Youth Study

Serbia

Generation Unlimited

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FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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About FES Youth Studies
What are young people afraid of or hopeful about? In a rapidly changing world that is challenged by the climate crisis and inequalities, and in many parts aging societies and democratic decline, **FES Youth Studies** investigate how young generations perceive the development of their societies and their personal future. Our aim is to foster informed debate about young people's views on politics and democracy against the background of their life circumstances and values. This includes key issues such as education, employment and mobility, family and friends, and their overall attitudes and perceptions. We focus on young people aged 14 to 29 to understand their perspectives on these critical topics.

FES has conducted numerous youth studies around the world since 2009. In 2024, young people in Serbia were surveyed along with youth in other Southeastern Europe and Central Eastern Europe countries.

Executive Summary

The more satisfied young people are, the more positively they assess their future prospects: half of them think that their personal future will be more favourable, while only a quarter think the same about that of broader society in Serbia. However, this does not prevent young people from planning for an average of 2.4 children, a significantly higher figure than the present total fertility rate.

As high a proportion as 60 % of economically active young people stated that they do not work in their profession, raising the question of the adequacy of the education system in the current economic climate.

It is necessary to emphasise positive narratives about migrations and their potential for aiding development through the framing of migrants as a resource, both for the country of origin (in this case, Serbia) and the country of destination, whereby migrants, their families and wider communities & society can benefit.

Young people value democracy as a form of government, but they have low levels of trust in institutions, especially NATO, political parties and the media. They have the greatest levels of trust in the church, the army and the police. The most important values for young people are security, human rights and employment, and they singled out independence and taking responsibility as important personal values, while political participation is almost universally least important.

Young people reported having been most commonly exposed to psychological violence, and least commonly electronic violence. They identify social networks, watching reality shows and the easy availability of psychoactive substances as primary causes of violence. In the event of being subjected to violence, they would first turn to the family, followed by the police and friends.

1. Introduction

Who are the Youth of Today? Generation Unlimited

The world today has the largest generation of young people[1] in history. Out of a total of 8 billion inhabitants of our planet, 1.8 billion people – or 22 % – are between the ages of 14 and 29; i.e. every fourth inhabitant of the world belongs to Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010.[2] The number of young people is decreasing in the developed part of the world, while regions in Africa, Central America and South Asia are recording significant increases among this cohort.

The development of modern technology has allowed the voice of young people to be heard louder and further than ever before. They are well-connected to each other, and want to contribute to the sustainability of their communities, proposing innovative solutions, driving social progress, and inspiring political change in urban and rural areas alike. Generation Z is broadly perceived as the most economically and culturally powerful generation to date. In the last decade, young people have been at the forefront of social movements dealing with issues that affect the livelihoods of communities around the world; they have established or come to lead some of the world's leading companies, headed political movements, etc. At the same time, young people are faced by a society characterized by crises and uncertainty. People born in 2006 have lived through a major economic recession, the COVID-19 pandemic, increasingly frequent changes in the environment caused primarily by climate change and global warming, numerous armed conflicts, the so-called migrant crisis, as well as the many other challenges they face in their immediate environs. And all of this by only 18 years of age.

Most of the respondents of the global survey "What do young people want?"[3] emphasised quality education as their highest priority, alongside the acquisition of skills and competences for entering the labour market and building successful careers. In addition, they consider it important that equal conditions exist on the labour market, without discrimination based on gender, economic status, disability, urban-rural origin, or migrant/refugee status. But they also face peer violence and marginalization, and struggle with the burden of the global erosion of human rights and access to justice, and therefore also consider the preservation of their mental health one of their priorities.

Modern-day processes have turned the world into a global village, and only interactive dialogue, understanding and mutual respect can create the environment required for a liveable world of resilient, inclusive and sustainable societies and economies. In this, young individuals, as key actors, leaders and partners, play a crucial role, through creativity, innovation and capacity for positive change. It is clear that long-term peace, security, justice, climate mitigation and sustainable development for all can be achieved only by engaging and working with young people, supporting them in realizing their rights, and creating conditions that allow them to advance and take an active role in society.[4] And, as stated in the UNESCO Youth Programme (Fig. 1):

By youth, with youth, for youth.

Fig. 1   **The most common words used by young people in the survey "What do young people want?"**

In the first decades of the 21st century, the Republic of Serbia stands facing a number of demographic challenges, among which we single out the ever-shrinking numbers in the cohorts of children and young people, the low and constantly decreasing number and share of young people within the total population, the emigration of the young population, the decrease in workforce numbers, etc. The continuous emigration of young people with higher education (or equivalent), as well as the departure of the female, reproductively capable population, indicates that the implementation of measures to improve the position of young people in the current climate of unfavourable demographic trends by achieving a so-called 'demographic resilience of society' is now critical. All of the above is together one of the main issues to be tackled in order to achieve a sustainable future, and additional state investment in young people with the aim of creating conditions for a better quality of life – especially from the point of view of education, employment and housing – is also necessary.

Who are the young people in our study?

The oldest respondent was born in 1995, when the eruption of the Mount Merapi volcano in Indonesia killed 13 people, and a catastrophic earthquake hit the Japanese city of Kobe. The World Health Organization in Geneva announced that the cause of the epidemic in Zaire could be the Ebola virus. 250,000 people were temporarily displaced by flooding in the Netherlands. Barings Bank, one of London's oldest banking establishments, went bankrupt. In the same year, basketball player Nikola Jokić was born, who, at the time of writing, is considered one of the top five players in the NBA, and an international icon who inspired generations of youth. While at the time of re-editing the text, he has just confirmed his readiness to play for the Serbian national team at the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris.

In 1995, Yugoslav basketballers became European champions at the championship in Athens, and the victory was celebrated with extra euphoria because FR Yugoslavia, after a three-year sporting isolation, was once again able to participate in an international competition. That same year, FR Yugoslavia lost its most celebrated theater actor, Mija Aleksić, while the world mourned Maurizio Gucci – one of fashion's most iconic figures. One of the most well-known names in fashion. In the same year, Novak Novak, a humorist and one of the most popular screenwriters from the former Yugoslavia, died. At the Cannes Film Festival, Yugoslav director Emir Kusturica received the Golden Palm for his film "Underground: Once Upon a Time There Was One Country". The Dayton Agreement was signed, which symbolically ended the war on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, in which many innocent victims died in all countries. These young people were born in the year when the World Health Organization announced that approximately one million people in the former Yugoslavia needed medical help due to war-induced psychological trauma. In 1995, the death penalty was also abolished in South Africa. The Schengen Agreement between the countries of Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain entered into force. Residents of (and visitors to) these countries could now travel between them without borders. On the subject of borders, the UN Security Council lifted sanctions against Yugoslavia, which had been under an economic blockade for 1,253 days, since 31 May 1992. Microsoft released Windows 95. The band The Prodigy held a concert in the "Pionir" (Pioneer) hall, which was reported on in the media as "the concert that changed Serbia".[5] The previous international act that a young audience had had a chance to see was Bob Dylan in mid-1991. This concert was a key moment because, after the lifting of sanctions, it once more allowed young people who were eager to see foreign performers to gather in a venue with a name that was equally symbolic. A year later, band members expressed their support for the student protests against the government of Slobodan Milošević.[6]

The youngest respondent was born in 2010, when the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, was built in Dubai. The 45th head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej, was enthroned in the Cathedral Church in Belgrade. Dušanka Kalanj, well-known announcer and host of TV Belgrade, and the first woman news anchor of TV Dnevnik, died. Other notable deaths include Momo Kapor, the Yugoslav painter, writer and journalist, and, across the Atlantic, actor John Forsythe, famous for playing Blake Carrington in Dynasty. Floods across Central Europe killed 15 people. More than 1,000 villages on the Chinese island of Hainan were also flooded following the heaviest rainfall in decades. Closer to home, the first Pride parade in Belgrade ended in violent clashes, leaving 124 policemen and 17 demonstrators injured – some seriously – and resulting in 207 arrests.

Young people were growing up, borders were shifting, architecture was being reshaped, planet Earth, the climate and the environment were also changing. Political actors and icons of popular culture came and went, with new idols entering the worlds of sports, culture, entertainment, film and fashion, and some older ones leaving us forever. The country fluctuated between periods of war and peace, between international isolation and packed sports and concert halls. All of this represents a framework that has shaped the lifestyles, values, attitudes and expectations of those who grew up through it.

Our young people have grown up in a society that some theorists would describe as postmodern. It is a society in which individualistic values have dominated collectivist ones (Tomić-Koludrović, 2002), in which narcissistic culture has reigned, dictates of beauty and health have become imperative, and faith in society and politics has declined (Lasch, 1986). Young people live in a consumer society where it is very important to buy "new and better" and to "be healthy" (Lipovecki, 2008).[7] Postmodern society is further characterized by fluid identities and lifestyles (Cifrić & Nikodem, 2008).

It is a society of risk (Beck, 1992) in which there is little chance that our young people will have a single continuous permanent job for their whole life (Giddens, 2003), nor that they will have lunch at 2:00 p.m., with the whole family gathering together at 8:00 p.m., after the news, to watch Bolji život, Minimaksovizija, or Dynasty. There is little chance that they will live their whole lives in the same place as they were born. They will change their address – both physical and virtual – many more times than their parents ever did. However, it is unlikely that they will change their citizenship as their parents did – parents who still struggle, confused, when filling out forms that ask for their country of birth (SFR Yugoslavia, FR Yugoslavia, Serbia & Montenegro; which one was it again?).

We can see two different traditions evident in our approach to young people. Young people can be seen as an important social resource, representatives of a desirable future, bearers of dominant values and innovations. This approach to young people comes to the fore in periods of social stability and economic progress. Another tradition views youth as a problem, as a group that is vulnerable, and as the originator of various forms of deviant behaviour. This approach comes to the fore in more socially unstable periods (Ilišin, 2005:17; Mojić, 2012:3, 4).

The post-socialist context brought further impetus to certain challenges faced by young people in Serbia: insecurity of the transition to adulthood, uncertainty surrounding the opportunity for employment, a subservient position of young people in relation to society and the world of their elders, difficulties in achieving socio-economic independence, delays in starting their own families, the resulting overall insufficient integration of young people into the system of economic and social growth and into the political system. Due to the modernization processes inherent to contemporary society, young people are forced to search for their own identity and to think about individual strategies of social integration (Mojić, 2012: 5, 6, Tomanović, 2012, Tomanović & Stanojević, 2019).

In such a context, it becomes a challenge to research – let alone begin to interpret – the values, attitudes, plans, hopes, expectations and fears of young people today. Are young people a resource for democratic change, bearers of a desirable future? Or have they been excluded (by themselves and others alike) from the social and political reality? Are they satisfied? What is important to them when choosing a partner? Do their opinions and views match with those of their parents? Are they planning a family? How do they perceive their chances of employment and careers? Do they have faith in institutions? Are they faced by a 'Should I stay or should I go?' dilemma? How do they see their future, and that of the society they live in? What do they value in society, and where do they see the biggest problems? To what extent do they identify with their own nation, and what are their attitudes toward minorities in society? Do they sometimes feel discriminated against? How interested are they in politics, and what are their views on current political issues? Are they exposed to violence? While a study like this can never provide definitive answers to these questions, it can offer one analytical perspective, which is an important starting point for discussion and critical examination of the issues at hand. Furthermore, the emerging questions concerning critical youth issues may hold greater significance. The authors deeply believe in young people's potential for contribution to a desirable future, and while we may find some answers disheartening, this should only provide incentive for us to all think about what obstacles prevent them from being more proactive in their personal lives and as part of broader society.

2. Methodology

This research aims to show how adolescents and young people perceive politics, democracy and the state of society, as well as how they perceive their role as agents of change in both the communities in which they live, as well as wider society. In other words, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Youth Study investigates how young generations perceive the development of their societies and their personal futures, with the aim of encouraging an informed debate about the interests, values and livelihoods of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 in the following domains: education, employment, mobility, relationships with friends & family, core values, attitudes & viewpoints, and political attitudes & perceptions. The study has been created on the basis of previous FES research, which has been conducted in the region of Southeastern Europe in 2015 and 2018/2019, in Russia in 2019/2020, in Central Europe and the Baltic States in 2021, and in Azerbaijan, Armenia & Georgia in 2022.

In accordance with the aims of the research, a methodological procedure framed by a quantitative-qualitative approach was applied, which enabled a comprehensive analysis of various aspects of young people's lives. Data collection was carried out by Ipsos, an agency specialized in global market and public opinion research, across 9,500 respondents aged 14 to 29 in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo & Metohija*, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Greece and Turkey. A non-probabilistic quota sample was chosen, in accordance with assumptions, expectations and/or knowledge about the population to which the results refer. Quota selection was made according to age, gender and region in all countries, and an additional soft quota was created according to educational attainment. One of the main rationales for choosing a quota sampling approach was the low number of cases of the target group (young people) in each of the study countries, which limited the feasibility of a purely random sample.

The sample size in Serbia was 750 people, and the research was conducted using the CaWI (Computer aided web interviewing) quantitative method, which is carried out by means of a computer, with the respondent filling out an online survey on a website specially designed and created for the research. The target group in the research was limited to those persons who signed up for the online panel and who had access to online services on a digital input device at the time of the survey. The survey was conducted through the Ipsos Online Panel and their partner network in the period from 9 February to 25 March 2024.

The CaWI sample was then drawn from the Ipsos Online Panel by quota selection according to age, gender and regional characteristics. These core sociodemographic characteristics are pre-defined so that respondents can be directly selected via online means to achieve a representative distribution.

The authors were aware of the limitations of the applied method during their analysis of the data. In the case of CaWI research, these primarily relate to the limited target group: online surveys can only be completed by persons who have access to the internet, and, in this instance, those who have registered in advance for the online panel, and there also exists a bias toward responses from persons who regularly participate in surveys of a similar type. In addition, online surveys are more accessible to respondents with secondary or higher education. For the above reasons, the use of quotas was significant, as it helped ensure the representativeness of the sample. It is also important to point out that for persons younger than 18 years of age, who make up a significant portion of the sample, parental consent was necessary in accordance with the laws of the Republic of Serbia. This study builds upon previous FES research and comparable studies of similar age cohorts, with necessary qualifications concerning sample comparability.

The responses were anonymous, and the submitted data was aggregated, without revealing the identity of the respondents or any personal data that could potentially provide a basis for their identification. This allowed survey participants to freely express their opinions and experiences without fear of judgement or disagreement, which improves the trust of respondents and often provides for more accurate and reliable answers. After completing data collection and processing, researchers from the Faculty of Geography at the University of Belgrade performed the data interpretation and presented the analytical results. The software packages SPSS and Microsoft Access were used for analysis. The analysis employs descriptive statistics to describe the collected data. Within descriptive statistics, correlation measures are often used to describe the relationship between two or more variables. The most significant results are graphically presented in tables or appropriate diagrams, and the values are expressed in absolute and relative (i.e. percentage) values.

3. Basic Demographic Characteristics and Trends

Major demographic changes in the population have been evidenced in a reduction of the contingent of the population aged 14 to 29 years, largely as a result of reduced fertility in recent decades. In the period between the two population censuses, from 2011 to 2022, the number of young people in this cohort decreased by as many as 300,867 (from 1,416,731 to 1,115,864), i.e. from 19.6 % of the total population to 16.7 %. They are also characterized by a slight gender imbalance: in 2022, the cohort aged 14–29 living in Serbia consisted of 570,525 males and 545,339 females (RZS, 2022). What characterizes this period of life is a high 'demographic density' (Rindfuss, 1991), highlighting this period as one with numerous life-altering demographic events and transitions. Demographic events refer to changes in the life cycle that are biological, social or cultural in nature, can occur in any period of life, and are related to institutional and structural effects, norms, needs and behaviours. A more detailed examination of the population of young people is certainly justified, especially when one takes into account that they are of exceptional importance for the reproductive, economic, social, political and cultural characteristics of the broader population.

The average age of respondents in the sample was 21.7 years (21.6 for male and 21.8 for female), while teenagers were on average 15.8 years old, respondents aged 20–24 were on average 21.6, and those in the 25–29 age group were 27.0 years on average. The gender structure of the sample is fairly uniform, as 45.3 % of respondents were male, and 54.7 % female. There were no major inconsistencies between the representation of respondents in terms of geographic region; a slightly smaller number is from Belgrade and the region of Southern & Eastern Serbia (which are smaller regions in terms of population) compared to the regions of Vojvodina and Šumadija & Western Serbia. If we look at the functional characteristics of the settlements in which respondents live, half of them are from urban areas, while a considerable proportion of the respondents were unable to define their place of residence as either urban or rural (21.1 %). A little under a quarter of the participants in the survey (23.1 %) live in (predominantly) rural settlements, and a small number of respondents (40, or 5.3 %) did not specify the type of settlement in which they live. Relatively speaking, in relation to representative survey samples from previous surveys conducted in 2015 and 2018/2019, the quota sample from 2024 had more female respondents, a higher representation of older respondents, and fewer respondents living in urban areas (Fig. 2). Of the total number of respondents, 80 % declared themselves to be Orthodox Christians, which is largely in agreement with the share of Orthodox Christians recorded in Serbia (RZS, 2022a). A relatively large proportion of young people stated that they do not know what their religion is (9.2 %). Muslims are represented by 2.5 % of respondents and Catholics by 1.7 %.

Fig. 2   **Demographic characteristics of the Serbian data sample**

		14–18	19–24	25–29	Total	%
	Total	188	287	275	750	100
Gender	Male	97	120	123	340	45.3
	Female	91	167	152	410	54.7
	Rural	23	44	46	113	15.1
	More rural than urban	20	22	18	60	8.0
Place of living	Neither urban nor rural	37	58	63	158	21.1
	More urban than rural	21	36	28	85	11.3
	Urban	84	105	105	294	39.2
	Belgrade region	56	59	60	175	23.3
	Vojvodina region	56	75	71	202	26.9
Region	Šumadija and Western Serbia regions	56	83	68	207	27.6
	Southern and Eastern Serbia regions	56	53	56	165	22.0
	No school or elementary school	22	33	38	93	12.4
Mother's education	High school	111	169	169	449	59.9
	Higher education or college	48	54	46	148	19.7
	No school or elementary school	10	22	39	71	9.5
Father's education	High school	112	173	163	448	59.7
	Higher education or college	58	57	47	162	21.6

In terms of parents' education, we can conclude that young respondents whose parents have completed high school predominate, with roughly the same proportion of both mothers and fathers – slightly below 60 % – having completed this level of education. In the sample, there are slightly fewer young people whose fathers have no or only elementary school, and, conversely, slightly more fathers who had specialist vocational or higher education compared to their mothers. If we analyze the homogeneity of the respondents' parents' education, of the total number, 4.5 % have both father and mother with no or only elementary school, 45 % are those whose father and mother have both completed secondary education, while 11.7 % have specialist vocational (polytechnic) or higher education. Cases with parental educational imbalance look like this: In cases where the father has attained specialist vocational (polytechnic) or higher education, 7.3 % mothers have the lowest levels of education and 9.6 % have high school, while, where the mother has attained specialist vocational (polytechnic) or higher education, 4.8 % of fathers have attained no education or only elementary school and 7.5 % have high school.

Unfavourable educational characteristics of mothers also existed in the 2015 survey, although the share with the highest level of education was higher in comparison to the sample analysed here. In the sample from 2018/2019, there were fewer respondents whose parents had only attained the lowest level of education, but also more children whose parents had completed secondary education as their highest level.

Main takeaways

1. The number of young people has decreased significantly in the last decade, both in absolute (by 300,867) and relative (by 2.9 percentage points) terms.

2. The sample is geographically evenly distributed; there are slightly more females; half of the respondents live in more urban areas; four out of five being Orthodox Christian (as among the general population).

3. The educational structure of the parents shows that 4.5 % have both a father and mother with no education or only elementary school, 45 % of respondents have both parents with high school education, while 11.7 % have both parents with advanced vocational or higher education.

