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BETWEEN "CV BUILDER" AND "GENUINE" ACTIVIST: THE MANY FACES OF YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENTIN SERBIA[3]

Između "CV bildera" i posvećenog aktiviste: mnoga lica građanske participacije mladih u Srbiji

ABSTRACT: *The aim of this paper is to explorethe characteristics and relative importance of civic engagement for young members of civil society organisations in Serbia. This article is exploratory in character and is based on qualitative methodology.Youth engagement is observed through the theoretical lens of the lifecourse approach. The questions addressedbythe paper are as follows: How do young people perceive their civic engagement? What motivates their participation? How does this engagement relate to other aspects of their lifecourse?*

The method used here is narrative analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with young volunteers and members of civil society organisations in Serbia selected through theoretical sampling.The key finding is that there is arange of motivations and accompanying strategies – from the purely idealistic to the highly instrumental. The majority of our respondents displayed a mixed type of motivation, successfully combiningactivities aimed at protectingthe "social good" with thosethat contribute to the achievement of personal goals. Motivation, however,tends to vary between the different types of organisations, professional and grassroots. Engagement in professional organisations is more frequently instrumental and, in contrast, grassroots organisations typically attract "genuine", value-driven activists.

KEY WORDS: youth, civic engagement, motivation, strategies, civil society

APSTRAKT: *Cilj ovog rada je da se ispitaju karakteristike građanske participacije i njenog značaja za mlade koji su članovi organizacija civilnog društva u Srbiji. Rad*

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ima eksplorativni karakter i bazira se na kvalitativnoj metodologiji. Angažovanje mladih se posmatra iz teorijske perspektive pristupa životnog toka. Ključna pitanja na koja autori teže da odgovore su: Na koji način mladi doživljavaju svoje angažovanje? Šta motiviše njihovu participaciju? Na koji način je građanski angažman povezan sa drugim aspektima njihovog životnog toka?

U radu je primenjen metod analize narativa 20 polu-strukturisanih intervjua. Ispitanici su izabrani teorijskim uzorkovanjem i svi su volonteri i aktivisti organizacija civilnog društva. Istraživanje je pokazalo da se motivacija mladih da učestvuju u civilnom sektoru kreće od idealističke do visoko instrumentalne. Većina ispitanika, ipak, kombinuje angažovanje za "opšte dobro" sa aktivnostima koje podrazumevaju ličnu korist, što ukazuje na višestruku motivisanost za uključivanje u ovo polje. Motivacija se razlikuje prema tipovima organizacija, tako što se mladi u profesionalne organizacije češće uključuju iz instrumentalnih razloga a u samonikle iz vrednosnih ubeđenja i želje da doprinesu zaštiti opšteg dobra.

KLJUČNE REČI: mladi, građanski aktivizam, motivacija, strategije, civilno društvo

Leaving school and finding a job, the conventional markers ofeducational and labour transitions, are sometimes accompanied byepisodic or more permanent phases of civic engagement. In adolescence, young people tend to become increasingly aware of the socio-political context and social problems around them – such as poverty, injustice, discrimination, marginalization, environmental degradation, etc. As a consequence, some of them choose to practice a more active civic life and engage in youth activist groups, social movements and organisations. However, civic engagement can also be an outcome of instrumentally driven decisions made by young people who enter competitive job markets with an ambition to build solid foundations (in terms of knowledge, skills and networks) for their future careers.

The aim of this paper is to explore motivation, subjective meaning andtherelative importance of civic engagement for young members of civil society organisations and social movements in Serbia. Our starting assumption is that the socio-political context and the reduced employment opportunities, accompanied with a specific type of civil society in Serbia, largely shape young people's motivation, choices and strategies regarding civic engagement, by reinforcing the importance of theirinstrumental goals and intentions. This research is exploratory and subsequently founded on a qualitative methodology. Theoretical considerations of motivation are used in this articleas a wider framework for theinterpretation of thecontextually specific forms of young people's motivation for participation in civic organisations.

Civic Engagementand the Life Course

In this paper, civic engagementby young peopleis observed through the theoretical lens of the *lifecourse* approach. It is assumed that civic engagement

tends to change throughout an individual's life ("biographical availability" for activism/volunteering), it depends upon one's life experiences and the specificities of theparticular historical time in which the person lives.

