of social and political life untouched.

The following picture is a generalization of the findings analyzed in greater detail in the research paper.

¹ Financial Times (2017): Brexit, Trump and a generation of incompetents. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/3a31862c-df91-11e7-a8a4-0a1e63a52f9c>

² Chryssochoou X. and Barrett M. (2017): Civic and political engagement in youth, findings and prospects, In: Zeitschrift für Psychologie, Vol. 225, No. 4, p.291

East – West

Corresponding to the generation of transition of Eastern Europe is the generation of Millennials in the West. Even though drawing comparisons goes beyond the scope of this paper, there are few comparative studies that give an idea about the differences. TUI's recent youth study reveals a generation to the West which is more trusting, less worried about security and income, whereas the South and East are more focused on economic success and wellbeing. Tolerance and solidarity are not among the top five values of young Poles, but do matter for Spaniards and French. In general, the combination of the factors described above help construct an accurate picture of a generation; focusing on some factors – i.e. economy – and leaving others out, leads to creating stereotypes about a generation. Just like the generation of Millennials is often described as self-centered and entitled by birth³, the generation of transition is often considered to be passive and pragmatic. This paper aims to contribute to a more differentiated picture of the generation of transition in Eastern Europe, which not only tries to escape the fallacy of stereotyping but also the trap of too much generalization.

East – East

The four regions we have looked at are the Visegrad Group (V4), the Western Balkans (WB), Bulgaria and Romania, and the countries from EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP). The regions show some differences which are related to their experience of transition. While there is a sensible democratic backsliding in the V4 countries these days, especially in Hungary and Poland and a more conservative and less tolerant generation of transition, in some EaP and WB countries we still cannot speak of consolidated democracies. The disenchantment with democracy is even bigger in the EaP countries than in the WB. The generation of transition on the Balkans, albeit having lived through war and collapse of former Yugoslavia, shows higher levels of trust in political institutions. Deficient dealing with the communist past seems to be a tangible impediment in both Romania and Bulgaria and the root-cause for many of the current challenges with accountability, corruption and the rule of law. The so-called pragmatism of civic causes is more so typical for the V4 countries, Bulgaria and Romania where democracy, especially after the EU accession, was considered a closed chapter. The active ones there engage typically in issues that have tangible results and which are clearly related to their closest environment or interests. With deterioration of democracy in those two regions, there is a chance that the focus shifts from concrete initiatives to normative ones related to the independence of institutions or quality of democracy in general.

Values

The generation of transition cares greatly about their dignity, the way they look, their career and social standing. Values like tolerance, altruism (with the exception of Kosovo), political or civic engagement or innovative spirit score lowest on their value ladder. Pragmatism seems to be a core value, exemplified in the type of causes with which the generation of transition and especially the younger cohort engages. Anything political is thought of as dirty business. Hence, the active part of the generation of transition prefers to engage in causes related to the environment, as these are considered apolitical. At the same

³ i.e. Harris, M. (2017), Kids these days: human capital and the making of Millennials.

time, the expectation is for a strong, paternalistic state which provides jobs, education, and medical care but collects very few taxes.

Trust

The greatest trust among the generation of transition is put in the family, friends and colleagues. Distrust appears already at the level of neighbors, more so of people of different religion, beliefs and immigrants (i.e. V4 countries). Distrust of institutions surpasses distrust of social groups. The least trusted institutions are political parties and parliaments, followed by governments and often media (except for Albania where trust in media is the highest of all). Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) become less and less trusted across the region. Elites working within power structures are least trusted and least appreciated. A recent PEW research demonstrated that the higher the levels of trust in people is, the higher the levels of support for democracy⁴.

Family

Without surprise, the family environment matters significantly when it comes to civic and political activism. Many of our interviewees testified to coming from politically or civically active families and have participated in various activities with their parents such as going to the polls, participating in protest activities, watching and reading news, and discussing politics at the dinner table. However, these families are in the minority. Often times, and especially in families that 'lost during the process of transition', there is trauma, silence, little knowledge of the totalitarian past, little understanding of democracy and little conversation around these issues. In addition, research demonstrates that children often get to decide on issues that concern them only after they reach 18 years of age, i.e. experience of democratic processes at home are very limited.

School

The school environment is not described as particularly democratic in the majority of transition countries. There is a contradiction in terms – if civic education is expected to teach democratic citizenship but the environment is not enabling it, then teaching becomes damaging as it constructs an idea of a normative concept without application. Moreover, citizenship is not taught only in subjects like civic education, but also in literature, language training, geography and history. The recent ICCS civic education study⁵ found, for instance, that in some countries up to 60% of students think that studying national history is what makes a good citizen. The latter is an example of how important it is to understand the country-specific context when thinking of the most suitable civic education approaches.

Experience of democracy

Our research confirmed that key sources of disenchantment with democracy are deficient democratic regimes and negative experiences with democracy or what citizens thought was democracy. We only now are beginning to realize how much personal experience matters when it comes to trust in democratic institutions. In the past 27 years prominent theories of democratization have paid a great deal of attention

⁴ PEW (2017), available at: http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/democracy-nationalism-and-pluralism/pf-05-10-2017_ce-europe-08-16/.

⁵ ICCS (2017), available at: http://ckoko.bg/upload/docs/2017-11/ICCS_2016_Report_BGR1.pdf, p. 38.

to the systemic level, but less to the level of citizens' socialization in democracy. Liberal democracies as opposed to illiberal regimes are not grounded in rigorous and all-encompassing propagation of one worldview; they are founded in what Schumpeter coined as the most important democratic values: freedom and equality. Hence, democracies are not canonical about teaching citizens democracy, especially when they are struggling to establish them from scratch. However, already Havel warned us of the danger of neglecting people's civility in transition. He argued that focusing on the economy is important, but what is equally important is to invest in people's general culture. A better salary, posits Havel, will not make a nurse treat patients better; and more money won't make a farmer treat the stock better.

Urban vs rural

The communitarians vs cosmopolitans divide of which many analysts speak today as the new cleavage that predicts elections outcomes in the West is valid also for Eastern Europe, but to a lesser extent. The classical divide between rural and urban centers is still a very accurate predictor of engagement for a variety of reasons, including structural.

Transition in Eastern Europe was approached with a strong focus on the capitals and less so on the peripheries. All efforts for greater cohesion between different parts of Eastern Europe will take a lot of investments and time to lift up the peripheral parts to the levels of the capitals. Opportunities to participate or engage are much more prominent in the urban centers than in rural areas. An interesting observation however is that levels of trust in political leaders on the local level are higher, because they are more accessible and their work is more visible to citizens.

These findings are explored in detail in the chapters that follow. Firstly, we present the theoretical framework and methodology of the study. Secondly, we explore the Visegrad Group -- Hungary, Poland, Czechia and Slovakia; then we turn to the Western Balkans (WB) -- Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia; the fourth chapter is dedicated to Bulgaria and Romania; and the final chapter is dedicated to the countries that are part of the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The research concludes with concrete recommendations on the future enhancement of civic education in the region in light of the research findings.

We have also gathered data on the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, East Germany⁶ and Russia, which goes beyond the scope of this study, but can be brought in at a later stage for a more cohesive picture.

⁶ With the term East Germany we refer to the territory of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) as the socialist state during the period of the Cold War from 1949 to 1990.

DEFINITIONS, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Theoretical framework

In the generational research literature there are, broadly speaking, two distinct approaches to defining a generation. The first one is to somewhat mechanically define a group of people born within a defined range of years under the umbrella of a generation. The second approach is to take into account formative experiences (often significant historical events) in order to describe how a group that has been affected by these experiences differs from other generations⁷. Socio-historical events and respective formative experiences during youth are highlighted as the key period in which people are significantly influenced and social generations formed⁸. The first approach is widely used in public opinion polling and youth studies, while the second approach is most often applied in generational research.

Following academic convention, the current study builds on the latter definition, while simultaneously attempting to circumvent its pitfalls. The approach has been criticized for its vagueness and failure to specify generational boundaries⁹. We address those concerns in the sections below.

Indicators of a generation

A new generation is shaped by a unique mix of factors caused by changes in socioeconomic or cultural conditions. These changes, including the digital revolution, the economic, ecologic or political crisis, or terrorism, can be witnessed every ten to twenty years¹⁰. At the same time, clearly there is divergence between the individuals that form a generation.

