

Bulgaria

*Optimism for the Self, Pessimism for Society:
Bulgaria's Youth Facing Times of Insecurity*

2024










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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 Bulgaria were surveyed along with youth in other Southeastern Europe and Central Eastern Europe countries.

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Executive Summary

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation Youth Study in South-Eastern Europe is a large-scale regional initiative that allows the life course transitions of young people from different perspectives to be traced. In 2024, the third wave of this research was realised with the participation of Bulgaria, after two previous waves, carried out with similar indicators in 2014 and 2018. This creates the opportunity to compare the trends in the development of young Bulgarian generations as well as their predecessors back through the years, as well as with their peers in neighbouring countries. The time of the research itself coincides with a series of crises that have been rife the world, Europe and Bulgaria. The consequences of an unprecedented pandemic, economic and financial turmoil, wars raging in Ukraine and the Middle East, migration flows, and permanent political instability in Bulgaria create a general context of uncertainty, within whose framework it is particularly important to situate the problems and challenges facing the new citizens of the country.

The report presented here interprets data from an empirical sociological survey that was carried out by the IPSOS agency online in the period February 9th – March 25th, 2024. The Computer Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) method used was adapted to ensure representativeness of the Bulgarian population between 14 and 29 years by gender, age, region and education. The volume of the sample realised is 750 effective interviews.

The analysis of the data collected gives reasons to conclude that today's Bulgarian youth are more educated than their parents' generation. At the same time, the research found low levels of satisfaction with the quality of the education acquired (21%) and high perceptions of corruption in the education system (57%). The majority of respondents consider completing a higher education important (56%), but not the investment of time in educational preparation. Educational mobility is not widespread and does not arouse interest.

The problems of education are more prominent because of the impression of inconsistency with the labour market. Practically half (48%) of working young Bulgarians declare that they do not work in their specialty, with their proportion being higher than the average for the region and many times more compared to 2018. From the data, it can be assumed that it is not only about detachment of the educational system from the needs of the labour market, but also for the orientation of young people towards faster and more profitable work where there is such. As a factor for finding a job, expert skills are indicated in first place, but their proportion (51%) does not speak of a mass belief that one's own competence is the only condition for full-fledged employment.

In comparison with the previous wave of research, a significant increase in intentions to emigrate is evident. Only 26% of young people declare that they do not intend to emigrate, compared to as many as 61% in 2018. This fact is alarming and can be explained in the general crisis situation in the country, but also in the desire to more effectively benefit from opportunities accumulated in Bulgaria. Again, the number of highly qualified young people is growing in the structure of potential emigrants. It should be noted, however, that a large number of those planning to emigrate do not have clear plans, nor have they taken steps in this direction.

The trend towards relatively good relations between young people and their parents is maintained. As before, leaving the parental home is often postponed, though not only for convenience, but also for financial inevitability. 40 % of respondents living with their parents declared that they would live alone if financial conditions allowed (compared with 28 % in 2018). In their plans for the future, young people more often talk about an official marriage and a preference for two children, although both these ideas are rather contrary to the current practices.

In the minds of young Bulgarians, individual values prevail over collective ones. Human rights (24 %) and security (20 %) occupy leading positions. Equality (7 %) and democracy (5 %) lag behind among the top values. Young Bulgarians are increasingly tolerant of others, but sometimes willing to resign themselves to having illegal or unprestigious practices such as paying bribes or tax evasion. The feeling of anxiety is relatively high. The respondents' fears are most often existential – for life, for health, and for the future. In the leading places in their worries are the concerns of the health care system (47 %), of a possible war (44 %), and of climate change (42 %). The research shows that the personal optimism that is characteristic of a young person coexists with public pessimism. Young people are more optimistic about their own future than about the future of Bulgarian society.

An increase in interest in politics is observed (21 % compared with only 7 % in 2018). The readiness for political participation, however, is not high and betrays distrust towards institutionalised forms of action at the expense of individual ones (boycotts, petitions and volunteering). The decline in trust in all major institutions is palpable, including the EU, which receives trust levels of 24 %. This does not necessarily mean a surge of Euroscepticism, as much as an ebb of the conviction that the EU is currently offering the necessary solutions for Bulgaria. In their ideological self-identification Bulgarian youth are more right-wing (24 %) than left-wing (15 %). There is also a serious proportion of nearly a third of the respondents who profess a purely ethno-nationalist political vision, sometimes distinguishing the Bulgarian identity from that which is European.

In their attitudes towards current topics and problems, young people are rather cautious. There is a lack of certainty on issues such as climate change, as well as enthusiasm for artificial intelligence. Material considerations often dictate attitudes towards refugees or working from home. The widespread practice of gambling stands out (22 % say that all or most of their friends regularly do so). The search for alternatives to income from work is an alarming symptom that should be taken into account.

On the whole, the research data reveal tendencies towards more individualism and a greater sense of insecurity among today's young Bulgarians, but also towards independence and readiness for independent decisions. Pragmatism, conditioned by the social environment, is becoming a characteristic feature of the generation.

Key Facts



Most young Bulgarians (56%) consider it important to graduate from university, but only a fifth (21%) are satisfied with the quality of education in our country.


Almost half of working young people declare that they do not work in their area of specialty. In 6 years, this share has grown dramatically (from 18% to 48%) and is significantly higher than the average for the region. Only 51% of young people think that their expert skills will help them find a job.

As many as 74% are considering, more or less seriously, the idea of emigrating. Recent years have seen a further increase in intentions to emigrate.


Only 19% support the thesis that dictatorship can be a better form of government than democracy.




The majority of young people (70 %) believe that a better future awaits them. On the other hand, a minority of 29 % believe in a better future for Bulgarian society.



Young people most often indicate human rights (24 %), security (20 %) and economic well-being (14 %) as their leading value. The most serious concerns for young Bulgarians are related to poor health care in the country (47 %), the risks of war (44 %) and climate change (42 %).



There is a noticeable increase in interest in politics – from 7 % in 2018 to 21 % now. Right-wing self-identification (24 %) leads ahead of left-wing self-identification (15 %), with the majority (41 %) identifying themselves in the centre.



Only 15 % of young Bulgarians see themselves completely as Europeans, while 16 % do not consider themselves Europeans at all.

1 ■ Introduction

Over the last six decades, youth research in Bulgaria has been established as an important element of the development of national sociology. The interdisciplinary approaches tested in them build bridges to many other fields of knowledge, enabling the critical assessment of the politics, economy and culture of the country, and more generally, the prospects of society.

In 2024, Bulgaria has for the third time participated in the large-scale regional study of youth, organised and financed by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. After two successful waves of research conducted in 2014 and 2018, we have the opportunity to follow the dynamics of the changes in the attitudes of young people in Bulgaria according to comparable indicators and to situate these dynamics in a broad regional perspective and an adequate European context (Mitev, Kovacheva, 2014; Mitev et al., 2019).

The main goal of the analysis is to outline the sociological portrait of a young person in Bulgaria and to establish how this portrait has transformed within a decade loaded with violent changes and upheavals both for the world and Europe, and in particular for South-Eastern Europe and Bulgaria. The research is a chance to cover almost all the more important spheres of young people's lives, or in other words, what we collectively call "life course transitions" (Kovacheva, 2020) – education, the family, value orientations, work realisation, mobility, social and political attitudes, and expectations for the future.

The report we are presenting has been developed on the basis of an empirical national survey of young people in the age group of 14 to 29 years, carried out by the IPSOS agency in the period February-March 2024. Our ambition is to offer a clear, accurate and concise interpretation of the quantitative data that we consider in their interrelationship and in an attempt to constantly compare it with other data across time and space. Our intention is to identify trends, and not so much momentary manifestations. Our hope with this analysis is to continue the tradition of the pioneer of youth research in Bulgaria, Prof. Petar-Emil Mitev, who took a leading role in the previous two waves of research.

The text of the report is structured in chapters that correspond to the structure of the empirical study questionnaire. First, we will briefly comment on the methodology of the research, then we will focus on some basic demographic characteristics of the Bulgarian youth, after which we will proceed to the specific analysis on the topics of education; employment and mobility; family and plans for the future; value attitudes and perceptions; political attitudes and political participation; and specific topics and challenges for Bulgarian youth. Finally, we will endeavour to summarise the most important deductions and conclusions from the proposed analysis.

The report is the work of a team of academic researchers and experts from practice under the general scientific editorship of Associate Professor Boris Popivanov. The team also includes Dr. Parvan Simeonov, Dr. Liliya Elenkova, Stefan Georgiev, Yanitsa Petkova and Juliana Galyova. The authors would like to express their special gratitude to the Office Bulgaria of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and especially to Maria Petrova for the efficient organisation of the work, as well as to Elena Avramovska and Krisztina Stefán and Margarete Lengger from the Vienna office "Democracy of the Future" of the foundation for the good coordination and fruitful cooperation.

2. Methodology

The empirical research, which is the subject of analysis in this report, was conducted online using a special panel methodology by IPSOS in 12 countries of South-Eastern Europe in the period from February 9th to March 25th 2024. Between 500 and 1233 respondents 14–29 years of age were interviewed in each country. The Bulgarian sample consists of 750 respondents. The sample is representative of the age group of the youth in the country by gender, age, region and education.

The method used (Computer Assisted Web Interviews – CAWI) exhibits certain disadvantages in principle. It targets respondents who have Internet access, who have previously registered with the agency's online panel, and who have shifted towards higher education. Quotas of underrepresented youth groups were therefore ensured, and after the fieldwork was completed, data were weighted to ensure that the data were representative.

The sample included 55.5% men and 44.3% women. A few of the respondents refused to provide information about their gender. The proportion of young Bulgarians who indicated a gender other than male/female is minimal.

The largest proportion of young people included in the sample have secondary education (60.6%), with the graduates interviewed amounting to a third of all who participated in the research. About 6% have primary or lower education.

The age structure of the sample is representative of the age distribution of the youth in the country. The distribution by type of settlement corresponds to the conditions for the country – with more young people living in cities and fewer in villages (Fig. 1).

The data interpretation approach is based on a multifactorial analysis of the obtained relative proportions in the answers to the questions, compared and clarified with the relative proportions of the answers distributed by key socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents: gender; age group; type of settlement; inhabited region of the country; education; standard of living; and family status.

Along with this, the analysis also groups the respondents on the basis of a segmentation of types developed and applied in the course of the study for the whole region of South-Eastern Europe.

Six different social segments with sustainable characteristics, attitudes and behaviour patterns are outlined, which give a clearer description of the characteristics of the youth population in the various countries of the region.

According to the analysis, there is no predominant type of youth in Bulgaria. The group of young people in our country seems diverse, stratified and heterogeneous. Several main types stand out.



Fig. 1 Structure of the sample of surveyed youth in Bulgaria (in %)

Gender	Male	55.5
	Female	44.3
	Other	0.1
	Refused to answer	0.1
Education	Primary or lower	5.9
	Secondary	60.6
	Higher	33.0
	No answer	0.5
Age	14–15	14.9
	16–19	21.3
	20–24	30.8
	25–29	33.0
Urban and rural population	Rural	7.8
	Rather rural	6.1
	Somewhere in the middle	13.5
	Rather urban	10.7
	Urban population	56.2
	Don't know	5.7

We can start with the segment of “conservative young women from Southeastern Europe” (Seg 1: Eastern European Young Conservative Women). There are women who define themselves more as religious. They are often married or with a desire to marry. Their priorities are family, financial stability and traditions. The group is associated with a rather expressed desire to work or study abroad, dictated by a desire to improve living conditions. The fears of this group are related to job security, access to health care and financial difficulties. Political views are rather right-wing, accompanied by a strong distrust in the institutions of political power.

Next is the group of “content minimalists” (Seg 2: Content Minimalists). This segment among the youth is characterised by a low level of education. They are often unemployed or looking for work. Their main aspirations gravitate around family, health and personal well-being. Getting married, having children, playing sports and maintaining a healthy lifestyle form the horizon of their intentions. Career ambitions and aspirations to move abroad seem less prominent. Rather, they trust institutions such as parliament, the government, the media, the army and the police, but are not supporters of serious political participation. Their focus falls on personal goals and not so much on change and progress in society.

Next comes the segment of “materially struggling youth with Materialist Aspirations” (Seg 3: Struggling Youth with Materialist Aspirations). These are mostly young people in the lower age group with low education, who experience financial difficulties. They have confidence in political parties and institutions and a desire to get involved in political processes, but they are critical of NATO and the EU, as well as democracy as a form of government. They do not have strongly expressed hierarchical values, nor a tendency to protect their own culture. Their main fears are related to uncertainty about the future. Their values are materialistic, and their aspirations rather aimed at improving their social status.

“Active Traditionalists” (Seg 4: Active Traditionalists) are mainly men rather in the upper age group of young people with higher education. A significant number of them are family members and/or parents. Their political views are rather right-wing and conservative, often with nationalist projections. Their trust in the institutions is weak, but they are politically active. The group is characterised by strongly expressed attitudes towards the protection of their own culture and a negative attitude towards the extension of the rights of people with different sexual orientations. Their concerns stem from perceptions of corruption, demographic crisis, lack of jobs, and immigration.

The segment of the “complex urban youth” (Seg 5: Complex Urban Youth) includes more often male adults, but rather in the younger age group with relatively low incomes, living in large urban areas. Low incomes put economic stability at the forefront for them. A significant number express a strong desire to travel or live abroad, which goes beyond the simple pursuit of economic well-being. Their pragmatism towards various questionable practices is clearly advocated. They have a strong opinion on political issues, demonstrating a high level of political knowledge and interest. They show a clear preference for traditional social hierarchies. Politically, they sometimes tend towards autocratic decisions.

The segment of “educated urban progressives” (Seg 6: Educated Urban Progressives) includes mostly highly educated young women living in a city environment, probably coming from families with a strong education and some financial stability. Education and career development are something of value for them. They believe that institutions should ensure the well-being of all and are concerned about problems such as the brain drain, quality of public services, demographic decline, corruption, inequality and the weakening of democracy. They have a strong sense of European identity. They prioritise independence and responsibility. They are often concerned about global issues such as climate change.

3 Basic demographic characteristics and trends

Demographic dynamics

According to data from the National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, as of 2023, the youth in the country (15–29 years) number 872,339 and are equal to 13.5% of the population of the country. In 2018, in the previous wave of the survey, the proportion of young people was 15.4% of the country's population. Four years earlier (2014), young people accounted for 17% of the population. Thus, the demographic collapse registered in the previous waves of the research is deepening in our country. The trends and figures are shown in Fig. 2 and Fig. 3.

The comparative analysis also shows that the proportion of youth in Bulgaria remains lower than the relative proportion of the youth population in the countries of the region, which vary between 22–23% (highest proportions registered in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina) and 15–16% (in countries such as Serbia and Croatia).

On average for the EU, the proportion of young people is 16.3% (in 2021) and has shrunk from 18.4% in 2010. Forecasts for the demographic picture of the Union outline a further deepening of this negative trend – the expected proportion of young people from the total population in the EU in 2025 is expected to reach 14.9%.



Bulgaria is part of the general trend of population aging in the EU, but it is distinguished by its drastic extent, especially within the framework of South-Eastern Europe. Countries such as Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro stand out among the countries with a relatively higher proportion of youth population, but even in them, no growth in the proportion of youth from the total population of the country has been registered in the last decade.

Socio-demographic distributions

The data collected within the framework of the present study enable us to identify the main demographic characteristics of the youth population in Bulgaria.

The distribution of young people by type of settlement is of interest. The dominant part of them live in larger cities (56.2%). This proportion is highest in the lowest age group, that of 14–18 year olds (67.2%), and this testifies to the continued rapid depopulation of villages and small towns in the country. The logically outlined trend is accompanied by a concentration of the population in the capital and large cities. Only 7.8% of the young people in the sample live in villages, where the proportion of those with low education is also significant – 13.4%. All this leads to concerns about the reproduction of the labour force, but above all about the future of rural areas in Bulgaria, where the decreasing number of young people corresponds to decreasing qualifications.

The majority of young Bulgarians (56%) live in big cities. Small settlements are also associated with lower education and more limited opportunities in life.

The economic situation of households is an important component of a young person's life. If the researcher were looking for objective figures, he could resort to the data from national statistics.

Fig. 2 Population and youth population of Bulgaria as of 31.12.2023

Source: National Statistical Institute

	Total	Men	Women
Total for the country	6,445,481	3,097,698	3,347,783
15–19 years of age	313,235	161,945	151,29
20–24 years of age	279,466	143,596	135,87
25–29 years of age	279,638	139,114	131,524
Total young people 15–29 years of age	872,339	444,655	418,684

In our case, however, the most important thing is the respondent's subjective assessment, which undoubtedly plays a key role in their attitude towards society and the world.

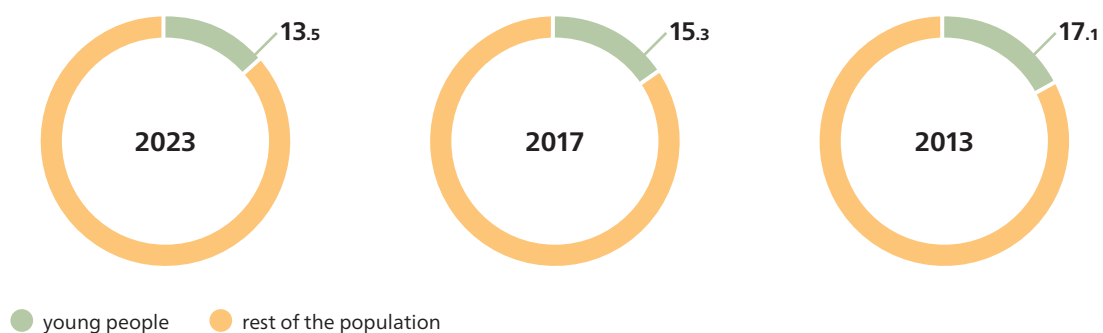
The largest proportion of young people in the sample (33.7%) actually defined themselves as "upper middle class", declaring that their household could afford expensive things, but not as expensive as a new car or new apartment. Another 19.7% rather subjectively find themselves in the "lower middle class" because they claim that they have no problem with providing food, clothes and shoes, but only with the more expensive things. The relationship between these proportions and the level of education obtained is obvious. 40.4% of young people with a higher education fall into the upper middle class, and 16.6% among the rich, or in other words among those who declare that they can buy everything they need for a good life. In terms of age distribution, 25–29-year-olds generally have a lower standard of living than lower age groups. We can assume that they are gradually separated from their parents into independent households and, at least initially, their financial picture is more uncertain. Two conclusions stand out.