4. Young people and education

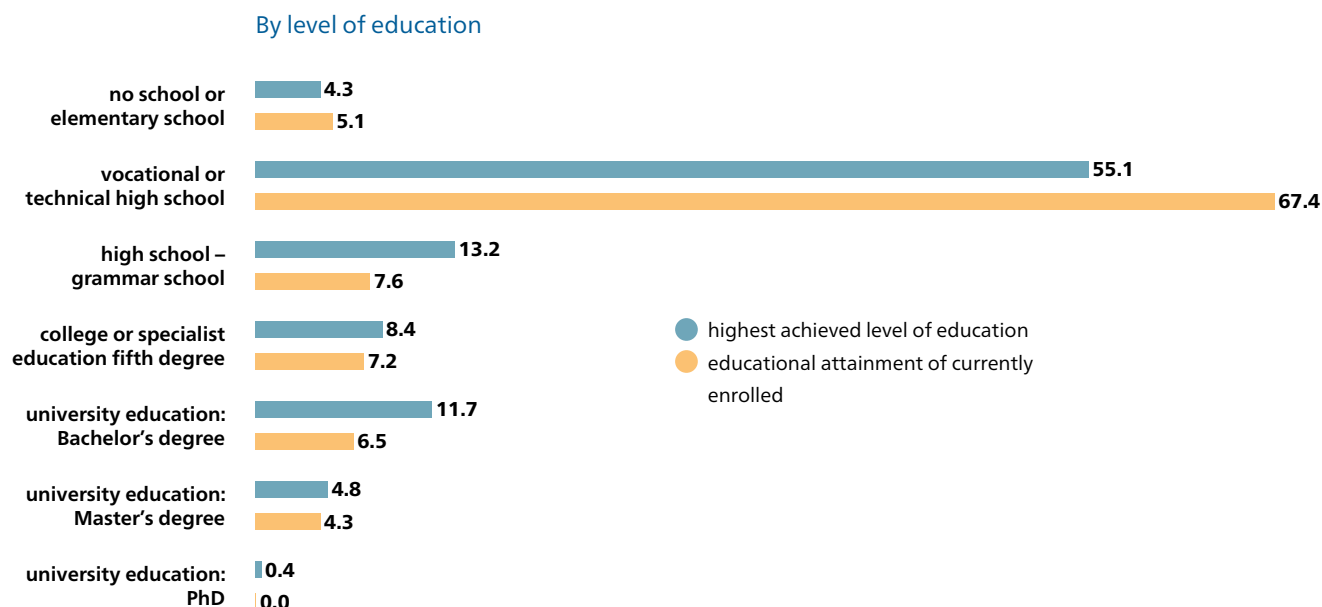## Education as a marker of transition to adulthood

The transition from youth to adulthood is marked by a greater number of events in the lives of young people, and "prolonged adolescence" is often mentioned as a phenomenon in Serbia due to structurally objective circumstances (Ignjatović, 2009). Certain shifts in the pace of transition have been recorded, but these are limited to the realm of financial independence, while other trajectory indicators have remained stagnant (Tomanović, 2012). Nevertheless, non-singular trajectories of the transition to adulthood are becoming a reality, which confirms the need to re-examine established knowledge about cohabitation, housing and living arrangements and the economic independence of young people. Youth unemployment is an all-pervading challenge and a major obstacle in the transition to adulthood, but it should be noted that both long- and short-term trends indicate that significant progress has been made within the framework of sustainable development goals due to the drop in the unemployment rate of the young population (RZS, 2022b: 60).

Education, in addition to playing an irreplaceable role in the socialization of young people, is often a key prerequisite for future employment. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has posed major challenges to the education system itself, including that of organizing and attending online classes. Today's young people are the first generation to encounter such a way of working, and the PISA survey from 2022 showed that 38 % of students in Serbia had a problem with understanding school assignments at least once per week, and 30 % had problems finding someone to help them with their homework (OECD, 2022).

The educational characteristics of the young people who participated in the survey are an important determinant of many other analysed trends, attitudes and values. The exploration of the educational structure was two-fold: first we analysed "What is the highest level of completed school?", and then "Who are the young people involved in the education process?". Of the total number of respondents, the majority are those with high school education: slightly more than half (55 %) have completed technical or vocational school, and 13.2 % have completed grammar school. 8.4 % have completed specialist vocational school (polytechnic), and 11.7 % of surveyed young people have a bachelor's degree, while 4.8 % have also completed master's studies. 4.3 % of the respondents have the lowest level of educational attainment, with no education or only elementary school (Fig. 3). Since this is a quota panel sample, it is expected that an 'educational bias' will be present, because the educational structure of the general young population aged 15–29 differs most in terms of the lowest level of education attained: 27.5 % with no education or only elementary school, 56.1 % with high school, 2.0 % with specialist vocational education and 7.3 % university (RZS, 2022c).

Fig. 3   **Education status of youth in Serbia**

By level of education

no school or elementary school	4.3 / 5.1
vocational or technical high school	55.1 / 67.4
high school – grammar school	13.2 / 7.6
college or specialist education fifth degree	8.4 / 7.2
university education: Bachelor's degree	11.7 / 6.5
university education: Master's degree	4.8 / 4.3
university education: PhD	0.4 / 0.0

● highest achieved level of education

● educational attainment of currently enrolled

Of the young people surveyed, 57.4 % are currently involved in education. Most of those who are involved in education process have completed secondary vocational or technical school (67.4 %), while 7.6 % continued their education after grammar school. 13.7 % of those surveyed continued education after completing specialist vocational school or university, while 4.3 % of respondents pursue further education after gaining master's degree. Currently 5.1 % are continuing education after the lowest level of education (Fig. 3).

The use of the internet by young people for educational purposes varies significantly depending on their age and place of residence. Thus, young people who do not use the internet at all in the course of their education more commonly live in rural areas, with 20 % of high school students and 43 % of young people aged over 19 from rural areas not spending any time using the internet in the process of their education. The largest proportion of young people who spend a significant number of hours online for schooling purposes – sometimes more than five per day – live in more urban areas and belong to the university student cohort (19–24 years old). Comparatively, 20 % of young people spend more than three hours using social media and networks such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc., with 18 % of young people (mostly from older cohorts) spending time online for paid (i.e. work-related) activities, and 12 % of young people using the internet for educational purposes.

Satisfaction with education and views of corruption

When asked "How satisfied are you in general with the quality of education?", the largest share – as many as 37.2 % – of young people opted for the "Unsatisfied" options, while around a quarter of students are generally and completely satisfied with the overall quality of their education. The answer to the question of how generally satisfied they are with the quality of education in Serbia is highly correlated with their previous experience with the education process, which makes it necessary to analyse this question in relation to the level of education attained. Those most dissatisfied with the quality of education, i.e. those who answered the question with "I am not at all satisfied" and "I am mostly dissatisfied" are young people who are currently in master's or doctoral studies (42 % of all enrolled in this level of study), followed by high school students (37.7 % of all high school students) and then those who have no education or training (36.6 %). On the other hand, the highest percentages of satisfied respondents (i.e. those who answered "Mostly satisfied" and "Very satisfied") – with equal percentages (29) – were found among those undertaking master's or doctoral studies and those attending another form of education or training (Fig. 4).

One of the determinants of quality can be the answer to the question of whether young people think that cases exist where grades are 'bought' at universities. If we cross-compare the level of satisfaction with the quality of education and the suspicion that corruption exists in universities according to respondents' current educational status (Fig. 4), we get an approximate indicator of trust in the education system in Serbia. As many as 53.4 % of those surveyed who had completed university studies but not yet graduated fully agree that there are irregularities with university examinations.

Although they do not have personal experience with this practice because they are still in high school, the cohort of high school students when compared to other respondents reported the lowest proportion of those who are convinced that corruption exist (33.8 %), although 31.7 % of them mostly agree with the statement that students are not evaluated at university solely on the basis of the knowledge they have acquired. The general conclusion is that two-thirds of respondents mostly or completely believe that there is corruption at universities, regardless of whether they are high school students (65.7 %), close to completing their undergraduate studies (73.7 %), or master's or doctoral students (71.6 %). Even those who attend other forms of education or training (72.4 %) or are not involved in education or training (66.7 %) believe to a large extent that corruption in education is a widespread phenomenon. However, as a general rule, young people who are more satisfied with the quality of education in Serbia are less likely to express suspicion of any of examination irregularities.

Main takeaways

1. A high percentage of young persons (38.2 %) are not (at all) satisfied with the quality of education in Serbia.

2. The more satisfied the respondents are with the quality of education, the less they express suspicion of corruption within it.

3. The most common form of educational attainment for both those who are still in education and those who are no longer engaged in the educational process is high school.

4. Young people who live in rural areas are less likely to use the internet for educational purposes

Fig. 4   **Satisfaction with education and views on corruption among youth in Serbia** (in %)

Do you agree that there are cases where grades and exams are 'bought' at institutes/universities in Serbia? And how satisfied are you with the quality of education in Serbia in general?
By respondents' current status in education.

		Completely disagree	Mostly disagree	Something in between	Mostly agree	Completely agree
High school	Not satisfied at all	2.5	0.0	2.9	6.9	9.3
	Mostly dissatisfied	1.5	1.0	2.5	4.9	6.4
	Something in between	1.5	3.4	4.9	9.8	10.3
	Mostly satisfied	0.5	0.5	3.4	9.8	6.4
	Very satisfied	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	1.5
Undergraduate	Not satisfied at all	1.1	0.0	1.1	3.4	14.8
	Mostly dissatisfied	1.1	0.0	1.1	2.3	9.1
	Something in between	0.0	4.5	6.8	6.8	23.9
	Mostly satisfied	0.0	2.3	3.4	8.0	5.7
	Very satisfied	0.0	0.0	2.3	0.0	0.0
Master or PhD studies	Not satisfied at all	1.2	0.0	1.2	9.9	14.8
	Mostly dissatisfied	0.0	2.5	3.7	4.9	3.7
	Something in between	0.0	0.0	7.4	3.7	12.3
	Mostly satisfied	0.0	0.0	6.2	7.4	7.4
	Very satisfied	0.0	0.0	1.2	1.2	6.2
Other types of studies	Not satisfied at all	1.7	0.0	3.4	3.4	10.3
	Mostly dissatisfied	0.0	0.0	3.4	1.7	3.4
	Something in between	1.7	1.7	3.4	19.0	10.3
	Mostly satisfied	0.0	0.0	5.2	6.9	13.8
	Very satisfied	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7	1.7
I am not in education or training process	Not satisfied at all	1.1	1.1	1.8	4.0	13.4
	Mostly dissatisfied	0.7	1.1	3.6	4.7	5.1
	Something in between	1.8	1.1	6.9	12.7	12.7
	Mostly satisfied	0.4	0.4	4.3	4.0	9.1
	Very satisfied	0.7	0.4	1.1	0.1	0.7

5. Employment and mobility

## Are young people 'flexible' on the labour market?

It is necessary to analyze the employment status of the respondents in relation to their age, because the youngest are not expected to be employed, which is also shown by the data, as within the 14–18 age group, the majority of respondents stated that they do not have a job and are not looking for one (32 %) or answered "Other" (15.4 %) or "Don't know" (14.4 %) to the question about current work status. Somewhat unexpectedly, as many as 12.8 % of the youngest subgroup stated that they do not have a job, but are actively looking for one. Almost a third (30.7 %) of young people aged 19–24 who belong to the student population are actively looking for a job, while 11.9 % do not have a job but are not taking any measures to find one at present, with another 8.0 % having temporary jobs. The cohort with the smallest proportion of unemployed young people not looking for a job is aged between 25 and 29 (6.5 %), while 27.0 % of this subgroup are actively searching for a job. When looked at by age group, the youngest experience the highest levels of unemployment, but there is a high share of unemployed youth aged 19–24 (40.3 %), as well as a third of 'older' youth.

It is surprising that as many as 35.6 % of teenagers report that they have a job, as do 42.2 % of those who are of the age where they are usually expected to be in faculty, and an expectedly high proportion (52.1 %) of those aged 25–29 also report having a job. The stability of jobs performed by young people, viewed through the duality of those young people who have permanent contracts or are self employed, and those with fixed-term contracts, reflects the relative insecurity of young people in the labour market. Among the youngest cohort, the shares of those working with permanent (12.2 %) and temporary (15.0 %) contracts are similar, while the share of permanent contract jobs increases with age. Nevertheless, as many as 40.6 % of young people aged 19–24 and 44.4 % of young people aged 25–29 are in temporary jobs (Fig. 5).

The professional orientation of young people plays an important role in the country's economic future, but also in the planning of educational programs. The issue of a high degree of mismatch between the education and professional activities of the young people surveyed is relevant from the perspective of the functioning of the labour market, and the fact that 60 % of respondents stated that they do not work in the field for which they received their education raises many questions (Fig. 7). As much as a quarter of all working young people do not work in their profession, in spite of having the most favourable type of contract, i.e. a permanent and full-time one. Of those who work full time on a temporary contract, most do work that is not related to their profession (13.4 %), as do young people with temporary jobs (10.3 %). On the other hand, roughly one-third of respondents work in their profession or one that is closely related to it. This divergence points to a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the shortcomings of the education system in providing adequately educated young workers to the labour market are evident, while, on the other, the resourcefulness and adaptability of young people is clear to see. Cross-comparisons with answers to questions about satisfaction with the quality of education and the degree of job-relevant training show that 25 % of young people who do not work in their profession are not satisfied with the quality, while only a 15 % are mostly or very satisfied.

Fig. 5   **Categories of (un)employment of youth in Serbia** (in %)

By age group
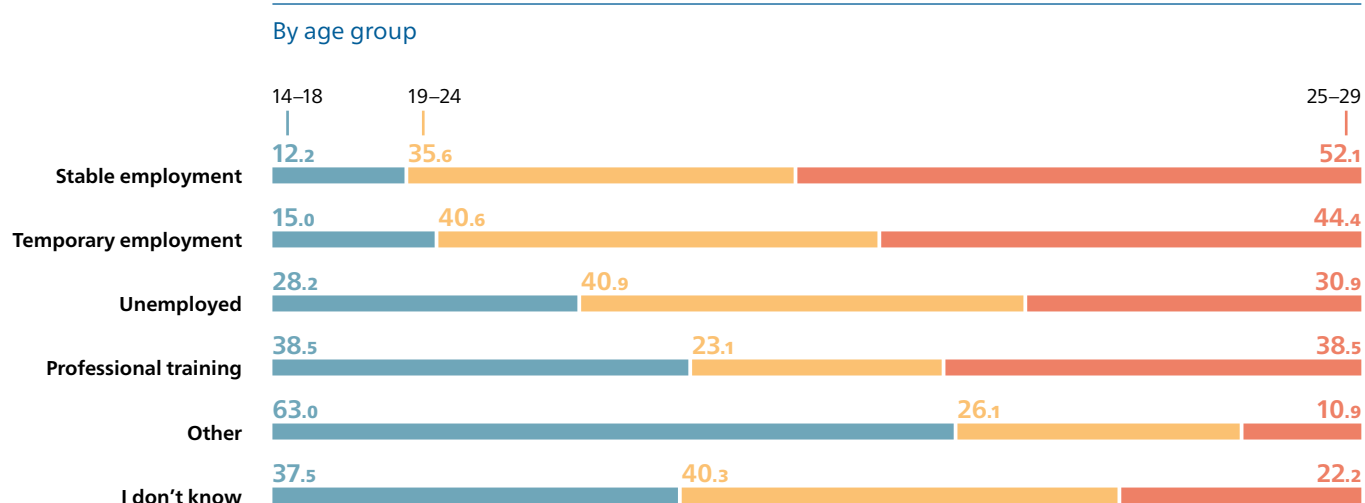
The flexibility of young people in employment can also be seen if we analyse the level of education required to perform the work in which they are engaged. Of all young workers, one-third work in a job that requires a lower level of formal education than the one they have attained. Half of the young people work in jobs that are in line with their level of education, while 9.3 % have been able to find employment in a position that requires a higher level of education (Fig. 6).

The most vulnerable segment of young people are those who fall into the NEET category, i.e. those who are not in employment, education or training. In 2019, almost one-fifth of young people aged between 15 and 30 in Serbia fell into this category. Based on the research conducted, we can conclude that 12.5 % of the surveyed youth fell into the NEET category. One pattern has been identified with the phenomenon of the so-called NEET cohort: it increases with age, and is higher among both women and rural area populations (Anđić & Rakin, 2020). The youth in the sample do not deviate from these patterns: as much as 55.3 % of the NEET youth are 25–29 years old, 36.2 % are between 19 and 24 years old, and only 8.5 % are 14 to 18 years old. Furthermore, only one-third of this cohort are male, and the only place where this indicator deviates from the general trends observed is related to the place of residence, as it is higher in urban areas (40.4 %), compared to rural (33 %).

When assessing the characteristics and values that respondents consider important when searching for a job (Fig. 8), two meritocratic ones could be singled out: expertise and experience from abroad, as well as two non-meritocratic ones: personal connections and membership of a political party. Slightly less than a third of respondents believe that non-meritocratic values are very important when finding a job, and almost half of respondents believe that 'connections' or membership of a political party are mostly or very important for employment. On the other hand, young people believe that experience from abroad is not particularly important for finding a job, although slightly less than half of respondents evaluate expertise as mostly or very important.

Taking into account the fact that almost half of young people consider that 'closeness' to a political party or people in power is of primary or high importance for getting a job, it is advisable to examine the extent to which young people justify tax evasion, accepting/giving bribes or using connections to 'get things done' (e.g. in the hospital, in various administrative offices, etc.). Namely, when comparing these three illegal actions, the general conclusion is that young responents in most cases are not supportive of them, with most being against bribery (62.6 %), followed by tax evasion (55.4 %), although every fifth young person justifies the use of 'connections'.