The lifecourse of an individual can be understood as the manner in whicha person goes through their life, makingdecisions and actingin accordance with their values, perceptions of the situation and the wider social context. Elder and Giele view lifecourse through the following four dimensions: 1) The historical and geographical context that creates possibilities and obstacles for a particular type of agency; 2) social ties to others (relationships) that open up the question of social position and availableresources; 3) agency that points to motivation and acting within a given context; 4) variations in the timing of events and differences in the roles that an individual adoptsthroughout their life, indicatingthe pace at which a person moves from one role to another, the way in which they simultaneously perform multiple roles, or harmonize different spheres of life (Elder & Giele, 2009).

In contrast to the life-cycle approach, the lifecourse model considers chronological age as just one of many factors (including, the wider social context, social structures and social change) influencing the moment at which individuals will assume certain social roles and experience transitions. Given different structural positions (class, status, ethnicity, gender), not everyone will assume the same roles at the same age (Elder et al, 2003). Civic engagement, even in the periods of great need for volunteering and activism, does not attract all young people equally, but is rather concentrated in certain locations and related to specific social groups and members of particular social classes (Fillieule, 2013).

Social movement scholars tend to explain youth engagement in social movements and civic organisations through their "biographical availability". Regarding civic engagement, biographical availability refers to a lack of personal constraints that can increase the costs of participation. Full-time employment, marriage and family responsibilities are usually regarded as impediments for civic engagement (McAdam, 1986). Therefore, young people without children, spouses orfull-time jobs are generally considered as more available for volunteering.

Studies of political and citizen participation have inspected various motives for civic engagement. Utilitarian perspectives, developed from the famous work of Mancur Olson, suggest that personal instrumental interests are the main motivators for individual participation in collective action (Olson, 1971). However, despite the gloomy predictions stemming from work based on *homo-economicus* assumptions, people tend to participate in various altruistic initiatives, thus contradicting the explanations based on narrowly defined self-interest. Aware that explanations for collective action based on the rational actor theory that emerged within economic literature arenot sufficient to explain a wide variety of altruistic behaviours, scholars have developed alternative explanatory models. For instance, sociological and socio-psychological insights show that individuals can mobilise fordifferent reasons: personal value norms, beliefs or emotions such as empathy, solidarity, humanism, or collective identity, ideological and moral concerns, public interest, etc. (Klandermans,1997;

Goodwin, Jasper &Poletta 2004; Opp, 2009).Civic engagement is closely related to the important moral dilemma "whether to act or not act, as well as how to act, in response to situations where civic values such as equality, justice, liberty and human dignity are challenged" (Malin et al, 2015:36).

Although individuals partake in collective efforts for various reasons, their motivationcanroughly be classified into two broad categories – value-driven and instrumental (Omoto et al, 2010; Geiser et al, 2014; Ballard et al, 2015;Verba et al, 1995).As Simon and colleagues (1998) suggest, the pathway to collective action is twofold – instrumental and identity based. Reasons based on values or identity are those that are guided by genuine concern for the best interest of the collectiveto which one belongs.Value-based motives include political or ideological beliefs, the altruistic intent tohelp others or support fora common cause. On the other hand, various types of individual interests such as earning money, enhancing one's human capital (developing new skill-sets, acquiring knowledge, attending workshops and job-related training) and social capital (making contacts as a means of improving job prospects) belong into the instrumental category (Clary et al, 1998;Cappellar&Turati, 2004).

A relatively recentstudyshowsthat when the motivation of young people is value-based, civic engagement tends to becomemore permanent and more productive (Marta & Pozzi, 2008). Omoto and colleagues demonstrate that "other-based" motivation (in contrastto the "self-focused" motivation) is an important factor in predicting civic engagement in the USA, especially regarding participation in the provision of assistance to vulnerable social groups (Omoto et al, 2010).Otherstudies show that "other-oriented" motivation is strongly associated with the engagement in community services (Malin et al, 2015; Ballard et al, 2015). On the other hand, when it comes toinstrumental motivation, research shows that young people tend to be involved in this volunteer workonly as long as they get what they want (Marta & Pozzi, 2008). Research conducted in the USA indicates that young people who do not have the access to educational resources (formal or informal), and belong to (ethnic) groups which value education, pick up "the possibilities that civic experiences provide for future school or job prospects" (Ballard et al, 2015: 79). The connection between civic engagement and instrumental motivation is mediated by the social structure, that is, by the likelihood of obtaining marketable skills, developing social capital and finding employment.

