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*Nothing ever changes:
practices of youth political (dis)engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the younger generation's political participation in Southeast Europe, considered as a geopolitical area comprising ten countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 11). My academic interest for the region derives from direct experience, as over the years I have had multiple chances to confront myself with the political reality of these countries, BiH in particular. These experiences have persuaded me to believe that «youth in the ‘periphery,’ to which Southeast Europe is often relegated, represent an untapped potential for studies of broader, continent-wide phenomena» (Mandić & Trošt, 2017, p. 2).

The aim of this paper is not only to understand if youth in Southeast Europe take part in elections, but also to investigate how they more generally engage in politics and what factors influence their political (non)participation. The main concern of my research is to understand if young people are apathetic towards politics or if their behaviours constitute an informed reaction to the state of play in their societies.

For my study, I used both quantitative sources coming from representative surveys (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019; Jusić & Numanović, 2017; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019; Taleski & Hoppe, 2015; Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015; Turčilo, et al., 2019; Žiga, et al., 2015) and qualitative sources derived from ethnographic research (Čelebičić, 2017; Hromadžić, 2015; Piacentini, 2018), in order to identify general trends without sacrificing «theoretical nuance and depth» (Mandić & Trošt, 2017, p. 6).

The results of my analysis have led me to claim that apathy is not a fitting explanation for the political behaviours of youth in the Southeast European region. Instead, I believe that it is much more useful and explanatory to analyse young people's political (non)participation through the conceptual lens of structure and agency. While the young generation's decisions

appear heavily influenced by structural factors linked to the region's economic and political transition, youth still show political agency when acting (or deciding not to act) in the political sphere. I argue that youth's apparently low political engagement is a deliberate reaction to the political and socio-economic situation in their countries.

In exploring youth political participation, I start with the general, giving a brief overview of the global and regional situation (chapter I), and then move to the particular, investigating the specific case of BiH (chapter II), and then conclude by tracing the case study back to its wider context, comparing it to the state of play in neighbouring Croatia (chapter III).

I. YOUTH AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In order to investigate youth political participation in the region of Southeast Europe, it is first of all needed to define the theoretical realm of the research. Therefore, I start this chapter by defining the concepts of youth, youth participation, and political participation. I continue by presenting the main political participation trends observed in democracies worldwide over the last decades. I then give a brief overview of the general political situation in Southeast Europe, focusing in particular on regional youth political participation tendencies. Finally, I present some concepts used by scholars to explain these tendencies, particularly in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

1. Conceptualizing youth and political participation

What does the term «youth» imply? What are «youth participation» and «political participation»? Youth can be a tricky concept to define. Scholars nowadays agree in claiming that youth is «a socially constructed intermediary phase that stands between childhood and adulthood» (Furlong, 2013, p. 2). This means that its connotations change across space and time (Wyn, 2015, p. 6) and that youth cannot be univocally linked to a specific age range (Furlong, 2013, p. 2). However, for the purpose of this paper youth is conventionally

considered as encompassing the 14-29 age cohort (Introduction and Methodology of FES Youth Studies, 2015, pp. 12-14; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 11; Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 7) and more specifically, for the case study analysed, the generation coming of age in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina (Čelebičić, 2017; Hromadžić, 2015; Piacentini, 2018). The majority of contemporary literature conceptualises youth as a time of change for individuals (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 11), during which they undergo «multifaceted transitions» (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 11). While it is true that young people share «a common experience of historical conditions» (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 12), it is important to note that they cannot be considered as a homogeneous group with universally shared world views, because many factors (such as gender, ethnicity, and social class, among others) contribute in shaping each individual's experience of youth (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 12). Nevertheless, prevailing attitudes and values of today's youth hold a great significance for the future of a society and for social research, because they can reveal the forthcoming trends in a population (Hurrelmann & Weichert, 2015, p. 8; Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 9).

Youth participation can be defined as «the active engagement and real influence of young people [and] the means by which they influence the opportunities and outcomes of the larger society» (Checkoway, 2011, p. 341). Participation is important because it enables youth to act as «agents of social change» in their societies (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 37). Moreover, participation of young people is particularly crucial for societies facing democratic transition (Hurrelmann & Weichert, 2015, p. 8), such as those in Southeast Europe (Freedom House, 2018), as both theoretical analysis and empirical research affirm that the active involvement of citizens in politics is crucial for representative democracy (Džihić & Segert, 2012, p. 248; Kaase, 2007, p. 791; Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, pp. 35, 45; Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 51; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 121). By participating

through democratic institutions young people «exercise their rights as citizens» (Checkoway, 2011, p. 340), they become more aware of democratic values (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 43; Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 51; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 121) and they develop a «general *repertoire* of political action» (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 51; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 121).

More generally, political participation can be broadly defined as «citizens' activities affecting politics» (van Deth, 2014, p. 351). Accepting this definition means acknowledging that almost everything can be considered as political participation (van Deth, 2014, p. 353). Many authors have tried to reach a satisfying definition of political participation (van Deth, 2014, p. 351-353). Nonetheless, it has proved difficult to formulate a definition specific enough to have scientific value yet broad enough as to not exclude from it the ever-arising new modes of engagement. It is however possible to identify some points that all definitions of political participation seem to have in common. According to van Deth (2014, p. 351-352) political participation is generally depicted as:

«An activity (or ‘action’) [...] done by people in their role as citizens [and] not as, say, politicians [...], [that is] voluntary and not enforced by law, rules or threats [...], [and] deals with government, politics or the state in a broad sense of these words».

