

Young People in Changing Societies

The MONEE Project
CEE/CIS/Baltics



United Nations Children's Fund
Innocenti Research Centre
Florence, Italy

This Regional Monitoring Report is the seventh in a series produced by the MONEE project, which has formed part of the activities of UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre since 1992. The project analyses social conditions and public policy affecting children and their families in Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltic republics.

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Foreword



The 65 million young people of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States are the “transition generation”. They were children when their countries took their first steps towards political and economic reform and have witnessed an era of unprecedented change. This is the first generation since the collapse of communism to leave education, enter the job market, or make decisions about raising families. As such, it is putting the reforms of the last decade to the test.

This Report from the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre focuses on the situation of young people who have emerged into a world that bears little relation to the world in which their parents grew up.

One thing is certain: progress for young people and progress in the transition are mutually supportive. The opportunities offered by a new economic climate favour the initiative, creativity and flexibility that are so often the hallmark of youth. But there are risks, including challenges almost unknown to earlier generations: unemployment, drugs, greater inequality, and exclusion. The environments that previously kept young people cocooned from danger have gone, for better or worse, and young people must now play a more active role in protecting themselves. That means involving them, talking to them, listening to them.

Under communism, youth participation was often about conforming. In these new societies, participation must be about making a difference. Young people themselves take a positive view of the changes that have taken place in their countries. This willingness to embrace change could help to maintain and build on the reforms of recent years.

Carol Bellamy
Executive Director, UNICEF

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Introduction and Overview



This Report, like earlier Regional Monitoring Reports of the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, covers countries in transition – the 27 nations of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States which embarked on market and democratic reforms after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Its theme is a generation in transition – 65 million young people aged 15-24.

Young people have an increasing presence and visibility globally: they are star athletes, technology wizards, entrepreneurs, advocates of peace, crusaders against child labour, pop idols, environmentalists, consumers, and leaders in their own right; in short, they are an economic, political and social force. Young people in the transition region are part of this international youth community, but they also have their own unique history, their own present and future.

Youth in the transition region has many faces. They come from widely ranging socio-economic backgrounds, and they live in many different countries. At the same time they often belong to nationalities and ethnic groups which dwell beyond state borders. From one angle, they still look like children; from another, they are already adults. In fact, they are both – and neither. It is increasingly recognized that youth are a distinct segment of society, and this Report aims to give voice to this younger generation who have grown up during the economic and political transformation of their countries.

These young people are their parents' children, but, in many ways, they have not and cannot inherit their parents' legacy. Their parents grew up in the stable, if oppressive, conditions of state socialism. The high degree of social control which saw young people move quickly and surely from school to work and marriage is gone. With transition, the institutions, processes and social norms which facilitated that smooth passage from one generation to the next are weakened, dismantled, under construction, or in the process of fundamental transformation.

This younger generation – children in the late 1980s when the historical changes started in Eastern Europe – are often portrayed as the natural winners of the transition. True, the market and democracy-oriented transformation offers increasing opportunities to the peoples of the region, and young people may be particularly receptive and responsive to new ideas and new conditions. However, they are also pioneers in these reborn societies, and this role, especially at a tender age, makes young people vulnerable to risks – risks which were largely unknown to the parents, educators and other adult authorities in their lives. Young people would appear then to be in a pivotal position: the transition is exposing them to both opportunities and hazards.

How have the post-communist transformations affected the lives of adolescents and young people? Are they better off? Are they healthier? Safer? More or less educated? How do they

participate in the economic, social and political life of their countries? What about family life? And what do they think, and how do they feel about their changing societies?

The Report is not shy about addressing the sometimes hard answers to these questions. It uses both quantitative data and qualitative research in its analysis, although information is sometimes constrained to a limited number of countries, cases, or studies. Differences were quite marked across the region before the transition began, and these differences have since grown. However, the transnational nature of youth issues becomes visible through relevant and sometimes striking findings which demand dialogue and action.