In the context of highly competitive job markets, civic engagement and volunteering are often used as a "signal" or proxy for a "good person" and potentially a "productive employee" (Handy at al, 2010). Additionally, civic engagement as a reference in the resume is nowadays considered important for admission to many institutions of higher education and can sometimes even be critical in deciding who willbe selected (Friedland & Morimoto, 2005). Moreover, volunteering in civic organisations is perceived as a solution for the dilemma young people frequently encounter: you need experience to get a job, but you need a job do get experience.

The Context of Youth Civic Engagementin Serbia

The context of this study is characterised by a chronic societal crisis, manifested through economic stagnation and decline; prolonged political instability; clientelism; party patronage and informality;rising social inequalities; high levels of unemployment and poverty; and weak civil society (Milivojević, 2006; Stanojević & Stokanić, 2014; Bešić, 2016; Mikuš, 2016; Cvejić, 2016; Pešić, 2007). In regard toyoung people, research conducted in Serbia and some other former-Yugoslav countries shows that the pattern of transition toadulthood differswhen compared to the experience ofyoung people inWestern countries. This trajectory could be described as "postponed" or "frozen" transition, with major life-events (completing education, acquiring independent housing and family formation) being delayed. This delay is explained as the result of a strong dependence on family (parental) material resources and psychological support. Although the transition to adulthood is prolonged, there is no evidence to suggest the presence of processes of destandardization and pluralization of life trajectories, as identified in some Western countries (Tomanović, 2012; Tomanović & Ignjatović, 2006, 2010).

Since the end of the socialist era, civil society in Serbia has undergone a profound change. In the socialist period the state did not permitcivic organizing outside of the established state institutions and organisations, whilethe post-socialism development of civil society was largely supported by foreign development agencies. What emerged as a result wasa variation of donor-driven, professionalized but nevertheless weak civil society, typical for the majority of the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Howard, 2003; Fagan, 2010; Vuković, 2016). However, the civilwar in former Yugoslavia, followed bythetrade sanctions, economic collapse and the 1999 NATO air campaign, made civil society development in Serbia slower and more difficult than in thecountry's Central and Eastern European counterparts. Stigmatized as "foreign mercenaries" and collaborators in the 1990s, driven by the whims of donors in the 2000s and failing to display agenuine interest in theneeds of ordinary people, civil society organisations in Serbia continue to becharacterised by a considerable lack of citizen support and low levels of engagement (Vukelić, 2009; Vujadinović, 2009; Mojsilović et al, 2011; Vuković, 2016). Civil society in Serbia is,on the whole, ledby a relatively small group of expert think-tanks and professionalized, project-based organisations. Although there have beensome indicationsof the development ofgrassroots activism in recent years (Jacobsson, 2015), it is still too early to claim that the sector is entering a new, self-sustainable, donor-independent phase.

Young people particularly struggle with the state of the labour market, with unemployment rate as high as 35 percent,accompanied bysharp decline in permanent job positions and the rise ofcontractual and precarious jobs (Stanojević 2015, 2017; Stanojević & Petrović, 2018). Although official statistics have recorded a slight decrease in unemployment rates since 2012, this reduction is taking place at the cost of increased flexibility and the deregulation of the labour market.

In less than a decade,the share of young people with permanent job contracts has decreased from 74.5 percentin 2008 to 51 percentin 2016, while the share of young people with temporary contracts without social benefits (health and pension contributionsor paid sick leave and/or vacation), has more than doubled from 18.1 percentin 2008 to 40.9 percentin 2016 (Stanojević, 2015, 2017).