Young people in Bulgaria tend to enjoy an average material standard, and education, despite all the criticisms and disappointments, is usually a predictor of a better economic situation.

Young Bulgarians most often (53%) define themselves as being in the categories of the middle class.

Parents' education is another indicator that opens up opportunities for a diachronic analysis of youth demographic trends. Traditionally, the mother's education is more important for the young person's life and educational trajectory. From the data in the study, it is clear that the mothers of the respondents most often have a secondary education (34.2%) or higher – bachelor's education (18.1%). The age structure of the youth sample itself turns out to be an important variable. Bachelors and masters, for example, are the mothers of 39.3% of 14–18-year-olds compared to only 24.6% of 25–29-year-olds. Without any doubt, the emergence of women from the patriarchal stereotype of less need for educational qualifications has been a fact for a long time. The higher level of education of the mothers of the youngest respondents speaks of the ever wider spread of higher education in Bulgaria in recent years.

Fig. 3 Proportion of young people 15–29 years of age within the population of Bulgaria (in %)



As will be seen later, education is becoming more and more accessible, but it is also valued less and less. Fathers, in turn, seem to have lower levels of education, but there we also see an increase when it comes to fathers of the youngest respondents.

The educational level of the families of young people is increasing more and more, with nearly 40 % of mothers of the youngest respondents having a university degree.

The segmentation adopted in the present study as an approach to typologising young people also shows interesting results. The largest segments in Bulgaria are “conservative young women” (23 %) and “financially disadvantaged youth” (22 %). They are followed by “active traditionalists” (21 %) and “complex urban youth” (18 %). The least represented are “educated urban progressives” (10 %) and “satisfied minimalists” (6 %).

The segmentation of young Bulgarians indicates wavering between tradition and progress.

The profile of a young person in this sense demonstrates wavering between tradition and progress and an orientation towards personal efforts to improve one’s material situation.

According to the distribution of the various segments among youth in Bulgaria, the youth in our country is more right-wing and conservative, but without reaching extremes. Trust in political institutions is low, participation in the political process is active among small communities of youth and more likely to be sporadic among the majority. Countries such as Croatia, North Macedonia and Serbia seem close to the Bulgarian picture. There is a significant difference in the distribution of segments shown by Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina – with relatively high proportions of “content minimalists” and “conservative young women”. Slovenia and Greece also clearly diverge from Bulgaria due to high proportions of “educated urban progressives”.

Main takeaways

- 1. The majority of young Bulgarians (56 %) live in big cities. Small settlements are also associated with lower education and more limited opportunities in life.**
- 2. Young Bulgarians most often define themselves in the categories of the middle class.**
- 3. The educational level of the families of young people is increasing more and more, with nearly 40 % of mothers of the youngest respondents having a university degree.**
- 4. The segmentation of young Bulgarians indicates wavering between tradition and progress.**

4. Young people and education

Education is one of the main approaches to achieving good levels of socialisation of young people in a given country through the acquisition of aggregate knowledge, skills, values, social beliefs, needs, habits and attitudes. Research shows that in recent years there have been systematic efforts in Bulgaria to implement a policy that brings formal education closer to the needs of the labour market and places special emphasis on the attitudes and assessments of young people themselves (Hristova 2022; Preshlenova 2016). At the same time, the data point to growing discrepancies between the educational qualifications of young generations and the system of employment (Milenkova & Kovacheva, 2020). It is clear from the works of analysis that the participation in educational and training practices of people in later youth is steadily decreasing, regardless of their socio-demographic characteristics, and the measures to limit the phenomenon of non-working and non-learning youth continue to be insufficiently effective (Atanassova & Borissova-Marinoва 2018; Pennoni & Bal-Domanska 2022). The present study enables us to specify the advantages and disadvantages of educational preparation through the eyes of the “users” themselves.



Attitude towards the educational system and education

The problem of corruption in the field of education deserves special attention. The research carried out shows that compared to 2018, the levels of perception of the importance of this problem are preserved, with a slight increase (Fig. 4). The low satisfaction and reported high levels of corruption among the respondents are grounds for critical assessments of the overall state of education in Bulgaria.

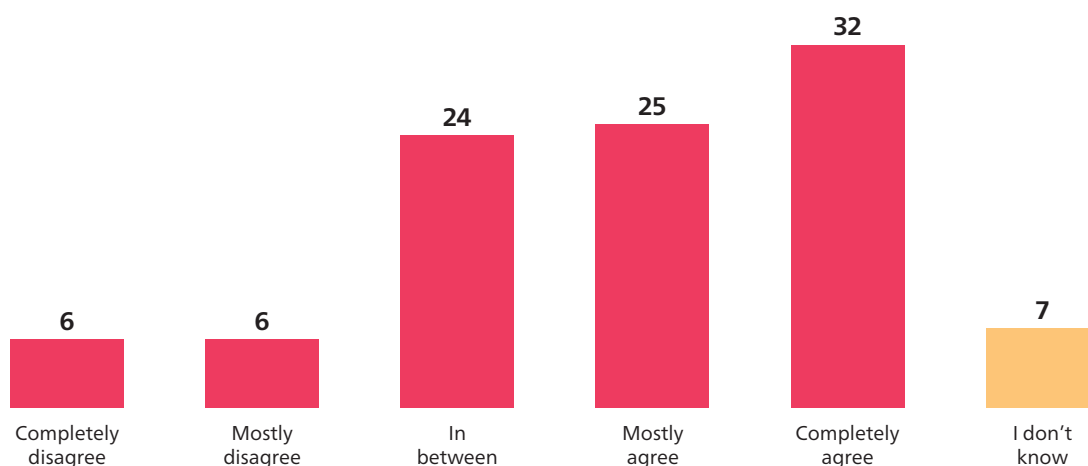
Over half (56 %) of young people accept the importance of education, but mostly on a declarative level. Low satisfaction with the quality of Bulgarian education and high suspicions of corruption dominate.

The problem of corruption is not only directly related to the attitudes of young people about the education they receive, but it can also directly influence the motivation for full participation in the educational process, and hence the quality of the results achieved.

Despite the critical remarks, the completion of higher education is important to the majority of young people surveyed. The aggregate levels of 59 % established in 2018 are maintained (Fig. 5). However, it could be assumed that the instrumental nature of higher education as a condition for high career positions plays a role here, and not only the evaluation of its qualities. Along with this, it is evident from the data that education is also perceived as an expression of status that could facilitate partner relations. Only 13 % of urban dwellers say that the level of their partner’s education is of no importance to them. In villages, this proportion is much lower (35.5 %), but this is also explained by the objective limitations in choosing a partner in small settlements.

Fig. 4 Perceptions among youth in Bulgaria about corruption in the education system (in %)

Do you agree that there are cases where grades and exams are 'bought' in institutes/universities in Bulgaria?



The bottom line is that the main demotivating factor for the full integration of young people into the education system is the low evaluation of its quality. Although the most serious proportions of answers fall into the middle categories, one should not underestimate the opinion of every third respondent that the quality of education is generally or to some degree unsatisfactory (Fig. 6).

It is a matter for concern that the awareness of dissatisfaction is growing among 25–29-year-olds (35%), who for the most part are outside the sphere of formal education and can critically evaluate the acquired knowledge and skills in practice. The most dissatisfied are university graduates (39%), whose qualifications are the most specialised, and the wealthiest (37%), who have had the widest possible access to educational services. Of course, one should assume the presence of unrealistic expectations in many cases. However, one cannot speak of an isolated problem, but of a key aspect of young people's life course transitions.

Youth mobility

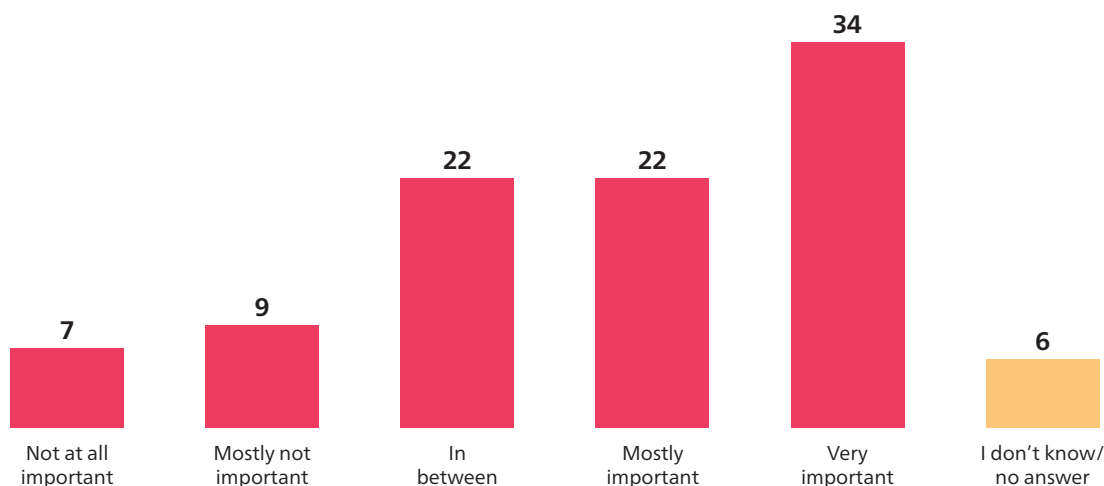
Creation and consolidation of a European education area is a commitment of EU member states, which is based on the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning. The functioning of the Erasmus+ Program and various other exchange tools should "open up" Bulgarian youth to new opportunities with undoubted added value for their qualification and self-realisation.

The question is how educational mobility policies manage to influence the attitudes and motivations of young people in the country. The data from the survey conducted give grounds for a critical view.

Educational mobility is poorly known and does not generate significant interest. It would appear that the overall idea of education is formalised and reduced to the mandatory elements of the educational process.

Fig. 5 **Importance of education among youth in Bulgaria (in %)**

To what extent is it important for you to have a higher education/graduate from university?



Over 90 % of respondents declare that they have no experience with educational mobility in the field of higher and secondary education. For over 85 %, the same applies in the field of professional education. Subjective intentions supplement objective facts. 72.8 % stated that they had no intention of taking advantage of opportunities to stay in another country for educational or training purposes. The values do not vary significantly according to the locality in which the respondents live, nor whether they can independently afford mobility or need support.

It can be said that it is not so much a question of geographical or material limitations as of a misunderstanding or ignorance of the benefits that a young person can have from mobility. The goals that the institutions set in these activities, such as increased sense of initiative, greater confidence in one's own potential, improvement of foreign language competences, increase of intercultural awareness, expansion of prospects for professional realisation, increased motivation to participate in various forms of training and etc., remain out of the consciousness of a large number of young people in the country.

Time for self-preparation

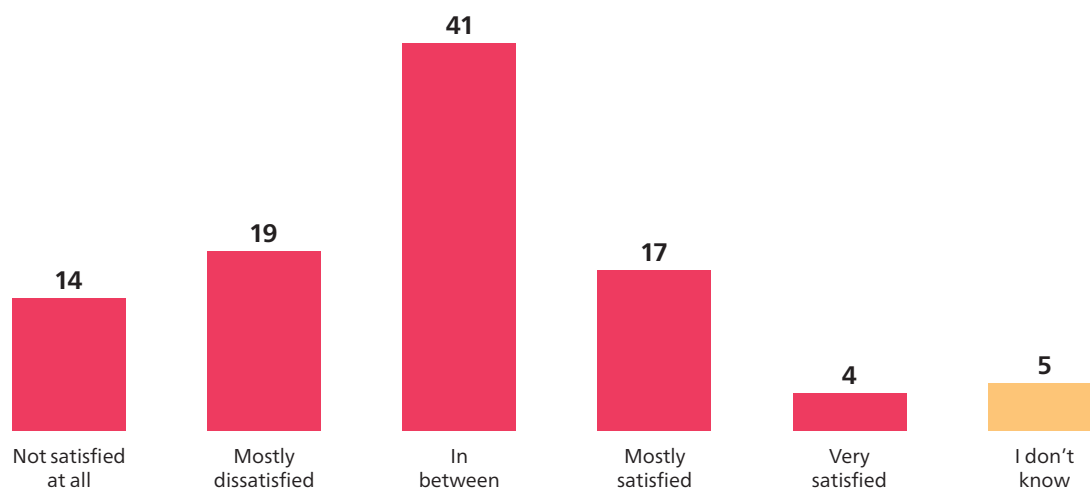
Education is not just a matter of a schedule of subjects to be covered. It is no less related to the independent work of the individual. This applies not only to those who are integrated into the formal education system, but also to all those who receive some type of informal education, who are trained to acquire a certain qualification or who seek for themselves some knowledge and seek to develop their skills.

About half (49%) of young people practically do not spend time on educational self-preparation. The data point to a widespread mistrust of young people in the pragmatic benefit of educational qualifications for their life course transitions.

An important indicator for reporting educational self-preparation is laid down in the research. It is about the approximate amount of time a person spends each day on activities related in some way to their education or training.

Fig. 6 **Satisfaction with the quality of education among youth in Bulgaria (in %)**

How satisfied are you generally with the quality of education in Bulgaria?



It immediately makes an impression that 26.6% of the respondents do not spend any time on this at all, and for another 22% the time allocated is less than half an hour a day. The demographic profiles of those who gave these answers suggest worrying trends. The two positions ("I don't spend any time at all" and "I spend up to half an hour") have respective values of 15.3% and 25% in the age group of 14–18 year olds, 39% and 33.4% for those living in villages, and 39.3% among young people with the lowest material standard. In the first case, the opinion of respondents who are mostly included in the education system as students in high schools or vocational schools is presented, and in the other two cases, the opinion of representatives of groups that should benefit the most from educational preparation to overcome the objective limitations of one's geographical or social environment.

A combination of factors may explain the data obtained. Some of them refer to the general attitudes towards the system and its supposed deficits. The perception of low quality of accessible education or other available forms of education certainly has an impact. Dropping out of the education system early often abruptly cuts off young people's connection to any practices of educational preparation. On the other hand, persistently negative economic prospects of the household and/or locality may lead to self-encapsulation. All that has been mentioned above really neither assumes nor motivates self-preparation.

Socio-economic explanations are not the only ones. Although relatively lower, the proportions of young people who spend no or almost no time on self-preparation and who come from big cities or wealthy families should not be underestimated. The age distribution also points to other problems. 40.2% of 25–29-year-olds, in turn, report that they do not spend any time on this activity. Perhaps this is where the understanding comes into play that education and qualifications are only related to school desk or university pew and do not signify an action for the whole of active life.

Internet culture, perceived to a limited extent as a substitute for educational effort, is probably exerting an increasing influence. The belief that all necessary knowledge can be acquired “ready-to-use” and is “one click away” is becoming more and more widespread.

In the end, we reach the conclusion of the relatively low value of educational opportunities. In such a context, education is something that is “given” by some institutions (schools, universities, and other structures), but does not guarantee (see Chapter 5) professional realisation in the specialty, and for this reason its pragmatic meaning is subject to doubt. Knowledge is either not perceived in a significant number of cases as a value in itself, requiring time to absorb and understand, but also to seek, or is considered isolated from the official institutional channels for its acquisition.

Main takeaways

- 1.** Over half (56 %) of young people accept the importance of education, but mostly on a declarative level. Low satisfaction with the quality of Bulgarian education and high suspicions of corruption dominate.
- 2.** Educational mobility is little-known and does not arouse significant interest. It would appear that the overall idea of education is formalised and reduced to the mandatory elements of the educational process.
- 3.** About half (49 %) of young people practically do not spend time on educational self-preparation. The data points to a widespread mistrust of young people in the pragmatic benefit of educational qualifications for their life course transitions.

5. Employment and mobility

From education to employment

The transitions of young people from school to employment constitute one of the most important components of the social integration of youth and have their effects on practically all spheres of society and the economy. In recent years, a number of studies concerning the Bulgarian situation have been published. The focus on barriers to full and effective youth employment is striking. The role of the grey economy, the dishonesty of some employers and the low wages of labour form expected explanations of this phenomenon, but now they are joined by the restrictions resulting from the economic structure of the inhabited area of the country. On this basis, a serious discrepancy between the educational qualification of young people and the profile of their employment has been established (Vutsova, Arabadzhieva, 2021; Krasteva, 2023). Regional imbalances are also emerging as a key factor for the relatively high proportions, compared to the EU average, of young people not in education or work (Caroleo et al., 2022).



The 2018 South-Eastern Europe Youth Survey revealed similar trends. Six years later, we have data from the new wave of research that allows us to refine and develop the conclusions drawn then.

The group of so-called NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training)¹ in 2024 amounts to 11.5% of the general population of young people in Bulgaria between the ages of 14 and 29. According to this indicator, the country is definitely not in the leading positions in the region of Southeast Europe, where the average value is around 19.6%. This value is not to be underestimated, however. It should serve as a serious warning about existing deficits in state policy, both in terms of education and the labour market.