“An age cohort spanning 15-20 years will necessarily include a diverse assortment of people — and often there are meaningful smaller cohorts within these generations. Changes in political circumstances, societal mores and economic conditions over a period of 15-20 years can lead to people within a cohort having different formative experiences. Understanding these differences within a cohort is an essential component of generational analysis.”¹¹

Within each generation, there are three indicators that account for differences between individuals: life cycle, period and cohort. In case of the *life cycle* effect, differences between younger and older people emerge largely due to their respective position in their life cycle. The *period* effect is typically thought of as having lasting effects and refers to events and circumstances that simultaneously impact an entire population regardless of age (e.g. the shift in public views as with the case of terrorism after September 11, 2001). Lastly, the *cohort* effect views generational differences as a byproduct of unique historical circumstances that members of an age cohort are experiencing, particularly during a time when they are in the age of forming their opinions¹². The study on the generation of transition in Eastern Europe builds on to the last effect.

⁷ Mannheim, K. (1928): Das Problem der Generationen. In: Ders. (1964): Wissenssoziologie. Berlin/Neuwied, pp. 509-565.

⁸ Pilcher, J. (1994): Mannheim's sociology of generations: an undervalued legacy. In: The British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 45, No.3, pp. 481-495.

⁹ Jureit, U. (2010): Generation, Generationalität, Generationenforschung, Version: 1.0, in: Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte.

¹⁰ Interview with Klaus Hurrelmann, Professor of Public Health and Education at the Hertie School of Governance (Germany), October 2017

¹¹ Pew Research Center (2015): The whys and hows of generations research, p 4.

¹² Ibid, p. 5.

Why the generation of transition?

The generation under investigation in the study is the generation experiencing transition from communism to democracy in post-communist Eastern Europe. This includes both post-communist and post-Soviet citizens.

“(…) a wide array of political, economic, and cultural transformations after the fall of Communism and dissolution of the Soviet Union formed the post-Soviet generation. Adolescence is a crucial period for the development of political dispositions. During their formative years in the 1990s, youths aged between fourteen and twenty-three witnessed (…) major social transitions (...). Each of these social changes left its imprint on post-communist youth and set it apart from its parents and grandparents raised under Communist rule.”¹³

The specific interest lies in the impact the transitional experience has had on their present attitudes and engagement as active citizens.

Transition is one of the most-referenced analytical frameworks of analyzing post-communist Europe and describing the transformation processes after 1989 from totalitarianism to democracy, open society and free market economy. While much emphasis has been put on the democratization of the system and its institutions, little attention has been paid to the formation of a democratic political culture. Institutions do not reform by themselves and policies do not get enacted without active individuals and political will. Social transformation requires a large scale shift, both personal and societal. While democracy indisputably knocked on every door of post-socialist Europe, it is a subject of debate whether it managed to enter everywhere and to what extent¹⁴. Major criticism both of the research body and theories of democratization lies in the neglect of the soft areas and those difficult to measure issues such as how the shifts from totalitarian to a democratic political culture take place.

Recent theoretical debates on post-communist transitions can be assigned to a second decade of theories that has emerged since the late 1990s. The trend to emphasize contextual factors rather than apply universalistic approaches goes along with efforts at further advancing theories through a historical and comparative lens. The current investigation aims to explore the specific conditions, capacities, and opportunities for former communist societies taking into account the specificities of each country¹⁵. In doing so it aims to contribute to the gap in looking at the *democratization* of political culture.

The study also takes a comparative perspective focusing on the experiences of the generation of transition in several countries/regions with a communist legacy. We build on and expand existing research on the topic.

As an example of this, Gries et al. (2016) examine the ‘Generation In-Between’ as the group of people born in the 1980s and early 1990s in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo - a generation experiencing the Balkan wars in their childhood. The interest they ascribe to this particular group is their crucial role for the

¹³ Nikolayenko, O. (2015): Youth Movements and Elections in Belarus. In: *Europe-Asia Studies* 67 (3), pp. 468–492.

¹⁴ Slavkova, L. (2017): Introduction, In: *Transition Dialogue Network: Mapping transition in Eastern Europe: Experience of change after the end of communism*, Berlin.

¹⁵ Kollmorgen, R. (2013): Theories of Postcommunist Transformation. Approaches, Debates, and Problems of Theory Building in the Second Decade of Research. In: *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, vol. 5 (2), pp. 88-105.

EU future of their countries as they are the ones to develop and shape the European integration. In the light of the skepticism and disinterest towards the EU that can be observed in some segments of this generation, Gries and his team investigate the European dispositions of this generation. Of particular interest in this research is how their unique experience with the societal and political impact of the war has shaped their attitude as active citizens¹⁶. In 2012 the study “20 years after 1991: the tale of two generations”¹⁷ looked at how the experience of war impacted the generations of the then 20 and 40 year olds when it comes to their attitudes vis à vis the EU. A key finding was the deeply ingrained expectation that the EU will most probably dissolve, just as Yugoslavia came apart. The example illustrates how significant experiences influence the way we perceive the political reality and formulate our expectations, but also our roles in it.

It is also worth asking, whether the transition generation is particularly active¹⁸/ passive, the issues they care about most and how their interests have been impacted by the processes of transformation. Since transition is not a genuine Eastern European phenomenon, our definition of transformative experience refers to transition towards democracy in the specific context of post-communist Europe.

Our study focuses on the generation born between 1975 and 1995. This age cohort includes, on the one hand, those who had experience under the previous regime and had to face transition as young adults and, on the other hand, those who have had no personal experience from the period before 1989 but grew up in the tumultuous period of transition. Following this logic, there are two distinct cohorts within the generation of transition – those who experienced both communism and transition and those who only experienced the transition period towards democracy.

The central research interest of this study revolves around the civic activity of the generation of transition. In our investigation we focus on a number of pertinent questions:

- How is this generation politically and civically engaged?
- Which values matter to them?
- How are the societal issues of today linked to the years of transition?
- How do the experiences in the past determine the way the generation of transition responds to present challenges?
- What is their perception of the present political system and its institutions?
- What lessons can be drawn for civic education and how should it be adjusted to address neglected challenges?

¹⁶ Gries, R. et al. (2016): Generation In-Between. Die Kinder der Balkankriege: Annäherungen an eine europäische Schlüsselgeneration. ERSTE Stiftung und Franz Vranitsky Chair for European Studies, Wien.

¹⁷ Kacarska, S. (2012): 20 years after 1991: The tale of two generations. European Fund for the Balkans, opinion paper – supporting policy development paper series, 1/2012.

¹⁸ Referring to Hoskins, B. and Mascherini, M. (2009), active citizenship is defined as, “Participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy.”

This definition highlights a variety of topics concerning participatory activities: they range from holding governments accountable, to representative democracy (e.g. voting), and also participation in the everyday life of the communities; active citizenship in terms of new (e.g. one-off issue politics) and traditional (e.g. membership in a political party) forms of participation; values-based ethical boundaries that set the limitations for activities. Ibid: Measuring Active Citizenship through the Development of a Composite Indicator. In: Journal of Social Indicator Research. 90 (3), pp. 459-488.

Methodology

The study was conducted in three research stages. Firstly, we conducted an extensive literature review of the existing academic research on the generation of transition. As mentioned above, the theoretical framework for the research draws from the research of Mannheim (1928), Kollmorgen (2013) and Jureit (2010). In addition, youth studies conducted in recent years serve as some of the main data sources. Examples include the aforementioned study by Gries et al. (2016) on the children of the Balkan wars; youth studies commissioned by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) focusing on political challenges and perspectives for young people in South and Eastern Europe (SEE)¹⁹ as well as the countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP)²⁰; the youth study of the TUI Foundation ‘Young Europe 2017’²¹; ‘Generation What’ survey (2017)²²; research carried out by the Institute of Public Affairs and the Bertelsmann Foundation on the Visegrad Four²³; the 17th Shell youth study (2015)²⁴; the ‘Sachsenmonitor’ commissioned by the state government of the German Federal State of Saxony (2016)²⁵ and the World Values Survey²⁶. Many of these sources are referenced in the following chapters. It is worthwhile mentioning that some of the studies offer an ideological interpretation of the data and are designed following certain assumptions, i.e. the generational research conducted by the FES puts an emphasis on unemployment and criticism of capitalist values.