Even accepting these common parameters, the list of possible forms of political participation remains potentially endless. There are, however, conventional types of political participation which have traditionally constituted the main channel for citizens' engagement and the major research focus for social sciences (Kaase, 2007, p. 786). These are electoral participation and participation through parties (Kaase, 2007, p. 786-788; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 61-68). During the late 1960s and early 1970s, students protests all around the world started to challenge these «institutionalized means of political participation» (Kaase, 2007, p. 789). Non-electoral participation significantly increased during those years

(Warren, 2002, p. 682) and nowadays social movements, protest politics, civic engagement and other types of «issue-based engagement», such as signing petitions, participating in demonstrations, joining boycotts and even volunteering (Kaase, 2007, p. 793; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 61), are accepted as alternative ways to voice and enact political preferences. Some of these forms of involvement, especially those related to the civic sphere, are sometimes differentiated by scholars from conventional political participation for being more «latent» (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 68).

Ever since the 1990s, studies in developed democracies have registered a continuous drop in citizens' political participation through formal channels (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 45; Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 43). This tendency concerns both lower turnout in elections (Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 38) and deterioration in established political party membership (Kaase, 2007, p. 787; Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 38-39). While these tendencies concern all demographics, they seem to be especially salient among the younger generation (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 46; Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 43; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 61), who is generally depicted as «uninvolved or minimally involved in public affairs» (Checkoway, 2011, p. 342). This downturn in political engagement has been labelled in different ways as «passivity, alienation, apathy, disillusionment, scepticism, cynicism and/or a critical disposition in citizens» (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 46). However, it is important to bear in mind that, in these researches, formal means of political participation are mostly considered as the only indicator to monitor (Checkoway, 2011, p. 342). In fact, competing research suggests that the «increasing disaffection from formal political institutions» is accompanied by renewed interest of citizens towards alternative forms of collective action (Warren, 2002, p. 682) and while youth participation can manifest itself in different forms (Checkoway, 2011, p. 343), it usually happens through civic engagement, volunteering and other non-institutional

channels rather than conventional political participation (Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 35; Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 51; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 121). Research conducted in recent years indicates that political participation in Southeast Europe has also followed the general trends discussed above (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 43).

2. The state of play in Southeast Europe

The countries included under the geopolitical label of «Southeast Europe» differ in many ways, most visibly for what concerns their level of European integration (Introduction and Methodology of FES Youth Studies, 2015, p. 11), which is often also considered as an indicator of democratic and economic development (Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 19). Only four countries in the region are members of the European Union (EU): Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia. Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia have the status of candidate countries, while BiH and Kosovo are only potential candidates for EU membership¹ (European Commission, 2019).

Considering this information, a question arises: why treat these countries as a single region and analyse them as a group? Firstly, they share a common past. They are all post-communist countries (Hurrelmann & Weichert, 2015, p. 7) and most of them (except for Albania, Bulgaria and Romania) are successor states of Yugoslavia (Hoare, 2010, p. 113). Moreover, several of these countries were involved in violent conflict during regime change (Hoare, 2010; Hurrelmann & Weichert, 2015, p. 7). Secondly, even if the countries find themselves in different stages of political and economic transition² (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 13), I believe they could potentially share similar challenges for the future, especially when it comes to their younger generation (Hurrelmann & Weichert, 2015, p. 9).

¹ The six countries that are not EU members are sometimes referred to as the «Western Balkans Six» (WB6) countries (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019).

² According to Freedom House (2018), currently only Slovenia classifies as a consolidated democracy, while all other countries in the region are still labelled as semi-consolidated democracies or hybrid regimes.

In most of these countries «absence of state legitimacy, weak institutions [...], populist movements, criminalisation, corruption and the shadow economy» (Hurrelmann & Weichert, 2015, p. 7) have hampered democratisation in the past 20 years and the region is often considered to be undergoing a generalised «crisis of governance» (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 3). Moreover, despite recent improvements, young people remain among the social groups most affected by unemployment and emigration³ (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 25-26, 73) and their interest and engagement in politics seems to be continuously dropping (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 63). Some young people decide to emigrate, while many others are reportedly disengaged from politics and society. Only a minority seems to take an active political stance «to contest nationalism, political violence, impunity and corruption» (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 3).

Considering that participation is one of the key elements of a functioning democracy (Džihić & Segert, 2012, p. 248), and that youth's behaviours are crucial in determining the future of a society (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 9), these trends appear as an urgent problem that countries in Southeast Europe must face. Youth's estrangement from politics could especially hinder those countries characterised by incomplete democratic consolidation (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 61). Some authors argue that in the midst of this political changeover youth in Southeast Europe have got «lost in transition» (Hurrelmann & Weichert, 2015; Taleski & Hoppe, 2015; Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015).