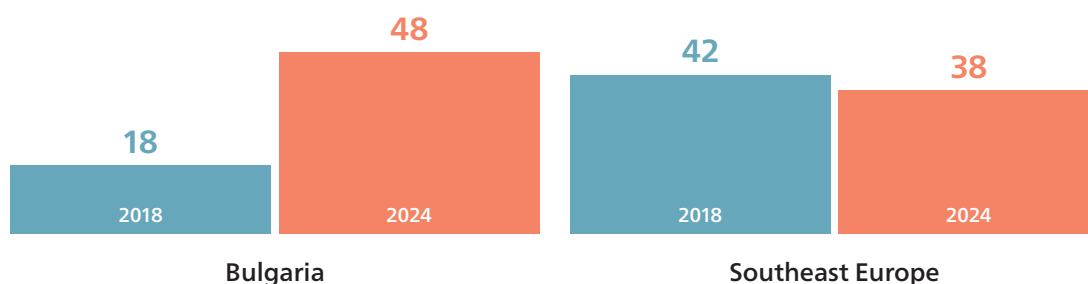
If we look at the differentiation by type of settlement, we will notice that the proportion of NEETs in large Bulgarian cities reaches 13.8%, more than the average value. It seems paradoxical that it is precisely in the big cities, where the opportunities to acquire a diverse educational qualification and to find a diverse job are greatest, that young people not in school and not in the economy are relatively the highest number. The initial hypothesis would be that these are ghettos with compact ethnic minority populations, where early school leaving and mass unemployment are widespread. However, the data also point to another explanation, related to the extremely low educational and work motivation and the overall social alienation of a considerable number of young people.

A significantly more important problem for Bulgaria, and for the whole region, is the discrepancy between education and employment, in other words – the impressive proportions of young people who work in a different field than the one for which they acquired a qualification during their studies (Fig. 7).

The trend for growth in this group is quite visible and even startling. Only 6 years ago, Bulgaria was the best in South-Eastern Europe according to this indicator, while today it has not only lost its relative advantage, but has also registered almost a 2.5-fold increase.

Fig. 7 **Proportion of young people declaring they do not work in their field of study (in %)**

Do you currently work in a job within your profession (one that you have been trained/educated for)?



We are bearing in mind the dynamic changes in the Bulgarian economy, we also take into account the upheavals and transformations that have occurred as a consequence of the Covid-19 crisis. Nevertheless, other explanations are needed. Data demographics in 2024 present additional fields of analysis.

In recent years, the gap between educational qualification and professional employment of young people has been growing. In just 6 years, the proportion of those who do not work in their field of study has increased threefold – from 18 % to 48 %.

The proportion of young people in villages who do not work in their specialty reaches 66.3%. It is permissible to conclude that the strategies and policies for the accelerated development of these areas are not producing a convincing result. In many cases, in the villages, only work in what is available can be done, no matter what education a young person has received. The continuing depopulation of the smallest settlements is a factor that inevitably shrinks the supply of work. Examples to the contrary are limited and unevenly distributed across the country. It is also worrying that in the older age cohorts the proportions of young people not working in their specialty are increasing instead of decreasing.

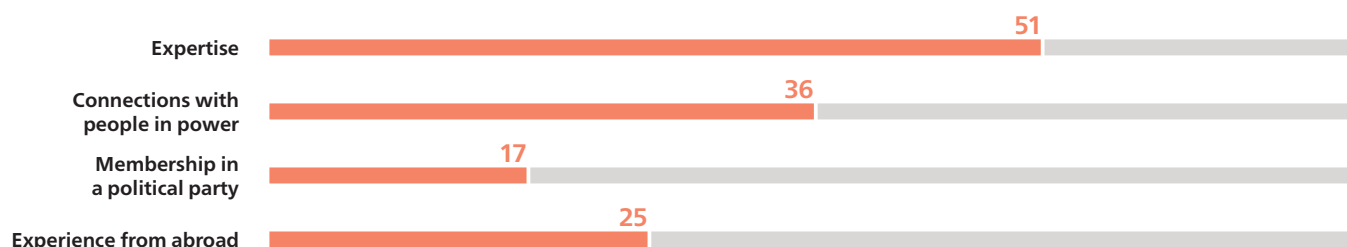
It is assumed that over the years, more opportunities open up for a young person to exercise their qualifications than during the first contact with the labour market. The data point in the opposite direction. The number of unemployed in their specialty make up 43% in the age group 14–18 years and this figure grows consistently as proportions up to 52.6% in the age group 25–29 years.

We should treat the numbers with some caution, because the research is about declarative attitudes. Respondents under the age of 18, for obvious reasons, have a more limited set of educational competences, and therefore fewer opportunities to diverge from the profession for which they have been learning. It is probably even more difficult for some of them to assess exactly what such a discrepancy would consist of. Despite the considerations made, the trend should be noted.

One might also expect that respondents with a higher standard of living would have a greater chance of working in their specialty than those with a lower standard. Better financial opportunities, as a rule, also lead to higher social capital, transferable to the labour market as well. Differences between the two most extreme groups in terms of their material standard do indeed exist,² but they are not large. 48.5% of the poorest respondents and 43.8% of the richest work in a profession that does not correspond to their qualifications.

Fig. 8 Importance of factors among youth in Bulgaria for finding jobs (in %)

In your opinion, how important are the following factors when it comes to finding a job for a young person in your country? Combined responses of 'important' and 'very important'



The geographical perspective provides nuances but does not refute the above observation. The same indicator has values of 49.2% for the economically most under-developed Northwestern region of Bulgaria and 46.4% for the most developed Southwestern region, in which the capital Sofia is also located. Again, the difference is not palpable.

It appears that the orientation towards employment in many cases does not express an understanding of career development, applying and deepening the competences of the education acquired, but of a more profitable job or a job that allows for faster realisation. In general, we can outline two factors for the growing distance between education and occupation: structural limitations of the labour market (which can be mainly viewed through the prism of increasing regional imbalances) and material aspirations (which emphasise the short-term horizon of higher income, to the extent in which it is attainable here and now).

In many cases, the job search is oriented towards higher incomes and faster realisation, not so much towards a consistent career and professional development.

It is also interesting to follow how young people envisage the conditions for finding a job in the country. With the help of these data, we can understand the subjective importance that respondents attribute to various factors of the domain. And since one of these factors is undoubtedly the qualifications, or expertise, of the job applicant, we can also glean more information about (de) motivation when looking for employment corresponding to the competences acquired (Fig. 8).

Having a qualification maintains first place among all the potential factors in finding a job. This is undoubtedly the good news. The bad news is that the downward trend for this indicator compared to the situation in 2018 is drastic: from 87% then, today just over half of respondents identify their own skills as important or very important in their personal transition to the labour market. A decline is also observed in terms of educational and work experience from foreign countries. In its entirety, the research data do not show that education abroad and education in Bulgaria are seen as a kind of quality alternatives. It would be more accurate to conclude that this reduces the importance of education altogether as a condition for a good job. The dominance of the thesis that a person will be evaluated according to his skills proven by a diploma is indeed fragile.

The comparative view of the whole region of South-Eastern Europe shows a lower assessment of the Bulgarian youth for the political factors for work realisation compared to the majority of the rest of their age group. While on average for the region 49.3% of young people find relations with those in power to be important or very important, and 35.3% think the same about membership in a political party, in Bulgaria the values are considerably lower, although not negligible. In the Bulgarian context, the socio-economic situation of the respondent is important for both factors. Among young people with the lowest material standard, 45.4% consider political connections important or very important (compared to 36% on average for young people), and 24.5% emphasise the importance of party affiliation (compared to 16.7% on average for young people).

Regional differences complement social ones. In the more under-developed regions of the country, they are more inclined to accept the mediating functions of politics. This can probably be explained by popular characteristics of the Bulgarian democratic process. In poorer regions and in the smaller settlements of the country, it often happens that the local government, directly or through the distribution of public contracts, creates employment, but also forms a fusion between the local political elites and local business. Therefore, it is logical that many young people appreciate this conjuncture as an unavoidable condition when looking for work.

However, facts also lead to longer-term perceptions. If we look at the lowest age group among the youth population studied (the cohort in the range of 14–18 years), we find that in it the positive answers about the importance of political connections and party membership are the most numerous in terms of relative proportions and the number gradually decreases with age towards the highest group (25–29 year olds). It is clear that the oldest young people have had the most exposure to the labour market and have the most realistic assessment of its functioning, while for the youngest it is much more about perception than personal experience. For this reason, the researcher must pay close attention to the expectations of 14–18 year olds.

They are formed within the influence of some environment (family, friends, media or some other) and most probably reflect in a more general way the attitude towards the political system, democracy and the future of the country.

The notion of work fulfillment is associated with spontaneity and short-termism, rather than a long-term investment in one's own skills and social capital.

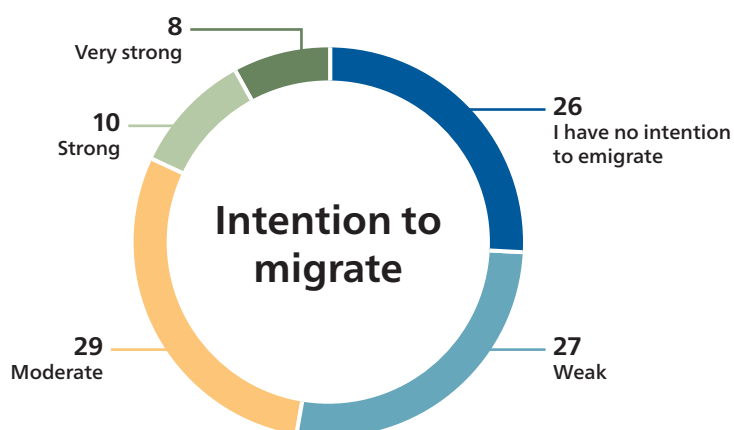
In summary, the analysis of the four factors mentioned leads towards what the research does not reveal – random events or sudden opportunities as a prerequisite for finding a job. Although very different, the four factors mentioned embody factual conditions that can be rationally calculated. It could be assumed that for a considerable number of the representatives of today's young generations in Bulgaria, the idea of realisation of work is filtered through an expectation of spontaneity, and not of the assimilation of social capital accumulated.

From Bulgaria to other countries

Since the very beginning of the democratic changes in Bulgaria, mass emigration to Western countries has been considered in public discourse as one of the risks for the demographic future of the country. The observation that mostly young people and people of an active age, as well as the fact that it is mostly highly educated and qualified people who are leaving, raises further concerns.

In recent years, youth emigration has continued to be analysed in the context of the demographic crisis (Budjeva, 2020). Bulgaria's membership in the EU in 2007, but above all the final opening of the labour markets of the member states to Bulgarian citizens in 2014, is a factor that facilitates migration processes, but at the same time gives them a new quality.

Fig. 9 Intention to migrate among youth in Bulgaria (in %)



The motivation remains predominantly economic, related to the standard of living and higher incomes in the countries preferred for emigration, but a certain place is also occupied by the search for more social and legal security in countries different from Bulgaria (Kovacheva & Popivanov, 2021).

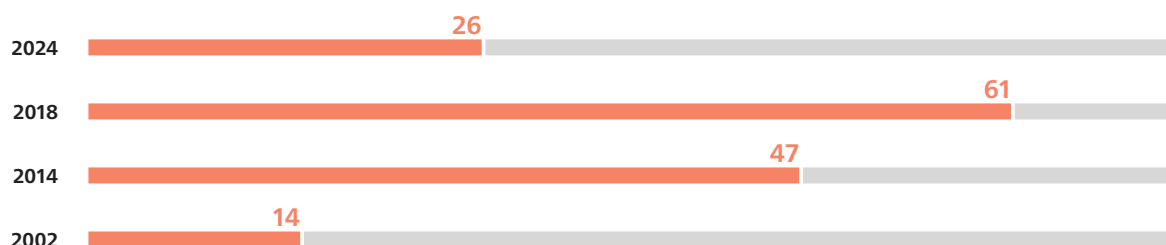
The new opportunities for mobility that are open to young Bulgarians are leading to changes in the very idea of emigration. It is no longer perceived so much as a final decision, forever separating the “life before” from the “life after”, but as a pragmatic and flexible choice that can be revised more than once in the future. Young emigrants leaving for other European countries often strengthen their Bulgarian and European identities at the same time (Kovacheva & Hristozova, 2019; Glorius, 2021). There is also a clear link between employment and migration. In many cases, migration is seen as the only option for the realisation of early school leavers and those who are low-skilled. It seems as if the structure of the migration flow from Bulgaria is becoming different, with an ever-increasing burden on the low-skilled and the poor. All this is developing against the background of a generally declining desire to emigrate among young people (Mitev et al., 2019; Kovacheva & Hristozova, 2022).

The present study reveals perhaps unexpected results, measured in a sharp growth in the intentions of high proportions of highly-skilled prospective migrants to emigrate and to return. This is reflected in the following table, expressing in percentage values how strong the desire of the respondents to emigrate is (Fig. 9).

The comparative analysis of data from the region indicates that the most drastic growth in intentions to migrate compared to the previous wave of the survey in 2018 was reported in Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia. These are also the newest member states of the EU. It is reasonable to assume that it is the greater opportunities for mobility available to the citizens of these countries that encourage this trend. Sufficient time has passed since joining the EU (in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania it has been more than 15 years) for the initial euphoric expectations of quick economic prosperity to subside. Taken together, the two factors (facilitated exit to other countries and frustration with slow progress at home) probably account for part of the explanation for the new impulse to emigrate. The dynamics of the proportions of those young people who do not intend to leave their homeland shows a tendency to approach the values of the times before membership in the European Union (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10 **Refusal to emigrate among youth in Bulgaria (in %)**

Share of 'I do not intend to migrate'-answers when asked 'How strong is your desire to move to another country for more than six months?'



The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents in the survey enable us to specify the profiles of both potential migrants and those who have no desire to emigrate. For example, refusal to emigrate is more noticeably represented in villages (32.2%) than in large cities (24.7%). The tradition of small settlements probably exerts its influence.

The economic perspective also plays an undoubted role. In the most developed regions of the country, reluctance to emigrate is the most widespread, evidently because young people from these places see more chances for realisation in the regions in which they live (27.1% of respondents in the South-Western region do not plan to emigrate and 33.7% in South Central). The trend is the opposite in the under-developed North-Western and North-Eastern regions, where the proportion of those who have firmly decided to stay in the country is noticeably smaller (respectively 18% and 14.6%).

Only 26% of young people do not intend to emigrate. Along with emigration plans, the leading position of highly qualified young Bulgarians in the structure of potential emigrants is on the return.

It would be hasty, however, to conclude that only the poorest tend to seek fulfillment in other countries.

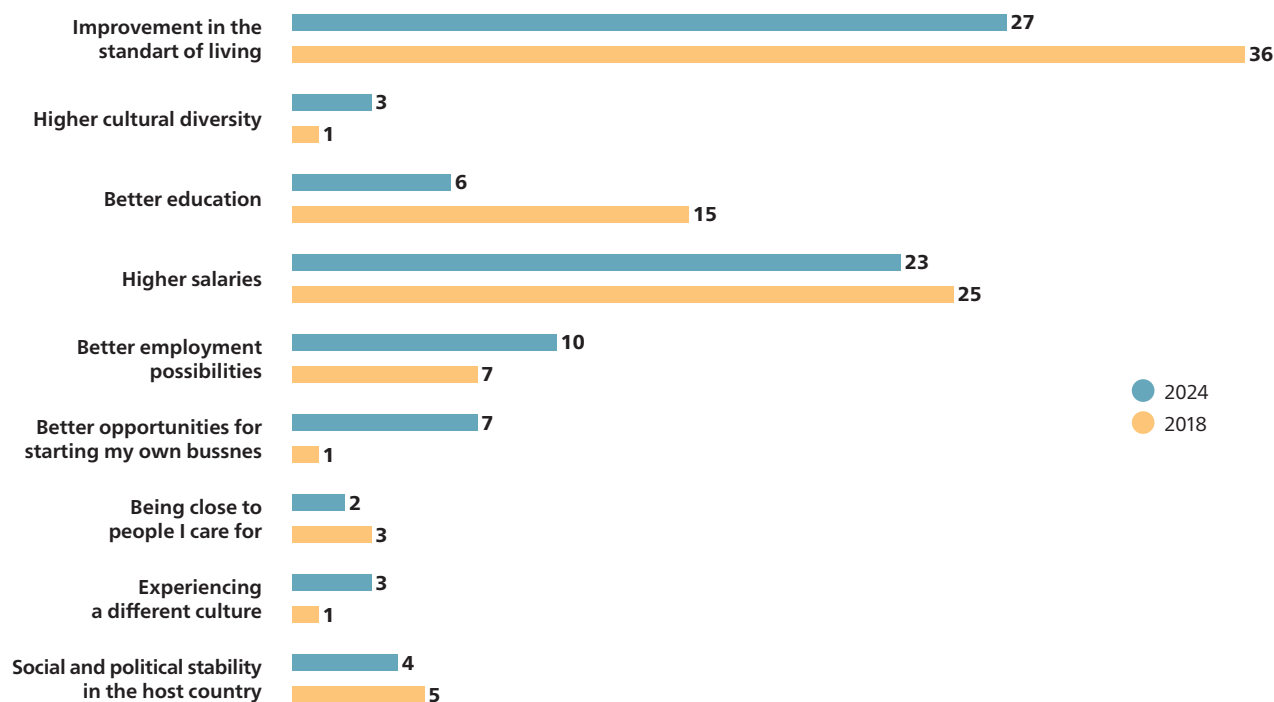
The data show that the desire to leave characterises rather the young people of the middle class, those who maintain a certain standard, but are far from affluent, and who at the same time are most exposed to the processes of crisis and economic twists. Among those unwilling to emigrate are only 20% of young Bulgarians with average opportunities, and in parallel, 31.6% of the poorest and 32.3% of the richest. We can assume that for the poorest the process of emigration seems too complicated and resource-intensive, while for the richest it is not so necessary for their own well-being.

The above reasoning is based on the presumption that for the majority of young Bulgarians, emigration provides them with a chance, economically. The research data confirm it (Fig. 11).