The second research phase included a series of interviews with scholars and experts on generational research and the generation of transition, in particular. The aim here was to create a broad overview of the state of the art in the field and to get expert feedback with regard to the next steps in the research.

Finally, we conducted 49 semi-structured interviews²⁷ with representatives of the generation of transition from the countries that enter in the scope of the investigation. The interviewees were selected in a way that their area of expertise allowed us to ask them questions not only about their personal experiences being part of this generation but also about the situation in their country more broadly and the role of active citizenship.

¹⁹ Hurrelmann, K. and Weichert, M. (2015): Lost in Democratic Transition? Political Challenges and Perspectives for Young People in South East Europe. Results of Representative Surveys in Eight Countries. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Berlin, Maribor, Skopje.

Mitev, P.-E. and Kovacheva, S. (2014): Young People in European Bulgaria – A sociological portrait 2014. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Sofia.

²⁰ Zarembo, K. (2017): Ukrainian “Generation Z”: Attitudes and Values – Nationwide opinion poll results. New European Center and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Kyiv; Mkrtychyan, A. et al. (2016): Independence Generation. Youth Study 2016 – Armenia. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Yerevan; Omanadze, S. et al. (2017): Generation in Transition. Youth Study 2016. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Georgia, Tbilisi.

²¹ TUI Stiftung (2017): Young Europe – The Youth Study of the TUI Foundation. Conducted by YouGov on behalf of TUI Foundation.

²² Generation What? (2017). Available at: <http://www.generation-what.eu/en/#>.

²³ Kucharczyk, J. et al. (2017): Exit, voice or loyalty? Young people on Europe and democracy – Case studies from Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Institute of Public Affairs and Bertelsmann Stiftung.

²⁴ Albert, M. et al. (2015): Youth 2015 – The 17th Youth Study. Hamburg.

²⁵ dimap (2016): Sachsen-Monitor 2016 – Ergebnisbericht. Bonn.

²⁶ World Values Survey (2017). Available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

²⁷ 39 interviews have been conducted on the phone while ten participants filled out an online questionnaire.

THE VISEGRAD FOUR

Background

The Visegrad group is composed by four Central Eastern European countries – Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. After the fall of communism, the region was seen as a textbook example of successful transition towards democracy. In recent years, however, these countries have become notorious for their democratic backsliding and the rise of “illiberalism”, albeit to different degrees.

In Poland, the Law and Justice populist right-wing ruling party has made a number of controversial moves since they came into power, including legislative attempts to hinder the independence of the judicial system²⁸ and taking control of state media²⁹. Recently, fears have grown that the Polish government would only fund non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that reflect the values of the ruling party³⁰. In November 2017, the march “White Europe” took place in Warsaw with the participation of tens of thousands of people as one of the events organized for the country’s Independence Day³¹.

In Hungary, ever since Prime Minister Victor Orbán came into power, he has been steering the country into what many would consider “illiberal” direction and attempting to gain control over the judiciary, the media and the electoral system. A particularly contentious moves included legislation that, if adopted, would close down the Central European University, located in Budapest and founded by George Soros. The law came under scrutiny by the European Union and sparked protests in Hungary³². Orbán’s government came under fire for his treatment of the NGO sector as well when legislation sanctioning organizations that do not register themselves as ‘foreign-supported’ if they receive more than €24,000 per year in funding from abroad was passed. The EU has undertaken legal action against this legislation³³.

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia challenges to democracy and civil society still exist but the governments of the two countries tend to gravitate more towards the mainstream. The victory of the populist party ANO ran by the famous millionaire Babiš in the 2017 Czech election on an anti-EU platform and amid corruption allegations against him is considered a troubling sign by many³⁴. Within this context, Slovakia’s Prime Minister Robert Fico has said that Slovakia remains “the only pro-European island in the region”³⁵. However, he has berated the “dictatorship” from Brussels in the past and the country still faces significant challenges when it comes to public trust in its democratic system³⁶.

²⁸ The Guardian (2017): Poland’s president signs controversial law despite protests. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/25/polands-president-signs-controversial-law-despite-protests>.

²⁹ BBC News (2016): Polish media laws: Government takes control of state media. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35257105>.

³⁰ Politico (2017): Warsaw grabs purse strings of Polish NGO. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/pis-polish-ngos-fear-the-governments-embrace/>.

³¹ The Guardian (2017): ‘White Europe’: 60,000 nationalists march on Poland’s independence day. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/12/white-europe-60000-nationalists-march-on-polands-independence-day>.

³² euobserver (2017): Hungarians march against Orbán crackdown. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/political/137979>.

³³ Financial Times (2017): EU escalates legal action against Hungary over NGO law. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/c148694d-685f-3405-ba9d-7c4fda603054>.

³⁴ Politico (2017): ‘Czech Trump’ Babiš claims big victory. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-voters-hand-euroskeptic-babis-big-victory/>.

³⁵ EURACTIV (2017): Slovak political elites: Between EU and Russia. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/slovak-political-elites-between-eu-and-russia/>.

³⁶ CIPE (Center for Private International Enterprise) (2017): Threats to Democracy in Slovakia. Available at: <http://www.cipe.org/publications/detail/threats-democracy-slovakia>.

The generation of transition – who are they?

Transition towards democracy has a clearly defined starting point in the V4 region, namely the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. From this point forward, it was largely up to the generation of transition and their parents to build the political system and society they hoped to live in. They all took the path of democratization and European integration. Nevertheless, the legacies from the totalitarian past are difficult to overcome entirely. Coupled with more recent challenges like the refugee crisis and the global economic crisis from 2008, they create the preconditions for illiberal trends.

Analyzing the generation of transition in particular, we gained useful insights into their values and attitudes. According to a study by the Institute of Public Affairs, people between 18 and 29 years old from the V4 countries are generally pro-European in their attitudes. Between 70% (Slovakia) and 79% (Hungary) agree that membership in the EU is a “good thing”. At the same time, although a majority of people say democracy is the best form of governance, between 19% (Czech Republic) and 26% (Hungary) disagree. A majority (51%) in Hungary also agrees that human rights can sometimes be restricted under the threat of terrorism. In the other countries this percentage is a little under 50%. The generation of transition is very noticeably opposed to immigration. Islamic fundamentalism is seen as the biggest challenge for the EU in the region followed by immigration and an inflow of refugees. Both challenges are ranked as “big” or “very big” by over 75% of the people in all V4 countries.³⁷

Another study³⁸ came to similar results focusing not only on the generation of transition but on citizens over 18 in general. With the exception of the Czech Republic (40%), over 50% of the people in V4 countries do not have trust in politics at all, this percentage being the largest in Poland (54%). Similarly, in all countries large percentages of people believe that virtually all politicians are corrupt but the variation in the region is somewhat greater with Slovakia having the biggest percentage (68%) and the Czech Republic having the lowest (38%). On the issue of immigration, 81% of the respondents in the region disagree with EU’s immigration policy while 73% on average for V4 countries (87% in Hungary) agree with the erection of the Hungarian border fence.³⁹

The data, coupled with eight interviews conducted with experts on the region (2 per country) led us to the conclusion that when it comes to describing the generation of transition in terms of values and attitudes, there are few differences between it and other generations. Other factors (apart from age) seem to determine attitudes and values, including education level, economic status or whether the person lives in a big city or a village, for example.

At the same time, it is clear that the totalitarian past and living through the transition period has left a mark on the generation in different ways. On the one hand, those who feel they lost the security and predictability of the past might feel abandoned and nostalgic for an idealized version of it. On the other

³⁷ Kucharczyk, J. et al. (2017): Exit, voice or loyalty? Young people on Europe and democracy – Case studies from Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Institute of Public Affairs and Bertelsmann Stiftung.

³⁸ Generation What? (2017). Available at: <http://www.generation-what.ie/europe/map/present-arms>

³⁹ Nezapont Intezet (2017): Public opinion poll on V4 issues and future perspectives of cooperation – V4-identity in focus. Available at: <http://nezapontintezet.hu/v4poll/en/>.

hand, those who can be described as the “winners” of transition appreciate the benefits of freedom and democracy.