Fig. 6   **Match between formal education and employment among youth in Serbia** (in %)
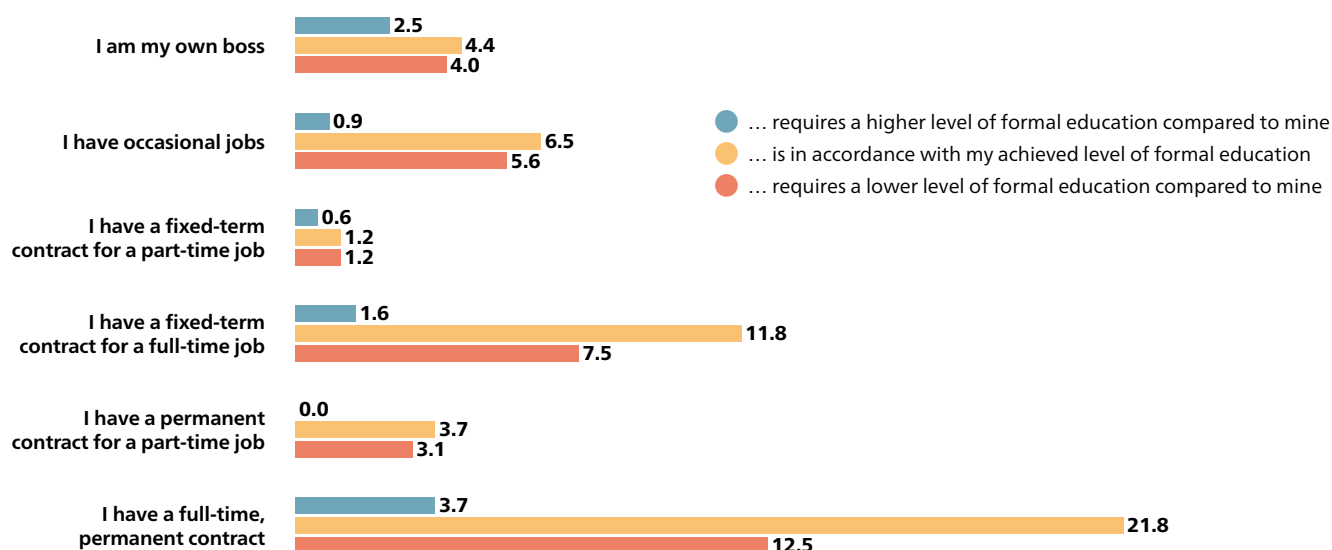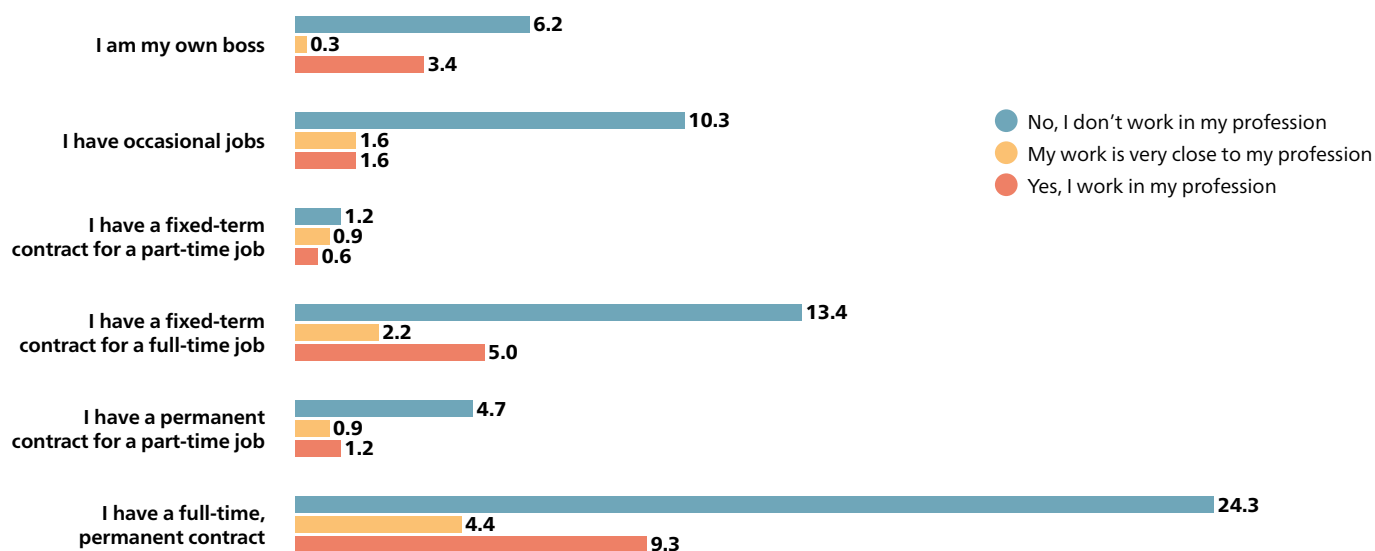
I am my own boss — 2.5 / 4.4 / 4.0

I have occasional jobs — 0.9 / 6.5 / 5.6

I have a fixed-term contract for a part-time job — 0.6 / 1.2 / 1.2

I have a fixed-term contract for a full-time job — 1.6 / 11.8 / 7.5

I have a permanent contract for a part-time job — 0.0 / 3.7 / 3.1

I have a full-time, permanent contract — 3.7 / 21.8 / 12.5

- … requires a higher level of formal education compared to mine
- … is in accordance with my achieved level of formal education
- … requires a lower level of formal education compared to mine

Fig. 7   **Discrepancy between the level of training and employment among youth in Serbia** (in %)

I am my own boss — 6.2 / 0.3 / 3.4

I have occasional jobs — 10.3 / 1.6 / 1.6

I have a fixed-term contract for a part-time job — 1.2 / 0.9 / 0.6

I have a fixed-term contract for a full-time job — 13.4 / 2.2 / 5.0

I have a permanent contract for a part-time job — 4.7 / 0.9 / 1.2

I have a full-time, permanent contract — 24.3 / 4.4 / 9.3

- No, I don't work in my profession
- My work is very close to my profession
- Yes, I work in my profession

While this data was analysed according to the economic activity of young people, there is no significant difference in these opinions according to employment category or job stability.

There are very few young people who believe that they have experienced some form of discrimination frequently, with the lowest numbers being among those who have sometimes or often been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation (10 %), while most young people reported that they have sometimes or often experienced discrimination as a result of their economic background (37.2 %). As expected, slightly more females reported that they were sometimes or often discriminated against than males, with 30 % of females having been discriminated against on the basis of gender, with 21 % believing that it happened sometimes, and 9 % often.

Mobility

Migration – among today's greatest global challenges – profoundly affects development in sending, transit, and receiving countries. Globalization, scientific and technological progress, the information revolution, and humanity's enduring pursuit of better living conditions have transformed population movement into an inevitable social phenomenon. This has made migration a key subject of scientific research seeking to better understand our world. Young people, with their work and reproductive potential, are key participants in migratory activities. According to data from the United Nations (2019), about 38 million international migrants are under the age of 20, while 84 million are under the age of 30 (Todorović et al., 2021). Youth migration occurs concurrent to the transition to adulthood, and interacts with personal, family and societal transformations, in turn affecting future opportunities and challenges.[8]

Migration debates spark deeper global divisions than nearly any other modern issue. In recent years, narratives about migration and migrants have become clearly divided into the positive, which are often ignored, and the negative, which gain excessive attention. As a result, the picture of this phenomenon is largely distorted, and the gap between perception and reality has deepened.

Recent studies have shown that societies with increasingly ageing populations have a need for migrant labour to fill the labour market and maintain productivity. There is an increased shortage of labour force across sectors of the economy, which will have an impact on the long-term sustainability of the social protection system. But the question remains: How many migrants are too many? Answers to this can cause serious debate when gathering with family or friends, can divide a neighbourhood, decide an election, or shape bilateral international relations (Albano, 2021).

Youth immigration in Serbia – Between hope for a better tomorrow and a desire to leave

Serbia is a country of highly dynamic migration, in which internal and external migration intertwine, and emigration of the labour force – mainly to EU member states – and immigration of the labour force from other continents – predominantly Africa and Asia – exist in parallel, as well as systems of return and circular migration, and also transitory and irregular migration phenomena. The dominant forms of spatial mobility involve external migration, with the primary reasons for leaving Serbia being employment, education and/or family reunification. Numerous studies have dealt with different aspects of migration in Serbia in recent years: the attitudes and intentions of residents of Serbia regarding migration have been investigated (Šantić et al., 2019; Šantić, 2020), student migrations studied (RZS et al., 2019), the development component of migration researched (Rašević, 2016), as well as external and internal migration with a special focus on young people (Bobić et al., 2016), the importance of return migration for countries of origin (Todorović, 2018), the emigration potential of young people in Serbia (Langović et al., 2021) and many other facets of the phenomenon. Young people in Serbia and their attitudes and intentions towards migration have been indirectly or directly addressed in the studies of FES, KOMS (Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije – National Youth Council of Serbia), CESID (Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju – Centre for Free Elections and Democracy), and others.

The migration of young people in this study was investigated through intention to move, which acts as a proxy indicator of the extent to which respondents will realize their attitudes related to migration phenomena. Through an analysis, it is possible to determine the intensity with which relocation is considered, and allows an assessment of the probability of realization of that decision. Also, issues relating to push and pull factors as determinants of migration processes, their ranking in the hierarchy of factors in the domain of demographic, economic, social, political, psychological, environmental and other quality of life conditions can be outlined. Although the respondents were from different regions of Serbia, each with their own specific historical-geographical, demographic, economic and social characteristics, the similarity in young people's thoughts about the phenomenon of migration supports the conclusion that Serbia has become one large, homogeneous emigration zone.

Young people leaving permanently?

The vast majority of young people have never stayed abroad for more than 6 months, i.e. as much as 82.1 % of them, with the majority of such respondents being women. Out of the total number of respondents, 148 reside or have resided abroad for the purpose of study or training, i.e. one in five people.

As many as 39.6 % have never stayed abroad for the purpose of education or acquisition of certain skills, but plan to do so in the future, while approximately one in three respondents have no intention of leaving the country for the aforementioned reasons. Empirical studies across the region demonstrate that participation in international academic mobility programs (including EU frameworks, ERASMUS+, CEEPUS) correlates with high rates of return migration among students. Getting to know new cultures and lifestyles in other countries, gaining new experiences and getting to know oneself through different situations outside the familiar environment represent additional benefits of their departure (Mladi i EU – Stavovi, prednosti i mogućnosti, 2021), which can be realized in the form of social and human capital, i.e. transferral of knowledge, skills and experiences that they have acquired abroad.

The migratory potential of young people is reflected in their intention to move away from their place of permanent residence (Fig. 9). A strong and very strong desire to leave was expressed by 23.8 % of respondents, or slightly under one in four people within the sample. Males and females and persons of all age groups are equally represented, although there is a significantly higher expression of this desire among persons with a higher level of education. It is worth highlighting that one in three people also has a moderate desire to leave the country, with this view having been categorized among those 'Undecided', with their final decision largely being conditioned by the future economic and political situation of the state.

Fig. 8 **(Non-)merit-based values in finding employment according to youth in Serbia** (in %)

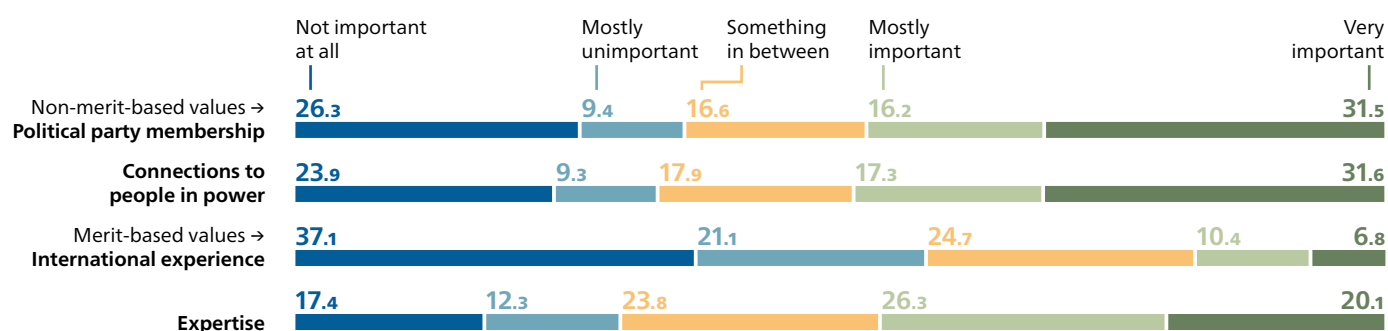|	Not important at all	Mostly unimportant	Something in between	Mostly important	Very important
Non-merit-based values → **Political party membership**	26.3	9.4	16.6	16.2	31.5
Connections to people in power	23.9	9.3	17.9	17.3	31.6
Merit-based values → **International experience**	37.1	21.1	24.7	10.4	6.8
Expertise	17.4	12.3	23.8	26.3	20.1

Fig. 9   **Intention to emigrate among youth in Serbia**

Mean values on a scale from '1 – don't intend to migrate' to '5 – very strong intention'
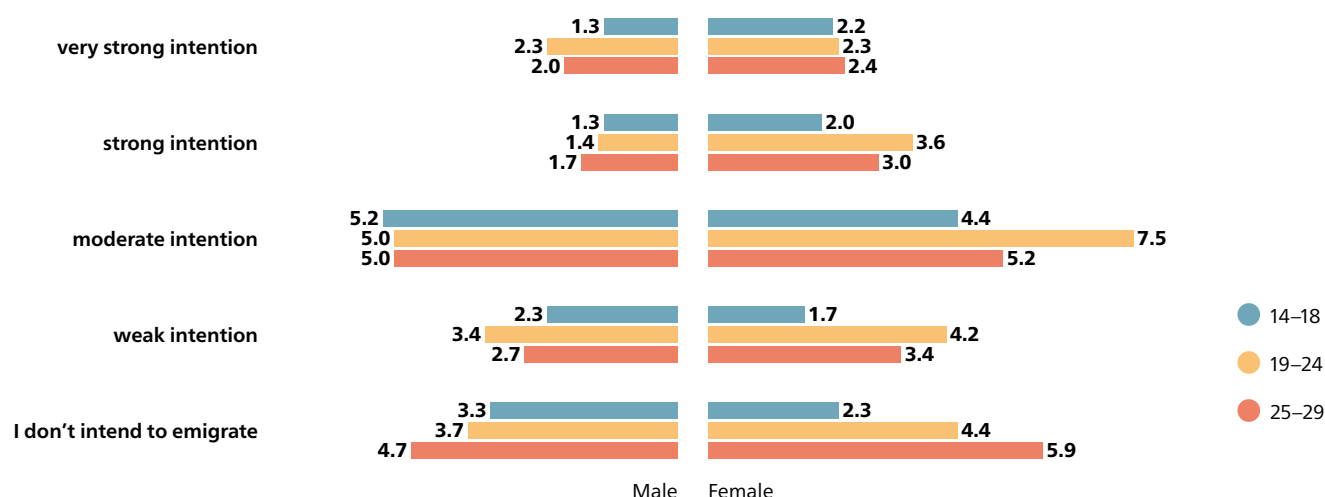
The majority of respondents who declared that they wanted to leave the country do not know when they would move out (approximately one-third of the sample), while an equal share would leave either in the next five years (20.7 %), or in the next ten years (20.5 %). Such long periods of time are indicative of emigration still lying in the domain of thinking and planning for many young people, and that it is connected with plans to complete the educational cycle in Serbia, and then leave to look for work abroad. Such answers indicate that by properly managing migration, through the creation of an effective migration policy, but also by improving the overall conditions in the country, it may well be possible to change even the minds of those young people who are thinking about or have decided to leave. Around 10 % of respondents aged 25–29 plans to move out in the next six months, which means that they have already started their migration cycle by planning to leave and that there is a high probability that they will achieve the next step in this, i.e. emigration itself. The Gallup World Poll research for the period 2013–2015 shows that such intentions are not necessarily realized, however.

This research found that of the total share of people in the world who expressed their intention to leave (22 %), only 3.2 % have actually taken concrete steps, with just 1.1 % having already begun preparations to leave. A comparison of Gallup studies across different time periods indicates that these values are relatively stable.[9]

If such plans are materialized, and young people do go abroad, one in three respondents plans to spend up to five years, of which 17.8 % plan to go for less than one year and 16.2 % from one to five years. The share of young people who do not plan to return is 18 %. It is clear that the category of young people is divided between those who want to leave the country forever, because they believe that there is no future in it, and those who want to spend a certain amount of time abroad, in order to secure certain financial resources and/or acquire knowledge & skills, before returning. The female population is most interested in permanent emigration, followed by the category of young people aged 14–18, as well as one in four respondents in the age group 24–29.

A slightly higher percentage of women, one in five respondents in the 19–24 age category and persons who are qualified, have decided to relocate to European countries for temporary/occasional work and then return. The presented data indicates an inclination toward increased circular and return migrations, which is one of the strategic development goals (specifically Goal 5) of the Strategy on Economic Migration of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021–2027 (Sl. glasnik RS, no. 21 of 6 March 2020).

When planning to relocate abroad, nearly 20.0 % of respondents first contacted relatives or friends already living in their desired destination country. The male population was more in contact with them, followed by every third person in the 25–29 age group and the persons with a lower level of education. 13.9 % of respondents contacted potential employers, with these being primarily males, persons in the 25–29 age group, and those with a lower level of educational attainment. A small number of respondents (6.9 %) had established contact with educational institutions, followed by embassies, and the smallest number had secured scholarships; only 14 in total. The study on student migration from 2019 showed that young people's parents are supportive of their emigration (as much as 90 %) and that they have someone abroad (70 %) with whom they have already established contact and who will help them realize their intention to emigrate. Therefore, it is not surprising that as many as 50 % of students declared that their move (with the first choice of destination being Germany) would be permanent (Migracije studenata, 2019).

Why are young people leaving, and what would keep them in Serbia?

The reasons for emigrating are diverse, and are predominantly related to existential issues. The most important reasons, as shown by numerous other studies about young people in Serbia, lie in the economic sphere. The largest number of respondents would move from Serbia because of higher salaries (29.6 %) and a better standard of living (25.8 %) (Fig. 10).

Higher salaries are slightly more important to male respondents, and a better standard of living to females. Furthermore, standard of living is the most important to persons in the youngest age group of 14–18 years, and higher salaries to persons in the 25–29 age group and respondents with a higher level of education. One in ten respondents stated that they would emigrate due to better employment conditions, while less than 5 % of respondents opted for each one of the other reasons in the spheres of economy, politics, and relationships with family and friends. It is important to mention that research among students in 2019 showed that the main obstacles to emigration were a lack of money for relocation (39.3 %), alongside a lack of knowledge of the (destination country's) language (13.8 %) and complicated emigration/immigration procedures (13.1 %) (Migracije studenata, 2019).

It is clear that the main factors behind the emigration of young persons are economic in nature, and relate to better standards of living, better paid jobs, and ease of finding employment. When making the decision to relocate, family and friends play a significant role, meaning that emotional factors sill retain a high level of importance when making the decision on whether to leave or stay. Major factors behind young people opting not to relocate include attachment to family and friends (32.0 %), issues relating to accommodation and housing (19.9 %) and an underlying feeling of belonging to the social community (10.0 %). The high ranking of psychological factors behind decisions to remain indicates a valuing of relatively stable and consistent emotional relationships within the family above direct material gain. The family is still an important pillar of society, and in this respect it is very important to strengthen and improve material and non-material assistance to families and households (Šantić et al., 2019).

Improvements in the sphere of social development can be seen as a factor of stabilization and redirection of migration flows. Namely, progress in certain segments of social life can influence respondents' decisions to stay in their current place of residence.

Fig. 10   **Main reasons for emigration among youth in Serbia** (in %)

By age group

	14–18	19–24	25–29
Being close to the people I care for	0.4	0.6	0.2
Experiencing a different culture	0.9	1.9	0.4
Greater cultural diversity	0.2	0.4	0.4
Better education	1.5	2.5	0.8
Social and political stability in the host country	0.8	1.1	0.9
Because of corruption and clientelism in my home country	1.9	1.3	1.1
Better opportunities for starting one's own business	0.6	1.7	1.1
Other	0.2	1.7	1.5
Escape from an unfavourable situation	2.1	1.7	1.5
Better employment opportunities	2.1	3.6	3.8
Improvement of standard of living	9.1	7.8	8.7
Higher salaries	6.3	12.3	11.2

Respondents in Serbia report progress in the economic sphere, i.e. improved chances for employment and the possibility of professional advancement, which indicates that economic determinants are the most important in the set of factors influencing relocation. In third place is the improvement in the field of social and health care, while in an unexpectedly high fourth place is the need for a cleaner environment. The protection and improvement of the environment is perceived as a key priority of contemporary society, which must be correlated with economic policy in order to achieve sustainable development (Šantić et al., 2019).

Young people in Serbia single out air pollution (32.2 %), followed by river pollution (14.4 %), neglect of infrastructure systems (12.2 %) and insufficient awareness of recycling (10.3 %) as the biggest problems related to the environment. An insufficiently understood problem is that of drinking water and waste management, especially in certain units of local self-governments. The construction of mini hydropower plants and the exploitation of resources are not the focus of the young respondents in this study, although these are topics that drive the public, activists, environmental protection movements and other actors. Young people agree that driving old cars should be banned in order to protect the environment, although one in three young people in this survey have no opinion on this.

In the introductory part of this section, it was already described how discourse around migration can be both positive and negative. A positive narrative about migration is related to framing the phenomenon as an opportunity for development. Debates on the development components of migration view migrants as, among other things, a development resource for both the country of destination and the country of origin, where migrants, their families, and wider social communities can benefit (Langović & Šantić, 2023). Given the large Serbian diaspora – of which a significant proportion is composed of young people – material and social resources acquired abroad can make an important contribution to the country's overall modernization process. Research on the attitudes and intentions of the population on migration from 2019 indicated that two-thirds of respondents perceive migration as a development problem, which has a negative impact on general social development, primarily in the spheres of demography (loss of young population) and economy (loss of labour). For this reason, it is necessary to strengthen the awareness of migrants as effective development actors through investment in local governments and the promotion of private entrepreneurship from the diaspora (transnational entrepreneurship). Also, the knowledge, experience and skills acquired can make an important contribution to the development of the country of origin in the fields of science, education and health (Šantić et al., 2019).

Main takeaways

1. The vast majority of young people from this survey have never stayed abroad for more than 6 months (as many as 82.1 %), although 39.6 % plan to do so in the future.