The Report identifies a number of significant gaps between the views and capacities of youth in the region on the one hand and their realities and achievements on the other. It finds that young people in the region:

- are more supportive of market and democratic reforms than older people, but they vote less
- are interested in the social and political life of their countries, but are critical of and even sceptical about the work of the new democratic institutions
- are exposed to higher health risks in terms of reproductive and sexual health, including the threat of HIV-AIDS, while having limited access to relevant information and services
- show often surprisingly tolerant views towards unlawful behaviour and are found in conflict with the law more frequently than were youth before the transition
- attach greater importance to education than did youth before the transition, but tend to start school later and drop out more frequently and, in most countries, are less likely to pursue studies at upper secondary levels
- appear to value family, but are much less likely to marry and have children than people their age did before the transition
- show an impressive degree of flexibility and a wide range of coping strategies in terms of economic welfare, yet still exhibit significantly higher unemployment rates than older adults.

The analysis also finds growing similarities between youth in transition countries and those in other industrialized countries, especially those in Western Europe. This reflects the greater opportunities and choices available to youth in the region, particularly in Eastern Europe, and is clearly a positive outcome of the reforms. However, it also appears that youth in the region now face problems and risks similar to their Western peers, though they often have much weaker support networks.

The Report finds that young people in the region:

- do relatively well or very well in international surveys

in terms of achievements in basic education, but, overall, show less convincing accomplishments in upper secondary education

- enjoy greater participation in tertiary education, at times approaching that in Western countries, but this trend appears to exclude youth in disadvantaged groups
- face similar or significantly higher risk of accident than youth in Western countries, although they have relatively less access to motorized vehicles and recreation facilities
- have considerably lower teen pregnancy rates than did youth before the transition, but, in most countries, the rates are still significantly higher than they are in Western countries
- display an incidence of substance use similar to their Western peers and are less likely in general to describe themselves as healthy and happy
- are, for the most part, less likely to get into conflict with the law than their peers in other industrialized regions, but, when they do, they face a greater chance of being sentenced to deprivation of liberty, often with long terms and under harsh conditions
- exhibit greater unemployment rates than older adults, like their Western peers do, and in several transition countries youth jobless rates appear strikingly high
- show an average wage gap with adults that is similar to or even smaller than that of their peers in Western Europe and North America, though average real wages remain, for the most part, lower than they were pre-transition
- are particularly exposed to exploitation and abuse by older adults and employers operating in the booming informal grey economy and illegal black markets
- do not necessarily participate less in the political and social life of their countries than is the case in Western democracies, though the differences may be bigger at the grassroots
- participate in youth exchanges and contribute to global youth culture despite relatively limited access to travel and the Internet.

These findings confirm that the period when repressive environments could keep youth away from risk-taking, whether for better or worse, are over. How can young people in the region be empowered to seize new opportunities and avoid greater hazards? International conventions now accept that all people, including children and youth, have the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. International research and experience show that having positive goals in life and living in supportive environments help adolescent health and development far more effectively than do oppressive methods. Fresh approaches to youth are particularly needed in the transition region, where economic growth depends greatly on human resources and where social progress often has few solid foundations in terms of civil society and democratic traditions upon which to build.

Indeed, in reviewing the status of various countries, the Report often finds a positive association between progress in the transition agenda and greater opportunities for young people; meanwhile, there is little evidence that slow reform entails fewer risks for youth. It appears, there-

fore, that progress in youth participation and progress in the transition are mutually supportive. The analysis also finds substantial evidence, however, that youth face greater risks now than before even in countries leading in reform. Although the transition may be youth friendly, it demands particular attention towards young people through public policies, as well as private initiatives.

The Report proposes that youth-friendly policies give priority to the following issues regionwide:

- broader and more equitable education opportunities
- greater use of active labour market measures for youth
- reducing accidents and violence
- greater care related to reproductive and sexual health
- prevention related to substance abuse, including tobacco, alcohol and drugs
- implementation of international standards in the treatment of youth in conflict with the law
- promotion of youth participation in civil society.

The Report suggests that in order to be effective youth policies need to:

- recognize youth as a distinct population group, with particular needs and capacities which stem from their formative age
- build on and work in accord with child-related policies
- advance a common approach and terminology for youth issues
- open a meaningful dialogue with youth on questions that affect their lives
- be open to a dialogue on sensitive areas such as sexual and reproductive health
- be multifaceted and supported by detailed research and political will
- better recognize the psychosocial factors in youth development
- develop intersectoral approaches to issues like youth health or employment
- foster trust between youth and service providers and policy-makers
- address factors which hinder access to services such as poor information, lack of confidentiality, and unaffordability
- pay particular attention to youth from disadvantaged backgrounds
- involve youth in service planning and provision
- target the promotion of youth as valuable assets and able partners.