3. Apathy and ethnicity: theoretical starting points

Two assumptions permeate social studies on the Balkan region in general, and its youth in particular. The first assumption relates to the matter of ethnicity. The Balkans are often depicted as a land of «ancient hatreds», where the different ethnic groups are cyclically

³ Youth from the WB6 in particular express a greater wish to emigrate (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 11).

involved in violence against one another (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 12). This assumption is consequently extended to youth studies and the main hypothesis is often «that ethnicity is the dominant lens through which Southeast European youth can be understood» (Mandić & Trošt, 2017, p. 1).

However, presently many scholars are rejecting these explanations (Džankić, 2015; Hromadžić, 2015; Jansen, Brković, & Čelebičić, 2017; Mandić & Trošt, 2017; Piacentini, 2018), claiming that «whereas ethnicity has been – for good and bad reasons – a dominant explanation of regional youth trends for decades, it cannot suffice anymore» (Mandić & Trošt, 2017, p. 2), because today ethnicity «is neither central nor predominant in youth identity and values in Southeast Europe» (Mandić & Trošt, 2017, p. 3). Scholars argue that «instead of using ethnic identity as an explanatory variable, we should problematize the nature of ethnic identity itself» (Mandić & Trošt, 2017, p. 4) by remembering that «all ethnic identities are constructed, contingent, and fluctuating» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 14) and that thus they are «more complicated than they first appear» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 14). Therefore, when it comes to research in Southeast Europe it is necessary «not to endlessly investigate nationalist ‘groupness’ along traditional lines» (Mandić & Trošt, 2017, p. 5) but to put «ethnonationalist categories in their place» by «investigating their *relative* salience [...] and analysing the degree to which they intersect with other categories» (Jansen, Brković, & Čelebičić, 2017, p. 8).

The second assumption concerns youth's presumed «political apathy» (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 61). As Hromadžić points out «youth have been repeatedly described as lazy, lethargic, [and] disillusioned» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 157). The author refers in particular to the case of BiH, however other scholars report that this is also a common explanation for studies concerning youth in Southeast Europe in general (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 61). Because of their reported withdrawal from politics, young

people in the region are largely considered to be «passive» (Taleski & Hoppe, 2015, p. 3), apathetic (Džihić & Segert, 2012, p. 248), «apolitical» (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 37) and unlikely to support democratisation and EU integration in their countries (Taleski, Reimbولد, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 52).

Nowadays, many authors challenge the validity of the concept of «apathy» as an explanation for citizen's political behaviours (Čelebičić, 2017; Checkoway, 2011; Hromadžić, 2015; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019; Piacentini, 2018; Warren, 2002) for multiple reasons. Firstly, they claim that it is not enough to look at youth's participation in elections or in political parties in order to assess their overall political engagement. A decrease in conventional political participation is not necessarily a sign of apathy, as youth could be involved in their communities in different ways (Checkoway, 2011, p. 342; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 61). In order to have a more complete overview of young people's political behaviours and the reasons behind them, it is necessary to consider alternative channels of participation in the analysis as well (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 51; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 121-122). Secondly, they argue that stopping at the «apathy» narrative often hinders deeper understanding of the factors that influence young people's choices. For example, talking about political participation trends in developed democracies, Warren (2002, p. 681) suggests that: «Apathy is not an entirely accurate description. Rather, over the past several decades, people [...] have become *disaffected* from their political institutions [...]. It seems that disaffection reflects not apathy but increasingly critical evaluations of government». Analysing voting decisions of young people in BiH, Čelebičić (2017, p. 129) agrees in claiming that «the ways in which young people [get] involved politically cannot be understood simply in terms of passivity or disinterest» as young people express their own agency when acting in the political sphere.

The matter can indeed be traced back to the so-called «dichotomy between structure and agency» (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 11). According to this distinction, the actions of young people are both limited by structural factors such as class, ethnicity, physical ability or gender (Furlong, 2013, p. 7) and actively shaped by individual agency (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 11-13; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 11). When analysing youth's political behaviour, instead of asking whether youth are «active» or «passive» (and hence, in the common opinion, apathetic) in politics, the question can be rephrased in these terms: to what extent do political decisions and beliefs of youth reflect their agency and to what extent are they determined by the structure young people live in? (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 11).

When analysing the link between structure and agency in youth's political behaviour, BiH appears as an interesting case to focus on. Emerging as «the most weakened of all states from the wars over Yugoslavia's dissolution» (Bieber, 2010, p. 311), the country has been object of heavy postwar international intervention (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 18-23) aimed at peace-building and state-making (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 4). In BiH the already discussed obstacles to democratisation, such as corruption, are more evident than in other countries (Bieber, 2010, p. 316-322; Džihic & Segert, 2012, p. 244-248; Hromadžić, 2015, p. 156-180) and despite substantial international intervention (Bieber, 2010, p. 315) it still appears as «a highly crisis-driven country [...] with very unstable governing institutions» (Džihic & Segert, 2012, p. 240). Moreover, the intertwinement of these structural constraints with youth's life experiences appears more clearly (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 9; Piacentini, 2018, p. 265).