2. A strong or very strong desire to leave was expressed by 23.8 % of respondents, or almost a quarter of persons in the sample, while every third person has a moderate desire to leave the country, with this view having been categorized among the 'Undecided', with their final decision largely being conditioned by the future economic and political situation of the state. The reasons for going abroad are diverse, but are predominantly related to existential issues, primarily higher salaries (29.6 %) and better living standards (25.8 %) abroad, which is in line with the results of earlier research conducted on this topic.

3. Young people are divided more-or-less equally between those who want to leave the country forever (19 %) because they believe there is no future in it, and those who want to spend a certain period of time abroad (less than a year = 17.8 %, and from one to five years = 16.2 %), in order to gain material resources, acquire knowledge and skills.

4. There is a clear mismatch between education specialization and the type of work the respondents are engaged in, which indicates the inadequacy of the education system on the one hand, but also the high level of adaptability of young people on the other.

5. About half of young people believe that non-meritocratic values ('connections' or membership of a political party) are important when finding a job, while also believing that experience from abroad is not particularly important in finding a job, while another half of respondents assess expertise as largely or very important.

6. Family and plans for the future

Housing arrangements of young people

Considering that a quarter of respondents in the sample were minors (14–18 years old), while the rest were almost evenly distributed between the student population (19–24) and those aged 25–29, this partly preconditioned the housing and marriage arrangements of young people. Overall, a majority of young people are not married. This is followed by those who are in a relationship but do not live with their partner. Next are those who are legally married, with the smallest proportion living in unmarried unions. In order to learn more about the familial and residential relationships in which young people live, marital and residential status were analysed according to age (Fig. 11). The majority of young people (a little over one-fifth of those surveyed: 21.7 %) live with their mother, father and brother or sister, and of these 14.7 % are not in a relationship, while 6 % are in a relationship but do not live together with their partner. The second most common type of household in which young people live is with a partner (13.7 %), where the share of cohabitations stands out, accounting for 8 % of the total; more than those who are married (at 5.5 %).

Across Serbia's total population, one-fifth of all those who live in a civil partnership are young people aged 15–29 (RZS, 2022d). This is followed by a larger share of respondents who live with a partner and a child (8.8 %), although married couples predominate amongst this subset (6.1 %), while 2.5 % are in civil partnerships.

The data indicates that having a child can be a factor in the legal formalization of a relationship, given that a greater number of young people (especially aged 20–24) are cohabiting with a partner, while those who have a child/children more often tend to be married. The share of young people who live with a partner and a child is similar to that of those who live with parents. In the latter case, the majority are unmarried, although there are also young people over the age of 20 who have a relationship but do not yet live together with their partner. Among all young people who live alone (7.9 %), this type of relationship is also characteristic (1.9 % living in casual relationship), although the largest proportion of this cohort is unmarried (4.8 %). As expected, almost all young people who live alone belong to cohorts aged 19 years or above. Among all other housing arrangements, the most common relationship type is "Unmarried", meaning that the number of unmarried young people is highest compared to other marital relationships among those who live in multi-generational families, only with the mother, in other forms of household, those who live with their mother and/or sibling(s), friends or father.
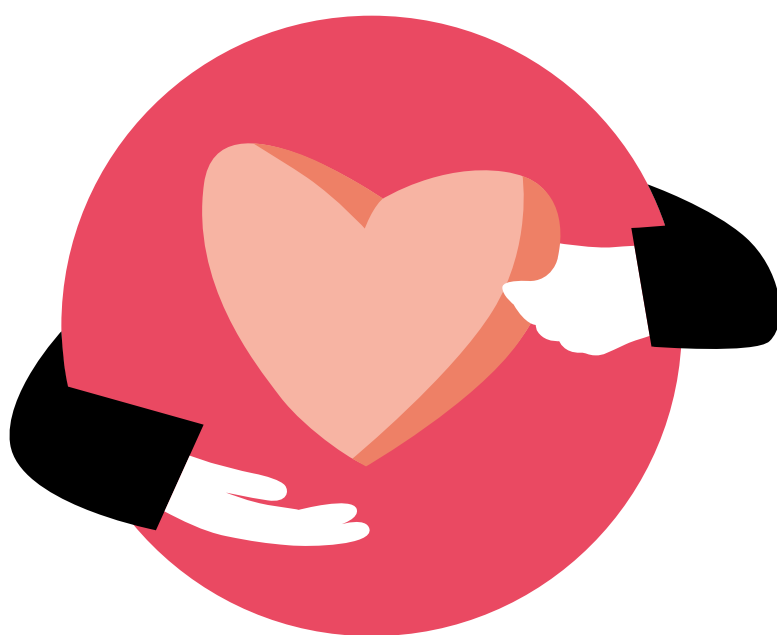
The family – A safety net for young people

The young people in Serbia who participated in this research have a fairly good relationship with their parents (Fig. 12), as the majority answered that they get along very well with them (41 %), with a further half reporting that they get along, even though they sometimes have differences of opinion. Only 3.6 % of young people generally disagree with their parents (they often argue), while 2.4 % have very conflictual/abusive relationships with their parents.

Fig. 11   **Housing status and marital structure of youth in Serbia** (in %)

By age

		14–18	19–24	25–29
Living with mother, father and brother/sister	Single	6.0	5.1	3.6
	In a cohabitation	0.1	0.0	0.0
	In a relationship, but not living together	2.0	3.3	0.7
Living with a partner	Married	0.9	1.2	3.3
	In a cohabitation	0.7	3.6	3.7
	In a relationship, but not living together	0.0	0.3	0.0
Living with a partner and a child	Single	0.1	0.0	0.0
	Married	0.8	1.7	3.6
	In a cohabitation	0.3	0.7	1.6
		0.0	0.0	0.0
Living with mother and father	Single	3.3	1.5	0.9
	Married	0.3	0.0	0.0
	In a relationship, but not living together	0.0	1.1	1.2
Living alone	Single	0.1	2.7	2.0
	Married	0.0	0.0	0.3
	In a cohabitation	0.1	0.3	0.0
	In a relationship, but not living together	0.0	0.8	1.1
Multigenerational family	Single	1.3	1.5	0.5
	Married	0.1	0.0	0.0
	In a cohabitation	0.0	0.0	0.3
	In a relationship, but not living together	0.0	0.9	1.1
Living with mother	Single	0.9	0.8	1.6
	In a cohabitation	0.0	0.1	0.0
	In a relationship, but not living together	0.4	0.4	0.7
Other	Single	0.7	1.3	0.3
	Married	0.0	0.1	0.4
	In a cohabitation	0.0	0.1	0.4
	In a relationship, but not living together	0.1	0.7	0.0
Living with brother/sister	Single	0.8	0.4	0.9
	Married	0.0	0.1	0.0
	In a relationship, but not living together	0.0	1.1	0.3
Living with mother	Single	0.5	0.8	0.7
	In a cohabitation	0.1	0.0	0.0
	In a relationship, but not living together	0.1	0.1	0.4
Living with a friend	Single	0.1	0.5	0.4
	Married	0.0	0.1	0.0
	In a cohabitation	0.1	0.0	0.1
	In a relationship, but not living together	0.0	0.7	0.1
Living with father	Single	0.3	0.4	0.1
	In a relationship, but not living together	0.1	0.0	0.1

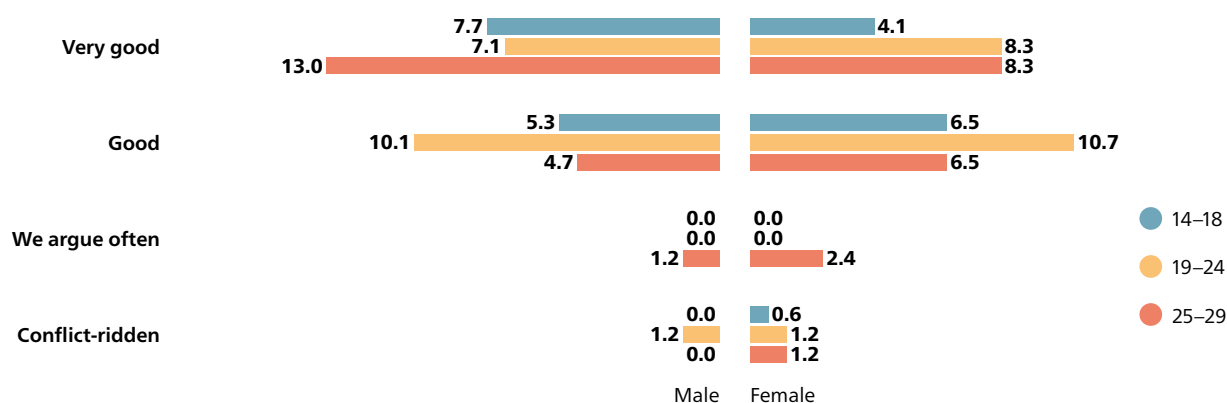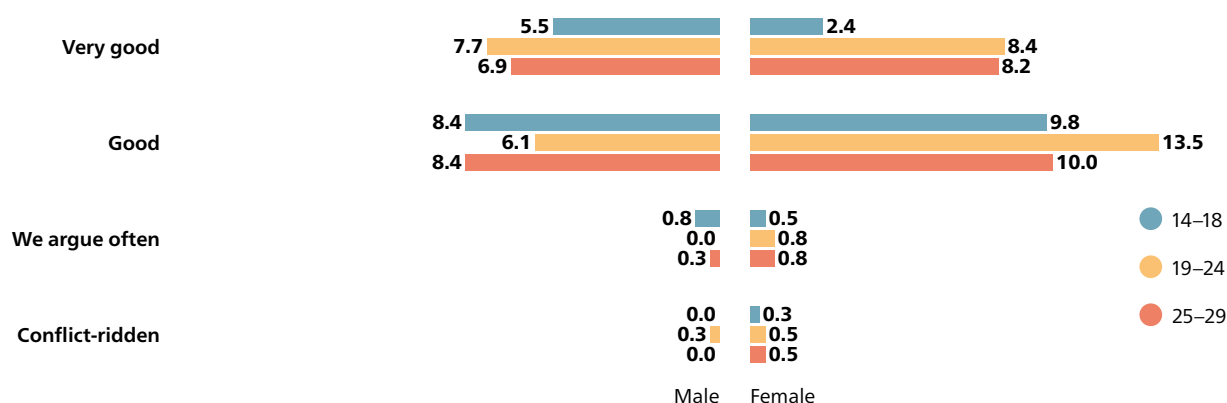Fig. 12 **Youth in Serbia's relationship with parents in rural settlements** (in %)

By age and gender

	Male	Female
Very good	7.7 / 7.1 / 13.0	4.1 / 8.3 / 8.3
Good	5.3 / 10.1 / 4.7	6.5 / 10.7 / 6.5
We argue often	0.0 / 0.0 / 1.2	0.0 / 0.0 / 2.4
Conflict-ridden	0.0 / 1.2 / 0.0	0.6 / 1.2 / 1.2

14–18   19–24   25–29

Fig. 13 **Youth in Serbia's relationship with parents in urban settlements** (in %)

By age and gender

	Male	Female
Very good	5.5 / 7.7 / 6.9	2.4 / 8.4 / 8.2
Good	8.4 / 6.1 / 8.4	9.8 / 13.5 / 10.0
We argue often	0.8 / 0.0 / 0.3	0.5 / 0.8 / 0.8
Conflict-ridden	0.0 / 0.3 / 0.0	0.3 / 0.5 / 0.5

14–18   19–24   25–29

If we observe this relationship through the prism of age, gender and place of residence, we draw the conclusion that in rural settlements the most favourable relationship is reported by males aged 25 to 29 years, with the smallest share reporting this opinion being found among the youngest female cohort. Of all the young people surveyed who live in rural settlements, those aged 19–24 generally have the best relationships with their parents. When it comes to urban areas, the proportion of females reporting a good relationship with their parents is lowest among the 14–18 age group and highest among those aged 19–24 (Fig. 12 and 13). Unsatisfactory relationships with parents are most often recorded in rural municipalities among young females over the age of 25.

Only those who live with their parents – i.e. 55 % of the total number of respondents – were asked to determine what best describes their aspirations for housing independence. Of that number, almost half of young people (48.8 %) stated that due to financial reasons they could not afford to live alone, among whom every tenth respondent was a teenager. Financial obstacles to independent living were cited more by young people aged 19–24 (17.3 %), and somewhat less by older young people. A high proportion of young people (40 %) who live with their parents have not left their parents' home because they believe that it is the simplest and most comfortable solution, with the youngest cohort accounting for the largest proportion providing this response.

However, it should be emphasised that 8.3 % of young people aged 25–29 who live with their parents have no aspiration to change their housing situation because it is the most comfortable solution for them. Only 4.5 % of young people want to live alone contrary to their parents' wishes.

The financial circumstances of households in which respondents live differ significantly depending on the place of residence, as well as age and gender (Fig. 14). The largest share of young people (36 %) reported that their household is able to afford certain more expensive things, but not items as expensive as a car or an apartment, while one-fifth report that there is no problem in meeting basic needs, but there are difficulties when it comes to buying more expensive household appliances, for instance. In 11 % of cases, young people have a high standard of living, and live in households that can afford everything they need. An equal percentage of households, however, have enough financial resources to pay for food and bills, but not enough for clothes and shoes. 6 % of surveyed young people live in the most unfavorable conditions, where households have difficulty paying for bills and food. Survey data indicates that the better the material situation in which young people live, the greater the chance that they live in an urban environment. Also, if we look at age, the households in which it is (most) difficult to live are those in which older cohorts of young people – 20–24, and especially 25–29 – live. Difficulties in (financial) independence, especially for young people in rural areas, have also been noted in Moldova (Prohnițchi, 2022), while teenagers are 'shielded' by the care of their parents. In households that have a decent-but-not-luxurious life, as well as in the wealthiest ones, there are more young people who belong to older cohorts, that is, those who have managed to become financially independent. If we look at this in terms of gender, we conclude that the biggest differences are seen among the wealthiest households, where especially male respondents who live in urban areas rate the financial status of their household better. It should also be emphasised that, in comparison to males, more female respondents living in urban areas, especially those over 20 years of age, while reporting that they had good financial conditions, were not able to afford a car or an apartment.

On the other hand, female respondents living in a rural settlement more often reported that their household had a problem making ends meet.
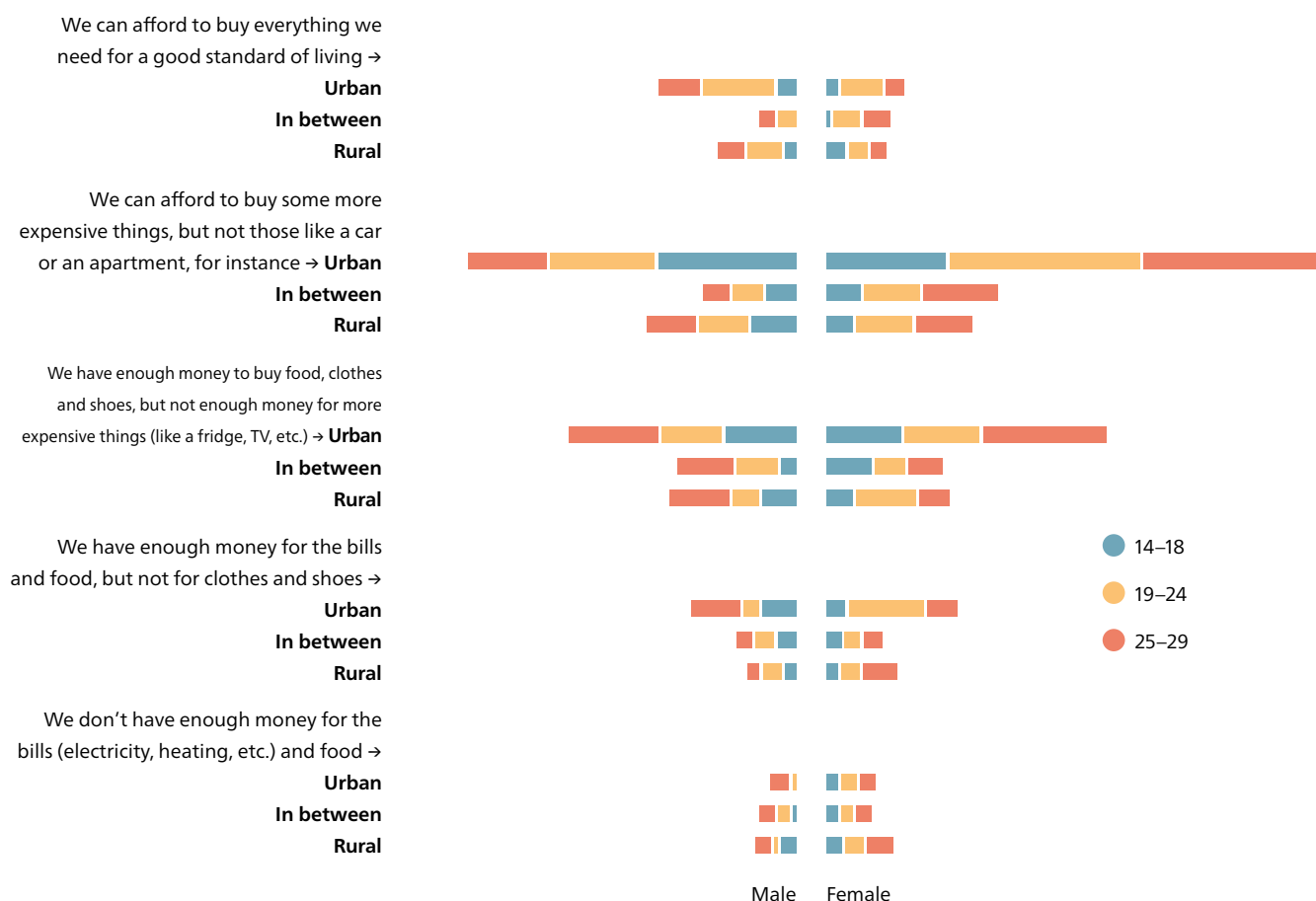
Young people as future parents – Between hopes and possibilities

Out of the total number of respondents, 62.6 % answered the question of how many children they plan or want to have. The aspirations of young people in terms of the number of planned or desired children amounted to an average of 2.4 children, which is significantly more than the current birth rate, as the total natality rate in Serbia in 2023 was 1.63 children per woman (RZS, 2023). On the other hand, it should be emphasised that just over 1 in 8 young people do not plan to have children (12.8 %), and that this share increases with the age of the respondents, while a quarter of young people have yet to form an opinion on the issue. When asked how important it is to have children, most respondents answered that it is very or largely important, while only 10.7 % do not consider having children to be important. In relation to respondents who intend to have their own family, the frequency of the number of desired or planned children ranges broadly, from one child (11 %), to the modality of two children (49 %), then three (31.7 %), and finally four or five (8.3 %). By comparing with the current fertility patterns in Serbia (Fig. 15), we clearly conclude that the surveyed young people have plans for higher birth rates, because in 2023, of the total number of births, 46.3 % are first births, 34.3 are second births, and 13.8 % are third births (RZS, 2023a). In the conditions of the low fertility climate evident in Serbia, it is encouraging that young people have a favourable attitude regarding the number of children they want in the future. Young people are a heterogeneous group, so they include teenagers for whom family planning is still far from the focus, as well as a portion of the cohort considered to be in their optimal reproductive period, i.e. the ages of 20 to 34. That is why the number of desired children visibly fluctuates between respondents' age groups, so the youngest express the lowest reproductive aspirations compared to the oldest, regardless of the number of desired children.