The generation of transition and active citizenship

Broadly speaking, the majority of people belonging to the generation of transition in the V4 region has little interest in participating in politics directly. People aged 18 – 34 that have never belonged to a political organization and have no interest in changing this total to 66% in the Czech Republic, 38% in Hungary (where another 47% have never been involved but would like to try it), 53% in Poland and 65% in Slovakia⁴⁰. Despite this, interviewees give examples of local politicians who manage to gain support by engaging in their communities and having direct contact with the citizens. These politicians rarely manage to move to the national level, however.

Apart from politics, another way to be civically active is through the NGO sector. Interestingly, the confidence in civil society appears to be greater. When asked whether they trust humanitarian organizations, the 62% in the Czech Republic, 46% in Poland and 53% in Slovakia respond positively. Hungary makes somewhat of an exception with only 39% trusting humanitarian organizations.⁴¹

A study of the Visegrad Youth from 2012 gives useful insight on those aged 15-29 at the time when it comes to civic activity. Young people’s participation in voluntary activities in the V4 countries ranges from 22% in the Czech Republic to 16% in Poland and is consistently lower than the EU average of 24%. In addition, young people from the region are less active in elections than the previous generation.⁴²

According to more recent data from 2016, NGOs in Hungary and Poland struggle in a number of ways. In both countries NGOs are chronically underfunded and the amount of private donations is consistently low. At the same time, the number of volunteers is evaluated positively by 86% of the NGOs in Hungary and 45% in Poland while the legal framing for the civic sector is evaluated positively by 14% of the organization in Hungary and 54% in Poland⁴³. This comes to show that despite clear similarities, there is also serious divergence in the region.

Through our interviewees, more in-depth understanding was gained into the activity of the generation of transition in the V4 region. Once again, there is a split between people from big cities where there is more civic activity and those from small cities or villages where there is much less of this activity. In addition, motivating citizens to become active appears to happen most often early on, in school or university, through youth organizations. Therefore, educational institutions should create favorable conditions for their students to get involved in causes that interest them.

Distrust towards politics and the political system pushes the transitional generation to get involved with causes that directly affect their lives as opposed to vaguely defined concepts. Those causes range from

⁴⁰ Generation What? (2017). Available at: <http://www.generation-what.ie/portrait/data/they-re-all-corrupt>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Krzaklewska, E. (2013): Comparative review of the situation of young people in the V4 countries. Available at: http://www.youthpolicy.org/library/wp-content/uploads/library/2013_Visegrad_Youth_Eng.pdf.

⁴³ CSF (The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum) (2016): Report of the State of Civil Society in the EU and Russia – Summary. Available at: http://eu-russia-csf.org/fileadmin/State_of_Civil_Society_Report/State_of_Civil_Society_Report_2016_Summary_en.pdf.

creating better conditions for cyclists to clean food initiatives. The one thing they have in common is that their relevance for everyday life is tangible.

Civic activity can be found in support of causes that can be considered illiberal. The “White Europe” march that took place in Warsaw is an example of this. Xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments have also proven to be able to mobilize voters, and thus they are being injected into the platforms of political parties and movements.

Conclusion and recommendations

If the trend towards “illiberalism” in the V4 countries is to be reversed, it is of crucial importance to civically activate the generation of transition but also citizens in general. The current research has allowed us to formulate a number of country-specific recommendations with a focus on civic education.

In Poland, civic education should be incorporated in the fabric of the society through both formal and non-formal education. At the same time, the subject should be clearly delineated from patriotism and nationalism. Transparency is missing from the political system which results in low trust in the institutions and government structures. An example of how to counter this trend by keeping citizens informed and the political structures accountable is the “I have the right to know” project that monitors and analyses the activity of MPs and local governance⁴⁴.

In Hungary, civic education should be part of the educational structure from students’ early years. All stakeholders should be involved in the process of teaching citizenship - parents, teachers, social workers, politicians. In addition, civic education should be integrated in the school curriculum not so much in the form of dry theory but with working examples of how change can be accomplished. As the political system is becoming more hostile towards NGOs, additional support is needed in the form of funding but also external pressure in favor of democracy.

In the Czech Republic, the generation of transition tends to care more about practical causes as opposed to abstract ones. For example, instead of fighting against climate change as a concept, citizens run impact-oriented and concrete initiatives like Zachran jidlo (a food saving initiative)⁴⁵, social projects like Klinika⁴⁶ or activities that promote cycling, guerrilla gardening, etc. These initiatives should be supported and expanded. Technology should be used for activism to connect people but also make a cause look modern and “cool” and therefore appeal to younger people. The danger with technology, however, is that rather than being a means to an end it gets mistaken with the goal.

When it comes to politics, attention should be paid to the local level of governance. Local politicians sometimes have grass root support but have difficulties transferring their success to the national or European level.

In Slovakia, a key challenge is to break the barrier of apathy and make people active, especially when it comes to those members of the generation of transition that have witnessed the civic passivity during the

⁴⁴ Association 61 (n.y.). Available at: <https://mamprawowiedziec.pl/strona/info-association61>.

⁴⁵ Zachran Jidlo (n.y.). Available at: <http://zachranjidlo.cz/en/>.

⁴⁶ Klinika (n.y.): About. Available at: <https://klinika.451.cz/english/>.

previous regime first hand. Training local community leaders in community organizing can have a great impact in activating entire segments of society in solving their collective problems is a cooperative way. In addition, publicizing and promoting success stories from civic initiatives when they happen is a great way to inform citizens while simultaneously widely sharing a good practice.

THE WESTERN BALKANS

Who are the children of transition?

The generation of transition in the Western Balkans grew up in turbulent times – the increasing ethnic tensions in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia resulted in a series of regional armed conflicts that tore apart Southeastern Europe for more than a decade. The outcome – 7 new countries, more than 140 000 people killed, almost 4 million others displaced⁴⁷.

Given the number of armed conflicts that turned the region into a warzone less than 20 years ago, the newborn⁴⁸ democracies had to (and still have to) deal not only with transition from communism to democracy but also with state-building (in the former Yugoslav republics Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and Montenegro and in Kosovo), with strong ethnic tensions within and on their borders and with the destruction and aftermath of the Yugoslav wars.

The war had a huge impact on all generations that lived through that period but it was a crucial formative experience that shaped the mindset and the values of the generation of transition since they had to face war and chaos at a point in their lives when they had yet to form their own worldview⁴⁹.

Generally, we can speak of two cohorts of the generation of transition that experienced the political changes in a different way – people born in the first cohort (1975-1985) experienced the war in a more conscious way, whereas the people born in the second one (1985-1995) grew up aware mainly of the post-war situation. Nevertheless, even though all Western Balkan countries were strongly affected, the regional conflicts erupted at different points in time, which created different conditions under which the two cohorts of the generation of transition developed in each country. The war in Slovenia ended in 1991, whereas the war in Kosovo lasted until 1999.

Disappointment

Even though the two cohorts of the generation of transition were raised in political systems based on different values, a survey indicates that their opinions and attitudes are similar. Furthermore, according to the data, the majority of people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia, even those born in the 1990s, believe that life would have been better had the previous system survived⁵⁰. Given the fact that the younger generation has never experienced communism, this tendency could be described both as nostalgia for an idealized version of the past and as disappointment from the current political system⁵¹. This disappointment comes as no surprise, since the *Freedom House Nations in Transit 2017 Report*⁵² indicates that there are no consolidated democracies in the Western Balkans. According to the report Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia show the lowest levels of democratic

⁴⁷ <https://www.ictj.org/our-work/regions-and-countries/former-yugoslavia>; 12.12.2017 11:54

⁴⁸ On the 17 February 2008, the day that Kosovo declared independence from Serbia, a typographic monument consisting of the English word “Newborn” in capital block letters was unveiled in Pristina.