An interesting concept is that of «anti-citizenship» formulated by Hromadžić (2015). She notes that the majority of youth met during her ethnographic research in Mostar, in southern BiH, consider «the Bosnian state and corruption [as] essentially synonymous»

(Hromadžić, 2015, p. 157) and «the instruments of democratization, peace-building, and state-making [...] are seen as key to the most extreme forms of corruption» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 159). In her opinion, one of the products of this social situation is the appearance of «an active stance of anti-citizenship» among young people who feel detached from their state and its politics (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 176, 179). In order to preserve «their political integrity and moral agency» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 156) youth place the situation of BiH within wider imaginative horizons, creating what she describes as:

«A sharp distinction between ‘here’, seen as morally corrupt Bosnian democratization where one has to withdraw from the state and its dirty politics in order to survive, and ‘there’, imagined as a site where moral rules are more or less in place and where a person can choose not to engage in corrupt behaviour and be a recognized, respected citizen» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 176).

She argues that this «positionality» allows youth to distance themselves from their state, which they perceive to be corrupt and «rotten» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 157), and preserve their morality as citizens through anti-citizenship. This detachment from the state, she claims, is often understood «as a sign of youth’s apathy and lethargy» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 176) but, on the contrary, she identifies non-participation «as a site of agency, calculated choice, and political and moral preservation» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 176). Youth’s «active detachment» from the state is framed as «a highly complicated and agentive process» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 176-177).

This distinction between «here and there» also reoccurs in Čelebičić’s presentation of her ethnographic research in Bihać, a town in north-west BiH (Čelebičić, 2017). The author observes that many young people share the experience of «unpredictability», which makes them feel as if they can «not anticipate what [will] happen next, even in situations when they [think] they should be able to do so» (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 131). Paradoxically, this

feeling is coupled with the persuasion that «nothing ever changes» in their country, and this generates a belief among young people «that BiH as a place [does] not offer opportunities for many of them [...] or a possibility for any meaningful political change» (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 131). This common sensation of simultaneous unpredictability and immobility of the future results in a practice that Čelebičić calls «improper voting» (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 132). Often, she claims, «young people are willing to vote, if the outcome of their vote has an immediate effect» (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 130), leading them to vote in an «improper» manner. Because of the perceived instability of the future, youth's actions are guided by short-term considerations about the possible material gains that could come from voting (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 135). This practice is well described by the words of one of Čelebičić's informers, Emina, a young student:

«My decision to vote [...] derives from my wish to help someone close to me in the short run. [...] If I lived elsewhere, in a better place [...], I would not do it, I would vote properly» (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 130).

Čelebičić rejects the explanation of youth's behaviour simply in terms of apathy, as according to these narratives «a young person could be either a passive (and hence irresponsible) or an active (and hence responsible) citizen» (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 129). On the contrary, her research proves that young people can be «simultaneously 'responsible' towards a friend, a parent or a relative, but 'irresponsible' towards 'the collective' or 'the common good'» (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 129).

4. Concluding remarks

Political participation is a vast concept that can include many different forms of engagement. Nowadays, scholars mostly differentiate between conventional (or institutional) and unconventional (or non-institutional) political participation. The former is expressed through voting in elections and participating in political parties, while the latter usually consists of protests, boycotts, demonstrations, and other more latent forms of

political involvement, such as civic engagement or volunteering. In the last decades, democracies worldwide have shown a steady trend of decreasing citizens' participation, especially through institutional channels. This tendency seems to be particularly evident among the younger generation, a situation that can be observed in Southeast Europe too. Many authors have explained this behaviour of youth as a sign of political apathy, however concurrent regional research in the last few years has provided for alternative explanations.

II. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

To operate a more detailed and in-depth evaluation, I focus on the situation of youth political participation in one of the countries in the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In order to provide for a better understanding of the case study, I begin the chapter with a brief overview of the country's recent history. I then move on to analyse the political behaviours and beliefs of BiH's younger generation. Finally, I try to explain these attitudes in light of the concepts presented in the first chapter.

1. Historical background: Bosnia and Herzegovina between war and regime change

Before the 1990s conflict, BiH was often referred to as *Jugoslavia u malom* (Yugoslavia in miniature) (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 8; Piacentini, 2018, p. 264), because it was (and still is) home to three major ethnic groups (Serbs, Croats and Muslims, now often labelled as Bosniaks), but none of them represented the absolute majority of the country's population (Piacentini, 2018, p. 264). In the midst of the Yugoslav dissolution, BiH «only reluctantly» (Bieber, 2010, p. 311) became an independent state in April 1992. This event also marked the start of armed conflict on the territory of BiH (Bieber, 2010, p. 313). Three main factions were opposed during the war: the self-declared Serb Republic, which wished to secede from BiH and join neighbouring Serbia, the Croat forces, which sought to establish a new state of «Herceg-Bosna» in Herzegovina in order to join neighbouring Croatia, and the Bosnian government forces (Bieber, 2010, p. 313). After more than three years of bloody

conflict, BiH was left extremely weakened, with around 100,000 Bosnian citizens dead and half of the population displaced (Bieber, 2010, p. 311; Hromadžić, 2015, p. 9).