The comparison between the leading motivations for emigration in 2018 and 2024 establishes a relative stabilisation of attitudes, with a clear leading position of economic incentives (standard of living and income). However, the differences should not be underestimated. In the present study, the indicators "better standard of living" and "better education" show a decline as reasons for emigration. They were compensated by the growth of values for "more easily finding a job" and "better opportunity to start a business". These four fluctuations have a common basis in the tendency towards individualisation and more pragmatism in the life course transitions of young people in Bulgaria.

Fig. 11 **Main reasons for emigration for youth in Bulgaria (in %)**

For those wanting to emigrate, what is the main reason for which you would move to another country?



It is not so much the general conditions of life or educational growth (assuming long-termism and integration) that define the personal perspective desired by many, as the immediate scenarios of a quick entry into a job, high salary and one’s own business (emphasising an individualistic notion of success).

Over 80 % of those wishing to emigrate do not have clear plans and preparations. A pragmatic view of emigration as a possible and temporary rather than a single and permanent path to the future is being formed.

The desire to emigrate can be further verified and qualified with the help of three other survey questions dealing with the time of departure, the projected length of stay abroad and the actions taken so far for this purpose.

Even the main question – about the intention to emigrate – suggests that in many cases it is perceived simply as an undefined idea. Only 17.9 % of respondents defined their desire to leave the country as “strong” or “very strong”. In parallel with this, when asked when they plan to move abroad, a significant number of them answered “after 2 to 5 years” (20.8 %) or that they could not decide (28.3 %). The other possible options show smaller proportions than these two.

The lack of specificity comes to the fore. Attitudes regarding the preferred period of stay abroad perhaps surprisingly reveal the greatest interest in the option of returning to Bulgaria within one year (20.5 %). Conversely, only 11.8 % (compared with an average for South-East Europe of 18.8 %) imagine they will leave forever.

Viewed through the prism of the demographic characteristics of those planning to emigrate, the numbers of those envisaging leaving forever account for 18.3% of those living in villages and 6.9% of those living in medium-sized cities, as well as 28.8% of the poorest and 6.5% of young people with moderate wealth. The understanding that the prospect of a better life can only be found outside Bulgaria is most strongly advocated among the most disadvantaged young people, probably as expected, but it has the weakest distribution not among the most affluent, but among the group with a slightly lower standard. The idea that moving forever to a more developed country than Bulgaria is a natural extension of the good opportunities in Bulgaria characterises the young people from the wealthiest families to a higher degree.

The analysis of the steps taken for leaving the country clearly suggests that for the vast majority of young potential emigrants, emigration either does not require preparation, or that preparation can be postponed for a convenient moment. Over 80% of those planning to emigrate have not done anything – they have neither contacted Bulgarian institutions abroad, nor foreign universities, nor potential employers, nor relatives and acquaintances. Still, the relatively highest proportion of those who have made contacts with their relatives or friends abroad (19.7%) is noteworthy. This is testimony not only to the large number and wide distribution of the Bulgarian diaspora abroad, but also to a preference for informal channels for information and orientation.

Taken as a whole, the data commented on demonstrate that a high desire for emigration among young Bulgarians usually does not correspond to clear plans. The perceived ease with which one can immigrate to another EU member state leads to ease and flexibility in decisions.

Main takeaways

- 1.** In recent years, the gap between educational qualifications and professional employment of young people has been growing. Young people in Bulgaria are increasingly not working in their field of study. In just 6 years, the proportion of those who do not work in their field of study has increased threefold – from 18 to 48%.
- 2.** The search for work is in many cases oriented towards higher incomes and faster realisation, not so much towards a consistent career and professional development.
- 3.** The notion of work fulfillment is related to spontaneity and short-termism, rather than a long-term investment in one's own skills and social capital.
- 4.** Only 26% of young people do not intend to emigrate. Together with plans to emigrate, the leading position of highly qualified young Bulgarians in the structure of potential emigrants is also on the return.
- 5.** The desire to emigrate does not correspond to any clear plans and preliminary preparation. A pragmatic view of emigration as a tool in a young person's life course transition is formed, combined with other possible tools.
- 6.** Over 80% of those wishing to emigrate do not have clear plans and preparations. A pragmatic view of emigration as a possible and temporary rather than a single and permanent path to the future is being formed.

6 Family and plans for the future

The transition from the generalised notion of home to “one’s own” home is a structural marker in the study of young people. Family and housing transitions are one of the essential problems of youth. It is accepted that in southern Europe, including Bulgaria, they are postponed to a greater extent.³ This is part of a more general trend of lengthening, complicating and individualising youth transitions in the Western world, which also includes our country (Kovacheva, 2020) and fits as an essential part of the problematic of what in the Western context is called “emerging adulthood” or “young adulthood” (Konstam, 2007, Arnett, 2011⁴).

Intergenerational dialogue is a particularly important research focus at the family level. The family environment is a regular field of interest in recent studies in Bulgaria, together with marriage and fertility issues (Kolcheva, 2023; Stoenchev, 2023; Ilieva, Berdarov, 2021; Kineva, 2021; Moraliiska-Nikolova, 2020; Kukov, 2020).

The present study adds some of its own touches to the themes of home, parents, family and children in a young person’s way of thinking.

Observations in this field specify the previous research experience and contextualise Bulgarian trends in the general picture of South-Eastern Europe, but at the same time gain additional meaning against the background of the demographic situation in Bulgaria, social inequalities, ghettoisation and differences in the development of the regions. These problems in their totality affect chances in life and opportunities for mobility in life.

Reconciliations between generations in the family environment

Both in 2014, and in 2018, and now, in the studies of young people⁵ in Bulgaria conducted with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the advantage of answers testifying to a good understanding with parents is visible. Now this proportion exceeds 90%. The picture is almost repeated in the three most recent research waves within a decade, albeit with some nuances in the internal proportion between “We get along very well” and “We get along well, although we sometimes have differences of opinion” – now and ten years ago these proportions are almost the same, while in 2018 understanding seemed more pronounced. The situation in our country now looks almost identical to the general situation in the region.

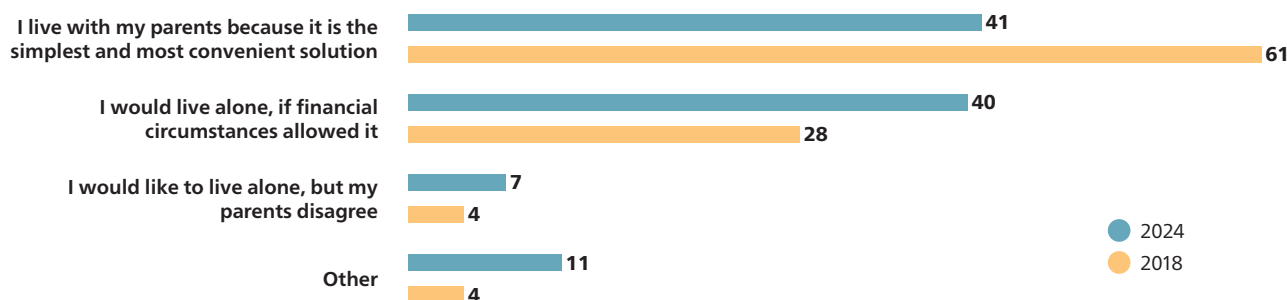
Among the youngest, the opinion structure seems to include more differences with parents, but in the older age groups it already shows a stronger emphasis on understanding to balance the two options in the upper age categories of young people. It seems that the more urban groups also show more nuances. It is likely that rural areas also demonstrate a more traditionalist attitude towards parents.

The group of those who answered that they live with their mother, father, grandparents, brothers and sisters, etc. prevails, as in previous years, over answers of the type “I live alone”, “I live with my children” and “I live with a partner”.



Fig. 12 Factors for staying in the parental home (in %)

For those living with their parents, which best describes your situation?



The most general comparison with the data from 2018 and from 2014, however, seems to indicate a certain increase in the weight of responses related to separation from parents and relatives. The latter is also confirmed by the dynamics compared to the previous wave in the proportions declaring that they are married or living in a form of cohabitation with a partner – with a slight preponderance of informal cohabitations both then and now. Continuing to live with the parental family is usually explained as being due to practical convenience and financial inevitability (Fig.12).

In 2018, and also in 2014, convenience was mentioned to a much higher degree. In the overall picture of South-Eastern Europe, the ratio is currently as follows: more than 50 % of those living with parents emphasise simple convenience, while less than a third talk about financial necessity. Thus, to a certain extent, our country is in a different situation in comparison with the region and against the background of previous years – a certain pragmatism seems to be replacing inertia.

Flying the nest of the parental home often turns out to be postponed in the agenda of the young. Along with the momentum of convenience (for 41%), a certain financial inevitability of this postponement is also clearly evident (for another 40 %).

Binding factors

Religious beliefs were found to be unimportant in 32.4 % of the responses regarding factors of compatibility with a marriage partner. The opinions of 18.7 % are at the other extreme on a five-point scale between “not at all important” (1) and “very important” (5). Curiously, in the more rural areas and lower income strata, religion does not show the pre-supposed higher importance, in fact it is the contrary. Six years ago the picture seemed to be reciprocal, and ten years ago the extremes were in equal proportions, with a certain supremacy on the scale of it being important.

In the aggregate structure of opinion across the region, the role of religious identity is now higher, to the point of almost equalising the weight of the extremes and full balance of the scale. Thus, Bulgarian youth shows a decreasing importance of religious belief – as an addition to the anyway more distanced attitude towards religion in Bulgaria against the background of South-Eastern Europe. It seems that among women we still observe a slightly more serious importance of religion.

A difference compared to previous waves of research is also noticeable in terms of the economic situation. Now, as with religion, it influences the choice of a marriage partner to a lesser extent. Judging by the answers: a few years ago 7 %⁶ found it unimportant, a decade ago was similar – 6 %, but now it is 23.3 %.

For women, the material situation is visibly more important in marriage, and this is probably also due to the inertial influence of the search for security. However, there is no clear demand for material orientation among the poorest, for example. In fact, the influence of material possessions is most visible in the highest income groups. In general, in the end, according to this indicator, Bulgaria does not contrast with the general background of the region.

In Bulgaria, parental approval has less weight as a factor compared to neighbouring countries. Moreover, if in 2018 the scale was decisively tipped towards this being important (and gradually cascading towards the weight of that importance), it is now balanced. In 2014, the share of those declaring serious importance was 22 %, i.e. close to that of the present time. It can be seen that in the last decade this criterion has undergone dynamic changes.

Now, the disadvantaged youth segment, for example, places parental approval on a significantly higher scale than the educated urban progressive segment. The older age groups expectedly forsake this factor to a higher degree. And again, more importance is evident in women. Rural areas here too, in fact, it turns out, do not demonstrate a more traditionalist attitude.

The lower importance of value orientations of a traditionalist type is confirmed. The attitude towards family values is central, but rather utilitarian.

Close to that in 2018, and also to that in 2014, remains the picture regarding the importance of educational level as a factor of attraction. Now 31 % are at the “very important” extreme. On the five-point scale, there are solid accumulations in both 4 and 3, and the accumulation in 1 – “not at all important” – is 13 %. With the raising of the educational level, its declared importance as a factor, respectively, in the group of educated, progressive-minded urban young people, the proportions of those insisting on the level of educational are significantly pronounced.

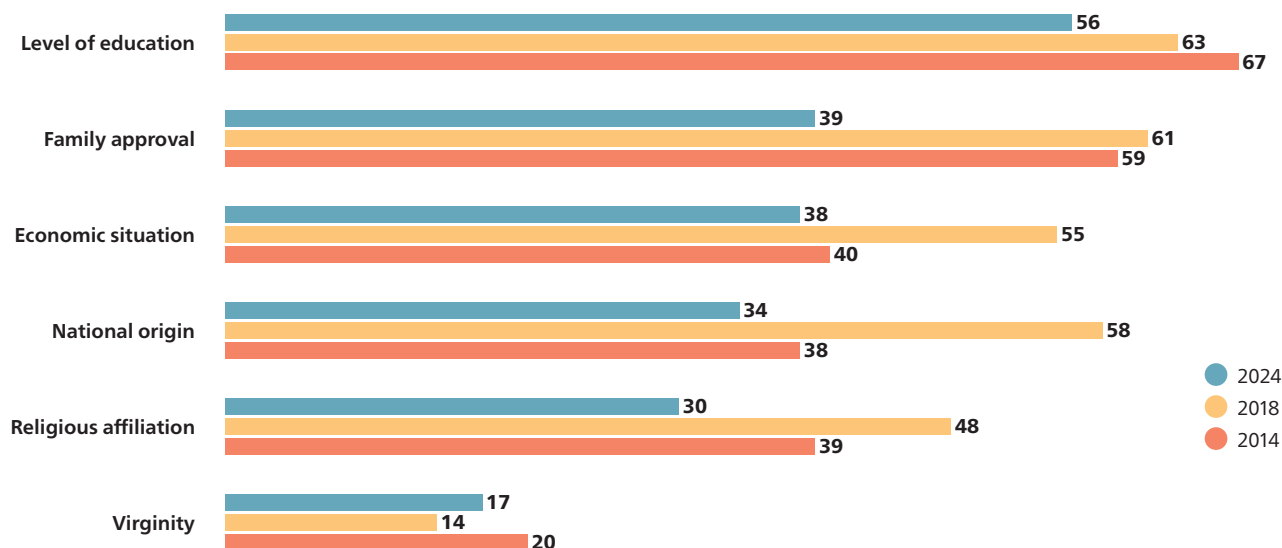
The lowest income groups and the young in rural areas are also the least fussy about the other person’s educational level.

When it comes to virginity before marriage as a factor in choosing a partner, 45.5 % fall into the “not at all important” extreme, while only 10.6 % are in the other extreme. And at this point, predictably, virginity before marriage turns out to be a minor factor. This was reported in both 2018 and 2014, and clearly one can conclude here that it is a persistent perception of anachronism. A similar conclusion, although not with such firmness, can be made about the general feeling among young people in the region as a whole. It appears that this factor influences the choice of women to an even lesser extent in the older age groups.

Nationality as a factor of connection in our country was also evaluated significantly differently in 2018. Then, for 6 % it was not important at all, the accumulations in the categories with increasing importance became higher and higher, until finally, in the category “very important” the number reached 32 %. Although not so pronounced, but in 2014, the importance of the factor also weighed. The two poles are now 29.9 % vs. 21.5 % in favour of “not at all important” vs. “very important”. However, it can be seen that a decade ago the accumulation in the “very important” option itself was 19 %, i.e. practically similar to the current one. This dynamics in the structure over the years are palpable. Therefore, it is interesting to see where Bulgaria is against the general background. It turns out that Bulgarian young people are rather representative of the overall profile of their region. Bulgaria is far from extremes. It also turns out that ethnicity is important especially in the segment of the so-called “content minimalists”. At the other extreme are the educated urban circles. Those living in rural areas are again the least fussy. It seems to show that the lowest income and rural areas show a lower degree of consistency of positions declared in general. It is possible to assume the effects of marginalisation and ghettoisation, the manifestations of which we can expect especially in Roma communities.

Fig. 13 **Important factors for choosing a partner among youth in Bulgaria (in %)**

How important are the following factors to you when choosing a partner?
 Combined responses of 'important' and 'very important'



And this is how the arrangement and its development over the years would look like, if the collected accumulations in the “very important” and “important” categories were taken as a criterion, i.e. the fifth and fourth steps in the scale (Fig. 13). Of course, certain differences in the context of asking the questions need to be taken into account.

When it comes down to it, if we try to rank the factors listed, the most serious weight with regard to importance is educational level, followed by family approval and material level, then nationality, after which is religion, and virginity remains an afterthought.

In 2024, the range of such indicators is actually narrowed to an even greater extent, compared to those of 2018 and compared to those of 2014, making comparability too conditional. The present study does not seek a comprehensive operationalisation of attraction between young people, but rather a measurement of the importance of pragmatic or hindering conditions. Emotional factors are, in a sense, brought out “before parentheses”.

We must make reservations, also, that in the answers about the educational level, declarativeness can be found, and in those about the material situation, lack of prestige, and that the wording does not always match completely. Despite everything, the conclusion seems to be that religious-traditionalist factors remain in the background, at the expense of intellect and utilitarian factors such as family and material environment. Ethnicity is also not irrelevant. Here too, as with the question of the factors for not leaving the parental home, in the end a certain pragmatism is apparent, without necessarily being mercantile.

So how important is marriage itself, then? 2018 showed a harmonious accumulation of responses from unimportant to very important, respectively, from 4 to 44 %. Now the certainty seems to be decreasing and the average options amass more accumulations, although again with a “shift” towards importance. For illustration, the negative extreme collects 10 % of the answers, and the positive one garners 21.6 %. Today, the importance of marriage remains most emphasised among the most conservative and female part of the youth population. Probably, the conditions in some of the ethnic groups, other than that which is Bulgarian, also exert an influence.

Thus, it can be concluded that there is a reduction in the binding force of marriage. However, the latter is only seemingly in contradiction with the above hypotheses about a possible "return of marriage". The situation corresponds to something recently described in the theoretical discussion – the "paradox of marriage" (Willoughby & James, 2017). The hypothesis is valid that it seems to reduce not so much the value as the fate of the decision to marry.

Children – Whether, when and how many

On a declarative level, having a child is very important for 50 % of the young people asked. However, the proportion does not approach the 80 % of the previous youth survey. And according to this criterion, naturally, the female and more traditionalist ones in the sample are more dedicated to this idea.

How do we add specifics to the picture? In this study, 13.4 % were reported to meet the criterion of no children and no idea of having children. Among them, it seems that more affluent groups, young people from urban strata, who, however, are not in the most promising in terms of education, respectively implementation and layers. It is possible that the problems or issues of the current professional development constitute a priority for them before that of having children. And the contrary: the segment of the progressive educated masses in cities shows more affinity for the importance of parenthood – close even to that of conservative women or traditionalists in general. Thus, to a certain extent, children turn out to be an attribute of the extreme options: either the most "closed" (traditional) groups, or the most "open" (already successful, or with a horizon open for parenting) groups.