Fig. 14 **Financial situation in households of youth in Serbia** (in %)

By age, gender and place of residence

We can afford to buy everything we need for a good standard of living →
Urban
In between
Rural

We can afford to buy some more expensive things, but not those like a car or an apartment, for instance → **Urban**
In between
Rural

We have enough money to buy food, clothes and shoes, but not enough money for more expensive things (like a fridge, TV, etc.) → **Urban**
In between
Rural

We have enough money for the bills and food, but not for clothes and shoes →
Urban
In between
Rural

We don't have enough money for the bills (electricity, heating, etc.) and food →
Urban
In between
Rural

● 14–18
● 19–24
● 25–29

Male   Female

Of the total number of young people who answered this question, as many as one-fifth are those aged 25–29 who want two children, while 26 % of those aged 20–29 want three children. In addition to the number of children, the timing of having them is also important in analyses of fertility. Just over half of the total number of respondents answered the question about the age at which they had or planned to have their first child. When looking at the age ranges, it is clear that young people plan (or have realized) having children at the optimally fertile age. Of the total number of responses, almost half had or planned to have their first child at the age of 25–29, almost a quarter at the age of 20–24, while a fifth believed that the first child should be had after 30 years of age. The most unusual finding is that as many as 7.6 % of those who answered this question believe that the first child should be born before the age of 20.

Whether young people are more traditional- or modern-minded can be seen through answers to the question of how important different characteristics are when choosing a partner (Fig. 16). Whether the partner had previous sexual experience is not at all important for 56 %, and it is extremely important for only 8.3 %. On the other hand, when analysing the factors for choosing a partner, a little less than half (46.5 %) of young people believe that nationality is not important at all, while for 10 % the issue of nationality is extremely important. Religious affiliation is not important in choosing a partner for 34.5 % of respondents, while it is extremely important for 19.1 %. For 31 % of young people, parental approval is not at all important for entering into a relationship, while 14.3 % believe it to be extremely important.

Fig. 15   **Desired number of children and realized parity among young people in Serbia** (in %)

By age group

Legend: 14–18 · 19–24 · 25–29 · realized parity
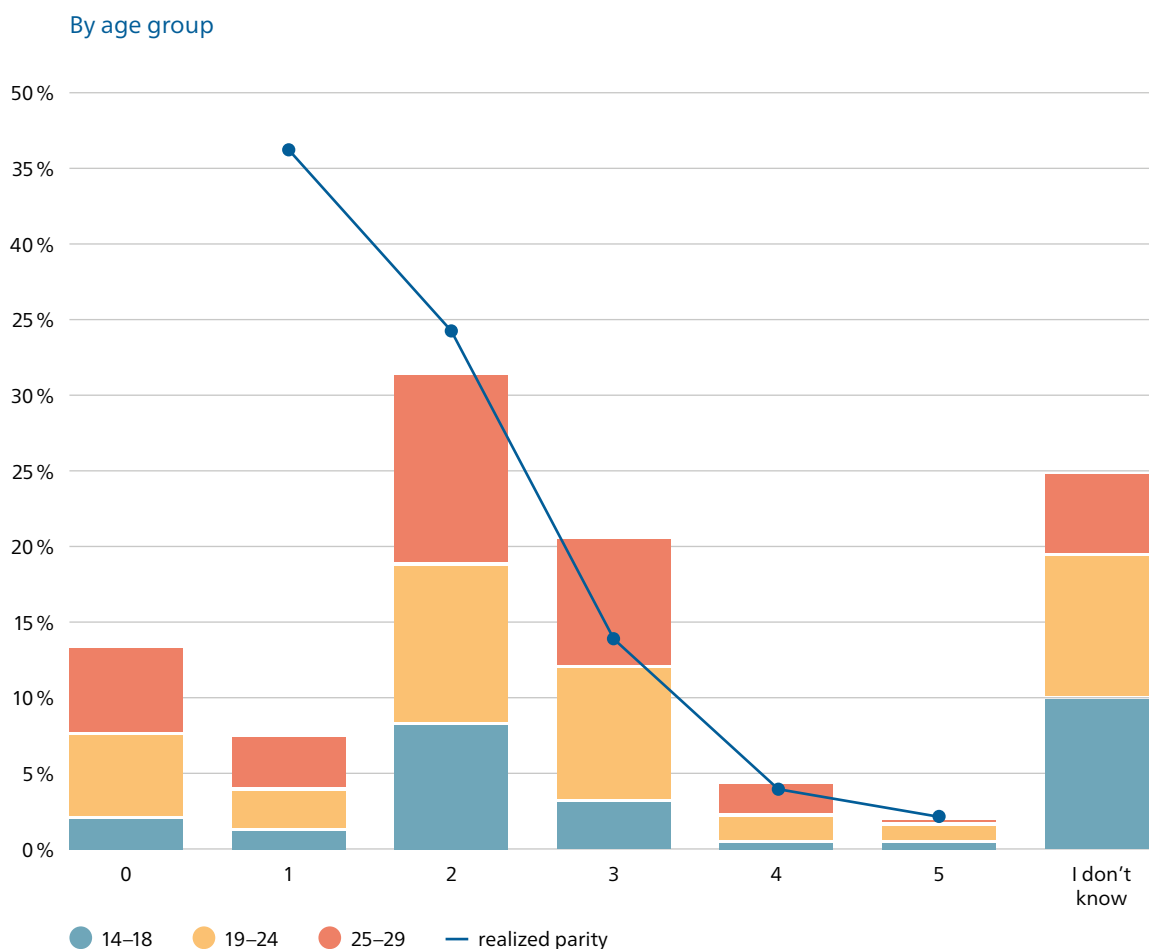
The economic situation of the partner is not important at all for 27.4 % of young people, while it is extremely important for 9.3 % of respondents. Finally, the level of education of the partner is considered extremely important by a little more than a fifth of those surveyed, while a further 16.4 % consider it very important.

Among young people, there is a polarization between fairly liberal attitudes, such as a lower importance of virginity when choosing a partner, on the one hand, and considerably more conservative attitudes related to the importance of religion and nationality on the other. The attitudes of young people to choosing a partner can be understood more deeply through answers to the question about the best method of family planning.

The largest percentage of surveyed young people believe that the use of condoms is the best way to achieve the desired number of offspring (36 %), while only one single respondent believes that abortion is a good method of family planning. A quarter of young people have no opinion on the best way to plan a family, but, while it would be expected that younger cohorts do not have enough knowledge or information about this important topic, the frequency of this answer is more common among older than younger people. A fairly large share of young people (26.4 %) do not approve of any family planning method, and when the importance of factors in choosing a partner stated by respondents are considered, slightly more pronounced attitudes than the average are evidenced in several domains.

Fig. 16 **Important factors when choosing a partner for youth in Serbia** (in %)

	Not important at all	Slightly important	Neither	Important	Very important
Education	21.6	15.3	25.3	21.4	16.4
Economic situation	27.4	19.2	28.5	15.5	9.3
Parents	31.0	19.4	21.2	14.1	14.3
Religion	34.5	14.4	19.8	12.1	19.1
Nationality	46.5	15.6	18.7	8.8	10.4
Virginity	55.9	15.0	13.2	7.6	8.3
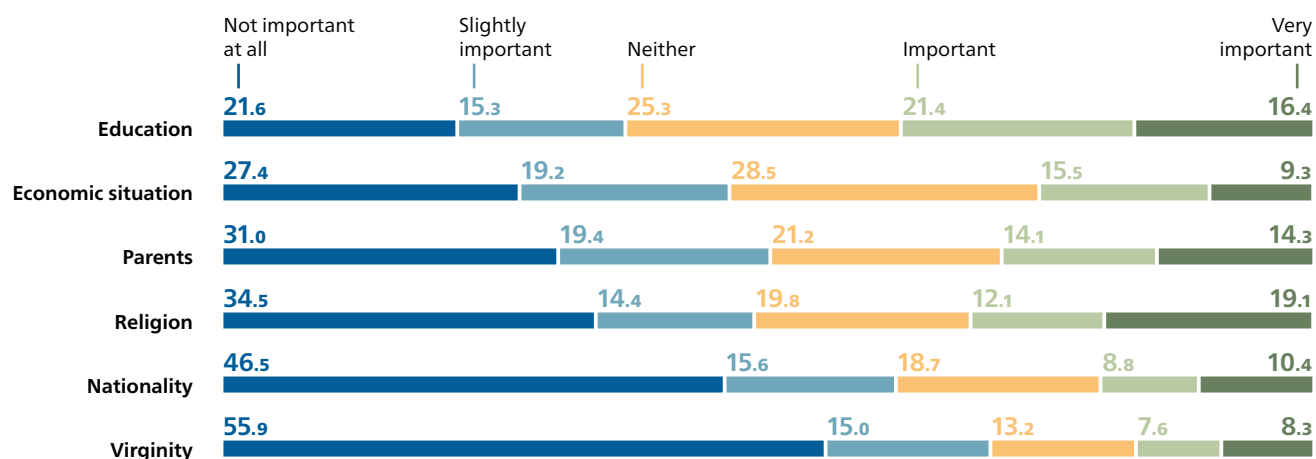
Fig. 17 **Life satisfaction of youth in Serbia and assessment of personal and societal future**

Satisfaction levels '1 – not satisfied at all' to '10 – very satisfied'

Future of Serbian society →
Better than now
- 23.0
- 9.1
- 2.2

The same as now
- 19.9
- 9.3
- 1.6

Worse than now
- 17.2
- 12.4
- 4.4

Future in 10 years' time →
Better than now
- 52.7
- 26.4
- 4.7

The same as now
- 6.4
- 3.8
- 1.8

Worse than now
- 2.3
- 2.0
- 1.7

● Satisfaction 7–10
● Satisfaction 4–6
● Satisfaction 1–3
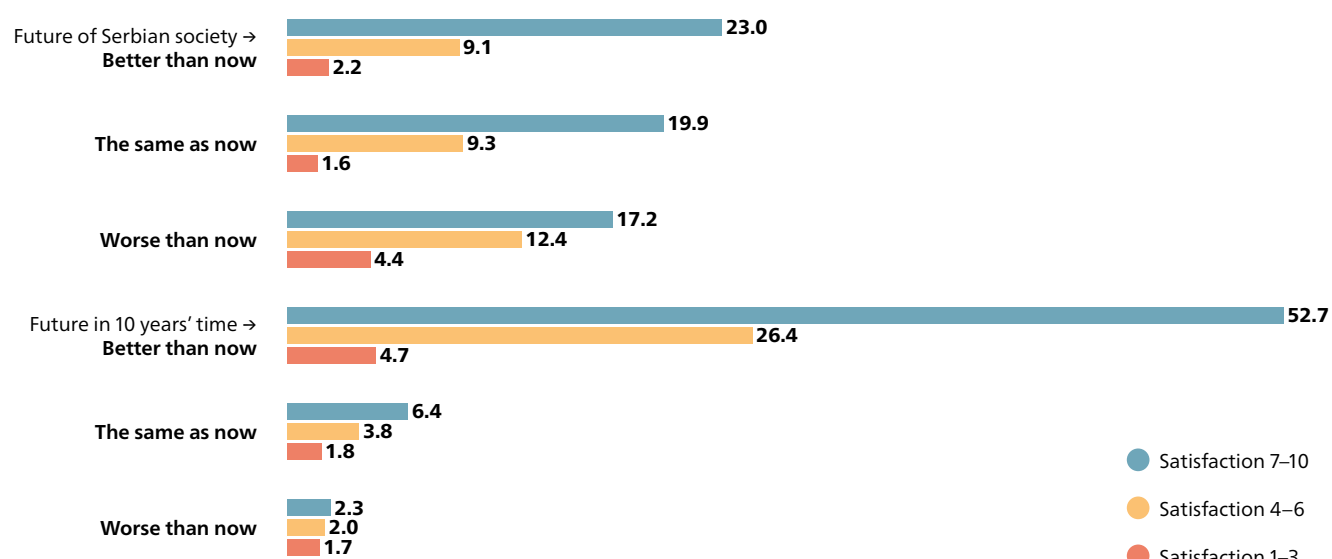
Of the total number of those who do not agree that family planning methods should be used, 14.1 % believe that virginity is very important when choosing a partner (the average is 8.3 %), 15.7 % believe that the partner's nationality is very important (the average across the sample is 10.4 %), and 25.1 % consider religious affiliation to be an important factor in choosing a partner (compared to the average of 19.1 %).

How do young people see their future and the future of Serbia?

The young people surveyed have more optimism in their assessment of their personal futures than that of society in Serbia (Fig. 17). Of those who answered this question, as many as 82 % expect that they will be better off ten years from now than they are today, while only 34.3 % believe that society in Serbia will be better in the future. The differences are more extreme in terms of pessimism, as only 6 % believe that they will be worse off in a decade's time, while 34 % think that the situation of Serbian society will be worse than it is today. However, the greater young people rate their current satisfaction, the more favourable their assessment of their personal future, as well as the future of society in Serbia. It should be emphasised that those respondents who were most dissatisfied believed that their personal circumstances would be better in the future (4.7 %) but that the future of Serbian society would be worse (4.2 %), with these two proportions being comparatively similar. Half of the most satisfied respondents have high hopes for their personal future, while even among those who reported the highest ratings of personal satisfaction, only 23 % think that the future of Serbian society will be better than it is at present.

Main takeaways

1. Having a child can be viewed as one of the key reasons for young people getting married, considering that a larger number of young people without children are cohabiting with a partner, while that of married people who have a child/children is significantly greater.

2. Young people rate their relationships with their parents as (very) good, and those who live with their parents mostly do so for financial or conformity reasons.

3. The most unfavourable socio-financial conditions were recorded in rural areas, while the most favourable were in urban settlements, with male respondents reporting more favourable material conditions.

4. Young people express a desire for a larger number of children compared to the average number of children born per woman in Serbia at present, with one in five wanting or planning for three children (the share of third births in Serbia currently stands at 13.8 %). One in four don't know if they will have children, and 12.8 % do not want children at all. For the quarter of respondents who do not approve of using family planning methods, nationality, religion and virginity are more important features when choosing a partner compared to the average.

5. The more satisfied the respondents are, the more favourably they rate their personal future, as well as the future of society in Serbia.

7. ■ General values, attitudes and perception

Trust in institutions: Who do young people (dis)trust?

People are not inherently trusting. Trust is always developed through experiences and interactions because it rests on the assumption of how others 'should' behave given certain moral standards. It is based on devotion and faith much more than on calculations. Trust in institutions is different from interpersonal relationships, because institutions in themselves are impersonal (Bešić, 2011). For the functioning of democracy, or 'social trust', trust in institutions is particularly important because it is the basis of the social system and the functioning of the entire society. Institutions should be the guarantor of the sense of security of individuals from a values-based perspective (Kramer, 1999), while their effectiveness is a prerequisite for strengthening solidarity within society (Bešić, 2011:121). Numerous authors have pointed to a general decline in trust in institutions the world over.[10]

But what is the situation among young people in Serbia? Respondents were asked about their level of trust in certain institutions. Here's what their average ratings say, on a scale of 1 (no trust whatsoever) to 5 (complete trust). Young people have the most trust in the church (3.3), the army (3.1) and the police (2.6), and the least trust in NATO (1.5), the media (1.7) and political parties (1.8). The current trust in the Church corresponds to the marked religiosity among people today, representing a stark departure from the widespread secularization that prevailed around three decades ago (Mojić, 2012). The findings are in line with the results of numerous researches that have shown that the institutions in which young people have the most trust and the least distrust are the church and the army (Tomanović & Stanojević, 2015; Popadić et al., 2019; Slavujević, 2010; Stojanović et al., 2023). Distrust in political parties, NATO, the media, and political institutions was likewise expressed in the aforementioned surveys.

The distrust of young people toward the media also corresponds to international evaluations of media freedom, according to which Serbia has recorded a decline since 2014. A report by Reporters Without Borders stated that Serbia fell from 64th place in 2008 to 93rd place in 2020.[11] And among citizens in general, not only young people, there is a great distrust in the media (with only 20 % trusting the news) compared to the European average (39 %). The reasons for this can be found, among other things, in the lack of full independence of public services, a continued lack of media pluralism, and great pressure and influence on the media and journalists (Kleut, 2021).[12]

As for the influence of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents on trust, it was shown that females are significantly less trusting of almost all institutions than males. Distrust in the parliament, the government, political parties, the courts and NATO grows with age. Young people aged 14–18 have the most trust in the army and the police, and the least in the media.

Values and young people

Values represent relatively stable, general and hierarchically organized characteristics of individuals and groups, and as such contribute to a comprehensive understanding of complex social and societal changes. They are formed by, but also change over time due to, the influence of various socio-historical and individual factors, as well as in the face of current affairs (Pantić, 1977). The value orientations of young people are largely determined by the broader social context. One of the greatest dangers for young people is entering a state of 'valuelessness', without clear goals, a state of anomie and apathy (Mojić, 2012; Pantić, 1990). In Serbia, the period spanning from late socialism until today has been marked by a serious confusion of values. Although the younger generations were assumed to be inclined to accept Western culture and modern values, it turned out that an extended period of international isolation and exposure to nationalist ideology influenced the youth to turn toward traditional collectivism instead of their own personal achievements. Therefore, despite the penetration of modernity, the majority of the population have remained traditionally oriented, with sustained values – in addition to the aforementioned collectivism – being those of nationalism, egalitarianism, patriarchy and authoritarianism (Lazić & Cvejić 2008; Pešić, 2006; Mojić, 2012).

What values are important to young people today?

Respondents were asked to indicate which out of a range of values were the most important to them. They could choose three values and rank them in order of importance (first, second and third place). If we look at all the values that young people ranked, the following stood out as the most important: security (56.2 %), human rights (55.8 %) and employment (41.4 %). If we look at the values that are a priority for young people, that is, which they put first, security (25.5 %) and human rights (23.7 %) stood out as the most important values, while the third place is essentially 'shared' by three values with similar percentages: employment (11.1 %), well-being (11 %) and individual freedoms (10.1 %).

Employment and human rights were also the values that were most important to young people in the Young People in Serbia 2018–2019 survey, albeit with human rights having a lesser percentage (41 %), and employment significantly higher one (61 %). However, security was not selected as being among the most important values at that time. In fact, just 6 % of respondents cited security as the most important value (Popadić et al., 2019). This data is suggestive of a possible increased awareness of young people about the importance of human rights, a somewhat more favourable situation in terms of employment, but a significantly less favourable situation when interpreted in terms of exposure to risk.

We can interpret the results in several ways, keeping in mind the breadth of the concept of people's security. The term is traditionally associated with states, and relates to the state's defence (police and army) against external threats. However, certain events in the modern world (violent conflicts, social exclusion, exposure to violence, human trafficking, forced migration) have led to the focus being shifted to the individual, i.e. to dangers resulting from direct violence that threaten the individual (Liotta & Owen, 2006; SECONS, 2022).[13] Regardless of whether respondents had security of the state or personal security in mind, the data is not surprising given the widespread violence and security risks faced by society at present. A higher percentage of females refer to security than males, which indicates their vulnerable position in society, especially if we take into account the increase in violence against women. However, the fact that one in five males places security as the most important value shows that security stands out as a key value for both sexes.

It is encouraging to see that more than half of young people singled out human rights as being one of the three highest-ranked values, bearing in mind that young people are representatives of a desirable future and bearers of social values and innovations (Ilišin, 2005; Mojić, 2012). Respect for human rights and freedoms is directly related to the basic principles and postulates of a democratic society, and in this context we can positively evaluate the potential contribution of young people in that domain in the future.

This information is consistent with the researchers' assessment that, regardless of the fact that political and social reforms in former socialist countries took place at different paces and in different directions, there was an overarching increase in respect for human rights (Kovacheva, 2001; Mojić, 2012). However, the fact that only 3.6 % of young people listed democracy in first place, and just 13.2 % of young people listed democracy in one of the three places overall, is discouraging. This data confirms that, while young people from post-socialist countries are interested in social and political life in their country, they remain sceptical of the democratic system and the functioning of institutions (Fajth, 2000). This was also confirmed in our research: young people do not trust institutions. The fact that individual freedoms were also singled out among the more important values (10 % listed them as their first choice, and 26.8 % among the top three) shows that individualization is evident among young people, despite the sustained survival of the values of collectivism, even after the political changes in 2000. The trend of valuing individualism was also recognized in Alternativnom izveštaju o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji (Alternative report on the situation and needs of young people in the Republic of Serbia) (2023), in which personal freedoms were shown to be the most important value to young people.