The Bosnian war was brought to an end in 1995 by the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, often simply referred to as the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) (Bieber, 2010, p. 314; Hromadžić, 2015, p. 10). The DPA did not only put an end to the armed conflict, but it also established a «post-war political order», by defining the newborn country's constitution and «principles for state-building» (Bieber, 2010, p. 314). In doing this, «the principle of interethnic accommodation and compromise between wartime parties» (Bieber, 2010, p. 314) was privileged over democratisation. The DPA envisaged a consociational model of democracy, but this led to the «absolute political institutionalization of ethnicity on the substate entity level» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 10) as it «reinforced ethnic divisions turning them into [territorial] boundaries » (Džankić, 2015, p. 527). The country was divided in two sub-state entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), with a majority of Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats in the population, and the Republika Srpska (RS), mostly inhabited by Bosnian Serbs (Bieber, 2010, p. 314; Hromadžić, 2015, p. 10). The consociational model essentially transformed the population's ethnoreligious background into «territorial partitions along ethnic lines» (Piacentini, 2018, p. 266). As Gagnon (n.d.) puts it, the DPA mostly rested on the «territorialization of ethnicity and ethnicization of territory» (as cited in Hromadžić, 2015, p. 111) and this ultimately prevented «the birth of a shared-by-all civic identification with the State of Bosnia Herzegovina» (Piacentini, 2018, p. 263).

2. Youth political participation trends in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Still today, 24 years after the end of the conflict, BiH cannot be considered a consolidated democracy (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 51). Because of this, «much hope is placed in today's youth and their role as catalysts for democracy» (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 51).

However, Bosnian-Herzegovinian society is rapidly aging (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 12) and young people represent only one-fourth of the total population (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 33). These numbers are even more worrying if we consider that a majority of young people (almost 62 percent) express the desire to emigrate, and 40 percent of them wish to leave the country for good (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 36).

In order to assess political participation of young people in BiH, it is important to look both at their political behaviours (in terms of *repertoire* of engagement) (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 61) and their socio-political values and beliefs. In order to provide a more exhaustive and comprehensive analysis of the situation, I rely on both quantitative researches (Jusić & Numanović, 2017; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019; Taleski & Hoppe, 2015; Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015; Turčilo, et al., 2019; Žiga, et al., 2015)⁴ that highlight general trends, and ethnographic studies (Čelebičić, 2017; Hromadžić, 2015; Piacentini, 2018) that provide for a more in-depth understanding of how youth make sense of their experiences, including the ones related to the political sphere.

i. Political behaviours of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The surveys suggest that political awareness among youth in BiH is very weak. Considering «political interest, political knowledge and deliberation about politics with family and acquaintances» as aspects of political awareness, only around 13 percent of youth can be considered politically aware (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 63). Around 50 percent of youth «are not interested [...] in political events» (Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 122), over 50 percent of respondents claim that they «don't know much about politics» (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 54), and young people mostly do not talk with family and friends about politics

⁴ The results of all these reports come from two rounds of representative youth surveys commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and conducted in various countries of Southeast Europe. The first round was conducted in the 2011-2015 period, while the second in early 2018 (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 11). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the surveys were conducted in 2014 (Žiga, et al., 2015) and 2018 (Turčilo, et al., 2019).

(Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 52; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 123). Moreover, comparing the results from the two survey rounds, we can see that youth's reported interest in national politics significantly dropped in the last years: youth that claimed to be «not interested at all in national politics» grew from 24 percent in 2014 to 58 percent in 2018 (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 64).

Nevertheless, despite the stated low interest in politics, young people vote more than the public opinion and media discourse claim (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 129; Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 52). Even if previous research suggested that youth voter turnout in BiH was below 20 percent (Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 32), in 2018 74 percent of youth claimed to have voted in the last national election (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 65) which took place in 2014, and 78 percent planned to vote in the upcoming election⁵ (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 52). Political participation through established political parties is in line with the global downward trend, as only six percent of youth are members of political parties (Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019). Moreover, most of the younger generation seems to be unwilling to take on any political function, with only five percent of youth holding such a function or gladly willing to do it (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 67; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 52).

Based on the general youth participation trends discussed in the previous chapter, it is largely expected that young people should get involved in politics through unconventional and non-institutionalised actions (such as signing petitions, participating in demonstrations, joining boycotts, participating in political activities online and volunteering) rather than voting. However, against these expectations, it seems to be quite unusual for youth in BiH to be involved in any form of non-electoral participation (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 52-53;

⁵ The last elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were held in October 2018, with the last survey being conducted in early 2018 (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 52). Unfortunately, to date, there are no reliable exit-polls or statistics available in order to confront the reported voting intentions of youth with the actual voter turnout.

Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 126-127). For example, as much as 66 percent of youth claimed to have never volunteered in social projects, initiatives or associations and only 11 percent affirmed to have done it frequently⁶ (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 68). Additionally, only 5 percent of young people are members of youth organisations (Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019). A rather bleak result based on the 2014 survey round suggests that an overwhelming «92,9 percent [of] young people have not been engaged in any social and political activities» (Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 126), however a competing report states that 52,6 percent of youth in BiH is «active in politics» and 38,7 percent is «active in civil society» (Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 21).

ii. Socio-political values and attitudes of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Some of the trends discussed above could be explained by the fact that generally, in Southeast Europe, youth do not deem civic and political participation as important values (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 16; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 39). Instead, socio-political values of youth are centred on «economic and social security», while «issues that are more abstract [...] such as individual freedom, equality and the rule of law» (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 46) appear as less important. Considering which is more important between «employment and economic welfare on the one hand, and [...] democracy and individual freedom on the other» (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 46), it can be observed that economic issues prevail over issues related to democracy in all Southeast European countries, but in BiH this prevalence ranks as the highest in the region (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 46). Consequently, «young people have [a] rather explicit attitude about problems in Bosnian-Herzegovinian society» (Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 129) and they identify «relatively consistent priorities on which policymakers should focus» (Taleski,

⁶ Sum of youth who claimed to have taken part in volunteering «often» (eight percent) and «very often» (three percent) (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 68).

Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 34). These are mostly socio-economic in nature (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 23) and related to unemployment, corruption, poverty, and social injustice (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 42; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 129). Thus, it appears that «young people are the most concerned about public issues, but largely don't see civic or political engagement as viable means to address those issues» (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 42).

This probably does not come as a surprise if we consider that youth do not feel adequately represented in politics and that they perceive their «impact on national and local government» (Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 33) to be very feeble. Around 60 percent of young people in BiH feel that they are not represented in politics (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 62; Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 33) and the majority of them «hold that their voice has little or no influence on the way the government governs» (Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 125). Recent ethnographic research also documents how youth largely believe «that the Bosnian political situation is impossible to change» (Piacentini, 2018, p. 264). In the words of one of the interviewees, «young generations [in BiH] don't know what they can do» (Piacentini, 2018, p. 264).

Generally, young people in BiH show a «negative attitude [...] towards politics, and low [levels] of trust in public institutions» (Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 127), particularly so when it comes to political institutions (Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 168) such as the BiH Presidency, the national Parliament, the entity government and political parties (Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 29; Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 53).

Considering the low trust young people place in democratic institutions, it is not surprising that they mostly express dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in the country (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 53; Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 31; Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 54; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 168) even if they «still think that democracy

is a good form of government and over 90 percent support the right to vote» (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 54).

3. Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina: «apathetic» or «actively detached»?

How can these trends in youth participation be explained? Which dynamics influence youth political (non)participation in BiH? To what extent are young people's behaviours and beliefs a reflection of their individual agency and to what extent are youth constrained by structural factors? Which concepts best help us understand the socio-political situation of BiH's younger generation?

I argue that the most useful conceptual framework in order to understand the observed trends is the already discussed structure and agency dichotomy. Many factors contribute in influencing the life environment and political choices of young people in BiH. These structural factors can be attributed to two main categories connected between them: on the one hand, the socio-economic status of youth and on the other hand, the unsuccessful democratic transition of the country.

Research has shown that indicators of higher socio-economic status are positively correlated with both formal political participation (Checkoway, 2011, p. 343; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 67), such as voting (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 65), and non-conventional political and civic engagement (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 68), such as volunteering (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 69). The «better educated and those of higher socioeconomic status [are] far more likely to be politically engaged» (Norris, 1999, p. 261). The importance youth attribute to values of political and civic engagement also grows with higher levels of education (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 39, 42). Reflectingly, «being outside of employment and education» is negatively correlated with both civic and political participation (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 69). Considering the situation of BiH's economy, labour market, and education system, the

socio-economic factor is a valid explanation for the deterioration in youth political participation, while the surprisingly high voter turnout could be explained through the already discussed practice of «improper voting» (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 129-32). In 2016, BiH registered the highest youth unemployment rate in Europe, at 54.3 percent (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 25), and the 2018 survey round registered that 20 percent of young people were not employed, nor undergoing education or training (the so-called NEETs) (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 27). Moreover, youth coming from «financially worse-off households» and whose parents are less educated, are more likely to be unemployed (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 27) and are less likely to access higher education (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 11). This proves the existence of inequalities in accessing both the education system and the labour market (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 32). Bearing in mind that an individual's socio-economic status and education are positively correlated with one's political participation, it is clear that the aforementioned type of inequality is in turn reflected in «inherent inequalities in political participation» (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 67) that cause unemployed and less educated youth to be distant from politics. High numbers of NEETs and unemployed people among the younger generation in Bosnia and Herzegovina could explain the overall political disengagement trend.

These problems of socio-economic inequality are indeed connected to the (unsuccessful) economic and political transition in the country. Young Bosnian-Herzegovinians live in a «perpetually incomplete consolidation of democracy» (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 51), where corruption is normalised (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 158) and unemployment is rampant (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 25). Unsurprisingly, the younger generation is dissatisfied with their «wider social context» (Jusić & Numanović,

2017, p. 9) and disillusioned with democratic transition⁷ and economic liberalism (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 159; Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 53), which are mostly perceived as «corrupt, impoverishing and unjust» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 179). These feelings explain the low level of trust towards democratic institutions registered among Bosnian-Herzegovinian youth. This mistrust, coupled with the sense of powerlessness highlighted by Čelebičić's research (see chapter I) is possibly a concurrent explanation for youth's low levels of political participation, as research shows that both trust in institutions (Norris, 1999, p. 261) and «having a sense of political efficacy» (Jusić & Numanović, 2017, p. 45) are significantly related to political participation.