Additional analysis of the income distribution shows that the lower income groups also have lower rates of rejecting the prospect of children. The research experience shows that it is precisely in these strata that a considerable number of young Roma are to be found. Of course, there is also a need for targeted research in this regard.

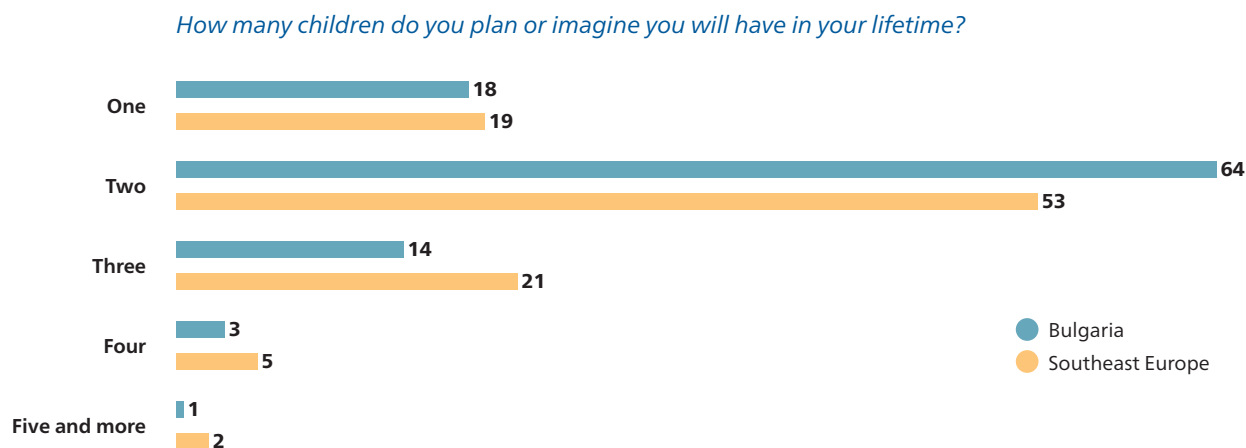
In nearly two-thirds of the cases, a preference for the two-child model is evident. It can be seen that the three-child model is not even seriously in the realm of what is desired and is only slightly more common among the groups mentioned with a lower standard of living.

Figure 14 shows in general the situation among young people in Bulgaria and the general picture for South-Eastern Europe. It can be seen that the country remains with an even more pronounced preference for a two-child formation against the background of the already pronounced preference in the region.

The two-child model is emerging as the automatic preference of young people in Bulgaria. This is indicated by 64 %, but it is debatable to what extent this will affect their practice or whether it will move towards the one-child model already established.

The ages of 26 and 30, and the pre-30 range as a whole, stand out as the most commonly cited suitable ages to have a child or the age when the first child was already born. After 30, the proportions decrease noticeably. In women, answers around and above all 25 and 26 years of age stand out. For men, the responses are to some extent "shifted" towards the upper age intervals, with the most visible accumulation at age 30, as well as at 26 to a certain extent.

Fig. 14 Number of children planned among youth in Bulgaria (in %)



The data correspond to a similar indicator in the European Social Survey conducted in 2018. The indicator there is related to the general idea rather than a personal experience or idea, but allows for the most general comparability. The study shows an increase in the “ideal” age for young women in Bulgaria between 2006 and 2018, correspondingly a shift from slightly under to slightly over 24 years of age, and for men – from 26 to over 26 years of age, noting that that the “ideal” and actual age for first becoming a parent naturally differ.

Against this background, we can admit an even more serious increase in the preferred parental age in Bulgaria now. However, according to the European Social Survey, Bulgaria still remains in one of the extreme places – with the lowest indicated ages in Europe.⁷

To further endeavour to verify the latter, we can filter out those who do not actually have children. So we are left with only an “ideal” variant. The most serious accumulations in women appear at the age of 27, and in men at the age of 30. And if one looks for the average values – as a possible comparison with the European Social Survey a few years ago, they are just below 26 for women and 27 for men respectively. We can outline the hypothesis of a real distancing of the image of children among the Bulgarian youth. It seems that even according to this criterion, the country still shows slightly lower ages against the background of the general data for the region.

Main takeaways

1. Flying the nest of the parental home often turns out to be postponed in the agenda of young people. Along with the momentum of convenience (for 41%), there is also a certain financial inevitability of this postponement (for another 40%).

2. The lower importance of value orientations of a traditionalist type is confirmed. The attitude towards family values is central, but rather utilitarian.

3. The two-child model is emerging as the automatic preference of young people in Bulgaria. This is indicated by 64%, but it is debatable to what extent this will affect their practice or whether it will move towards the one-child model already established.

7 General values, attitudes and perception

What is important for young Bulgarians?

The research conducted allows us to make an overview of the main values and attitudes of young people in Bulgaria, as they are shared on a declarative level, and to follow their dynamics both in time, in relation to previous waves of research, and in space, in relation to the data from the entire region of Southeastern Europe. Being independent (74% of answers in the “important” or “very important” categories) and taking responsibility for one’s actions (73%) are among the most important values of young Bulgarians. This is followed by the desire to have children (70%) and the realisation of a successful career (68%). It seems, then, that young Bulgarians are more inclined towards individualism (Humphrey, Bliuc, 2022), which is associated with an orientation towards independence, self-confidence, the freedom to express one’s goals, the pursuit of personal goals and often maintaining relationships when the cost does not exceed the benefit (Triandis, Gelfland, 1998). The above values are confirmed by the importance of looking good (63%), as well as eating healthy and playing sport (62%).



This contrasts with the relatively lower weight of collectivist values associated with shared identities, goals, and obligations in society. Among the important things for young Bulgarians are those related to recognition and self-affirmation in society, without this necessarily expressing materialism and consumerism. If, for example, having a successful career is positioned among the most important goals of young Bulgarians (68%), being rich (52%) or especially wearing branded clothes (20%) rank significantly lower in youth priorities. Also – creating a family (children) – 70% is in the top three most important categories for young Bulgarians, but getting married (46%) remains far behind in their priorities (see Chapter 6).

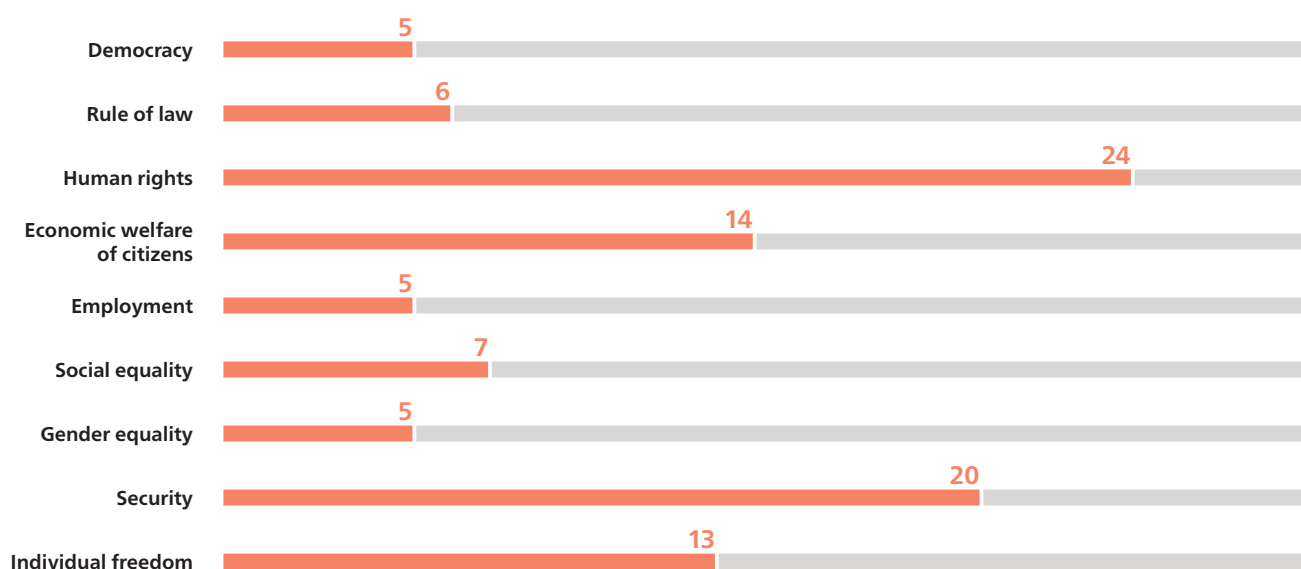
The research in 2018 fixed a different trend at first glance. The attitudes registered at that time speak of more socialisation and departure from hyper-individualism, characteristic of the years of the transition to democracy and the first decade of the 21st century.

Trends towards more individualism, anxiety and becoming closed in the narrow environment have characterised the value orientations of young Bulgarians in recent years. Protection of rights (24%) and security (20%) are in the leading places.

Then, as now, independence, personal responsibility for one’s actions, career development and children have held the leading positions among the value orientations of young Bulgarians. Sociability has a role, but it continues to affect rather the closest circle of respondents. Social recognition is also important, albeit not in relation to the creation of communities and the pursuit of common causes, but in relation to the self-affirmation of the individual as successful among the group.

Fig. 15 Important values among youth in Bulgaria (in %)

Which are the most important values (listed above) for you personally? Proportions of first mentions



This was reflected in the attitudes registered in 2018 and is also true now, related to a low degree of importance of values such as being active in politics (23%) or participating in civic initiatives or activities (30%). The values in question are not only ranked low, but also occupy the final places in the ranking of the young people surveyed.

Values of young people

Asked to name only three of the most important values related to democracy for them from a preset list, young Bulgarians most often define human rights as the most important, followed by security and free enterprise. These attitudes have undergone a noticeable change among the study population in recent years. In 2018, freedom definitely took first place in the ranking of values among young Bulgarians, followed by profit and democracy. Even four years earlier (in 2014) the ranking of first choice looked like this: freedom, democracy, market economy. Nearly two decades of comparative data show that freedom, however, has always been in the top 3 values for the youth of the country. Now individual freedoms have fallen to fourth place (Fig. 15).

The answers of young Bulgarians have been influenced by the social and political context in the country and the region in recent years. Freedom, democracy, the market economy and profit, until recently the dominant values among young people, speak of the ideals professed by them, the aspirations, the fears and, to some extent, the deficits they faced. Without having dropped out of the value scale of young people in Bulgaria, these priorities are giving way to the desire for security and the protection of human rights as leading values. The topics represent a key part not only of the national, but also of the European public agenda and reveal (besides an interesting transformation) an increasingly evident synchronisation of the attitudes of Bulgarian youth with those of their peers from other EU member states. At least on a declarative level, Bulgarian youth are more and more value-integrated with the young generations of Europe.

The shift in values from freedom and profit to the protection of rights and security suggests a profound change in the social environment and the new needs it provokes. These needs correspond to aspirations, fears and deficits experienced by young people in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic, economic instability, political upheavals in the country and within the EU, as well as military conflicts determine the conditions in which the new generation are maturing. The years of the pandemic, for example, exerted a significant influence on young people's perceptions of values, democracy and civic activity (Petkova, 2022).

Collective and somewhat more abstract values fade into the background without them disappearing. Democracy is the first value for 5% of young people.

The values registered of the indicators for the two leading values – “human rights” and “security” reveal the potential for division and tension between the different socio-demographic groups in the young population. Highly educated urban youth, those with better incomes and more favourable living conditions value security to a much lesser extent. In their personal ranking, entrepreneurship, individual freedoms and protection of rights occupy the leading places. Those with less education, more conservative communities, and young people from smaller settlements place much greater emphasis on security.

Acceptable and unacceptable

The question of the place of certain discussion practices in the minds of young Bulgarians deserves special attention (Fig. 16).

Tax evasion and giving/taking bribes seem least acceptable in the eyes of young people. These indicators show stable levels of negative attitudes over the years, despite some trend towards more tolerance. The two practices in 2018 were rejected by about two-thirds of the young people asked at the time.

About a tenth were willing to accept them. The change today has increased the “grey” area between acceptable and unacceptable and gives indications of a process of displacement of values that, at least at the declarative level, has had clear outlines in the last decade. However, it should not be forgotten that in both cases it is a question of criminal actions falling under the reach of the law.

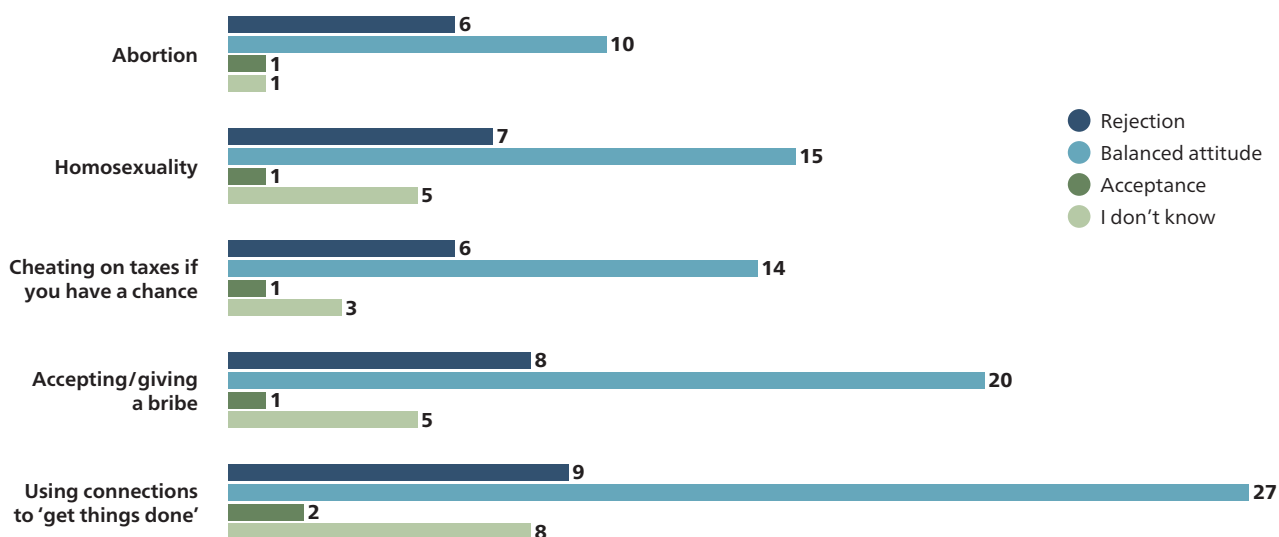
For this reason the research measures not only the real attitudes of the new generations in Bulgaria towards them, but also the degree of lack of prestige they enjoy among the respondents. Higher tolerance in the current wave of research is also reported for two other practices that are often controversial in society. Homosexuality, for example, often provokes social tensions, also visible in youth communities. In recent years, the topic has been confirmed in the Bulgarian agenda through the European debate, and although the division on the issue is not new for the national debate, it has gained additional topicality with the rise of conservative parties and ideologies and the popularisation of the debate on the rights of minorities with different sexual orientation in a counterbalance to “traditional” values. A dominant negative attitude towards homosexuality is reported now, as in 2018 and 2014. In the previous waves of the survey, however, the rejection was more categorical and characterised nearly half of the young people. Now the proportion of those rejecting it has decreased at the expense of more balanced and positive positions.

The growing individualism among young people is increasing tolerance of the behaviour of others, regardless of whether this behaviour is evaluated positively or negatively.

Attitudes toward abortion have also shifted, albeit minimally, toward greater tolerance. The theme is not as topical for the national debate as in some European countries and the USA, and Bulgarian youth rather accept abortions, but not with extremely positive attitudes.

Fig. 16 Justified behaviours among youth in Bulgaria (in %)

In your opinion, are the following behaviors/orientations always justified, never, or something in between?



Now virtually equal proportions accept, reject or are somewhere in the middle in their attitude to abortion. Of course, answers vary across segments of the youth group, and attitudes depend mostly on factors such as political beliefs, education and piety.