Young people do sometimes manage to bridge the education-employment gap caused by weak job opportunities with episodic or extended periods of civic engagement. However, it should be noted that employment opportunities in civil societyare quite modest and that most activists and volunteers cannot expect to be employed full-time in this sector (Vuković, 2016;Velat, 2011, 2015). Despite the existence of a relatively large number of professional civil society organisations, the employment levels within this sector are quite low – with anaverage of zero to one permanent job position per organisation (Velat, 2011, 2015).

A study of volunteerism in Serbia conducted in 2013[4] has identified a generally positive attitude towards volunteering, with more than three quarters of respondents being in favour of this type of engagement. Around 60 percentof young people listed expectations pertaining toemployment and the acquisition ofnew skills and knowhowas their main reasons for volunteering, while 20 percentcitedcommunity interests, social responsibility and humanitarian values. The findings of this study imply that volunteerism is more oftenframed in terms of personal goals, such asfinding a job, than in terms of civic engagement and protection of the public interest. However, volunteering is perceived as beneficial for thewider communityand, therefore, despite the primarily egoistic motives for engagement, it results ina win-win situation. An additional finding suggests that there is a greater interest for this kind of engagement among the highly educated in comparison to those with lower levels of educational attainment. This is in line with some other studies that show that civic engagement and volunteering are more common in populations with higher educational and socio-economic status (Jarić &Živadinović, 2012;Tomanović&Stanojević, 2015).

Despite positive attitudes towards civic engagement, however, a studyconducted in 2012 revealed that only 6,2 percentof young people can be considered as socially active, 14,8 percentas partially active and 79 percentas completely inactive (Jarić&Živadinović, 2012: 201). Another study, conducted in 2015, revealsa somewhat brighter picture of civic engagement in Serbia, with about 29 percentof young people being active in various formal and informal activities (Tomanović&Stanojević, 2015:76). This study, however, shows different prioritisation of reasons for participationtothe research conducted in 2013, with the desire to help the community being more important than preparing oneself forfuture employment (Tomanović&Stanojević, 2015: 78).

To summarise, according to the results of several quantitative studies conducted in Serbia, about one quarter of young people tend to be (periodically) engaged in the civicsector. Most commonly active are young people with a middle-class background, usually students. Their motives are in some cases

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4   http://www.mos.gov.rs/mladisuzakon/attachments/article/387/Istrazivanje%20polozaj%20 i%20potrebe%20mladih%20-%202013.pdf (Accessed 10/09/2018)

community-oriented and in others they are personal and inseparable from their employment aspirations. However, based on existing research, it is not quite clear how these motives are prioritised. While some elementsof the observed phenomena can be sketched roughly with insights gleaned from quantitative research, many questions remain open and need to be clarified througha fine-grained, qualitative approach. We attempt to address these questions by examiningthe personal narratives, interpretations of motives and plans of young people actively engaged in civic organisations in Serbia.

Research Questions and Methodology

The main research questions are as follows: How do young people perceive their civic engagement? What motivates their engagement? How does this engagement relate to their lifecourse? And, more precisely, what is the relationship between civic engagement and theireducation-to-labour transition?

In order to answer those questions, in the summer 2017 we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews withyoung people (18–35 years old), actively engaged in civic sector organisations (members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and grassroots organisations or social movements). The sample is theoretical, constructed in such a way to include equal numbers of young people from both types of organisations, and with an even distribution of age and length of engagement within the sector. Virtually all of our respondents were university students, some of them attending masters or PhD programs.[5] The gender distribution of our sample is slightly skewed in favour of female volunteers and activists. As shown by previous research (Tomanović&Stanojević, 2015), members of civil society organisations are more oftenfemale than male.

The narratives of the respondents provided us with detailed descriptions of the relationships between their educational, work and civic engagement trajectories. We tried to track down the following dimensions of their narratives: 1) The personal and social circumstances within which the specified pathways are formed; 2) their motivation of becoming socially engaged; and 3) the different ways of acting within this field. Given the significant diversity within the field of civic engagement, we explore the differences between professional NGOs, on the one side, and grassroots organisations, on the other.