⁴⁹ Gries, Rainer. Asboth, Eva Tamara. Krakovsky, Christina. *Generation In-Between. Children of the Balkan Wars: Getting to know a crucial generation for Europe*. Erste Stiftung, 2016, 11-18

⁵⁰ Kacarska, Simonida. *20 Years After 1991: A tale of two generations*. Opinion Paper, Supporting Policy Development Series, 1/2012. European Fund for the Balkans

⁵¹ Nostalgia for the previous political system “embodies a utopian hope that there must be a society that is better than the current one”. Velikonja, Mitja. *Lost in Transition: Nostalgia for Socialism in Post-socialist Countries*, East European Politics & Societies, 2009, 535-551

⁵² <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2017>; 12.12.2017 12:04

progress in the region and are defined as “Transitional Governments or Hybrid Regimes”, whereas the other states are labeled “Semi-consolidated democracies”. However, there is still some progress, considering the fact that in the 2015 Report⁵³ Kosovo was ranked as a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime on a similar level to Kyrgyzstan and Armenia.

In the article *Fractured Authoritarianism in Bosnia and Herzegovina* Jasmin Mujanovic suggests a possible reason for the unsuccessful democratic transition. According to her, “[i]n a sense, the dirty little secret of the contemporary Western Balkans is that while the old state dissolved, the old regime never did.⁵⁴” This assessment is supported by numerous academics in the Western Balkans who describe similar tendencies in each country such as “continuity of the same ruling elite⁵⁵” and unfair elections⁵⁶, corruption and strong political influence over institutions⁵⁷ and lack of effective rule of law⁵⁸. This political climate in the Western Balkans discourages active citizenship and leaves the majority of young people with the bitter impression that they have no influence over politics be it on national or local level⁵⁹. In addition to this, only 6.2% of the people born between 1984 and 1999 in Macedonia and 7.9% of the same age-group in Croatia claimed to be content with the state of democracy in their country in a survey held between 2011 and 2014, with the average for the region being 17.1%⁶⁰.

This begs the question – if people are so obviously disappointed with the democratic transition, as studies suggest, what is the extent of civic engagement in the region?

Civic Engagement

Interviews with civil society experts in the region suggest that civic activity varies across countries. They often call the generation of transition “the lost generation”⁶¹, since the crisis at the beginning of the transition period forced them to focus on securing the survival of their families⁶² rather than participating actively in civil society. As one of the interviewees from Bosnia and Herzegovina explained: “[...] there is always the question of what a human [being] needs to live a life in dignity. We are still struggling [to have a normal life] and [this] is fundamental for democracy.” Experts from Montenegro, Serbia and Croatia express their concern that since the generation of transition received no support in the beginning of the changes, this generation could not develop any sense of social responsibility, thus could not recognize their role in the transition. A civic activist from Croatia shares: “Official support in developing in this direction was given to the younger generations but not to the one immediately affected – the generation of transition. They got stuck in their generational trauma focusing on social security, the struggle to

⁵³ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2015#.Wi-qA0qWbIU> ; 12.12.2017 12:06

⁵⁴ Mujanovic, Jasmin. *Fractured Authoritarianism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Religion and Society in East and West 9-10/2016, Vol. 44

⁵⁵ Marović, Jovana. *The Thin Line Between the Party and the State in Montenegro*. RSEW 9-10/2016, Vol.44; Hadzibegovic, Ajsa. Civil Activist from Montenegro, Interview 2017: *A peaceful change of power never happened and the same people [like in the previous regime] are still in power.*;

⁵⁶ Marović, Jovana. *The Thin Line Between the Party and the State in Montenegro*. RSEW 9-10/2016, Vol.44

⁵⁷ Vujačić, Marko. *Serbia: The State Besieged, Society in Distress*. RSEW 9-10/2016, Vol.44

⁵⁸ Hajrullahu, Arben. *Kosovo between Unsolved Problems and Ideas of Liberalism*. RSEW 9-10/2016, Vol.44

⁵⁹ Taleski, Dane; Hoppe, Bert. *Jugendliche in Südosteuropa. Lost in transition*. FES, 2015

⁶⁰ See 14.

⁶¹ “Lost generation” is a term referring to the generation that came of age during and shortly after World War I. They were often described as cynical and lacking cultural and emotional stability as a result of their war experiences. The generation was “lost” in a sense that their inherited values were no longer relevant in the new post-war world.

⁶² Civil activist from Croatia shared these observations during an interview in November, 2017.

survive”, whereas an NGO activist from Serbia, born a few years before the collapse of Yugoslavia, points out: “[...] political activism was not valued in a time doomed with problems.”

Surveys confirm these assessments - when asked about their biggest concerns, the children of war rank unemployment and poverty the highest across the different countries. Most of them believe that employment and economic growth should be among the top priorities of the government and share that they would become involved to help decrease unemployment, poverty, corruption, health care and to some extent environmental issues⁶³. At the same time, only 3% of the participants in Croatia, Kosovo and Macedonia and 5-7% in in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania said they would get civically involved to improve the state of democracy and democratic institutions even though they are clearly not satisfied with the democracy in their countries⁶⁴.

This leads to a mistrust in the democratic institutions related to politics – the political parties are one of the least trusted in all countries in the region followed by the parliament and the government⁶⁵. On the contrary – people in the region have faith in law enforcement institutions with the police and the army ranking among the top 3 most trusted institutions in most of the countries in the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Romania religion plays an important role – the religious leaders and the church are the most trusted ones, whereas in both Albania and Kosovo more than 55% of the young people interviewed put media on the first place among all democratic institutions. The case of Slovenia is also quite curious because according to the survey people have the most faith in the educational institutions, the police and the non-governmental organizations⁶⁶.

At the same time about one third of those in the region born between 1984 and 1999 believe they could influence the national and local institutions. The participants in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are the most skeptical – only about 15% think they can have an impact, whereas in Kosovo and Albania young people are much more optimistic – around half of them believe they can have an influence on a local level and 40% - on a national level as well ⁶⁷.

The data on their interest in politics and civic society, however, indicates that even though the youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina is skeptical that they could have an impact, 52.6% are somehow involved in politics. The mistrust towards politics in Slovenia leaves an impact on the political involvement – only about 9.3% are active in politics. In the other countries, the numbers suggest that around one third are politically active. On the other hand, it seems like much more people in Kosovo and Slovenia prefer being active in the civic society than in politics, whereas in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania it is the opposite⁶⁸.

⁶³ Kacarska, Simonida. *20 Years After 1991: A tale of two generations*. Opinion Paper, Supporting Policy Development Series, 1/2012. European Fund for the Balkans

⁶⁴ See 14.

⁶⁵ Flere, Sergej; Hurrelmann, Klaus; Klanjšek, Rudi; Lavrič, Miran; Reibold, Haley; Taleski, Dane. *Lost in democratic transition?* Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015; p. 31

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 49

When it comes to being civically active, citizens are not so enthusiastic about volunteering. A civic expert from Albania suggests an explanation why volunteering is so underestimated in the region – volunteering and youth organizations had been used as tools of influence by the communist party. Slovenia is an exception with almost 40% who would do volunteering. In the other Western Balkan countries, the perception of volunteering is limited to assisting seniors and people with disabilities and public work in the local communities (such as cleaning public areas and constructing public facilities) – activities that are relatively politically neutral.

Most experts interviewed in 2017 share that the second cohort of the generation of transition (those born between 1985 and 1995) is more civically active than the first one (born 1975-1985). The most active citizens in Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia recently, according to the experts, are well educated young people. However, interviewees from Albania and Croatia confirm the research data by stating that the civic activity is still usually related to local organizations working on non-political issues.

Conclusion and recommendations

Transition to democracy in the Western Balkans is far from over. The legacy of the Yugoslav wars, the communist past and the lack of political experience in the youngest democracies in the region are all obstacles in the way of the development of civic society in these countries.

Due to the diversity of the region, recommendations on enhancing civic involvement are formulated on a country-specific basis.

In Albania efforts should be directed to applying civic education in practice, not only as a school subject. Exposing nepotism and corruption in the political system is a key priority.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the general institutional and educational framework for civic engagement needs to be improved upon. At the same time, there needs to be encouragement and even mentorship at the individual level for those who have demonstrated potential for civic engagement.

In Croatia, despite the fact that civic education has been introduced superficially, the critical thinking skills of the public when it comes to governmental decision-making should be improved. Creating spaces where citizens can be active and develop their civic skills both within and outside educational institutions should be a key priority.

In Kosovo, the main point of action is to put an end to the country's international isolation and to open the path to economic and political development. Young people will engage civically when they have perspective and the opportunity to exchange experience and practices with their peers in Europe.