Security and human rights were more commonly selected in the first place by young people aged 19–24, while employment was more commonly chosen as the most important value by a larger percentage of young people aged 25–29. This last piece of information speaks in support of the thesis about the prolonged and fragmented transition of young people from education to the labour market, insufficient integration of young people into the economic system, 'precarious' employment of young people (casual and temporary jobs, performing multiple jobs, etc.) (Tomanović, 2012; Tomanović & Stanojević, 2015; Mojić, 2012).

The upholding of the majority of the listed values (Fig. 18), which represent the basic values of European society and democratic order, is rated poorly by respondents in Serbia, especially in relation to how they are correspondingly rated by respondents in EU member states. Over half of the respondents rated the situation regarding almost all values as bad or very bad, with the exception of individual freedoms and security, although these were also rated as bad and very bad by a significant percentage. The best – or rather least bad – rating in relation to other values was that of security; this can be explained by the greater trust that respondents have in the army, and to some extent in the police, compared to other institutions. Of all the values, the economic well-being of citizens was rated the worst, followed by rule of law and democracy. Despite the expressed Euroscepticism, young people rate all the mentioned values as being significantly better in Europe than in Serbia, and among the best rated are employment, economic well-being of citizens and democracy.

Young people and democracy

The analysis so far has shown that young people barely recognize democracy as an important value, but when young people are asked direct questions about democracy, 40.3 % of them mostly or completely agree that democracy is a good form of government, while 37.5 % of them believe democracy to be the preferable form of government always and under all circumstances. As a caveat, it must be noted that almost the same percentage (37.3 %) of young people state that democracy is the best possible system of government only when it can provide economic security for people.[14] Although the majority does not agree – and generally disagrees – with the position that they should have a strong leader who does not have to bother with the assembly or elections (38.9 %), the 34.5 % who agree and 26.6 % who are undecided confirm the thesis that authoritarianism as a value in our society has remained despite the modernization processes, and that our young people have adopted (or at the very least acquiesced to) it.

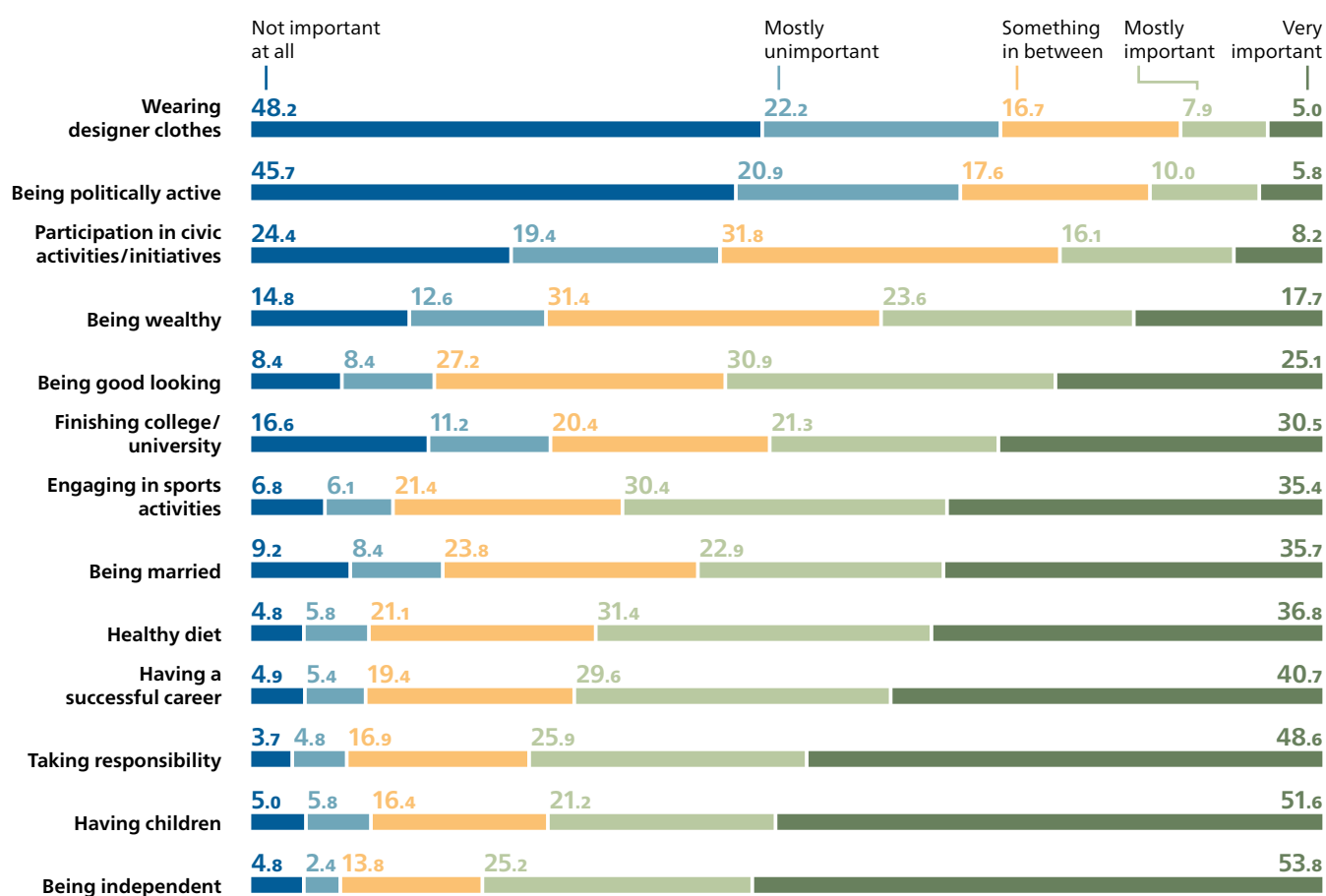Fig. 18   **Youth in Serbia's views on values in their country and the EU** (mean values)

Value	EU	Serbia
security	3.0	2.8
individual freedom	2.9	2.6
human rights	3.1	2.4
gender equality	3.2	2.4
social equality	3.1	2.4
employment	3.7	2.3
democracy	3.3	2.2
rule of law	3.1	2.2
economic well-being of citizens	3.5	2.0

● EU
● Serbia
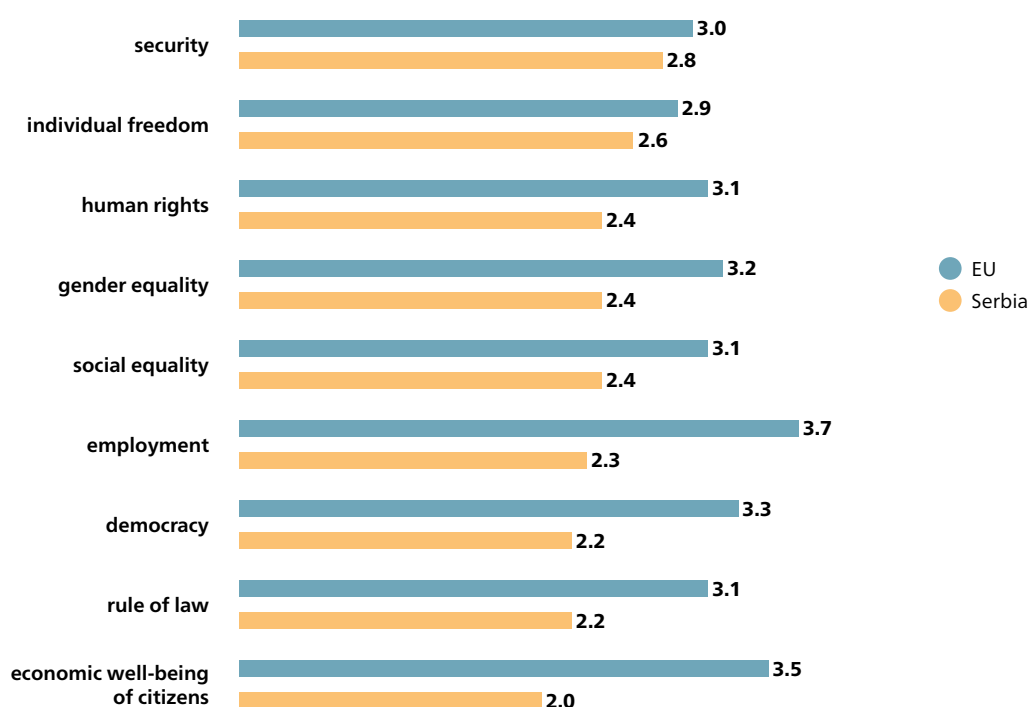
The largest number of young people ideologically position themselves in the political centre (70.7 %), 12.1 % to the left, and 16.9 % to the right. It is encouraging that young people want their voice to be heard; as many as 62 % largely or completely agree that young people should have more opportunities to express themselves in politics. However, young people exhibit worryingly low levels of participation and activism; large proportions of young people are of the opinion that it is largely not or not at all important for them to participate in civic actions (43.3 %), or to participate in politics (66.4 %). One of the biggest challenges facing future research will be to precisely determine the obstacles to channelling young people's more-than-clear desire to express themselves in the political sphere on the one hand, and the impossibility of channelling that desire either through practical means or through their own identity on the other. Young people do not view themselves as homo politicus. But how do they see themselves, and what is important to them?

For young people, it is generally important (both 'important' and 'very important') to be independent (78.7 %) (Fig. 19), which marks a certain shift in relation to the final decade of the 20th century, when young people were characterized by a situation of dependence, and a reliance on both adults in their immediate social environment and the overarching social order (Mojić, 2012). Somewhat paradoxical in relation to the views on activism above, 74.5 % believe that taking responsibility is either important or very important. In terms of expectations, young people show an orientation toward the market, with majorities finding completing university (52.3 %) and having a successful career (70.2 %) to be important. Financial wealth is less important to them compared to other values (41.7 %). Career preferences tend to outweigh family preferences, although the latter remain highly significant. Also somewhat paradoxically, given that they live in a consumer society, or even better, a hyperconsumer society, it is of lowest importance for them to wear branded clothes (13.3 %).

Fig. 19 **Important values for youth in Serbia** (in %)

	Not important at all	Mostly unimportant	Something in between	Mostly important	Very important
Wearing designer clothes	48.2	22.2	16.7	7.9	5.0
Being politically active	45.7	20.9	17.6	10.0	5.8
Participation in civic activities/initiatives	24.4	19.4	31.8	16.1	8.2
Being wealthy	14.8	12.6	31.4	23.6	17.7
Being good looking	8.4	8.4	27.2	30.9	25.1
Finishing college/ university	16.6	11.2	20.4	21.3	30.5
Engaging in sports activities	6.8	6.1	21.4	30.4	35.4
Being married	9.2	8.4	23.8	22.9	35.7
Healthy diet	4.8	5.8	21.1	31.4	36.8
Having a successful career	4.9	5.4	19.4	29.6	40.7
Taking responsibility	3.7	4.8	16.9	25.9	48.6
Having children	5.0	5.8	16.4	21.2	51.6
Being independent	4.8	2.4	13.8	25.2	53.8

In spite of this, the influence of the consumer society is reflected precisely in the medicalization of society (Lipovecki, 2008), where it is shown that young people consider it important or very important to eat healthily (68.3 %) and to play sports (66.3 %). The influence of the consumer society is also reflected in the narcissistic culture of young people (Lasch, 1986), because it is very important for over half (56 %) to look good.

Attitudes of young people toward the LGBT population and minorities

In the introduction, we emphasised that the youngest respondents to our survey were born in 2010, the year when the first Pride Parade was 'successfully' held.

The parade ended with a large number of injured and detained, and immense material damage was caused. Those who were born then are now 14 years old. Has anything changed in terms of attitudes towards the LGBT population during that time?

Although the majority of young people do not see homosexuality as a disease, i.e. they do not think that members of the LGBT population need some form of treatment (82.4 %), there is still a significant percentage of young people (17.6 %) who responded that they do have such an attitude. Young people who believe that members of the LGBT community require some form of treatment are mostly male, aged 19–24, and place themselves ideologically closest to the centre and the right, although closer to the centre than to the extreme right.

Only 15.9 % of young people believe that they fully understand and support LGBT people. There are significantly more women among this cohort, as has also been shown in previous research (Radoman, 2011; Tomanović & Stanojević, 2015;Stojanović et al., 2023). This can be interpreted from the angle that women are more sensitive to discrimination against certain marginalized groups due to their own marginalized position. Another possible interpretation is that members of the male gender feel that their identity is threatened when they are associated in any way with the stereotypical characteristics of homosexual men (weak, feminized, unmasculine) (Radoman, 2011). An interesting fact is that there are no great regional variations in these results. As expected, there is a slightly higher percentage declaring their support and understanding in the Belgrade region, and the smallest in the region of Southern and Eastern Serbia. However, overall, young people who support the LGBT population are almost evenly distributed across all regions. Ideologically speaking, these respondents mostly occupy the position of the centre and the left, although it is interesting to note that those closer to the centre show a more tolerant attitude compared to those on the far left.

The majority of young people do not think that LGBT people should be expelled from the workplace/school (95.6 %), nor are they offended by their ideology (70.5 %). The majority also do not think that they deserve to be exposed to violence (88.7 %), but, again, we cannot help but be worried by the fact that 11.1 % of young people answered that they think that violence toward this group is acceptable. Such young people are predominantly male, ideologically belonging to the centre and right, and aged 19–24. The distance that we stand at present from talking about the liberalization of young people's attitudes about LGBT people is also shown by the data that 91.9 % of respondents are opposed to their right to marry, while 93 % of young people are against them being able to adopt children.

If we add to this the fact that young people perceive members of the LGBT population to be the only group that has too many rights (44.9 %)[15] and that the majority would feel very bad or bad (45.1 %) if a member of the LGBT population moved to their neighbourhood (with only drug addicts – at 80.3 % – evoking a more negative response in this respect), we can conclude that homophobia is still present among young people. This social distancing from members of the LGBT population is an increase on the previous result from the 2015 Young People in Serbia survey, in which 39.9 % of young people said that they would feel bad or very bad if a member of the LGBT population moved to their neighbourhood (Tomanović & Stanojević, 2015). Young people feel less social distance towards other groups (Roma, Muslims, Jews) for which a higher percentage answered that they would view a member of these minorities moving into their neighbourhood positively or very positively than those who would view it negatively or very negatively (Fig. 20). This confirms the thesis that attitudes towards homosexuality are often at odds with indicators of attitudes towards other minority groups, whereby homophobes can show tolerance towards other minorities (Radoman, 2011).

However, as one major characteristic of values is that they are slow to change (Pešić, 2006), bearing in mind the findings of a number of earlier studies, we come to the conclusion that, when looked at over an extended period of time, there has been a liberalization of attitudes about illnesses of and violence towards groups, although intolerance still exists in terms of basic rights and social acceptance.

Young People and Violence

Just a year before writing this study, Serbia was shaken by two events in Belgrade and in a series of villages near Smederevo and Mladenovac. On 3 May 2023, in Vladislav Ribnikar elementary school, Belgrade, a 13-year-old boy committed the murder of eight female students, one male student and a school caretaker. Just a day later, on 4 May, a 21-year-old young man killed 9 people (aged between 15 and 26) and injured several others.

Fig. 20   **Views on marginalized groups among youth in Serbia** (in %)

How would you feel if some of the following families or persons moved into your neighbourhood?

	Very bad	Bad	Something in between	Good	Very good
Drug addicts	51.5	28.7	14.6	3.1	2.1
LGBTQIA+ persons	26.6	17.2	29.2	17.8	9.1
Roma	7.8	14.1	37.2	30.3	10.5
Jews	6.3	10.2	37.8	32.9	12.8
Muslims	4.0	8.4	37.4	34.7	15.6
Christians	2	15.2	35.7		46.8
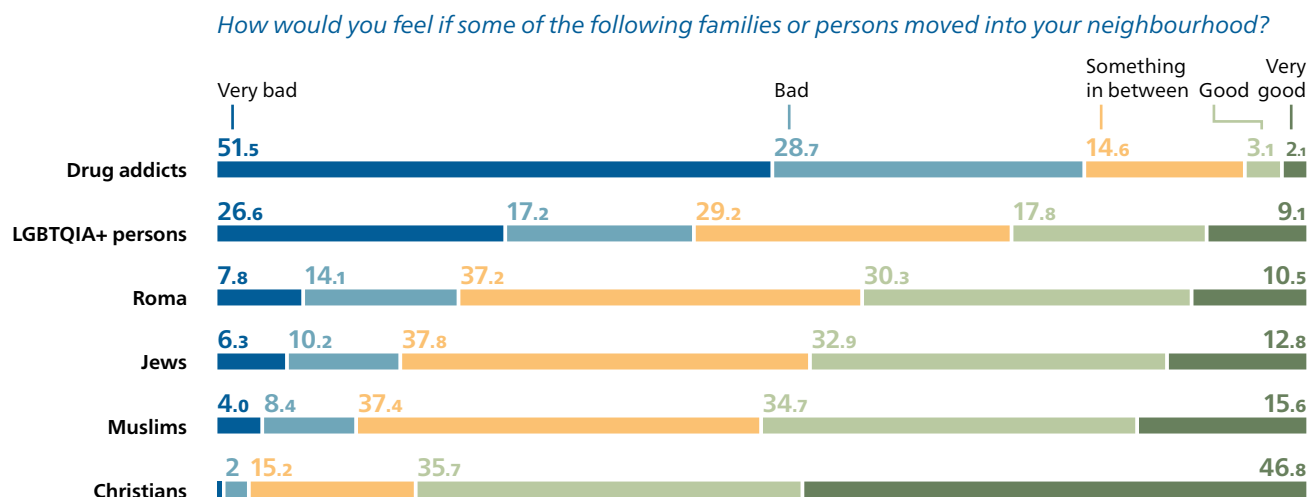
The topic of violence among young people has returned to the focus of numerous public debates and scientific meetings for the worst possible reasons; unfortunately, the topic is also often misused for political and sensationalistic purposes. This series of tragic events raised the question of responsibility for the increase of violence within society. However, public debates in the media provided little space for the voices of young people. These events undoubtedly influenced our interlocutors, and we thought it necessary to investigate their attitude towards this phenomenon. As this is a comprehensive study of issues affecting young people, and not a study devoted exclusively to violence, the limited number of questions allows us to only scratch the surface of this complex social phenomenon, in order to provide, we hope, a grounding for further studious research and analysis.

What is violence?

The World Health Organization defines violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" (WHO, 2002). This definition is relevant to our analysis, because violence is not limited exclusively to physical harm. A classification of several types of violence exists, based on the way in which violence is manifested.

Here we distinguish between: physical violence (bodily harm); emotional/psychological violence (threatening the mental and emotional health and dignity); sexual violence (unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour related to sexual activity); and electronic violence (sending and publishing offensive and hurtful content via the internet and other digital means) (Popadić, 2009:43; Kalezić Vignjević et al., 2009; Terek, 2017). It is also important to emphasise that violence is interpreted differently depending on the cultural context, that is, according to the value system that a certain culture manifests and advocates (Vuksanović, 2018:1824).

Are young people afraid of violence? What are their fears?

The results of the Young People in Serbia 2018–2019 study show that, from a list of several items,[16] young people stated that they are the least afraid of becoming victims of physical violence. Their biggest fears were that they would get a serious illness, that they would lose their jobs, and an overarching fear of corruption and social injustice (Popadić et al., 2019:23). The findings are somewhat different this year. Regarding the fear of becoming victims of physical violence, 37.2 % are very afraid, 30.9 % somewhat, while 31.9 % are not at all afraid.

Similar percentages are reported when it comes to the fear of being victims of sexual violence (including rape): 42.8 % are very afraid, 20.4 % somewhat, while 36.9 % are not at all afraid. Young people are least afraid of becoming victims of domestic violence. While there is therefore a noticeable increase in fear of physical violence compared to 2018, considering the circumstances of the last few years, especially the tragic events of May 2023, this increase in fear is to be expected. However, a fear of violence is still a relatively minor fear among young people compared to the other listed items,[17] as if violence is still seen as something that can happen to someone else, but not to oneself. The fear of physical and sexual violence is more prevalent among girls, and is more present in the 19–24 age group.