Research Findings

Perceptions of Engagement in the Civic Sector

The interviewees generally recognise their civic engagement as something important – beneficial both for them personally and for the wider community. Civic engagement is often describedas being an activity that is the antithesis

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5   The sample reflects the social composition of these organisation, since they mostly engage highly educated people/students.

of engagement in party politics. Membership in political parties is generally regarded as something undesirable, since party politics is a sphereconsidered to be fraudulent and politicians are seen as not genuinely concerned about the public interest. The civicsector is, on the other hand, typically described as honest and ethical but "poor", meaning that in comparison to the private sector, political parties and public institutions, it is not able to provide adequate material support for the majority of people involved. Volunteers and activists are well aware of this and,in returnfor their engagement,expect to achieve certain levels of experience. Some of them aspire to experience areal-life encounter with social problems and an opportunity to help change things for the better.

> "Here you meet a wide variety of people, even more varied problems and lots of new stuff. Working in the organisation makes you stronger and teaches you how to work under pressure.... From this perspective, I think of it as great practice and I am proud of the knowledge and skills that I have acquired, as well as what I have experienced and seen." (female volunteer from a professional organisation)

Engagement is viewed as a source of experience that cannot be obtained from attending seminars or reading books. "People tend to change when they fight for something, one day of action is like a hundred years of reading." (male activist from a leftist grassroots organisation)

Belonging to a group of like-minded people who share the same values and ideology is also perceived as an important aspect of engagement in civil society organisations.

> "I was feeling isolated, because I thought that I was the only one to see the problems in society in this way... of course, naturally, I was thrilled when I found a group of people who shared the same worldview. To be surrounded by these people– it meant a lot to me." (female volunteer from leftist grassroots organisation)

For others, the experience they aspire torelatesmainly to the development of practical skills and knowledge that will one day bring them better career prospects. Therefore, the learning opportunities through informal educationand personal development offered by civic organisations (e.g. seminars, trainings, workshops etc.) are often perceived as themain benefit ofparticipation.

Motivation for Engagement

Motivation for engagement tend to revolve around two poles – value-based (other-oriented) and instrumental (self-oriented).

> "I think that the two main reasons [for civic engagement]are: the desire forsocial change and the wish to improve oneself." (female volunteer from a professional organisation)

Respondents note different motives prompting young people to participate in civic initiatives. They tend to make a rough distinction between two types

of activists and volunteers. In one category they place those that they call "CVbuilders" and, in the other,so-called "genuine" activists. A "CVbuilder" is a person who is primarily interested in the activities that will "sound good"on their resume. Their intentions are quite pragmatic. They wish to enhance or even "pad" their biographies in order to make a strong CV that will in future provide them an *expert career* in the NGO sector or inpublicly or privately-owned companies.

One of the motives of young people to participate in professional NGOs is to acquire practical, marketable skills that cannot otherwise be obtained through the process of formal education. Being part of a prominent civil society organisation is a "valuable CV reference" (male volunteer from a professional organisation). The *signalling function* of volunteering is recognized by one of the respondents in the following manner,"For sure, being in this organisation is a great CV reference, because there are plenty of people who know what this organisation is and what we do, so it is certainly an advantage." (female volunteer from a professional organisation)

Although respondents are concerned with the fact that instrumental reasons tend to prevail among the members of civil society organisations, they are not overly critical because they assume that the whole system is instrumental and that young people are just "play the game" and doing their best to fit in. The logic behind this strategy is explained as follows: "Yeah, well, soon enough I'll need to find a job... and for the type of job that I want they will ask for like 5 years of experience in a given area... so, I'll get involved in an NGO to obtain this experience and maybe I'll make some money throughit" (female volunteer from a professional organisation). In other words, volunteering is perceived as a good enough solution for the "employment-experience" paradox.

In addition todeveloping practical skills within civic organisations, interns and/or members tend to *network* with their co-workers and activists from other organisations. They expect that networks will be valuable for them one day in the future, mostly for their career aspirations.

> "Contacts from this organisation and with other organisations... it's something that you should always be aware of... and the valueof the connections... The more people you know, it's definitely better for you" (female volunteer from a professional organisation).