In Macedonia, the recent shift in the political situation has produced a surge of civic engagement. This energy needs to be preserved while at the same time systemic problems (like corruption and clientelism) are addressed through civic education and legislative reform.

In Montenegro, to obtain the desired result citizens tend to rely on shortcuts rather than civic instruments. More practical experience with civic engagement is needed, both in the context of politics and the civic

sector. Credible community leaders should be empowered and supported in order to produce bottom-up systemic change.

In Slovenia, citizens perceive politics as something negative and thus are not very willing to be politically engaged. Citizenship education plays an important role, since it has the potential to prepare young people to engage actively in democratic processes. Citizenship education should be introduced in the broadest possible sense – through literature, poetry, arts, humanities etc.

In Serbia, formal educational structures for civic education are lacking. More effort needs to be invested in creating a structured curriculum encompassing topics like democracy, human rights and European integration that is taught at educational institutions from an early age.

BULGARIA AND ROMANIA

Background

Even though transition to democracy started in a different way in Bulgaria and Romania, the countries are often put in the same basket, not least because they joined the EU together as part of the East enlargement (2004) yet with a delay, or as it is popular to say in the region ‘we got on the last train’. Indicators demonstrate⁶⁹ that Romania was in a worse condition compared to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and Bulgarians -- sometimes with jealousy, sometimes with admiration -- state that Romania is better off these days. Higher income levels, special measures to fight corruption, including on the highest political level⁷⁰, as well as a civil society that seems to take it easily to the streets and in big numbers make Bulgarians wish there were more of that energy in their own country.

When both countries joined the EU in 2007, they did so under a Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) that annually monitors the areas which were not reformed sufficiently in the accession process – judicial reform, corruption and organized crime (Bulgaria). Ten years later they are still ‘under quarantine’. In these two countries, where EU-bashing does not yet have the prominence and effects we observe elsewhere, and where EU institutions enjoy a higher levels of trust⁷¹ compared to national institutions, the CVM is an accountability measure in the public perception.

Neither of the countries ‘enjoy’ being put in the same basket. On the one hand, Romanians generally do not perceive themselves as part of *the Balkans*, the term being associated with being backwards and disintegrating. On the other hand, Bulgarians are not thrilled that in this ‘rivalry’ Romania continuously scores better, with a probability of ending the CVM of the judiciary before Bulgaria by 2019.

An even more important reason for grouping the countries together is the way their current problems relate to the insufficient dealing with communist past and to low levels of democratic political culture. Lustration either never took place or was delayed in a way that made forgetting easier in societies that did not know much about and were not given the means to learn about the depths and widths of communist oppression. Individuals, belonging to the old networks of power, often related to the former State Security structures, have managed to transition their influence in the democratic system, keeping the same corrupt practice of doing business as before. That, along with various forms and high levels of corruption, lack of political and institutional accountability (especially of the intelligence services), lack of independence of the judiciary and socio-economic disparities paint a gloomy picture of democratic transition, almost 30 years since its onset.

Both experts and practitioners agree that the political problems are more challenging than the socio-economic ones. Even though the gap between poor and rich – as opposed to countries like Poland – is more significant, citizens of both countries are better off than they have been in the past few decades.

⁶⁹ World Bank (2017): GDP per capita. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=RO-BG-PL-CZ>.

⁷⁰ Politico (2017): The DNA of Romania’s anti-corruption success. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-dna-of-romanas-anti-corruption-success-eu-transparency-international/>.

⁷¹ OSI (Open Society Institute) (2016): Demokratsia i grazhdansko uchastie – Obshtestvenite naglasi kam demokratsiata, varhovenstvoto na pravoto i osnovnite prava na choveka prez 2016 g. Available at: <http://osi.bg/downloads/File/2017/Democracy%20Survey%202016%20BG.pdf>, page 12 and Standard Eurobarometer 87, Spring 2017, Public Opinion in the European Union, p. 15

In both countries the former communist parties did not properly part with the past and increasingly use nostalgia for communism for political purposes, officially denying the gains from democracy. In the words of the Bulgarian Socialist leader “Democracy took a lot from us”⁷².

As an interviewee from Romania put it “Nostalgia is a matter of geography”⁷³, meaning that citizens in smaller towns, or the so called ‘communitarians’ are more susceptible to it than those living in the urban areas, or the ‘cosmopolitans’. It also used to be a matter of demography, but as we observe in the past few years, nostalgia too, can be passed onto a younger generation which has never experienced the past. In the absence of proper teaching of history of communism and civics, myths and misconceptions take roots easily.

The lack of a deeply rooted democratic culture makes the above statements very dangerous, because they additionally fuel a slow, but steady democratic backsliding, visible throughout the various democracy indexes of the past couple of years. According to a recent poll only 14 % of Bulgarians rank democracy and freedom of speech as one of their top three values⁷⁴.

The generation of transition: one generation, two stories

Based on the definition used for the purposes of this paper⁷⁵, we make a distinction between two cohorts within the so-called generation of transition – those, who experienced both communism and transition and are roughly born between 1975 and 1985 and those, who experienced only transition to democracy and are born between 1985 and 1995. There is a growing number of comparative research data in the region on the second cohort as representatives of youth studies. However, the first cohort’s sociological portrait is somewhat difficult to isolate. The picture of the generation of transition we get here is a mixture of general sociological data for both countries, youth studies that look at the second cohort and a number of interviews with representatives from both cohorts.

The cohort 1985 – 1995

A 2014 comparative study, done by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation throughout South-East Europe finds a youth (14 – 27 years old) in Bulgaria which cares about looking good (85%), being independent (80%) and having a career (75%) the most. The picture in Romania is similar with 89%, 84% and 78% respectively⁷⁶.

However, independence does not translate into civic engagement or political activities, it means economic power. The percentage of those who find civic actions ‘cool’ in Bulgaria is only 27% and political 24%⁷⁷, while 41% think this is old-fashioned. In Romania 33% find civic activism appealing.

The cohort 1975 – 1985

⁷² Politico (2017): Bulgarian bruiser’s comeback dreams. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgarian-bruisers-comeback-dreams/>.

⁷³ Interview with Gruia Badescu (Romania), December 2017

⁷⁴ Kapital (2017): Tsennostite na bulgarite sa kasha sas socialisticheski vkus. Available at:

http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2017/10/30/3069077_cennostite_na_bulgarite_sa_kasha_sus_socialisticheski/.

⁷⁵ Mannheim, K. (1928): Das Problem der Generationen. In: Ders. (1964): Wissenssoziologie. Berlin/Neuwied, pp. 509-565

⁷⁶ Mitev, P. E., Kovacheva, S. (2014): Young People in European Bulgaria – A sociological portrait 2014. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Sofia, p. 95.

⁷⁷ FES (2014): Young people in European Bulgaria. A sociological portrait 2014, p. 51

Quoting a Romanian interviewee⁷⁸, the first cohort composes the core of the civically active today, predominantly living in the big, urban centers. To cite a teacher from the town of Sliven, Bulgaria, in her assessment „the first cohort are the ones who are not so well-behaved, but brave. The second cohort is well-educated and polished, but cowardly. They think they have much to lose.”

A clear distinction has been made in both countries between the two groups not only about whether they are active or not, but also about the issues they care about when they become active. While the first cohort is more prone to engage in activities related to the quality of democracy and its institutions like rule of law, freedom of speech, assault on the independence of the judiciary or corruption, the second cohort would much rather associate with causes and activities they deem apolitical, like the environment, protecting the forestry or the mountains. While the first cohort has some experience under communism and does not necessarily take democracy for granted, the second cohort has been born and grew up in transition, with change and turbulence but in a (deficient) democracy. The economic uncertainties and scarcity of the 90s could offer one way of looking at why the younger generation cares so much about material status and gains. Success at any cost is an ultimate goal for 42% of young Bulgarians and nepotism remains a wide-spread way to become successful (69% of Bulgarians think connections rather than work contribute to success).

One of the interviewees in Bulgaria spoke of the dangers of the disconnection between those two cohorts or in general between the older and the younger citizens, both politically and civically. Their concerns and fears vary and as she put it: “it isn’t just a matter of different in the causes they care about, but also a matter of vocabulary”⁷⁹.