This survey showed that among the main biggest fears of young people are a bad health system (59.1 %), that they will become seriously ill (55.6 %), followed by war (54.2 %), and pollution and climate change (52.6 %). This data can be interpreted in the wake of firsthand experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, which young people were exposed to for a comparatively long period of their lives. The fear of illness is a universal fear among people, regardless of the context of the pandemic, and this type of fear was also present among young people in the 2018/2019 survey. As stated in the introduction, the oldest respondents were born in 1995. Considering the proximity of a context of war during early childhood, as well as the current global and regional situation, it is not surprising that a fear of such conflicts is among the list of the top three fears among young people.

Have young people experienced violence?

In this part of the research, we wanted to hear the perspective of young people on the following topics: Have they experienced certain forms of abuse, what in their opinion are factors that contribute to the increase in violence among young people, and who would they turn to for help if they were victims of violence?

The highest percentage of young people reported being exposed to emotional/psychological violence. As many as 47.7 % of young people had experienced being called derogatory names, around one-third (34.3 %) stated that peers had spoken badly about their families, 28.4 % experienced threats from peers,[18] while 21.5 % experienced being socially ostracized. While emotional/psychological violence dominates the responses, physical, sexual and online violence are less prevalent. Compared to male respondents, females are more exposed to each of the mentioned types of violence; however, a statistically significant relationship between female gender and exposure to violence was observed only in the case of sexual violence and emotional/psychological violence in the segment of social exclusion ("Someone forced others in the class /group not to socialize with me"). There are no statistically significant differences regarding different age groups among young people and exposure to violence. This research has confirmed the findings of numerous studies that examined different types of violence among young people about psychological violence being the dominant form of violence, and electronic violence being least reported.[19]

Young people have an almost equal presence in the virtual space as in the real space, so the lowest percentage reporting experience of electronic violence may well be explained by an increased application of cautiousness in regard to the online sphere. According to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2021), when it comes to the use of the internet and personal data, slightly more than half of young people aged 16–24[20] care about security: 53.9 % of them restricted or denied access to their geographic location, 54.4 % restricted access to their profile or content on social networking sites or online content they published. In the study Bezbednosti mladih: smanjenje rizika kroz podizanje svesti – nalazi iz istraživanja i preporuke (The Security of Young People: risk reduction through awareness-raising – research findings and recommendations) (2023), as many as 80 % of respondents stated that they avoided internet content that includes hate speech.

And the study Korišćenje interneta i digitalne tehnologije kod dece i mladih u Srbiji (Use of the Internet and digital technology by children and young people in Serbia) (Kuzmanović et al., 2019:25) showed that children and young people aged 11–17 apply caution about whom they will come into contact on social networks: 32 % will only accept requests if the have mutual friends, 59 % accept only if they know them directly, and 13 % only accept if they know them very well (Kuzmanović et al., 2019).

Causes of increased violence in society

We further asked young people what, in their opinion, are the main causes of violence in society (Fig. 21). More than 56.8 % of young people believe that social networks are the main cause, followed by watching reality shows (28.6 %) and the easy availability of alcohol and psychoactive substances (27.5 %). The lowest impact, in their opinion, stems from watching violent films (9.5 %). The influence of the familial environment is only in seventh place in terms of importance (19.6 %).

The young people in our research – as we stated in the introduction – belong to Generation Z, a digitally literate generation for whom digital communication is, so to speak, their mother tongue (Popadić, 2009). According to the data of the study Nasilni ekstremizam i mladi: od dezinformacije do radikalizacije (Violent Extremism and Youth: from disinformation to radicalization) (2023), young people use Instagram the most (84 %), followed by YouTube (71 %), Facebook (53 %) and finally TikTok (50 %). This data tells us that young people have a strong presence in both the real and digital environments, so it comes as little surprise that young people perceive the digital space, specifically social networks, as one of the potential causes of an increase in violence. This should be seen as a red light about the necessity of studying social networks as a potential space of violence, especially considering the consequences that violence across social networks has on the self-confidence and self-esteem of young people. Violence on social networks has been found to affect children and young people in the following ways:

93 % of children feel sadness and depression, anxiety, 31 % feel discomfort, 19 % are hurt, 18 % are ashamed, 39 % have poor performance in school, 27 % exhibit delinquent behaviour (Veljković et al., 2022:90).

It is not surprising that young people place the watching of reality shows in second place as a cause of increased violence, bearing in mind how much has been said about its harmfulness in the public space, especially after the tragic events in May, following which numerous petitions were launched by both political actors and non-governmental organizations to request the cancellation of broadcasts of this format. The results of the Nasilni ekstremizam i mladi: od dezinformacije do radikalizacije study (2023) also showed that young people associate watching reality TV with violence in the real world. In that survey, 14 % of young people stated that media that promoted violence bore primary responsibility for the events in Vladislav Ribnikar elementary school and Mladenovac. A large percentage of young people (68 % in total) fully agree that the state should ban reality shows, while over half of young people (54 %) stated that they are either regularly or occasionally exposed to violence through the media.

Experts warned long before these unfortunate events that reality shows are sensationalistic, and that violence, hate speech, stereotypes, aggressiveness and vulgarity are commonly depicted in them (Terek, 2021: 38). As they state, it is a format that, due to its poor scripting and competitive nature, has a strong potential for conflict that favours violence, which is additionally encouraged by the production (Terek, 2021). Media theorists have also warned of the dangerous link between violence and the entertainment industry. Violence, together with sexuality, has become one of the most profitable assets of the modern media industry. The moment the entertainment industry begins to include violence in its commercial projects, the question arises: "Does media violence hurt and cause harm, or is it just 'fun' like any other entertainment content?" (Vuksanović, 2018:1823, 1830)

Fig. 21   **Causes of increased violence in society according to youth in Serbia** (in %)

	Yes	No
playing video games	5.6	94.4
lack of prospects for young people in society	7.6	92.4
unfavorable economic situation in the country	8.0	92.0
weak performance of institutions	8.4	91.6
watching violent movies	9.5	90.5
easy access to weapons	15.5	84.5
insufficient mental health care in society	16.9	83.1
family influence	19.7	80.3
peer pressure (being in "bad company")	20.7	79.3
promotion of inappropriate idols in the media	22.3	77.7
mobbing in schools	23.2	76.8
easy access to psychoactive substances and alcoholic drinks	27.1	72.9
watching reality shows	28.4	71.6
social media	56.8	43.2

The results of numerous studies have shown a direct correlation between watching violence in the media and aggressive behaviour of viewers: increase in inclinations to aggression, physiological excitement and imitation, as well as desensitization to violence. Certain studies have shown the existence of a connection between regular viewing of reality programs in which social aggression is present and a high level of social aggression among viewers, especially among adolescents who perceive the content as realistic. The connection between the amount of violent media content in early childhood and aggressive behavior in adulthood has also been established (Terek, 2021: 39).

However, other authors have refuted the connection between violence in the media and the behaviour of viewers, arguing that violent content in the media was preceded by real violence, and therefore media productions only reflect violence that already exists in society. There are also some authors who opine that violence in the media can sometimes play an aestheticist role, critiquing social relationships, and, paradoxically, violent culture itself (Vuksanović, 2018: 1824, 1831).

Fig. 22   **Who young people in Serbia would turn to in case of violence** (in %)

	Number	Share (%)
next of kin	365	48.7
the police	108	14.4
a friend	83	11.1
no one	58	7.7
I don't know	57	7.6
a professional (pedagogist, psychologist, psychiatrist)	28	3.7
a judicial institution	14	1.9
other	12	1.6
a member of extended family	9	1.2
a social worker	7	0.9
a teacher	5	0.7
a medical institution	2	0.3
a non-governmental organisation	2	0.3

The reason for young people's perception of the watching of reality shows as a cause of violence in much higher percentages than watching violent films can be explained by research that says that it is more likely that viewers will adopt behaviours from media content if they believe that the events are real, meaning that the effect of violence from reality shows on viewers is therefore greater (Terek, 2021).

In third place, young people identify the easy availability of psychoactive substances and alcohol as causes for the increase in violence in society. This relationship was empirically confirmed in the same research, Young People in Serbia 2015, which showed that violence correlates with certain habits such as the consumption of tobacco products, alcohol and marijuana (Tomanović & Stanojević, 2015: 66, 67). Numerous empirical studies likewise support this thesis.[21]

Who should young people turn to in a situation of violence?

In a situation of violence, almost half of young people (49.5 %) would first turn to a close family member, then the police (14 %), followed by a friend (10.8 %). The percentage of those who would not turn to anyone (7.8 %) or those who would not know what to do (7.7 %) is not negligible (Fig. 22).

It is important to note that a significant percentage of young people declared that they get along very well with their family (41.2 %), or that they get along in general, even if they sometimes have differences of opinion (51.2 %), so it is not surprising that the data supports the idea that, in the event of violence, they would first turn to a family member. We can likewise interpret this from the key findings of the Young People in Serbia 2018–2019 study, in which it was shown that the family is the main source of financial, emotional and social support for young people in general. However, the authors of the study five years ago warned that excessive reliance on the family results in a neglect of roles by societal institutions, and even one's own responsibility (Popadić et al., 2019). The results of the Young People in Serbia 2015 study likewise showed that young people have the most trust in their family members (Tomanović & Stanojević, 2015). The findings are consistent with the research in Nasilni eksptremizam i mladi (Violent Extremism and Youth) in which, when asked "Who do you trust most to guard the security of your family and yourself?", young people first named themselves and their family (48 %), then the police (21 %), followed by close friends (7 %). The fact that only 3.6 % of young people would turn to a professional (psychologist, pedagogue, psychiatrist), 1.8 % to a judicial institution, and just 0.7 % to a professor or teacher is discouraging. These attitudes, in turn, correspond to the data from this study, evidencing an insufficient trust of young people in educational institutions and the judiciary.

Main takeaways

1. Young people's lack of trust in institutions is one of the main obstacles to the development of a democratic society. Young people have the most trust in the church, the army and the police, and the least trust in NATO, political parties and the media.

2. The general attitude of young people towards democracy is one of ambivalence. The majority of young people evaluate democracy as a good form of government, and positively evaluate democratic values, but they are sceptical about the democratic system and the functioning of institutions.

3. The three most important values that young people state are security, human rights and employment.

4. The fear of physical violence is not considered one of the biggest fears among our respondents, although it has increased compared to the same survey conducted in 2018/2019. Young people express their greatest fears as being a poor health system, serious illness, war, pollution and climate change.

5. Mental abuse is the most common form of violence among young people, while electronic violence is the least common.

6. Females experienced sexual violence and psychological violence (social exclusion) to a greater extent than males.

7. Young people see the biggest causes of violence as being social networks, watching reality shows and the easy availability of alcohol and psychoactive substances.

8. If they were exposed to violence, young people would first turn to their family, then to the police, followed by a friend.

8. Political attitudes and participation

The attitude of young people towards politics is complex and often problematic. They see themselves as a group that is not politically engaged, and historically their feeling can be collectively described as one of being excluded from political life. Interpreting the low levels of engagement of young people in political life as evidence of apathy ignores the structural and organizational obstacles that many of them are faced with. It also overlooks the mistrust they feel towards the traditional institutions that govern the state. The qualification that young people are politically disinterested has been refuted by recent studies, which say that their political engagement is more oriented toward political organizing, social movements, protests and boycotts. Young voters care about the same issues as everyone else who goes to the polls. The difference is that young voters are not prioritized within traditional political strategies, and their role in society is often characterized as ineffective and apathetic.

Young people in political life – Spectators or actors? [22]

Despite the generally accepted image of young people as abstainers from elections and political life, many are involved in political events. Politically engaged young people from a variety of political and civil spheres use social networks every day for information exchange, mobilization and engagement in the political space. Since 2015, they have been on the front lines of the struggle for human rights and environmental protection, the fight against climate change, etc. They are the leaders of movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Climate Justice Movement or the March for Our Lives. Engaging young people in civic participation is only possible with new approaches and relevant methods. But even then, the question remains: Why aren't young people becoming more involved in politics? The fact that their needs are not met leads to a feeling of disinterest in the society in which they live. One of the factors of suspicion towards politics is the lack of influence of young people on political decision-making, while the vast majority believe that the political system in Serbia does not provide young people with the space to make decisions regarding the political and social agenda (Stojanović et al., 2023).

In Serbia, there is a widespread opinion that young people are not interested in participating in politics and that they are not interested in voting, while young people's own perception is that there is no place for them in politics. According to the 2022 population census, young people account for 15 % of the voting-age population. Questions frequently asked include: How interested are they in participating in the electoral process? Why is there a narrative about them having apolitical attitudes and a general inertness? Why don't they fight for better living conditions and a more orderly and just society?
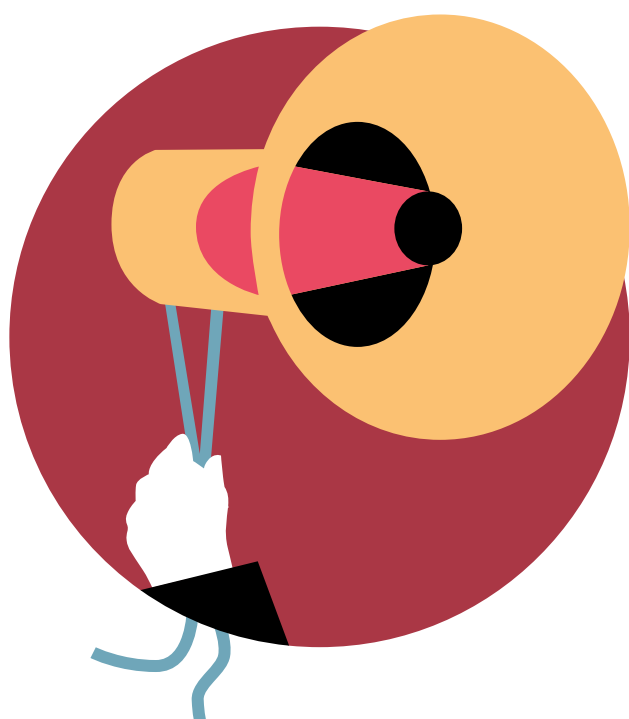
There is currently no young (defined as 19–29 years of age) minister in the Government of the Republic of Serbia, and there have only been two since 2001. In the most recent convocation of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, there were a total of 28 deputies under the age of 30, and young people composed 11.2 % of the total number of representatives (8.8 % by the end of the Assembly's mandate). When it comes to comprehensive engagement in public and political life, only 3 % of young people are engaged, mostly in local self-government units. Is this the result of the legal framework, which inhibits young people from actively participating in decision-making, or are young persons insufficiently capable of making important decisions? (Indeks participacije mladih, 2018).

Youth policy should be more stimulating for young people, recognizing their values and giving them the opportunity to participate in decision-making in those spheres that directly relate to their lives. KOMS's proposal to establish both a formal Youth Committee in the National Assembly (to review youth-related legislation and consult with Serbia's National Youth Council) and an informal Youth Caucus (bringing together young MPs, youth-focused legislators, and civil society representatives) remains unfulfilled. Likewise, no Youth Council has been established in the majority of local self-governments in Serbia, and some of them didin't establish youth clubs or implemented Local Action Plans for young people. Young people are not involved in decision-making processes, they feel excluded, and, as a result, first the intention to emigrate, and then the act of permanently leaving their place of residence, manifests (Lokalna omladinska politika u Republici Srbiji, 2021).

Recent examples of research focusing on young people, their rights, and their political participation have been conducted by the Belgrade Center for Human Rights in 2021, NAPOR in 2022, KOMS in 2023, etc.[23].

They have dealt with topics related to the position of young people, their habits, attitudes and problems they face, the protection and realization of the rights of certain sensitive groups of young people and the continuous monitoring of the realization of their human rights, the involvement of young people in the activities of the youth sector, and more.

Interest in politics was expressed by 18.6 % of respondents ("In general I am very interested"), while as many as 52.6 % of respondents declared that they were generally or not at all interested in politics. Compared to the recent study by KOMS in 2023, the share of young people interested in politics is twice as low (18.6 vs. 36.8 %), while disinterest in politics is twice as high (52.6 vs. 24.9 %). The male population is more interested in politics, predominantly in the 25–29 age group, followed by persons with higher education, as well as persons living in urban areas (Fig. 23), as was also indicated by the results of the previous FES study on young people in 2018 / 2019, as well as the KOMS research in 2023. When it comes to knowledge of the political situation, only 10.8 % of young people expressed that they knew a lot about politics; the same value as in the previous survey on young people in 2018 / 2019. Those demographic categories with a higher level of interest in politics were also more likely to state that they knew a lot about politics, which indicates that personal aspirations determine the desire to know about the political situation. Following on from the previous answers, as many as 62.2 % of respondents believe that their interests are not represented in national politics, stating that they are not represented at all or poorly represented. On the other hand, one in ten respondents believe that their interests are well represented. Although pre-election slogans of some political parties in Serbia have targeted the youth population, in reality there was a complete absence of representation of their interests. The oft-repeated observation remains valid: young people and their social issues are primarily discussed by those who neither belong to their demographic nor genuinely understand their struggles – frequently for political point-scoring.

Fig. 23   **Interest in politics by place of residence by youth in Serbia** (in %)
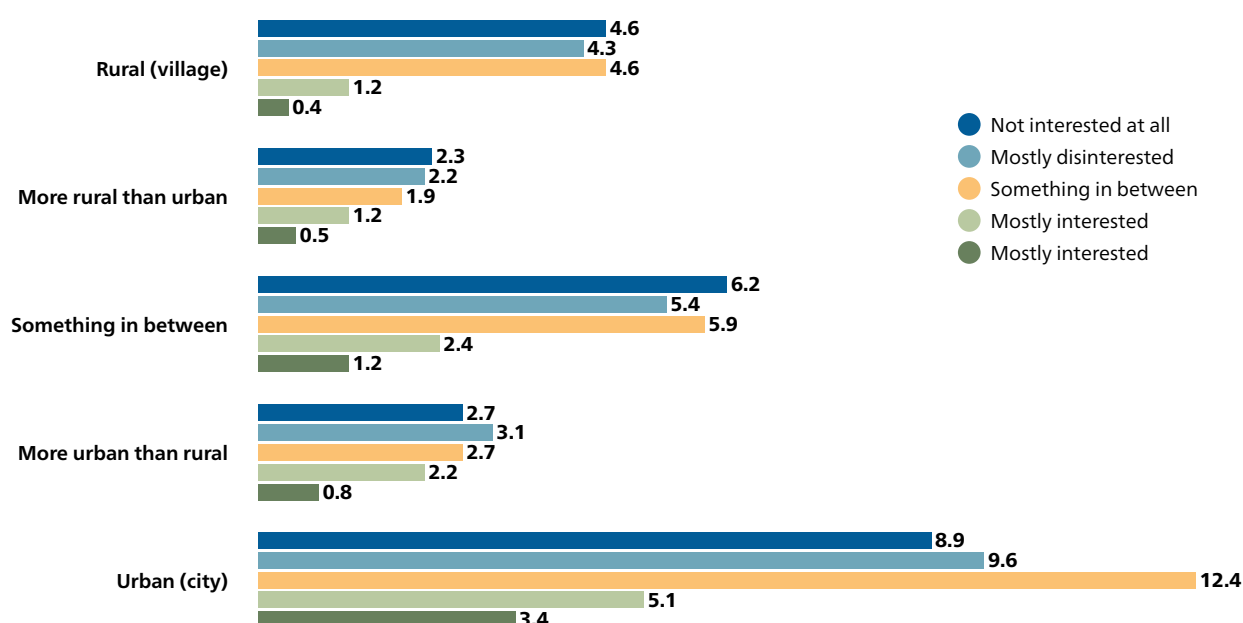
According to a study conducted by the UNDP, the political participation of young people in public life is in constant decline the world over.[24] Young generations are at risk of being excluded from decision-making processes, which poses a potential security risk in the future. Two-thirds of respondents would not take up political function, with the female population predominating this statistic, in a 7:3 ratio. Young people in the age group of 14–18 years believe themselves ready to assume political function at an earlier age than their older peers, and research has shown that the higher the level of education, the greater the readiness to make important decisions. A large number of young people answered that they did not know whether they would be willing to take up political function, and made it clear that they did not have a clear position, i.e. a significant contingent of young people had not thought about political engagement, with one explanation for this being found in the fact that in the entire region the average age of holders of the highest political positions is 54, which gives the message to young people that important political positions should be waited for.