Although respondents tend to citeinstrumental motives when they speak about others, when talking about themselves they highlight the humanitarian and socially responsible characteristics of the work they do. "Humanitarian work is what's most important for me, and for the others, I don't know." (male volunteer from a professional organisation)

Despite many accounts of instrumental motivation behind civic engagement, the respondents believe that there are still a lot of people who are fuelled bygenuinely altruistic motives and beliefs. Their rationale for engagement is explained in the following manner: "I want to create something that will bring at least a minimal change." (female volunteer from a professional organisation)

Moreover, it is not uncommon forself-enhancement ambitions to go hand in hand with the intention of doing some socially responsible work. This is perceived by the respondentsas a win-win situation. Sometimes, it can occur simultaneously, in other cases, successively.

"Definitely, these first motives were focused on me, my capacity building, and later when I became stronger, then I started with empowering others." (female member of a professional organisation)

A shift in motives but in the opposite direction from thislastexample was described by one of the interviewees from another professional organisation:

"Inthe beginning – it was activism...When I was socially active, I felt good... I had the feeling that I was doing the right thing. Then, I became a peer educator... The lectures and the skills I acquired, that was important to me...Well, there were, of course, financial motives as well, since I was paid for the work I did." (female member of a professional organisation)

Finally, some of the respondents no longersee their futureas being in Serbia. They perceive the civic engagement recorded in their CVs as a ticket out, since some higher education institutions abroad list experience of civic engagement asan element of their admissions criteria.

"I will spend the next two years doing masters studies abroad; I've got an Erasmus scholarship for a joint masters programme... so I'll move, I'll leave Serbia, definitely for the next two years... Will I come back? Sincerely, I don't think so, I simply do not see myself in this system." (female volunteer of a professional organisation)

Although the extremes of, on the one hand, self-oriented careerists interested solely in paving apath totheir future career and, on the other, idealists who dream of "making the world a better place" can indeed be found among our respondents, those with amixture of motives and identities werethe most common.

It is important to note that the motivation and strategies of our respondents are closely related to the distinct stages on their lifecourses. Respondents with longer "civic careers" (usually starting in high school) tend to describe their engagement as a "natural line of events", an integral part of their lifecourses.

"All in all, it was a natural course of events... I was in the High-School Students Union, which is a member of a youth umbrella organisation. After that I was involved in that organisation, worked there... I participated in the development of the organisation itself. I have recently applied for the Supervisory Board" (female member of a professional organisation).

Others, who entered the civic arena somewhat later (usually during their final year of their studies), connect their civic engagement with an interruption in the transition from education to employment. Although the transition from school to work is rarely a single move and usually occurs in stages, in Serbia the situation

is particularly difficult due to the considerable gap between full-time education and full-time employment –a consequence of the overall economic situation, the mismatch between labour market supply and demand, but also due to the incompatibility ofthe knowledge and skills developed within the formal education system and the demands of the labour market. For young people, there are several points of entry to the labour force, one of them being civic engagement.

> "At that moment, I was about to complete [my] studies... and it was not as if I planned like: 'I'm going to finish college, I'll get hired'. I could not find a job, I had a lot of free time, so I decided to at least do something useful...and then I got engaged in the Green Youth... For the next couple of years, I plan to [...] stay engaged in the non-governmental sector...at some point, a little bit further in the future, when I finish [my]doctoral studies, I would like to start [...] working for a research institute." (male member of a professional organisation)

Differences Between Engagement in Professional and Grassroots Organisations

In terms of organisation type, the analysis shows a significant difference in motivation between young people engaged in professional civil society organisations and activists from grassroots organisations.

> "There are organisations that want to induce social change... On the other hand, there are organisations that are created not to solve problems, but to earn money... Of course, young people often change organisations because they cannot find what suits them and what is in line with their expectations." (female volunteer in a professional organisation)

Engagement in *professional organisations* is often formalised through volunteering opportunities or internships/apprenticeships and has a strong element of informal and applied education with theintention of developing marketable skills and building social capital. Among the interns of professional CSOs, engagement is perceived as a temporary activity mostly foreducational purposes, often in parallel with formal schooling that should lead towards a good job position either in civil society or theprivate andpublic sectors.

The typical career path of a professional activistleads from internshipor volunteering to a part-time/full-time job in a professional civil society organisation. Volunteering combined with auniversity degree can be a springboard to expert positions within the organisation. Based on the interviews, it becomes clear that members of established, project-based organisations generally see their membership as part-time or semi-formal work that could one day result in a full-time position, rather than as activism or volunteering.