The lack of identification in a common BiH state (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 108; Piacentini, 2018, pp. 268-270) caused by the postwar territorial division along ethnic lines (Piacentini, 2018, p. 266) and «institutionalization of ethnic nationalism» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 8) embedded in the DPA, triggered a process of youth «alienation from the state and its institutions, including the rights and responsibilities of formal citizenship» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 108; Piacentini, 2018, p. 268). This process is illustrative of how it is not ethnicity in itself that influences youth political participation in BiH. Results of recent ethnographic research show that there is no «significant difference deducible to the interviewees' ethno-religious background» (Piacentini, 2018, p. 271). What is relevant is the primary importance given to ethnic differentiation in the institutional set-up provided by the DPA (Bieber, 2010, p. 314-315; Džankić, 2015; Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 53), and the consequent transformation of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian state in an «ethnopolis» (Jansen, Brković, & Čelebičić, 2017, p. 6). As Hromadžić argues, «youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina come of age structurally constrained by three deeply interwoven processes [...]: the rigid visions and practices of

⁷ As one of Piacentini's interviewees claims when talking about the ethnicization of politics in the country: «Democracy gave voice to all this. All this, happened with democracy» (Piacentini, 2018, p. 274).

international peacebuilding; ethnic nationalism and the mistrust they generate; and war-initiated, rapid ethnicization of everyday life» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 9).

Youth carry the «weight of ethnic collectivism» (Piacentini, 2018), just like they carry many other structural burdens. Still, it is not possible to talk about political apathy among young people (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 129; Hromadžić, 2015, p. 179; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 3; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 132), because «their socio-political abstinence is primarily a form of protest and revolt against the political system that has been marginalizing them at every step» (Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 132). Youth's detachment from the state and its politics is «active» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 177), as they «have the ability to engage in politics [...] but they consciously choose not to, except for the act of voting» (Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 52). It does seem that rather than being apathetic, youth are «*disaffected*» (Warren, 2002, p. 681) from their state and its institutions. I therefore argue that the best conceptual lens with which youth's political behaviour can be analysed and understood is that of Hromadžić's (2015) «anti-citizenship».

It can be concluded that despite constraining structural factors, youth show political agency, even if not in the «proper» or expected way. By engaging in corruption (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 179; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 54-56), practices of «improper voting» (Čelebičić, 2017, p. 129-132) and even by deciding to emigrate (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 206; Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 43), youth prove to be «complicated postwar political agents» (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 180) who deliberately employ various «strategies of surviving» in a malfunctioning state (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 3).

4. Concluding remarks

Even if the current young generation of Bosnian-Herzegovinians probably has little or no memory of the 1990s conflict, they live in a society which is still profoundly shaped by the war's aftermath. The post-conflict reality influences their lives, and their political

participation too. Even if youth apparently vote much more than the public opinion thinks, they are still largely unininvolved in politics. Yet, this behaviour appears not as simple disinterest for politics and society, but as an active withdrawal from a political system that they perceive as corrupt, malfunctioning, distant, not representative of their interests, and ultimately impossible to change.

III. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

How do youth political participation tendencies in Bosnia and Herzegovina fit in the wider regional context? Are the concepts used to explain the Bosnian-Herzegovinian case useful in order to understand the wider regional reality of Southeast Europe? To answer these questions, even if only partially, I operate a comparison between BiH and another country in the Balkan region, Croatia. I begin by briefly assessing the general political situation in the two countries. Subsequently, I juxtapose the national youth political participation trends and evaluate differences and similarities in the two countries.

1. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia: neighbours at odds

I reason that it is interesting to weigh the trends of youth political participation in BiH against those in Croatia, because the differences and commonalities between the two countries could potentially highlight discriminant factors for youth political engagement.

The two countries shared the experience of socialism under the Titoist regime (Hoare, 2010, p. 113) and they were both directly involved in armed conflict during the «War of Yugoslav Succession» in the 1990s (Hoare, 2010, p. 111). This means that BiH and Croatia started their regime shift towards democracy roughly at the same time. Yet, the outputs of this process appear today as drastically different. Croatia has been a member of the EU since 2013 (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 52), while BiH only holds the status of potential candidate, and negotiations for EU accession seem unlikely to start any time soon (European Commission, 2019). Neither country seems to have completed its journey of democratic

consolidation, but the situation for democracy seems brighter in Croatia. The latter classifies as a «semi-consolidated democracy», while BiH is still referred to as a «hybrid regime» (Freedom House, 2018). It is important to note that Croatia's transition to democracy is also favoured by the country's EU membership, which is one of the strongest incentives for democratisation (Taleski, Reimbold, & Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 19).

2. Youth political participation trends compared

Are the discussed differences in democratic development reflected in how youth take part in politics in these countries? Firstly, for what concerns political behaviours, Croatian youth show a «consistent lack of interest in politics» (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 45). No more than 16 percent of young people in Croatia can be considered politically aware (in the sense discussed in chapter II), which is not significantly higher than the reported 13 percent in BiH (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 63). Instead, the percentage of Croatian youth that reported to have voted in the last election is notably lower than in BiH, as can be observed from the figure.