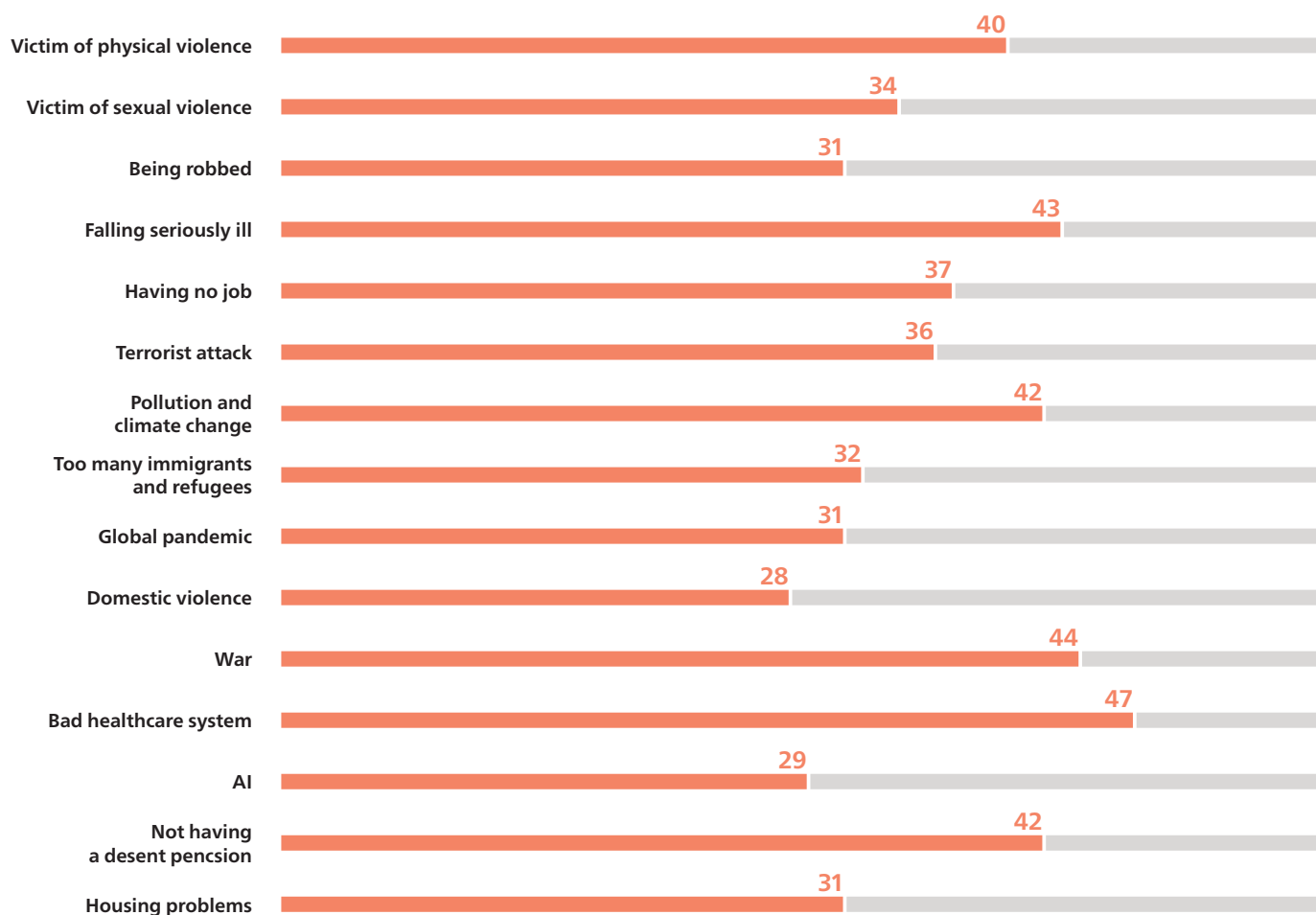
Something of interest is the topic of using “connections” to achieve various goals in life. In 2018, slightly more young Bulgarians were inclined to accept the use of “connections” – both for finding a job and for accessing services.⁸ The difference in the proportions of those who rejected this concept and those who adopted it was then minimal, but from the point of view of the results in 2024, the change in attitudes is significant. The proportion of young people who reject such practices now is 10 points more. Probably, the trends towards individualisation and self-affirmation have an impact on this indicator as well.

Fears and concerns

Fears are mostly related to personal health and well-being. Community-related issues are also a concern, but the focus “I” is most often that of concern. The main concerns of young people in our country can be conditionally grouped into the following categories: social fears – related to the social system, social inequalities, health care; fears of war – caused by the risks of potential armed conflicts; and environmental fears – provoked by climate change. After these come worries stemming from the dangers of becoming a victim of violence and terrorism, fears of migrants, and the risks of unemployment. Concerns about new technologies, and especially the rise of artificial intelligence, seem to have not yet reached the agenda for Bulgarian youth (Fig. 17).

Fig. 17 **Fears and concerns among youth in Bulgaria (in %)***To what extent are you frightened or concerned in relation to the following things?*

Share of 'a lot' responses



To the greatest extent, young Bulgarians are worried about the poor state of the health care system in our country. Probably for this reason, the fear of falling ill, although not so much expected at a young age, was indicated in third place in terms of frequency among those surveyed. Of course, the Covid-19 crisis in 2020–22, which exacerbated the importance of existing problems in the health care system and increased public anxiety, also had an effect on these attitudes.

Another element of the social system also raises serious concerns among young people – “insufficient pension”. Such concern is again surprising when it comes to youth research. However, this fear is probably not so much related to ideas about the distant future as concerns concentrated in the immediate present. Poverty, social inequalities, job insecurity, political instability and faltering social policy give rise to expectations of greater vulnerability in years when incomes will depend on the welfare system, and not so much on personal effort.

Fear of war, on the other hand, is naturally the second most frequently mentioned. Russia's invasion of Ukraine over the past two years and widespread discussions of possible escalation cannot escape the minds of young people, even when they are not heavily engaged in political issues. In 2018, for example, fewer than 20 % of all young people surveyed indicated that the possibility of military conflict worried them very much.

The topic of environmental pollution and climate change maintains a stable presence in the concerns of young people in our country, with a growing trend. Comparative studies show that this fear is typically a "youthful" one, and it increases among younger age groups (Petkova, 2023). In 2018, environmental concerns accounted for about 35 % of the responses "I worry a lot".

In the structure of young people's fears, existential fears related to health, life and the future occupy leading places. Anxiety is growing among the more active, more affluent, more progressive and more educated groups of young people.

It is noteworthy that the perceptions of fears are not evenly distributed among the different groups of the youth population. The most statistically significant are the differences in the responses by gender. Women's fears are much more pronounced on almost all issues, especially those related to violence or social topics. 43 % of women and 26 % of men declare that they are "very afraid" of becoming a victim of physical violence.

The ratio for the same answer was 51 % of women and 37 % of men when asked about the fear of serious illness; 43 % of women and 32 % of men regarding the lack of work; and 50 % of women and 39 % of men about the danger of war. Exceptions include concerns about climate change and refugees, where the proportions of men and women are similar.

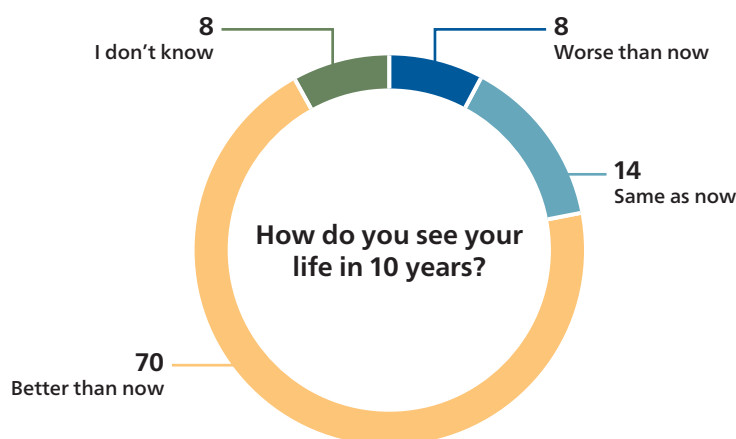
The dynamics of recent years have almost completely changed the picture of the fears of the youth in the country. The young generation in 2018 were mostly afraid of social injustice, corruption and poverty. Young people today are worried about their health (disease; the healthcare system) (for 47 %), their lives (war) (for 44 %) and their future (the climate; pensions) (for 42 %). At the same time, we note, against the background of previous waves of the study, the relatively low levels of this anxiety. No indicator accounts for more than half of the responses "worries me a lot".

The future

Young Bulgarians have a rather optimistic view of the future. Optimism has been preserved in recent years, probably as a characteristic feature of youth and despite the new anxieties and upheavals that have had an effect on the value system and attitudes of young Bulgarians. Pessimism has increased, however, from 4 % to 8 % for the period 2018–2024. Young men are now slightly more optimistic. Those living in big cities, the less educated, and the group of 19–24-year olds also stand out with a little more optimism (Fig. 18).

In terms of expectations for the future, 70 % are optimistic about themselves and only 29 % about society. Personal optimism definitely prevails over that which is collective.

Fig. 18 Optimism among youth in Bulgaria (in %)



However, for the respondents, the future of the country is most often painted in darker colours. 36% reckon that in general it will be worse than now, a quarter do not expect any change, and 29% have a positive view.

Attitudes largely give an assessment of the current development of the country and express attitudes towards political institutions and decisions and the overall quality of life. Positive attitudes towards the development of Bulgarian society as a whole were also lower in the previous wave of research (47% then thought it would improve; 11% expected a deterioration). However, the difference in the answers now seems significant, and the fact that pessimists outweigh optimists is indicative of the overall influence of recent years on the new generation of young Bulgarians that is forming. The feeling of permanent social, economic and political crisis, culminating in social and health upheaval, high levels of inflation, and an endless spiral of pre-term elections, inevitably reduces positive expectations.

Main takeaways

1. Trends towards more individualism, anxiety and becoming closed in the narrow environment have characterise the value orientations of young Bulgarians in recent years. Protection of rights (24%) and security (20%) are in the leading places.
2. Collective and somewhat more abstract values fade into the background without them disappearing. Democracy is the first value for 5% of young people.
3. Growing individualism among young people increases tolerance for the behaviour of others, regardless of whether this behaviour is evaluated positively or negatively.
4. Existential fears related to health, (for 47%), their lives (for 44%) and their future (for 42%) occupy leading places in the structure of young people's fears. Anxiety is growing among the more active, more affluent, more progressive and more educated groups of young people.
5. In terms of expectations for the future, 70% are optimistic about themselves and only 29% about society. Personal optimism definitely prevails over that which is collective.

8 Political attitudes and participation

In this chapter, the subject of analysis is several directions related to the general idea of the Bulgarian youth about politics – the ideological and political concepts, the general attitude and interest in the political process, the readiness to be included in various forms of political participation and the attitude towards democratic governance. The low levels of political engagement of young people in Bulgaria have become a traditional finding of researchers, with the proviso that the Bulgarian case is among the least studied in the region (Kiisel et al., 2015; Ilić & Markov, 2024). At the political level, there is a tendency to bring young people closer to the decision-making process through various institutional mechanisms (Becquet et al., 2019; Elenkova, 2023). In general, however, it is accepted that the attitude of Bulgarian youth towards politics is marked by low trust in factors outside the immediate family-friendly environment, slightly increasing in groups with higher social and educational status, and growing support for authoritarian practices (Kovacheva & Kabaivanov, 2016; Stoykova, 2021; Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & Kennedy, 2022).

General attitudes and interest in politics

Are young people interested in politics? From the research it is seen that the ratio between interested (more or less) and not interested is approximately 1:2. The data seem to indicate a serious increase in general interest in politics compared to the previous survey wave in 2018, when the relative proportion of positive responses was only 7% (Fig. 19).

Interest in politics presupposes some awareness of political processes. This is also visible from the research. A large proportion of young people rate their own knowledge as significant when it comes to political issues. 11% give the maximum score “I know a lot about politics”, and another 20% assess themselves as being at the level below the maximum.

In Bulgarian society, a tangible expectation for “active young people” and “politically engaged young generation” is present. It often dominates the public discourse, but does not fully correspond to the realities and rather appears to be wishful thinking. We can put this declaration in the prism of assessing to what extent the interests of young people are represented in national politics.

The numbers are categorical. A significant majority of over 70% are of the opinion that the interests of young people are poorly represented or not represented at all in Bulgarian politics. In total, only 11% (one in nine young people) have the opposite opinion (“very well” or “to a certain extent”). Moreover, in the survey those who state that the youth interest is represented in a good way are the exception (they make up only 2% of the respondents who gave an answer). A critical approach to the current political situation cannot ignore the fact that in the last few years we have also observed a perceptible “rejuvenation” of the national political elite in personal and party terms, and in the various sectors of the political space. However, the survey data paint a rather negative assessment of political representation to date.

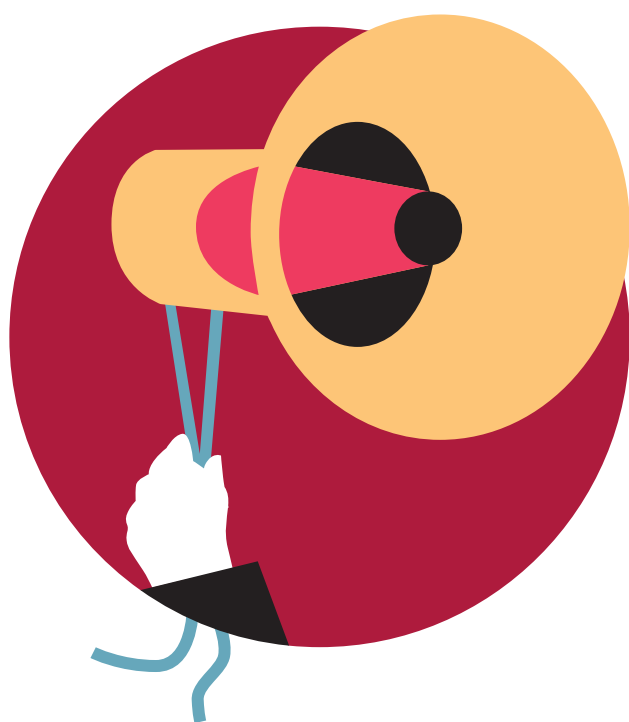
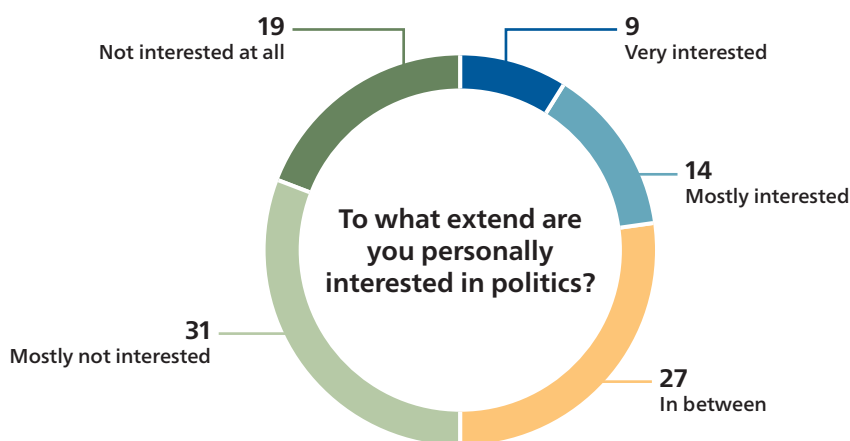


Fig. 19 **General interest in politics among youth in Bulgaria (in %)**

The segmentation of the respondents enables us to conclude that more positive answers (in the direction that the interests of young people are represented in politics) are found among young men between 19 and 24 years of age, who are residents of cities and who often have a higher education. At the same time, in relation to the same segments, the opposite opinion of underrepresentation is held to a greater extent by young women, again mostly living in cities.

Young people's interest in politics has grown from 7 % to 21 % in 6 years. However, the belief that the political system is alienated from the problems of young people is persistent.

On the whole, the picture is rather critical, it fully corresponds to the general context of South-Eastern Europe, and calls into question the relations between those represented and representatives.⁹ Perhaps not so surprisingly against the background of the above-described trends, we report a significant number of young people who declare their readiness to occupy a position that implies handling power. As many as 30 % of respondents answer positively to the question "Are you inclined to take up a political position?" The cross section of the data is interesting.

Men (especially those living in urban areas) say they are more willing to enter governance than women (a disturbing difference, which, however, can also be explained by still strong paternalistic stereotypes in our country), as well as the youngest among the young (between 14 and 18 years of age). The positive dynamics compared to the previous wave of 2018 is visible, when the number who expressed this readiness accounted for half as many respondents, only 15 %.¹⁰

To a certain extent, the data, at least on a declarative level, can also be read as a readiness to "take matters into one's own hands", but at the same time, they do not correspond to a series of indicators related to trust in institutions, along with a readiness for political participation. It is possible to hypothesise that it is not political positions that have become more attractive to young people, but that the sense of responsibility when entering politics has decreased.

Ideological self-determination

The ideological self-identification of young Bulgarians is an important topic, concretising their interest in politics and the assessment of representation of their age group.

The distribution of respondents' answers on a ten-point scale to the Self-Determination Question, where 1 means "extreme left" and 10 "extreme right", produces the following distributions. 4% of young people define themselves as extreme leftists, and 11% as moderate leftists. In the right-wing spectrum, the answers are more popular – moderate right-wing are 18%, and far-right – 6%. Centrists, on the basis of self-assessment, are as many as 41%, and the share of those who do not indicate an answer to the question is also not small – 21%. Research experience actually allows us to suggest that frequently centrist self-definition reveals not a conscious position but a lack of attitude.

What does this tell us? First of all, we can conclude that the Bulgarian youth in terms of their ideological self-determination are "shifted" slightly to the right side of the spectrum.¹¹ The conclusion is valid both in relation to the more moderate opposition between the left and the right, and in relation to the extreme factions – in both cases the youth who define themselves as "right-wing" predominate. Bulgaria is no exception to the right-wing dominance in the region of Southeastern Europe. The ratio between left-wing and right-wing self-identification in the country approaches the values in two other EU member states – Croatia and Slovenia.

It is worth looking at these results from two perspectives: 1) who are more left-wing and who are more right-wing; 2) how this self-identification has developed over time (based on previous waves of research).

The segmentation made enables us to conclude that the left-wing ideology is more often advocated by women who are more often married, with higher education or those living in an urban environment, often sharing more progressive views (the segments of "conservative young women" and of "educated young progressives").

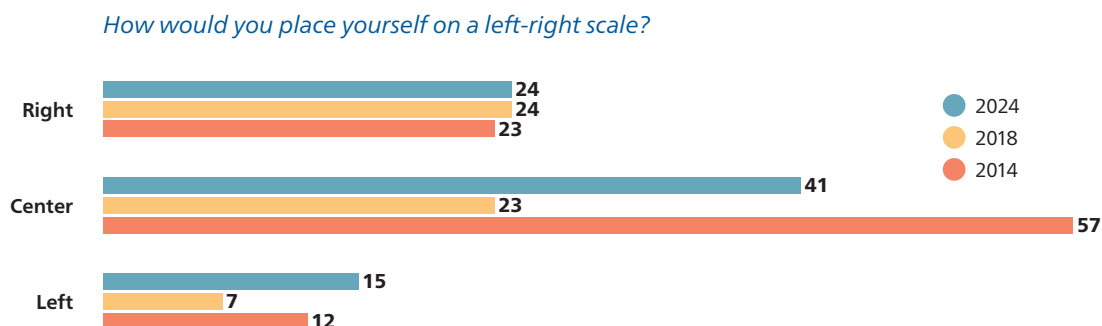
On the other hand, the right-wing spectrum is filled more often by teenagers, with lower education and in a more difficult financial situation, young men between 19 and 24 living in cities. Socio-economic indicators do not lead to the formation of political views.