> "From the start, my idea was the same, to stay and work here... The main motive for me is to be in a good and healthy working environment, then to

be interested in what I do, and then the salary. This organisationprovides me with that." (female volunteer in a professional organisation).

Young people are aware that many valuable skills (such as teamwork, time management, communication skills, presentation skills, writing skills,etc.) cannot be obtainedthrough formal education, so they turn to informal education in the civicsector as a means of personal development. The combination of formal and informal education and networking opportunities is perceived as an ideal arrangement for building up a strong CV and finding a job. Our findings indirectly reveal the shortcomings of the formal educational system in Serbia, which does not meet the demands of the job market. There is an evident lack in practical and "soft" skills that are becoming increasingly important in the modern economy.

However, engagement in professional NGOs can have a dark side,since volunteering in this type of organisation can become precarious and exploitative. As described by one of the interviewees, professional "NGOs have quite a similar relationship to their volunteers as the political parties: there is a clear hierarchy of power, young people are often exploited..." (female activist from a leftist grassroots organisation).

Engagement in *grassroots organisations* is, on the other hand, described as a value-driven activity. For the grassroots activists, skills obtained in the process are perceived as a side benefit, but not as an objective *per se*.

> "As an activist, I don't believe that I getsome kind of personal benefits, activism is not about personal gain. I acquired an academic skill-set.... I also obtained a sort of strategic knowledge ...But I didn't expect to get that from activism" (male activist from a leftist grassroots organisation)

Regarding employment opportunities, grassroots activism can be quite disadvantageous, sometimes even counterproductive as it consumes a great dealof time and often impedes the completion of formal education. In a society with rather limited freedom of acting in the public sphere, civic engagement can bring about certain undesirable consequences.

> "I was fired from a school where I worked as a philosophy teacher because I was not a member of the ruling party and because I criticised the neoliberal programme of the new school principal" (male activist from a leftist grassroots organisation).

Moreover, grassroots activism is not oriented towards creating interest networks that can enhance career opportunities. In these kinds of organisations, networking is framed as an activity for capacity buildingof theorganisation/movement itself and not in terms of boosting individual social capital or employability.

> "So far, I have not been hiding from my employers that I am a member of the group. It's in my CV... I was just wondering whether I was abusing it and contaminating my political engagement because I used it for some personal purposes. But then I realized, I really need a job because...if I

want to continue my civic engagement, I need to have some money...that's a vicious circle" (male activist from a leftist grassroots organisation)

However, despite the more horizontal structure and value-based engagement within grassroots organisations, this type of organisation and activism is prone to serious problems, mainly related to the lack of resources.

> "These organisations, despite their best will, cannot reach young people and cannot make them more politically engaged. Because of this, all too often, in such organisations everything comes down to self-initiative, the self-sacrifice of the activists, and it is not sustainable in the long run." (female activist from a leftist grassroots organisation).

While volunteering in professional civic organisations is regarded as a step towards full-time employment and is generally compatible with career aspirations, the situation is very different for grassroots activists. Sincegrassroots activists perceive their engagement as something that is at loggerheads with career development and their general transition to adulthood (one marker for this being full-time employment), the age of thirty is perceived as a turning point in the life of an activist.

> "Then you realize that you are close to yourthirties, that you still haven't been officially employed for a single day, that your parents are getting older, that you have to start making some money, but you do not have a university degree, still have some exams to pass, having done only some small student jobsfor 5 or 10 years, and essentially it should be totally different, because there is a material need for that... Then you think you might get out of the whole activism thing." (male activist from a leftist grassroots organisation)

Civic Engagement and Socioeconomic Status

Biographical availability for civic engagement tends to be dependent on an individual'ssocio-economic position (McAdam, 1986). It could be argued that it is a privilege of the middle-class youth, materially supported by their families during their university years and in periods of unemployment. Moreover, the development of human capital and lifelong learning are highly valuedin middle-class families, so that civic engagement in professional organisations is perceived as a productive use of one's freetime.