Citizens and the state

However, what unites the two cohorts in both countries is, on the one hand, the inability to translate their scattered civic energy into something uniting and impactful – be it a civic initiative or a political movement, and on the other hand, the almost total disconnect between them as citizens and the state apparatus. At the same time, the expectations are high when it comes to the role of the state to provide for its citizens. In Bulgaria, between 92% and 86% agree that the state should provide free education, healthcare, minimal wage and work for everyone while at the same time 60% think the state should decrease taxes.

Citizens do not think of themselves as being the state but as being exogenous to the state⁸⁰. In Romania this is starting to change, as more and more citizens see their rights under assault. One explanation is that the more often people take it to the streets, the more they see their protest actions impacting policy formation. Another is that the so called technocratic governments, found recently in Romania, give civil society actors and experts access to the institutions. Regardless of the short time they are in power, they build bridges that serve as fundamentals for a trustful ‘citizen – institutions’ relationship. Recently the awareness of the cost of corruption in Romania has reached a level that was able to activate even citizens in smaller towns.

⁷⁸ Interview with Madalina Mocan (Romania), December 2017

⁷⁹ Interview with Evelyne Slavkova (Bulgaria), December 2017

⁸⁰ Interview with Evelyne Slavkova (Bulgaria), December 2017

Trust

When it comes to institutional trust, both countries showcase similar level of distrust vis à vis main political institutions like the parliament, the government or the president. Political parties and the parliament are in both countries the least popular institutions of representative democracy. The highest levels of trust go to the police, the church and the EU. Unlike in Romania, religion in Bulgaria is increasingly a matter of traditions and less so a matter of faith.

When it comes to social trust, young people clearly trust their families the most, as well as their extended families and friends. The low levels of engagement in social causes or volunteering are put in co-relation to the lack of trust in individuals, structures and networks beyond the immediate circle of family and friends⁸¹.

What has been and what to do?

Romania and Bulgaria have the lowest numbers of active NGOs per capita in EU's Eastern Europe⁸². The low levels of engagement in civil society and volunteering correspond to the low levels of trust be in the business, civic sector or institutions. In addition, the civic sector is under a strong financial pressure, especially after the accession to the EU and the funding vacuum created by the withdrawal of a number of supporters from the region. Moreover, work on democratic rights, culture and institutions has been abandoned, following the logic that with the EU accession democracy consolidation has been irreversibly accomplished.

Against this background, the recent concerns voiced in both countries about state capture do not come as a surprise. A number of recommendations have been distilled from the research. Keeping in mind the complexity, they can be summed up in the following areas:

Institutions: There is a disconnection between citizens and the state. One way of bridging institutions with citizens would be by developing mechanisms for access of CSOs to decision making and to the institutions. This, however is a question of political will and the lack thereof mirrored in the low number of NGOs who monitor or collaborate with institutions⁸³.

Civic society organizations: Currently the CSO sector is under a strong assault (being labeled as agents of George Soros) and financial pressure. This means that the sector itself needs strengthening and empowerment be it externally, or through internal transformation of their missions and funding mechanisms. The active representatives of the generation of transition predominantly engage in the work of civil society organizations. The topics they deal with are mostly related to the environment and work with children and young people. There is a staggering depoliticizing of civic life, politics being considered to be a dirty business and any politician being thought of as a criminal.

⁸¹ FES (2014): FES (2014): Young people in European Bulgaria. A sociological portrait 2014, pp. 62 -- 63, pp. 69 -- 70

⁸² Vador, P. et al. (2017): Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenges and Opportunities. ERSTE Stiftung, Vienna, p. 28. Available at: https://issuu.com/erste-foundation/docs/civil_society_studie_issuu_e1.

⁸³ OSI (Open Society Institute) (2017) Aktivnite nepravitelstveni organizatzii v Balgaria prez 2017 g. – доклад na Institut "Otvoreno obshtestvo" – Sofia. Available at: http://osi.bg/?cy=10&lang=1&program=1&action=2&news_id=738.

Values: “A hodgepodge with a socialist flavor” is how a recent article described Bulgarians’ values⁸⁴. The combination of low levels of social and institutional trust, coupled with low appreciation for civic and political activities, as well as the unrealistically high expectations from the state are a ticking time bomb. The low appreciation for democratic institutions and the low levels of democratic political culture make citizens susceptible for anti-democratic forms of governance. This is how financial security, connections and corruption climb up on the values ladder.

Experience in transition and the current deficiencies of our democratic system have been crucial for the formation of a distorted understanding of democracy. In the absence of democratic values education, young people have acquired a mishmash of values, which often are not contested at home, in the media, or in the public discourse and encourage more and more illiberal attitudes.

The small numbers of young people who value democracy and civic activism are usually raised in active families or have studied abroad. Even though the emigration trend is about to be reversed for the first time since 1989 and well-educated, young Bulgarians begin to return, the number of the active citizens is still very low and diverse to constitute cohesive networks of trust capable of improving the democratic environment. On the contrary, there is an understanding that life is comfortable and satisfying enough, especially when one is working for a foreign company, so one does not need to care for the political framework.

Studies of recent protest movements have shown that it is easier to get organized around the idea of so called “negative sovereignty” based on the definition of Pierre Rosanvallon, i.e. citizens agree upon what they don’t want and take it to the streets. The fact that they don’t belong to a trust network prevents them from formulating a positive idea about what they aim at⁸⁵. In this sense social networks appear as a communication channel rather than a network of trust.

⁸⁴ Kapital (2017): Tsennostite na balgarite sa kasha sas socialisticheski vkus. Available at: http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2017/10/30/3069077_cennostite_na_bulgarite_sa_kasha_sus_socialisticheski/.

⁸⁵ Georgieva V. (2017): Mnozhestva na nesaglasnite, Sofia, p. 305

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES

Background

“(…) recent civic engagement initiatives for young people (in Armenia) were declared to be non-political, otherwise, the activists would lose mass support”⁸⁶

Civil society engagement is generally limited in the Eastern Partnership (EaP)⁸⁷ countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. All of them are still dealing with the legacy of their communist past and the incomplete transition to democracy. The biggest challenges these countries struggle with are high levels of corruption, nepotism and abuse of power among political elites and human rights issues⁸⁸. The structural and political unreliability results in citizens retreating to their private lives with a strong focus on family and friends and a high reluctance to get politically and/or socially involved⁸⁹.

The generation of transition - values and responsibility

Throughout the region both traditional values (emphasizing the importance of religion, parent-child ties, deference to authority and traditional family values⁹⁰) and new global values (like unity, community, life, freedom, connection, sustainability, creativity, empowerment, choice, and integrity⁹¹) are playing a role for the people belonging to the generation of transition⁹². A much higher level of trust exists towards family and friends than towards any governmental or social institution. In the case of Georgia 81% of young people (14-29) trust religious institutions while only 25%-26% trust local political institutions (political parties, Parliament, central and local governments)⁹³. In Armenia, 51,7% of young people (14-29) do not trust the ruling political parties; 53,9% do not trust the opposition parties; 53,8% do not trust the president of the republic; 52,7% do not trust the National Assembly and 40,3% do not trust local self-government bodies⁹⁴. Almost half (49%) of Ukrainian youth (14 to 29) strongly distrust Ukrainian politicians⁹⁵.

Among the actively engaged members of the generation of transition, there is appreciation of democratic values. Interviews show that the greatest benefits of democracy come from the freedom of speech,

⁸⁶ Mkrtychyan et al. (2016): Independence Generation. Youth Study 2016 – Armenia. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Yerevan, p. 72.

⁸⁷ The EaP is officially defined as a joint initiative of the six countries and the EU that aims at “(…) building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation. Additionally, bonds forged through the Eastern Partnership help strengthening state and societal resilience: it makes both the EU and the partners stronger and better able to deal with internal and external challenges.” (European Union External Action (2016). Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/419/eastern-partnership_en).

⁸⁸ cf.: Mkrtychyan et al. (2016); Hölscher, J. (2012): Azerbaijan in Transition. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) Working Papers 12/20; Matskevich, U. (2012): Public dialog in Belarus: from grass-roots democracy to civic participation. “Belarus for Beginners” series, Lohvinau Publishing House, Minsk; Omanadze et al. (2017): Generation in Transition. Youth Study 2016. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung – Georgia, Tbilisi; Timus, N. (2016): Moldova’s Democratic Decay. In: Illiberal and Authoritarian Tendencies in Eastern Europe, in: Religion & Society in East and West, 9-10/2016, Vol. 44, p. 36-37; Zarembo, K. (2017): Ukrainian “Generation Z”: Attitudes and Values – Nationwide opinion poll results. New European Center and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Kyiv.