Bulgaria fits into the regional pattern of the dominance of right-wing political self-identification: 24% of young people are right-wing and 15% are left-wing. The explanations are cultural rather than socio-economic.

Illustrated in Figure 20 are the dynamics for the last ten years, which are covered by the three periodic waves of the study.¹² On the whole, more young people identify themselves on the left of the ideological spectrum, but we also see growth in numbers among centrists. All this happens at the expense of those who did not indicate an answer (in 2018, almost every second young person refused to define themselves). We also observe a stable and consistent presence on the right-wing spectrum without a significant change over the past decade.

In addition to the declaration of ideological self-determination, the study validates several statements related to state governance and general political issues, which also have their ideological weight on the left-right spectrum. It can be seen from the results that the majority of Bulgarian youth (57%) believe that the income gap between the poor and the rich should be reduced; opinions are more balanced regarding the increase of state ownership in economic processes (35% agree, while 30% disagree), but are most categorical viewpoints relate to the statement that general welfare should be the prerogative of the government (agreement of 64%, or every two out of three respondents). The accumulation of responses seems to suggest a tendency towards more left-wing political thinking among the respondents.

Fig. 20 Ideological beliefs – self-identification among youth in Bulgaria (in %)



In the absence of sufficiently clear ideological and party orientations for left wing and right wing, however, it is probably normal for attitudes towards specific political statements to deviate from subjective self-identification. Left and right appear to be markers of culture and socialisation, rather than of a consistent political orientation.

Attitude to institutions

Something directly related to the readiness to be included in the political process is the attitude towards the institutions that make up the state administration and public relations as a whole. It is no surprise that trust in the three authorities is around a critical minimum, and this trend is long-term, beyond the conjunctural reasons associated with a given government. We also observe a downward trend in the general attitude towards international organisations and alliances such as the EU and NATO.

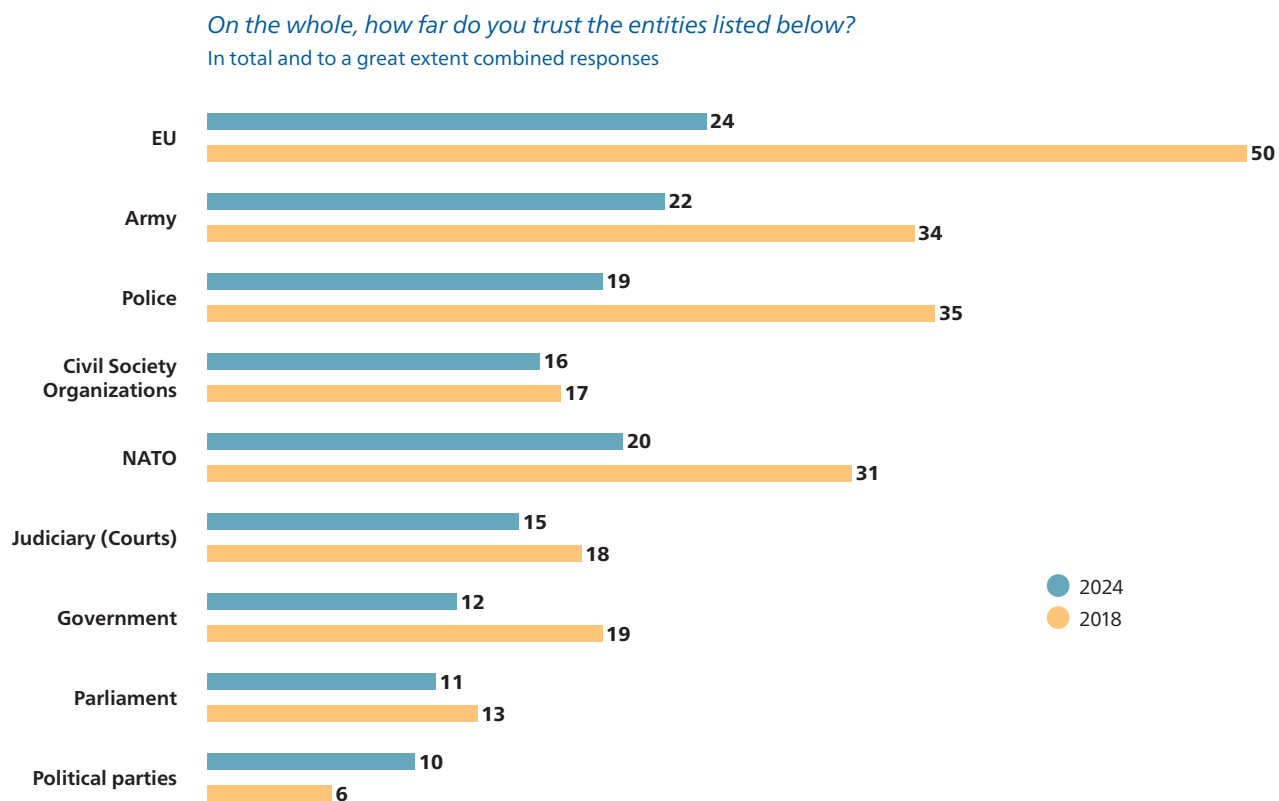
A sense of general insecurity and political crisis is exacerbating the decline in confidence in key institutions.

Data from the current wave of youth research fully confirm the trend described above. It can be seen from Figure 21 that the majority of institutions achieve lower values of trust compared to the previous wave in 2018, but even to some extent compared to the general attitudes in society.¹³

Young Bulgarian people maintain their negative attitudes towards the traditionally critical national institutions almost without change. This applies in full force to the three powers – parliament, government and the judiciary, and to political parties. The army and the police, which 6 years ago accumulated more trust and gave rise to hypotheses about the orientation of some of the young towards “order” and a “firm hand”, today are noticeably declining. Civil society structures are stabilising their levels of trust, but as before, they are highest in relatively limited “elite” groups of the population of youth (20% of young people with higher education, 21% of the richest, 19% of “educated urban progressives”). What is most noticeable is the collapse in trust in the international structures of which Bulgaria is a part – in relation to the EU, the decline is to half the previous rate in six years, and trust in NATO is expressed by only one in five young people.

Other institutions that are not included in the graph, but which are worth noting – the media and trade union organisations in our country also receive rather low trust among the Bulgarian youth – respectively with 12% and 10% according to the same combined scale of answers.

The crisis of trust in institutions is not a new phenomenon, also among young people. However, the clear downward trend requires further explanation. The growing general scepticism of the Bulgarian youth towards the environment should be taken into account. Individualistic attitudes expanding in the youth consciousness cause alienation from collective institutional decisions and practices.

Fig. 21 **Trust in institutions among youth in Bulgaria (in %)**

Assessments of poor functioning of social systems are inevitably transferred in the form of distrust towards the institutions called upon to build and develop these systems. The political crises in our country and the military conflicts around us are logically eroding the feeling of stability and predictability.

The significant decline in trust in the EU (to a level of 24%) is due at least in part to the damaged image of the Union as a source of solutions for the problems of Bulgaria.

For this reason insecurity has become a central factor explaining the decline in trust in institutions responsible for security, from international ones like NATO to national ones like the army and police.

And last but not least, it is evident that in recent years the EU has changed its image in the eyes of the Bulgarian youth. If in 2014 and 2018 we registered an almost ideal image of the EU, as a source of solutions for a large number of the problems of Bulgarian society, now the EU itself seems to be a source of problems.

It would be an exaggeration to equate the relatively low levels of trust with Eurosceptical sentiments. It is not so much about a conscious critical position towards the EU as about the descent of the EU from its earlier pedestal in the eyes of young people. The road to Euroscepticism is open, but not taken. We should not forget that, despite everything, the trust of Bulgarian youth in the EU is more than double the trust in the national government. We also observe higher trust in the EU than in the national government in all countries covered by the study in the region, without exception.

Finally, we must add that the considerable proportions of “I trust to some extent” answers, which we have excluded from our analysis, represent a reserve for reversing the trend and for regaining the more serious trust of the past.

Attitude towards democracy and its values

If attitudes towards democratic institutions are marked by mistrust, the broader question concerns the attitude of young people towards the democratic system.

In a proven series of statements, we find an answer as to what tendencies and dominant ideas exist among young Bulgarians. For the purpose of analysis here, the five-point scale is reduced to three options – agree, neutral, disagree. The results can be seen in Figure 22.

The above data reveal certain contradictions in thinking about democracy. On the one hand, we see the prevailing opinion that “democracy is good as long as it guarantees economic security”, and that in general “democracy is a good form of government”, but at the same time a “strong leader” is needed precisely to reject democratic institutions such as parliament and democratic procedures like elections.

The proportion of those who agree with the statement that “dictatorship is a better form of government” in certain circumstances is worryingly high – yet this is the answer of one in five young people asked. At the same time, one in four would sacrifice civil liberties for the sake of a high standard of living. In times of wars that have broken out near Bulgaria, it is worth paying attention to the weight of positive responses regarding the restriction of freedoms in the name of security and the threat of terrorism. The preference for security at the expense of freedom is, however, a classic choice in conditions of crisis. We also find indications in this research that this corresponds to the value orientations of some of the young people in Bulgaria. Democracy does not rank among the leading values indicated by respondents (see Chapter 7).

We can assume that Bulgarian youth on a declarative level recognises democracy as an optimal form of government, but under specific conditions and a sufficiently “substantial” reason, this ideal can be circumvented.

Participation in politics

The practices related to the participation of young people in socio-political processes provide an opportunity to reveal the previous experience of Bulgarian youth, but also the potential for future mobilisation through similar examples. It can be seen from the table below that at the time of the survey, the majority of respondents did not identify themselves as practitioners of any of the practices tested. The proportions registered speak of meagre experience. This is probably even more scarce because of the supposed prestige of positive answers.

Something of interest is the potential for future mobilization indicated in the responses “I have not participated in such a thing, but given the right conditions I would do”. At least on a declarative level, joining a voluntary or civic organisation and boycotting goods for political and environmental reasons seem most appealing. It seems that practices that do not require a high degree of organisation and preserve the individual freedom of behaviour of the individual participant stand out. Distance from conventional forms of political participation may express disinterest, as a counterbalance to declarations of interest in politics, but also a more general non-acceptance of established, and probably compromised for many, channels of involvement (Fig. 23).

There is a potential to engage young people in individual and unorganised forms of political activism, rather than in established conventional channels of participation.

Against this background, it is not surprising that only 7% of those questioned stated that they were members of a trade union. According to the segmentation, these are much more often men, mostly urban population, in the age range of 19–24 years.

Fig. 22 Attitudes towards democracy and its values among youth in Bulgaria (in %)

	Agree	Neutral opinion	Disagree
Young people should have more opportunities to speak out in politics.	50	26	16
Democracy is the best possible system of government only when it can guarantee economic security for the people.	40	26	23
We must have a strong leader who does not comply with parliament or elections.	39	24	27
In general, democracy is a good form of government.	37	30	22
Democracy is always and under all circumstances preferable to any other form of government.	36	29	24
Sometimes civil liberties must be limited to better protect citizens from terrorism or other threats.	32	33	25
I would sacrifice some civil liberties to secure a higher standard of living.	26	29	34
Under certain circumstances, dictatorship is a better form of government than democracy.	19	27	42

Fig. 23 Political activism among youth in Bulgaria (in %)

	Yes, I have done this	I haven't done this yet, but I would do	No
You have participated in activities of voluntary or civic organisations.	27	27	45
You have signed a petition for political demands/ supported an online petition.	26	20	52
You have stopped buying things for political or environmental reasons.	21	26	52
You have participated in a demonstration.	18	22	59
You have engaged in political activities online/on social media.	14	22	63
You have worked for a political party or political group.	9	19	72

In spite of everything, if a cursory comparison is made with the previous wave of 2018, for a significant number of the practices surveyed we see an increase in experience gained, while the declaration of future participation remains at stable levels. Passivity in the political sphere dominates, as before. It seems that some good news is the stipulation of future intentions to participate, but there are no data pointing to an unequivocal trend of repoliticisation.

We find an indirect confirmation of the thesis that the vulnerable socio-economic situation of the respondents leads to disillusionment with the EU as a source of solutions.

In quite a number of cases, the Bulgarian identity is thought of in opposition to that which is European, and not as its basis.

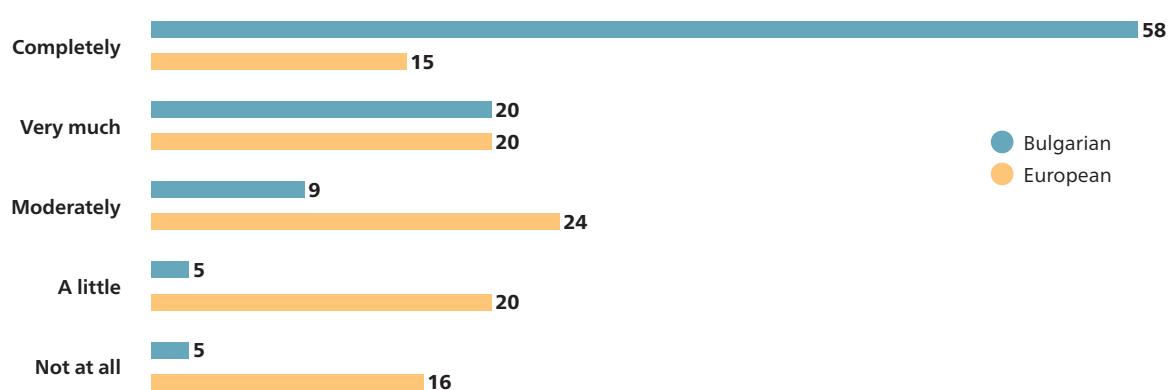
Nationalism versus European identity

A startlingly high percentage of Bulgarian youth are of the opinion that Bulgaria should leave the EU. This is an answer given by one in three respondents. However, a majority of 51% answered this question negatively. The sociological profile of Eurosceptics includes young Bulgarians with lower education, lower incomes, who are worried about their future (often more than their peers), and nationalistic. At the same time, we notice that to a greater extent supporters of the EU are women, with higher education and those living in cities, as well as the age group from 19 to 24 years.

Bulgarian youth think of themselves much more in terms of a Bulgarian identity than of one that is European. 78% of all respondents answered that they see themselves entirely or to a large extent as Bulgarians, while the share of those who indicated a European identity was 34%. Another important point in this connection – 35% of young Bulgarians think of themselves as Europeans in general or to a small extent. It should be noted here that the questions do not force the respondent to choose between the national and the European and allow the two identities to be thought of together without contradicting each other. It is for this reason that the data cited are disturbing, because they speak of an “opening of the scissors” between national-centric and the Europe-centric self-perceptions (Fig. 24).

Fig. 24 **National versus European identity among youth in Bulgaria (in %)**

To what extent do you see yourself as Bulgarian and European?



We find an additional litmus test for the growing wave of a nationally dominated self-image, as a counterpoint to the European one, in the large proportions of agreement with the following statements:

- People who are not Bulgarians, but living in Bulgaria, must accept the customs and values of Bulgaria – 39 % expressed general agreement with the statement;
- It is best if Bulgaria is inhabited only by real Bulgarians – a total of 32 % agree completely or almost agree;
- A true Bulgarian is simply a person who has Bulgarian blood – the rate of agreement is 32 %.

Although some of the statements quoted do not meet the approval of the majority of those asked, the significant proportion of agreement suggests a view of the world that is strongly nationalist and even hostile to “non-Bulgarians”. 17 years after full membership in the EU, we observe serious groups among the new “European” generations of the country, who profess a concept of closure within themselves. The idea of a nation, evident from the statements tested, is openly ethnic (Bulgarian belonging is determined by Bulgarian “blood”), nativist (the Bulgarian state is the exclusive territory of Bulgarians) and traditionalist (not the observance of laws, but the observance of traditions builds the national order). As in many other cases, such notions coexist with declarative support for democracy.

Main takeaways

- 1.** Young people’s interest in politics has grown from 7 % to 21 % in 6 years. However, the belief that the political system is alienated from the problems of young people is persistent.
- 2.** Bulgaria fits into the regional dominance of right-wing political self-identification: 24 % of young people are right-wing and 15 % left-wing. The explanations are cultural rather than socio-economic.
- 3.** The sense of general insecurity and political crisis is deepening the decline of confidence in the main institutions.
- 4.** The substantial decline in trust in the EU (to a level of 24 %) is at least in part due to the damaged image of the Union as a source of solutions for Bulgaria’s problems.
- 5.** There is potential to involve young people in individual and unorganised forms of political activism, rather than in the established conventional channels of participation.
- 6.** In a considerable number of cases, Bulgarian identity is thought of in opposition to that which is European, and not as its basis.

9. Specific topics and problems facing the Bulgarian youth

In the current wave of the research, issues that, in the opinion of the research team, are important for the agenda of Bulgarian society and Bulgarian young people are covered. This chapter presents the analysis of answers of the respondents, broken down by topic.

Attitude towards refugees

The topic concerning refugees has always, and especially in recent years, aroused a great deal of interest. It is not uncommon for refugees to be perceived as a threat, which is largely confirmed by the results of the survey. The proportions of people who believe that Bulgaria should not accept refugees due to security risks (30.5%) and due to economic restrictions (29.8%) are relatively close. It is clear that among the youngest respondents aged 14 to 18 years, the leading negative attitude towards the acceptance of refugees is security. While for the respondents in later youth, the reason is rather rooted in financial opportunities, behind which also appears a rather low assessment of the standard of living in the country. Only 18.2% are of the opinion that Bulgaria should accept refugees because they are people in need and we should help them. Women (20.7%) are more likely to support this statement than men (15.8%).