> "University did not take too much time, nor was it too demanding... I wanted to try to find my own way, to fillmy free time... so I got engaged within this organisation." (female volunteer from a professional organisation)

On the other hand, for those young people that lack the same opportunities to participate "civil society is not perceived as a benefit, but as awaste of time, because it does not give them monetary compensation or work, and then they have nothing left but to try with political parties" (female volunteer in a professional organisation).

> "When you have to work – one, two, three, jobs just to survive ... to provide for [your]mere existence, then there is no time for activism." (male volunteer in a professional organisation)

In comparison to the "job-seeking" discourse typical for young people belonging to political parties in Serbia (Stanojević&Petrović, 2018), the "CV building" discourse is a characteristic of young people with middle-class backgrounds, engaged in professional NGOs. Since they are sufficiently materially supportedby their families, they are not pressed to find "any job", but a high-quality job.

There is a relatively clear-cut distinction between political and civic engagement among young people in Serbia. Youth engagement in political parties is perceived as purely instrumental. Civic activists usually do nothave friends who are members of political parties, but do have friends that are engaged in the civic sector (Stanojević & Petrović, 2018). One of the reasons for this separation between civic and political engagement could be found in different social backgrounds, with young people engaged in political parties often having less social, human, cultural and economic capital to be able to volunteer and be educated without material compensation in the long run. Being a volunteer and a university student could be considered to bea privilege.

Members of the professional organisations tend to declare themselves as "apolitical", in a narrower sense, meaning that they are not interested in and sometimes even quite critical of party politics, since they perceive it as a place for careerism, opportunism, corruption and the promotion of different particularistic interests which oppose the public interest. However, activists from grassroots organisations are sometimes willing to advance their activist career through political parties – oppositional, labour or right-wing parties that they would organizethemselves. "I believe that civic engagement is just a side routeto a political party" (male activist from a right-wing grassroots organisation).

Conclusion

Civic engagement is perceived as a valuable personal experience. For some young activists it is their first encounter with real-life challenges and problems. Another important aspect of engagement in civic organisations is the experience of belonging to a group of like-minded people.

Through the process of volunteering, young people develop a variety of practical skills that are both important for their personal development and for theirtransition to the labour market. In the individual narratives, a discourse of "CV building" was frequently mentioned, often with a dose of criticism. However, thesignalling function of volunteering as a valuable CV reference was recognized by a majority of the interviewees.

The studyhas shown a considerable difference between, on the one hand, volunteers or interns with professional organisations who are primarily interested in their own personal developmentand, on the other, members of grassroots initiatives whose major interest is social change. Despite these differences, activists

are not overly critical of the instrumental interests observed in others. They acknowledge that these practices are just one of the adaptive mechanismsavailable to young people and preferable to some others, such as membership in political parties.

Volunteering in professional organisations is perceived as a solution for the "employment-experience" paradox.In contrast, grassroots activism is seen as time consuming and even assomething that can endanger one's future professionalinterests and opportunities. Skills gained through the process are perceived as "side benefits" but not as an objective *per se*.

Placingcivic engagement in relation to other lifecourse events, it could be argued that for activists and volunteers it represents a significant part of their transition to adulthood. However, it is also clearthat it fits differently in one's pathway depending on the type of civic engagement. A grassroots activist's career usually starts earlier, in high school, long before any professional or job-related engagement is in the horizon. On the other hand, later instances of civic engagement are typically related to one's inability to find a job. In such cases, civic engagement acts as a bridge between education and employment and,on occasion,as a springboard to an expert career with professional civil society organisations. Sometimes, it is also an exit strategy – a way to leave the country with an enhanced CV thatmight be more attractivefor a potential employer or for admission to auniversity.

The age of thirty is perceived by the interviewees as a symbolic threshold to adulthood, it is a turning point in one's life, a time when one should pause, rethink their activist career and find a "proper" job. Strong family support, especially in material terms,seems to be crucial in sustaining volunteering activities.Young people from poor families usually do not sharethe privilege of their middle-class peersin engaging in this way. In the context of the stalledand prolonged transition to adulthood in Serbia and the quite modest opportunities available in the job market, civic engagement serves as a means to fill the gap between leavingschool and finding a "real" job by "doing something useful" and/or "building" one's CV.

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