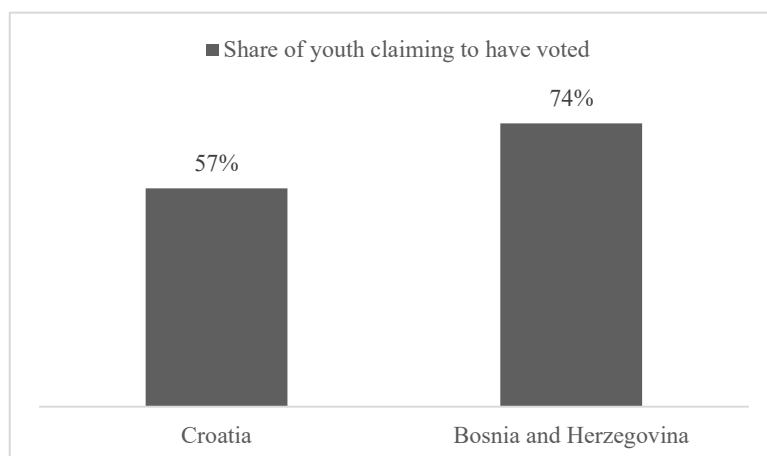


Figure 1. Percentage of youth reporting having voted in last national elections (N = young people eligible to vote during last election in each country). Source: Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić (2019)

Nonetheless, despite differences in absolute voter turnout, electoral participation among youth in both countries seems to be more popular than any other type of non-electoral

political engagement (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 45; Turčilo, et al., 2019, p. 52-53; Žiga, et al., 2015, p. 126-127). Overall, in Croatia «political participation of youth is at a commensurately low level, as is their willingness to become more politically active» (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 45) and this is also true for non-institutional means of civic and political engagement. Participation through these channels appears even lower than in BiH (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 68).

Secondly, socio-political values and attitudes of youth seem to be mostly analogous in the two countries. Similarly to their peers from BiH, Croatian youth rank issues related to social and economic security as their top concerns (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 50-52). This classification «is most certainly related to the socioeconomic situation in Croatia, characterised by a high unemployment rate in recent crisis years» (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 49). While unemployment and NEET rates in Croatia (respectively 19 percent and 11 percent) are significantly lower than those in BiH (39 percent and 20 percent) (Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 26-27), youth seem to share the same preoccupations related to the economic situation in their countries. Comparably to what happens in BiH, youth in Croatia largely do not feel adequately represented in politics (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 45; Lavrič, Tomanović, & Jusić, 2019, p. 62), do not trust democratic institutions, and are accordingly «mostly dissatisfied with the condition of democracy in the country» (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 45). Moreover, when asked about the perceived results of Croatia's five-year EU membership⁸ in terms of economic and political development, as many as «two-fifths of respondents did not think that EU integration resulted in any noticeable changes» (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 52-53).

⁸ At the time of the survey in 2018, Croatia had been a member of the EU for five years.

Youth political participation in Croatia and BiH predominantly follow similar patterns. From this it is possible to conclude that differences in democratic development and EU integration do not necessarily preclude «the existence of similar challenges for the younger generation» in the two neighbouring countries (Hurrelmann & Weichert, 2015, p. 9), related to unemployment, corruption, generalised distrust towards political institutions, and overall feeling of powerlessness when it comes to influencing national politics. Researchers affirm «that in recent years there has been a continuous decline in the already insufficient democratic potential exhibited by Croatian youth» (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 46). The main causes of this trend have been identified «in the inadequate functioning of Croatian political institutions and actors as well as the country's long-term economic and social crisis» (Gvozdanović, et al., 2019, p. 46). These remarks suggest that the major structural factors constraining youth's political behaviours and decisions in the two countries are the same (peculiarities of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian institutional set-up aside): the socio-economic status of youth linked to incomplete democratic and economic transition in the country.

3. Concluding remarks

The comparison between the two Balkan countries suggests that, despite the numerous differences, Croatian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian youth mostly share the similar worries and generally react to the socio-political situation of their countries in an analogous way. Therefore, I argue that the conceptual tools used to analyse the BiH case could be extended to explain the Croatian case as well, and potentially the overall regional situation.

CONCLUSION

Young people in BiH in particular, and Southeast Europe in general, are mostly not interested in politics and youth political participation in the region seems to be rather low. Nevertheless, contrarily to what was expected, the younger generation's preferred channel

of engagement is electoral participation. Involvement through unconventional means of participation (be it civic or political) is rather rare.

First of all, I claim that these behaviours of youth, as well as their beliefs and attitudes, are heavily influenced (in a negative way) by structural factors related to their country's socio-economic panorama and incomplete (or unsuccessful) democratic and economic transition. However, I argue that despite these structural constraints, youth's political behaviour cannot be framed in terms of apathy, because their withdrawal from politics is a deliberate adjustment to the environment they live in, which they perceive to be corrupt and impossible to change. This detachment shows that youth hold individual agency. Moreover, given their rather firm beliefs about problems in their society, it can be affirmed that youth hold a significant political potential. The recent *Pravda za Dženana* (Justice for Dženan) and *Pravda za Davida* (Justice for David) protest movements in BiH (Sasso, 2019) are a proof of this.

Finally, I reason that structure and agency are intertwined. Agency is defined and redefined in reaction to structural features, and in turn structure is shaped by this continuous agentive reaction. Perhaps, if the structure where youth live in changed, their type of agentive reaction in the political sphere would as well, possibly towards a more participative and democratic one. Or, as the *Pravda za Dženana* and *Pravda za Davida* examples show, youth's distrust in politics and institutions could eventually lead to an organised and widespread protest against the state.

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