Against the background of the other data, a relatively small proportion (9.2%) of young people are of the opinion that accepting refugees will contribute to the economic development of Bulgaria. It turns out that those who agree the most are also the youngest (12.4%), which is largely due to the fact that they are a little more distant from the labour market at this stage of their life course and do not recognise "importing" labour as a problem. In the opposite direction, the worse positioning on the labour market affects, respectively, the worse economic opportunities, often resulting from the lower level of education. Thus, respondents with lower education stand out as those with the least positive attitudes towards the idea that accepting refugees will help the economy of the country.

The data from the survey indicate that empathy for asylum seekers is most pronounced when this is presented in abstract terms and refers to an undefined "everyone" (41.8% indicate that "all people fleeing conflict and disaster" must be accepted in Bulgaria), and this decreases with each specification of the origin of the refugees. 20.1% approve of accepting those fleeing the war between Russia and Ukraine, and 12.1% are in favour of accepting refugees resulting from conflicts and disasters in the Middle East and North Africa. In these responses, cultural and religious proximity probably exerts its influence.

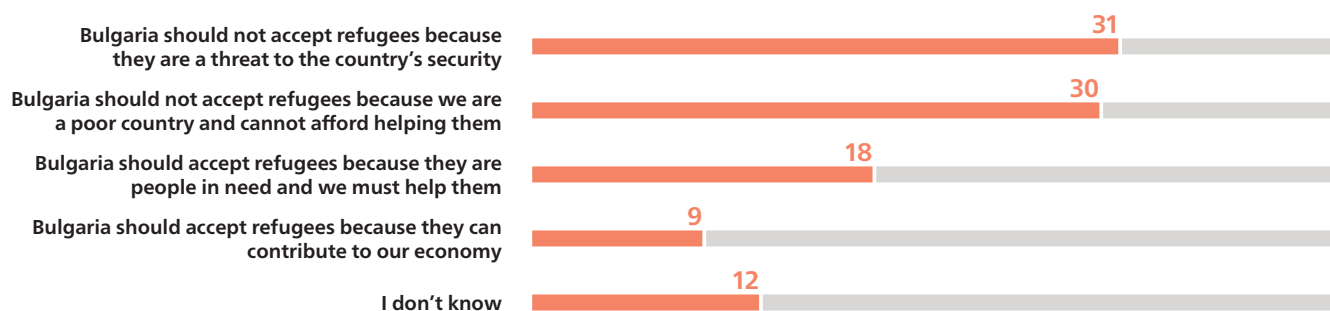
The majority (61%) of young Bulgarian people are rather negative towards the reception of refugees. The sense of empathy exists, but it is often subject to material or other conditions.

It is interesting to observe how the respondents, who are united around the statement that it is proper for the country to accept all those who are looking for a new home as a result of conflicts and disasters, remain divided on the question of accepting refugees into the country (Fig. 25).



Fig. 25 Attitude among youth in Bulgaria towards accepting refugees (in %)

When it comes to refugees, which of the following statements represents your opinion the best?



At 29.1%, there is an overlap between “Bulgaria should accept refugees because they are people in need and we should help them” and “All people fleeing as a result of conflicts and disasters”. A similar proportion of 29.2% of those who indicate that all people fleeing from adverse natural and other factors should be accepted believed that our country does not really have enough resources to afford to accept refugees. This is how the insecurity of young people and the lack of a sense of economic and financial stability are evident here. There is a desire to help, but it is subject to material conditions.

Age and the right to vote

Expanding political representation or deepening the crisis in it? The concept of reducing the age limit for active voting from 18 to 16 years does not meet the enthusiasm of the young population. According to 48.6% of the participants in the survey, this would increase the share of non-oriented voters. Approximately the same proportion (47.2%) are of the opinion that the lower age would set the conditions for abuse of the vote of young people and that parties and politicians would more easily be able to manipulate the youngest voters (46.3%).

In the answers, one can clearly feel scepticism on one hand, and on the other a distance from the political process is visible.

There is apparent scepticism towards one's own generation. For a large number of young people, a lower voting age would mean more disoriented and manipulated voters.

All the same, 35.8% of the youngest respondents, those in the 14–18-year-old group, most strongly believe that lowering the age barrier would have the effect that more young people would vote, respectively more young people would be interested in political life in the country. Conservative young women (30%) and educated urban progressives (29.5%) were the most likely to agree that lowering the age limit would actually increase youth voter turnout.

The new modern – working from home

In recent years, and especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, more and more people are working from home when the nature of their work allows it. It turns out that the proportion of young people in the country (47.4%) who, given such an offer, would agree to start working from home is not small.

Their reasoning is about being able to manage their schedule and working conditions. 20.4% would also accept this if their choice were directly related to the future development of the labour market. They expect a highly skilled workforce to perform their duties from home. For both options, the difference between respondents who are expected to already be working and those who are expected to start work is clearly delineated. For some, between the ages of 25 and 29, the experience they have shines through, and for them freedom in the schedule and working conditions are leading factors.

Working from home is perceived (among 68% of young people) in a more positive way due to associations with higher skilled and paid work.

For younger respondents, especially those now entering the labour market, the association of working from home with higher skilled work appears to be of greater importance. Thus, the youngest people associate working from home with higher incomes and a better standard of living. Only 9.9% would refuse to work from home because it would limit their personal and professional contacts. Respondents from the “diverse urban youth” segment seem to be most likely to think that working from home would disrupt the balance between personal and professional life.

Youth and artificial intelligence

At a rapid pace, artificial intelligence is becoming an increasingly topical theme in the contemporary world and in Bulgaria. In addition to this, it is the younger generations, who are keenly interested in new technologies and the opportunities they provide, be they for entertainment, learning or work. In their attitude to the development of artificial intelligence, young people again direct their answers to more moderate and middle positions. 28.5% prefer to place their opinion somewhere in the middle between the extremes of optimism and pessimism.

Most probably, for the most part, they see countless possibilities, but when all is said and done, the development of artificial intelligence brings with it a feeling of uncertainty and a dose of anxiety about what is new and unknown. To some extent, this is also confirmed by the close proportions in the two options opposing each other on both sides of the attitude towards the development of artificial intelligence. 18.3% have a completely negative attitude, while 17.9% have a completely positive attitude. This general distribution is somewhat surprising, at first glance, bearing in mind that young people are strongly connected to technology and virtuality, in which they live and spend much of their time.

As is to be expected, artificial intelligence is rather welcomed by the younger generations, but without enthusiasm.

In general, however, artificial intelligence is received with a positive attitude in two main cases. One is for the youngest, up to 18 years of age, where the change probably seems most interesting and exciting. It is also well received where it is already bringing with it positives for lifestyle and work – among respondents with higher education, whose everyday life is most likely to be greatly facilitated by the advantages of artificial intelligence.

Climate change

The climate disaster is emerging as one of the most serious problems facing the young generation. Concerns about pollution and climate change rank among the top fears of respondents.

Against this background, the research endeavours to check what is the prevailing understanding of young Bulgarians regarding the main causes of climate change. The issue fits into a popular divide between people who dispute the reality of climate change or believe it is not caused by human activity, and those who support the scientific consensus that climate change and rising average temperatures of the Earth are the product of industrialisation, global capitalism and human behaviour.

The leading opinion among Bulgarian youth is that humans are the main cause of climate change – exactly half (50 %) are of the opinion that it is “mostly” or “entirely” due to human activity. Going by the previously prepared segmentation, it can be summarised that more often such an opinion is expressed by more educated urban youth, and more often by women, as well as young men living in smaller populated, often rural areas.

Young people are concerned about climate change, but cautious in their assessment of its causes.

The opposite opinion is held by a significantly smaller proportion of Bulgarians – a total of 9 %, according to whom climate changes are entirely or mainly a consequence of natural phenomena and processes, without the activity of our civilisation having had any impact on the changes observed. It is interesting that this opinion is more often expressed by young men between 19 and 24, mostly living in towns. The ratio between one group of young people and the other is 5:1.

The proportion of respondents who accept the simultaneous and equal impact of human activity and natural phenomena (28 %) should not be underestimated. However, the proportion of those convinced that climate change does not exist is negligible (2 %).

In this sense, climate sceptics are a definite minority among Bulgarian youth. Despite this, we need to pay attention to the intermediate proportions and their volume, to the orientation towards the average and balanced positions, and to the mistrust in categorical assessments, which is probably caused by other spheres of the life and social experience of young people.

Games of luck and gambling

The topic of gambling games, also known as “games of luck” or “games of fortune”, has been present in recent years rather peripherally in the Bulgarian public. Despite attempts to legally limit these practices in Bulgaria and warnings from global organisations about the harm of gambling on young generations, a boom in casinos and on-line betting platforms can be seen.

The research shows that there are few respondents who do not have acquaintances who gamble regularly. Although statistically small, something of social significance is the group of young people whose circle of friends as a whole regularly gamble (Fig. 26).

Fig. 26 **Gambling among youth in Bulgaria (in %)**



The cross-section of the data, as well as the pre-prepared segmentation, indicate that “all of my acquaintances” and “most of my acquaintances” are more common answers among less educated, more likely male (especially those between 19 and 24) respondents living in rural areas, but also smaller cities, and young people in more difficult material conditions. A logical, but important, conclusion is that these answers are inherent more often to young people from lower social strata, however, they are not an exception among representatives of high strata. These cuts, as well as the divisions visualised in Figure 26, actually suggest that the practice is rather large-scale, not concentrated to just one stratum of society, and above all, not a practice encapsulated by geographical, demographic, social or other prerequisites. We can state with a great degree of confidence that it is widespread among a significant proportion of the young population of Bulgaria.

Gambling games are gaining considerable popularity among young people. There is also a tendency among some to accept them as an alternative to income from employment.

The reasons for the mass popularity of gambling games in Bulgaria are many and complex – from aggressive advertising and its scale, the lack or weakness of state regulations (especially regarding online betting), the material needs of the players, purely mental addiction and problems related to mental health, along with many others. In the study, we try to look into the general attitude of young people, addressing some of all these prerequisites listed above, namely – the material ones, insofar as they are a prerequisite for involvement in the practice.

The hypothesis that gambling is the key to financial success that cannot be achieved through honest work and work is tested. This assumption presents the alternative that, despite hard work and the desire to earn an honest income, gambling “opens a door” that otherwise remains closed.

With a directly presented statement “Games of luck” provide opportunities to earn money that we cannot achieve with honest labour”, a total of 24 % agreed, and a total of 40 % disagreed¹⁴ However, to the extent that the majority disagree, the group that considers gambling to be a legitimate and real alternative to labour is not to be neglected. Based on the segmentation, we can conclude that this attitude is stated much more often by less educated young people, while more educated women living in cities disagree more often.

Main takeaways

- 1.** The majority of Bulgarian youth (61 %) have a negative attitude towards accepting refugees. A sense of empathy exists, but it is often subject to material or other conditions.
- 2.** There is scepticism towards one’s own generation. For a large portion of young people, a lower voting age would mean more disoriented and manipulated voters.
- 3.** Working from home is perceived more positively (among 68 % of young people) due to associations with higher skilled and higher paid work.
- 4.** Artificial intelligence is expectedly rather welcomed by the younger generations, but without enthusiasm.
- 5.** Young people are concerned about climate change but cautious in their assessments of its causes.
- 6.** Gambling games are gaining considerable popularity among young people. There is also a tendency among some to accept them as an alternative to income from employment.

Conclusion

The analysis of the study of the Bulgarian youth allows us to outline longer-lasting trends, revealing the problems and challenges facing young people's life course transitions.

The long-term social context of the data obtained is undoubtedly related to the demographic crisis. This is a matter of processes that, to a greater or lesser extent, are valid for almost the entire region of South-Eastern Europe, but in Bulgaria they are felt and perceived particularly sensitively. The group of Bulgarian youth is steadily decreasing both as a relative proportion of the total population and in absolute values. Young people are more and more concentrated in big cities. The depopulation of villages and small settlements affects the perceptions of respondents living in them about their economic chances and prospects. The next point is that young people are more likely to define themselves in the categories of the middle class, with moderate material possibilities, which probably also has its effect on the relatively more limited spread of extreme values and positions. Young people also increasingly come from families with more highly educated parents, which is not only a factor in shaping their own attitudes about the world, but also increases the declarative levels of familiarity and awareness of a variety of topics.

The shorter-term social context of the study is constructed by the global rise in tension in recent years, contrasting with the relatively calmer situation of the previous wave of research 6 years earlier. The life course of the new young generations in Bulgaria is accompanied by the various manifestations of the Covid-19 crisis, the crises of the EU related to finance and migration, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the inflationary processes in Bulgaria, as well as the almost permanent political instability in the country. All this is bound to affect the general background of youth attitudes.

For this reason, the first more visible trend is the increased sense of insecurity among young people. The research enables us to establish it in the value orientations, and especially in the priority of human rights and security as a kind of protection of the individual, in the widespread pessimism about the future of Bulgarian society, in the growth of fears for life and health, as well as fears of war, but also in caution on topics such as climate change or artificial intelligence, which in other societies indicates significantly higher engagement of youth. The uncertainty also reflects on findings of conservatism in family relationships, where delayed flying the nest of the parental home is increasingly motivated by financial inevitability rather than convenience and shared views. The distinction that quite a number of respondents make between national and European identity can also be interpreted as striving for more security within the national identity.

Another trend is towards more individualism. If in the previous wave of research there was a development towards more sociality, now the emphasis definitely falls more on individual values at the expense of those which are collective. Recognition and self-affirmation come to the fore, solidarity is narrowed to the young person's inner circle, while tolerance is reduced not so much to understanding others, but to accepting their right to act as they see fit. Different identity and a different material situation are perceived more than before as a barrier in choosing a partner. On the other hand, greater causes seem increasingly abstract. Even readiness for political participation reveals a preference for independent and less organised action. In many cases it becomes possible to think of the personal perspective as being separate from that which is communal.

In connection with the latter comes the tendency towards greater mistrust. Levels of trust in the main institutions are falling noticeably, but in parallel with this, the same is true of the trust in international structures such as the EU and NATO. The concerns of young people determined in the research suggest distrust in the social systems: health, education and pensions. Young people are also distrustful of their own generation and widely share the view that lowering the voting age to 16 would bring more disoriented and easily manipulable voters to the polls.

The trend towards more utilitarianism stands out. The research brings to the fore a rather material attitude to life. Job search is often associated with striving for quick realisation and high incomes. For many, the meaning of education and independent educational preparation from the point of view of integration into the labour market is questionable. For certain groups of young people, practices such as tax evasion, paying bribes or using connections are acceptable. In some cases, even gambling profits are seen as a legitimate alternative to work. The utilitarian attitude also affects politics, where for a significant proportion of respondents democracy is useful only when it guarantees economic security.

The trend towards more spontaneity should also be mentioned. This covers the decisions and choices of young people in a number of spheres of life. To a lesser extent, one relies only and only on one's own competence when looking for a job, and more on situational factors. This also refers to the readiness to occupy a political position, even in the absence of political experience and a more substantial involvement in the political process. The growth of intentions to emigrate does not correspond to more serious preparation and clearer plans. Even with regard to intentions to marry, it can be argued that they are not so much diminishing, as losing their importance in destiny.

Based on this research, it can be concluded that a generational change is underway, and it is leading to more pragmatism, conditioned by the uncertain living environment of young people. In general, young Bulgarian people are not apathetic, anti-democratic or anti-European; in terms of values they do not differ drastically from their peers in the region and in Europe, and they are not radicalised. Striving for independence and self-reliance, which we find in the majority of cases, is a key positive factor for the success of the transitions in the lives of young people. The awareness of the need for integration in society, also observed most times, reduces the dangers of asociality, alienation and segregation. Nevertheless, the alarming indications are not to be underestimated and require a much more effective, comprehensive and long-term commitment of political institutions to limit the existing risks.

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Endnotes

- 1 “Not in Employment, Education or Training” (used by the British government to describe a young person who is no longer in school and does not have a job or is not training to do a job.)
- 2 Conditionally, and not entirely correctly, we call them “poorest” and “richest”.
- 3 → ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230904-1
- 4 The more general topic of generational transitions is also a visible focus in the recent Bulgarian research discussion in youth studies (Hristozova, 2022; Papazova, Mineva, 2021; Kovacheva, 2020).
- 5 In 2014 the target group of the research was those aged 14–27; In 2018 and 2024 it was 14–29.
- 6 We round the data from previous years to whole percentage values.
- 7 → europeansocialsurvey.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/TL11_Timing_of_Life-English.pdf
- 8 Back then, there were two separate positions: “using connections to find work” and “using connections to access services”.
- 9 The data correspond to the conclusions of another recent study, which is dedicated to those unrepresented in Bulgarian democracy and establishes that the relationship between representatives and those represented is the most fragile precisely among young cohorts and in vulnerable economic groups (Bankov et al., 2024).
- 10 In relation to 2018, the positions “yes” and “maybe” are combined.
- 11 The mean magnitude of all responses was 5.81 on the ten-point scale described above.
- 12 For better comparability of data from the three survey waves, in this graph positions 1–4 on the ten-point scale are combined as “left-wing”, positions 5–6 as “centrist”, and positions 7–10 as “right-wing”.
- 13 In this case, for the purposes of the analysis, the two positions “I trust completely” and “I have a great deal of trust” were combined. The approach is the same as in the analysis of data from the previous wave of the survey from 2018. The position “I trust to some extent” is not included in the overall trust score as it is intermediate and rather expresses hesitation.
- 14 The positions “strongly disagree” and “rather disagree” as well as “strongly agree” and “rather agree” are combined.

Figures

- 10 **Fig. 1** Structure of the sample of surveyed youth in Bulgaria (in %)
- 13 **Fig. 2** Population and youth population of Bulgaria as of 31.12.2023
- 14 **Fig. 3** Proportion of young people 15–29 years of age within the population of Bulgaria (in %)
- 16 **Fig. 4** Perceptions among youth in Bulgaria about corruption in the education system (in %)
- 17 **Fig. 5** Importance of education among youth in Bulgaria (in %)
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