⁸⁹ Mkrtychyan et al. (2016), p. 4.

⁹⁰ Zarembo, K. (2017), p. 125.

⁹¹ Miller, K. (2015): Global Values: A new Paradigm for A New World.

⁹² cf.: Omanadze et al. (2017), p. 11; Mkrtychyan et al. (2016), p. 4.

⁹³ Omanadze et al. (2017), p. 51.

⁹⁴ Mkrtychyan et al. (2016), pp. 51f.

⁹⁵ Zarembo, K. (2017), p. 23.

followed by the freedom of movement, the freedom of assembly and participation as well as the freedoms of expression and dignity.

Some interviewees highlighted the obligation to raise awareness about the previous regime amongst youngsters who do not have direct experience with communism. This would prevent the young generation to take democratic rights and freedoms for granted.

The crucial generation?

None of the respondents from the EaP countries perceived their generation as the crucial one for the future of their country. The younger generations are perceived as more open, more active and also more oriented towards the community wellbeing, while the majority of people belonging to the generation of transition are mostly concerned with their personal economic situation. The majority of those being active in the region are referred to as being mostly young – born in the late 90s, millennials – and highly educated – mostly university students – that are aware of their rights and had the possibility to be involved in different programmes, develop a bigger circle of interests and travel and study abroad.

However, the active members of the generation of transition play an important role in enabling and supporting the younger generations and their quest for change by giving guidance, presenting ideas and raising awareness. In Azerbaijan, the generation of transition can be considered crucial. However, its civic activity started to be severely limited by the state. As a result, many active citizens and all international organizations left the country while those who remained struggle to be successful.

Future outlook on civic engagement

„And democracy...what is that? That's politics from the USA where every second person is homosexual. Or in Western Europe where one does not know what to do with the refugees, most of them being terrorists.“⁹⁶

The lack of positive experience with democracy and lack of trust in the political system and its institutions poses an obstacle to transition⁹⁷. The expectation that the state provides for the people and decides on their behalf resembles the citizen-state relationship during the communist regime and leads to the absence of a culture of self-organizing and a sense of responsibility as an active participant in the events⁹⁸. All interview partners from EaP countries emphasized the importance of specific civic education measures in their national context:

In Armenia there is a need to develop mechanisms for young people that will enable them to educate themselves in the field of non-formal education.

The most successful civic education efforts in Azerbaijan happen from abroad through social media channels, which are very popular in the country.

⁹⁶ Interview with Iryna Kalinovich (Belarus).

⁹⁷ Diuk (2012): The next generation in Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan. Youth, Politics, Identity, and Change. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., United Kingdom, p. 131.

⁹⁸ Diuk (2012), p. 137 and Omanadze et al. 2017, p. 50.

In Belarus the society is described as apolitical due to a lack of understanding and democratic experience in which citizens do not perceive themselves as part of the society with rights and responsibilities. Topics on democracy and the future of the country as perceived by the generations to come should be part of school curricula.

In Georgia there is a basic need in getting an understanding of what the specific needs and possibilities of those groups are that are hard to reach and develop corresponding civic education measures to address these people.

A particular need exists in Moldova for educating people in terms of what democracy is and what your rights and your obligations are.

In the context of Ukraine, civic education should focus on dismantling nostalgia towards communism. Especially in rural areas where Russian influence by propagating that democracy is not good is having a huge impact on the people. Civic education should address the issue of the influence of Russian propaganda.

CONCLUSION

Civic education in each of the countries is making baby steps – in the V4 it exists for a little longer, in others it is in the launch phase. There are great expectations when it comes to its potential impact. However, there is **little understanding about what exactly constitutes civic education and how political it should be**. The very **notion of citizenship is debatable**, having in mind the ambivalent experience with democracy and the high numbers of citizens who wish for a strong, paternalistic state.

In addition, the debates so far are about formal civic education as part of the school curricula and not about adult civic education which would target the generation of transition.

In some countries an example is given with post World War II Germany and the importance of political education. Having in mind that the generation of transition cares more for **apolitical issues**, encouraging political attitudes and positions based on democratic values proves crucial. However, the entry point should be with causes which are close to the generation, i.e. environment, education, career opportunities, travel.

There is a latent danger of making **civic education into a subject that nurtures nationalism**. With the rise of right-wing populism, there is a real concern of overloading civic education with patriotic undertones. Civic education is not a matter of only creating a separate subject at school, but is also **part of literature, history, geography and language teaching**. Literature and history in particular follow a widely conservative curriculum, which is important to revise. The **school environment** is equally important in teaching citizenship and democracy, just as **teachers' life-long learning programs** and trainings. With relative freedom of choice of books and materials, the formal process of teaching citizenship relies heavily on the levels of knowledge and personal experience of the teachers.

There is a broad consensus that **democracy is an abstract matter** that should be taught through case studies and project work that empower students, but also allow them to gain **positive experience with the democratic processes**. The more positive the experience is, the higher the motivation to uphold the democratic standards and the more likely students are to engage subsequently. As one of the interviewees from Romania put it, **faith should be regained that democracy solves more problems than it causes**.

The school is not the only place that deserves attention. The family is the other avenue through which young people acquire their values compass. **Intergenerational formats** prove to be one of the few approaches that instigate conversations and can challenge misconceptions, not only about democracy, but also about the communist past for which many feel nostalgia.

The gap between **urban centers and rural areas** is another area of concern in all countries; transition has left places in the countryside where there is no sense of community. In addition to capacity building for local elites, there should be programs that encourage the **exchange between the center and the periphery**.

Insufficient dealing with the communist past or an attempt to rewrite both its history and the history of democratization seems to be an impediment in all countries. In the V4 countries there is an intent to degrade the process of democratization, which goes with praise for an illiberal state (in Orban's words);

in Bulgaria and Romania there is a strong nostalgia for the glorified communist past even among the generation that never witnessed it, but did witness the hardship of transition; on the Balkans democracy struggles to consolidate with various degrees of success and history continues to divide; in most of the EaP countries war, frozen conflicts and old Soviet turn into oligarchic networks prevent the countries from unfolding their potential. It is important to mention the role Russia plays in making use of and enhancing the vulnerabilities of Eastern Europe, but elaborating on it would go far beyond the scope of this study.

It seems that the generation of uncertainties now slowly taking the wheel of their countries is for its most a pragmatic, distrustful of traditional politics and a disengaged cohort. Its elites, in Ivan Krastev's words, are meritocratic and find it increasingly easier to go somewhere else than to stay and change their countries. But they do care about issues they deem apolitical. The challenge remains to mobilize them to put the same amount of effort in political and civic engagement, but also to draw all lessons for the upcoming generations as well as for other countries and regions in transition.

The weak and underfunded NGO sector plays an important role. Not only should new and sustainable forms of funding be sought but also the disengagement of large donor organizations in the region should be reversed. Different Eastern European countries have a different status vis-à-vis the EU and based on the quality of democracy and even if support programs follow a regional principle, there should be enough flexibility to adjust to realities on the ground.

This leads to the role played by international organizations and the donors community invested in democratization. If there are three major takeaways from the democratization wave post 1989/ 91 these are that:

- 1) Democracy is a long work in progress and support for it should not be cut off, even when countries join the EU.
- 2) Democracy should be thought of as the process of integration in a new political system – it takes time, positive experience, trust and repetition.
- 3) The political system's gradual refurbishment matters, but the democratic political culture of citizens matters equally. If no attention is paid to them but instead the focus is on the elites, when they start turning away from democracy there is no one to stand in opposition.

From the almost five dozens of interviews conducted and the numerous studies read for this research, we have discovered quite few powerful stories that have motivated the generation of transition to engage – run for senate, go on the streets with posters at minus 5C°, urge for transparency and accountability, protest and shift policies. It takes uplifting the positive stories that give more hope, build trust and restore confidence in one's own abilities to be part of change.

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