They are furthermore of the opinion that political parties do not give young people a chance to demonstrate their knowledge of new technologies, social networks, running online campaigns, etc. These factors lead young people to prioritize debates about economic challenges and democratic governance over discussions of youth policy.

Political engagement can manifest itself in different ways. However, most respondents did not even engage in political life (more than 60 % of respondents did not participate in demonstrations, did not work in a political party in person or online, and did not boycott products for political or environmental reasons). According to the results of the survey, the participation of young people can most commonly be seen through signing a list of political demands and/or supporting an online petition (23.4 %), volunteering, or participating in the activities of civil society organizations. This question also queried respondents' intent to become politically engaged in the future, with the largest proportion of respondents indicating that they intended to engage in volunteering activities or participating in the activities of civil society organizations in the future (40.3 %).

The power of first-time voters

The generally accepted image of the young population as voters is that they do not vote, that they are disinterested in and resistant to politics. Compared to older generations, today's youth are less interested in conventional politics (Pattie et al., 2003), recording low levels of voter turnout and engagement in party politics across Europe. Unlike traditional political engagement, creative forms of engagement are on the rise, however, hinting at what may well be a participatory transformation (Barrett & Zani, 2015; Norris, 2004). If we are serious about increasing political participation among the generations that come of age in the 21st century, approaches to it must change.

However, when asked about voting in the last elections in Serbia (in this case, the elections held in December 2023), the sample of respondents across all age groups (i.e. 18–29 years) was almost equally divided between those who voted (51.3 %) and those that did not. We can divide the latter group into two categories: persons who had the right to vote (26.8 %) and those who did not (21.9 %). A slightly higher percentage of females turn out to vote in the elections, followed by those in the 25–29 age group, as well as those with higher education. The largest number of people cited illness or holidays as the reason for not going to the polls (28.3 %). Almost one in five respondents believes that their vote will not change anything, while 14.6 % of young people do not vote out of principle. Gender analysis reveals that males exhibit the highest percentage (21.5 %) of electoral skepticism, a perspective equally prevalent among 19–24-year-olds. It is interesting to note that this cohort includes people who were voting for the first time. The first vote is of great importance, since it can have a significant influence on formulating future voting habits. Yet in most countries, young and first-time voters remain less engaged than older voters.

Young people between East and West

According to the regular survey of public opinion carried out by the Ministry of European Integration in December 2022, support for Serbia's accession to EU membership amounted to 43 %, with the figure for those opposing membership standing at 32 %. In comparison, the data of this survey indicate that young people are more pessimistic when it comes to Serbia's European path, as 42.5 % believe that the country should not join the EU, while 41.9 % see Serbia as still being on the path to European integration. Sources for this decline in support for joining the EU can be seen in the length of the negotiation process, the situation with Kosovo and Metohija, the fear of loss of identity, etc. The greatest proportion of young people do not identify themselves as citizens of Europe (40.7 % do not identify at all or only slightly identify as such), while 27.4 % identify with European values. On the other hand, 76.8 % of respondents identify themselves as citizens of Serbia. When looking more closely at the gender structure, more males identify themselves as inhabitants of Europe, followed by the youngest respondents of the 14–18 age group and those with higher education.

Young people feel the greatest affinity for people from the area of the former SFR Yugoslavia (36.7 %), followed by the residents of the Russian Federation (23.5 %). Those feeling a connection with EU residents are extremely low, amounting to only 3.1 %. It is interesting that every fifth respondent mentions a connection with all the nations of the world, with this feeling being more strongly expressed among females. On the other hand, twice as many women feel a connection with the inhabitants of the Russian Federation (Fig. 24).

Fig. 24   **Feelings of connection with foreign nations among young people in Serbia** (in %)
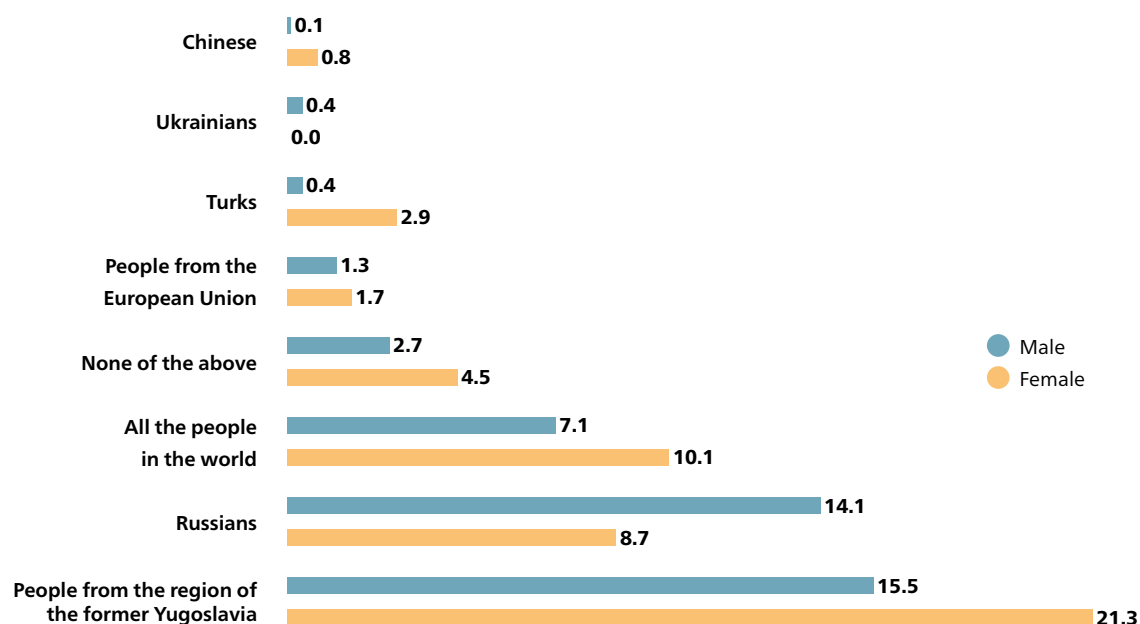
Furthermore, 58.2 % believe that the state should not accept immigrants, while every third respondent believes that only those of Serb ethnicity should live in Serbia. They also believe that only a person who has Serb blood can be a real Serb, and 44 % of respondents state that they are proud citizens of Serbia. The share of respondents who agree that immigrants who want to live in the country should accept the country's customs and values amounts to 18 %. Such attitudes are far more common among males than females, followed by respondents aged 14–18.

When it comes to the relationship between Kosovo and Metohija and Serbia, the largest proportion of respondents believe that this territory is and will remain part of Serbia (48 %), with this being equal among males and females, as well as across all age groups and all levels of education. Followig this, 22.7 % of respondents agree with the statement that Kosovo and Metohija should be part of Serbia, meaning that more than 70 % of the young people surveyed see Kosovo and Metohija as an integral part of Serbia in the future.

According to the respondents, the biggest problems that Serbia will face (Fig. 25) in the coming decade are: corruption (60.2 %), emigration of the labour force (60.1 %), and unemployment (56.8 %). A significant percentage of young people in Serbia do not think that depopulation, robotization and transformation of employment, the weakening of democracy or terrorism will represent significant challenges in the future. It is interesting that the respondents do not see immigration or climate change as worries for the future, either, something completely contrary to the attitudes of European residents who see these two phenomena as the main challenges of society (Democracy Perception Index, 2024). However, the opinion of young people in Serbia that reducing immigration should be a key priority of governments is in full agreement with that of many Europeans.

Fig. 25   **The biggest problems Serbia will be faced with in the following decade according to young people** (in %)

	Yes	No
Qualified workforce leaving the country	60.5	39.5
Corruption	59.6	40.4
Quality of public services (healthcare, education)	57.5	42.5
Unemployment	57.5	42.5
Inequality	44.9	55.1
Immigration	37.6	62.4
Climate change	33.7	66.3
Weakening of religious and traditional values	33.5	66.5
Demographic decline	28.5	71.5
Robotization and transformation of employment	23.5	76.5
Weakening of democracy	20.7	79.3
Terrorism	18.9	81.1
I don't know	6.4	93.6

Youth activism – because we want to be part of the solution, not just observers! [25]

Youth activism represents the social engagement of young people around a common idea, networking together in order to implement certain project ideas with the aim of improving the quality of life, acquiring competences, solving relevant issues, and generally contributing to society both in local communities and at the state level.

Political activism of young people on the social and political level is evidenced by membership of numerous non-governmental organizations, as well as smaller movements, informal associations and student parliaments. In spite of this, 53 % of our respondents are not members of any organization or association (Fig. 26). The largest percentage are members of a sports association or youth organization (9 %), followed by various humanitarian organizations (6.2 %), or of some other form of organization that was not mentioned in the survey (5.3 %). The remainder – less than 5 % – belong to organizations for animal welfare, environmental protection, etc. The female population is more likely to be engaged in youth organizations, as well as artistic, educational, humanitarian and similar organizations.

Fig. 26   **Membership of organizations among young people in Serbia** (in %)

Yes   No

Organization	Yes	No
I am not an active member of any organization	53.1	46.9
Youth organizations	9.3	90.7
Sports or recreational organizations (hiking, scouting groups, etc.)	8.8	91.2
Humanitarian organizations	6.4	93.6
Artistic, educational or similar organizations	5.3	94.7
None of the listed organzations	5.1	94.9
Animal protection organizations	4.5	95.5
Student parliament	4.4	95.6
Environmental protection organizations	3.7	96.3
Organizations within the church and other religious communities	3.2	96.8
Political parties	2.7	97.3
Supporter groups for sports clubs		98.4
Non-governmental organizations		98.4
Feminist organizations		98.8
Informal groups in the region you live in		98.9

The male population is more represented among sports associations and fan groups of sports clubs. It should be emphasised that the basis of youth activism is volunteering, which should be accessible to everyone, regardless of origin, social, economic or any other status, and in spite of any limitations (e.g. educational, geographical, health-related). Creating and promoting opportunities for young people to volunteer in ways that are available, valued and supported will result in increased active participation of young people in society, and build their skills for better employment and quality of life, which will, in turn, further strengthen the empowerment of young people in Serbia.[26]

Through active participation in any form of activism, young people would thus contribute to decision-making important for their future and improving their position in society. The experiences of many countries have shown that, without activism and participation in social life, young people become 'invisible'; a marginalized component of society with its needs neglected. Young people more readily leave such societies, with the onus being on society to retain them, by offering more opportunities to fulfil their needs. As Mladi istraživači (Young Researchers)[27] highlighted when discussing young people: Through activism and volunteerism, we create meaning and a new culture.

Main takeaways

1. The young people in this study indicate that they are mostly or not at all interested in politics (52.6 %), and one of the main reasons is that as many as 62.2 % of respondents believe that their interests are poorly or not at all represented in national politics.

2. Two-thirds of young people would not take up political function, with this answer being more common among females (in a 7:3 ratio). However, the higher the level of education, the greater the willingness to make important decisions.

3. Only a small percentage of young people in Serbia partake in any form of political involvement at present, with the largest number of respondents stating that they intend to engage in volunteer activities or activities of civil society organizations in the future (40.3 %).

4. Opinions are almost equally split on being for and against joining the EU. The greatest proportion of young people do not identify themselves as citizens of Europe, instead feeling the greatest connection with people from the area of the (former) SFR Yugoslavia (36.7 %), and then with the residents of the Russian Federation (23.5 %).

5. The biggest challenges that Serbia will face in the near future are identified by young people as corruption (60.2 %), emigration of the workforce from Serbia (60.1 %), and unemployment (56.8 %). It is interesting to note that young people in Serbia do not perceive climate change and migration to Europe as future worries, which is completely contrary to the attitudes of many Europeans, who see these two phenomena as the main challenges of society.

Conclusions

A thousand questions, but only a few answers

We asked young people numerous questions from the spheres of family, politics, education, employment and mobility in order to see what their expectations and values are, what is important to them, what is completely unimportant to them, how they perceive the present, and what their views are to the future. Have we gotten to know them better now that we've reached the end of the study? Or is the conclusion that we draw from everything that we are merely opening up new questions: For us, for them, and for society as a whole?

Just as in the poem by Arsen Dedić or Dušan Prelević, youth gave to and stole from our young ones. Young people are – in a certain sense – the losers of the transformation, but they are also winners if we look at various processes in modern society, such as the development of modern technology: young people today are more mobile, they have more chances to connect with each other, and greater opportunity to act. As we pointed out in the introduction, Generation Z is the most powerful generation, both economically and culturally, to have yet been born. Numerous opportunities are opening up to them that were unknown to young people just a few decades ago. Of course, all changes in society are essentially two-sided coins, and the technological and media revolution, on the one hand, opens up the digital space for young people in terms of labour market, connectivity and action, but also potentially compromises their personal security, especially in the context of electronic violence. Technological progress opens up the issue of greater inequality within society, and this study showed that young people who do not use the internet for educational purposes are more likely to live in rural areas.

In the introduction, we mentioned different approaches to young people and we unequivocally advocated for an optimistic one: we see young people as bearers of a desirable future, of positive values, and of innovation. While we remain optimistic, we need to take a look at some of the more worrying findings, and likewise encourage the public to jointly search for answers and root causes.

Why do more than half of young people state that they are not at all interested in politics? Why are 53 % of young people not members of any organization or association? Why do young people not trust institutions, why is how they look more important to them than being politically active? Before we all-too-easily draw the conclusion that our young people are not interested in anything and that they are apolitical, let us recall the following findings of the study: Our young people emphasise that it is of great importance to them that they be independent and take responsibility. They also highlight the fact that they feel excluded from political life. Therefore, the reasons for their 'disinterest' should be sought first of all in structural and organizational obstacles to the engagement of young people in politics rather than in their own apathy.

Furthermore, before drawing the conclusion that, in addition to politics, our young people are aren't interested in school and education either, let's take a look at the data from the study that shows that education and career are among the most highly valued items when we ask them what is personally important to them. They are more important than being rich, and even more important than having a family. Let us then ask the following questions that concern us: Why do two-thirds of young people believe that there is corruption in education? Why are 38.2 % of young people dissatisfied with education? The cohort most dissatisfied with education is not predominantly composed of young people who 'sit at the back of the class', who 'mess around' and 'waste everyone's time', but rather those undertaking master's and doctoral studies.

Before we apply a blanket description of 'apathetic' to or young people, let's take a look at the results of the study and the expressed optimism of the youth regarding their personal futures. Let's ask the question of why young people do not have that kind of optimism when it comes to the future of Serbian society, and only a third think that Serbian society will get better again. Data on migration and reasons for leaving may provide an answer. Why does every fifth respondent want to leave the country? The findings show that the main reasons are existential and economic in nature.

Among our young people, a confusion of values is evident in all spheres, from family, family planning and decisions on choosing a partner, to politics, attitudes towards democracy and towards minorities. Certain answers point to the liberalization of young people's attitudes, but also to a sustenance of conservative values. In this context, we can once again ask with concern why young people are so bothered by having a member of the LGBT community as a neighbour? Why do 25.1 % of young people consider religious affiliation to be an important factor in choosing a partner?

Based on the findings of this study, our young people are by no means disinterested or apathetic, but they are clearly distrustful. Distrust is shown to be a constant characteristic of young people across all of the most recent studies (2015, 2018/2019), and a key obstacle to the development of a democratic society. It must also be reiterated that trust is a two-way street, the result of past interactions, and the expectations we have toward and from the other. It is fair to say that the expectations of our young people have not been met for many years. In a scenario of great distrust towards institutions, the role of the family is strengthened, which, according to the results of this study, has proven a significant support for young people, from the housing situation to the situation of potential exposure to violence and seeking help with this.

However, what remains the key challenge in the future is the activation of the obvious potential of young people as bearers of the main values of a desirable future. In order to facilitate this, we need to identify the obstacles on that 'path', not only as obstacles per se, but by framing them in a wider social context, and especially in the context of the responsibilities of various actors, primarily the institutions that exist within our society. Continuous work on restoring trust in society's institutions will turn young people from observers into actors, allowing them perceive their own actions in society as purposeful, instead of futile. Oh, "youth, hold your course for a moment" ("mladosti, daj stani na čas"), there are many challenges that are not easy to answer!

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Endnotes

1   The Law on Youth from 2011 and 2022 defines young persons in the Republic of Serbia as those from the age of 15 to the age of 30 (Sl. glasnik RS, no. 50/2011 & 116/2022, According to the United Nations, youthhood is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood. As a result, young people are more fluid as a demographic cohort than other age groups. However, years of life represent the easiest way to define this group, especially when it comes to education and employment, because 'youth' often means a person who is of the age where they leave compulsory education and find their first job (Andjić & Rakin, 2020).

2   Youth and migration: an overview, 2020.

3   What young people want – Dashboard.

4   The UNESCO Youth Programme, UN Youth Strategy 2022, World Youth Report, 2018.

5   Data taken from the website
    → nadanasnjidan.net/godina/1995

6   → urbancityradio.org/the-prodigy-beograd-1995-koncert-koji-je-promenio-srbiju-video (accessed 11.6.2024)

7   Artist Ana Đurđić Konstrakta has, more recently, popularized such criticisms of consumer society, with the quoted issues being included in her song In corpore sano, an entry at the 2023 Eurovision song contest.

8   → Youth_and_migration_final_online.pdf

9   → Youth_and_migration_final_online.pdf

10 For an elaboration of this, see: (Bešić, 2011:122)

11 → rsf.org/en/country/serbia (datum pristupa 1.6.2024)

12 More than half of our respondents, when asked how much time they spend following politics or current events across a range of media, answered that they do not spend any time or less than an hour.

13 It is important to emphasise that security as defined by the UN and its agencies implies a broader meaning: protection and promotion of basic rights and freedoms, respect for social justice, long-term investment in sustainable development, etc.

14 Therefore, we can rightfully question whether our respondents understood this set of questions, bearing in mind the large number of undecided responses in the assessment of almost every attitude.

15 When we talk about rights, young people believe that the poor (81.9 percent) and young people (61.8 percent) are groups that have too few rights.

16 Among the items listed were the following: corruption, social injustice, excessive numbers of immigrants and refugees, increased poverty in society, pollution and climate change, war in the region/world, terrorist attacks, losing your job, suffering from a serious illness, being a victim of physical violence.

17 The items listed differ slightly compared to the questionnaire from the 2018 survey: being a victim of physical violence, being a victim of sexual violence (including rape), being robbed, becoming seriously ill, losing your job, a terrorist attacks, pollution and climate change, too many immigrants and refugees, a global pandemic, being a victim of domestic violence, war, a poor healthcare system, negative effects of artificial intelligence, being without a decent pension, housing problems.

18 It is often not possible to delineate precise boundaries between different forms of violence. We classified the threat of physical violence here as emotional/psychological violence, because it is expressed verbally, although it is often closer to physical violence because the harm threatened is physical or material (Popadić, 2005:44).

19 Bezbednosti mladih: smanjenje rizika kroz podizanje svesti – nalazi iz istraživanja i preporuke (2023), Nasilni ekstremizam i mladi: od dezinformacije do radikalizacije (2023), Alternativni izveštaja o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji – 2023, DeSHAME.

20 We took the data for this age group, because the next one for which the results are presented in the Report is between the ages of 24 and 35, and our sample does not include people older than 29.

21 For more information, see: (Dragišić Labaš, 2015).

22 This title is borrowed from an article in the week-
    ly newspaper Vreme, authored by Darko Mršević,
    20.9.2023. Gledaoci ili akteri – Vreme.

23 BCLJP, Izveštaj o ljudskim pravima mladih u Republici
    Srbiji u 2021. godini; NAPOR, Mladi u Srbiji – participaci-
    ja: mogućnost i prepreke, 2022. Alternativni izveštaj
    Krovne organizacije mladih Srbije (KOMS).

24 Političko učešće mladih mora da preovlada | OSCE.

25 Institut za razvoj mladih KULT.

26 Volontiranje i umreženost za bolji razvoj mladih |
    UNICEF Srbija.

27 MIS Home – Mladi Istraživači Srbije.

Figures

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