A decade of transition has eroded many doctrines once closely held in the region, and this dissolution can be liberating. In particular, it may change the belief that young people are passive recipients of social values, public services, economic goods, and political priorities. It may promote the understanding that, in mind, body and spirit, the 65 million members of the “youth nation” in the region form an immense asset to their 27 countries and beyond in this time of rapid economic and social transformation.

20 facts about young people and the transition

1. The region now consists of 27 countries, including 22 newly independent nations born out of the former Czechoslovakia, SFR Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union – at times peacefully, at times through ethnic tensions and wars.
2. Most countries now participate in European institutions such as the Council of Europe, and 10 states have officially applied for EU membership – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.
3. By 1999 economic growth had brought national income above the 1989 level only in Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia; most countries still fell short of 1989 output, and many fell a long way short. Still, 1999 was a landmark year, as economic recession finally bottomed out in the region as a whole: economic growth averaged 2 percent that year.
4. In 1999 there were 65 million young people aged 15-24 in the region, six million more than in 1989. Of the total youth population, 26 million (41 percent) were enrolled in education; 21 million (32 percent) were employed, and 18 million (27 percent) were neither in education, nor in employment.
5. Within this last group, eight million youth were unemployed, while another 10 million were neither in education, nor in the labour force. More girls than boys were in education, but fewer females than males held jobs.
6. The average youth unemployment rate for 18 countries where data are available stood at 30 percent, double the overall unemployment rate. In 11 of these countries both the youth unemployment rate and the ratio of youth unemployment to overall unemployment were higher than the European Union averages.
7. Youth unemployment rates are particularly high in Southeastern Europe (71 percent in FYR Macedonia, 61 percent in FR Yugoslavia, 35 percent in Bulgaria), in the Caucasus (46 percent in Azerbaijan, 27 percent in Georgia) and in Central Asia (37 percent in Kyrgyzstan, 33 percent in Tajikistan).
8. Through migration during 10 years of transition, over a million members of the generation aged 5-14 in 1989 (and who are now 15-24) have left the region altogether. Only five countries show a positive balance in migration over the decade of change. Russia has absorbed most of the large-scale movement of a Slavic homecoming which followed the breakup of the former Soviet Union.
9. Within the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina registered the biggest negative change in population, while hundreds of thousands of people were also uprooted in Croatia and FR Yugoslavia during the 1990s.
10. Between 1989 and 1998 the number of marriages among young women fell by more than 40 percent and the number of births by more than a third. Overall, two-thirds of marriages and half of childbirths are still occurring among women under 25.
11. The 41 percent education enrolment rate among 15-24 year-olds in the region is significantly lower than the rate in the EU (58 percent). Overall, in the 23 countries for which data are available, youth participation in educational or training programmes has declined in 14 countries, including Russia, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Romania, Ukraine, Moldova, and all the nations of the Caucasus and Central Asia. A survey in the mid-1990s found that the dropout rate was over 10 percent in vocational education in Hungary, Slovenia, Estonia, and Latvia and about 17 percent in both vocational and general secondary schools in Albania.
12. In 1998 about one-third of 15-18 year-olds were not in school, numbering nine million individuals altogether. This is three million more than in 1989. Adolescents from ethnic minorities, poor families and rural areas are overrepresented among out-of-school youth.
13. Among the 27 million youth aged under 18 in the region, there are about a half-million cases of conflict with the law annually, though only a few thousand young people commit major violent crimes.
14. In 16 countries youth mortality rates stood at lower levels in 1998 than in 1989, including the Baltic States and all the countries of Central Europe. In 11 countries, youth mortality rates were higher – largely in CIS countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.
15. Overall, about 30 percent more young people aged 15-24 died in the region in 1998 than in 1989 – about 15,000 more young men and 4,000 more young women.
16. Suicide rates in 1998 were higher than in 1989 in 16 of the 24 countries for which data are available. Male suicide rates were particularly high, and rising, in Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. Among countries with relatively lower incidence in 1989, the rates more than doubled in Belarus and Turkmenistan.
17. Tobacco use is increasing: a 1993-94 international survey found 10 percent of females and 18 percent of males smoking among 15 year-olds in seven transition countries. Four years later the figures were 22 and 29 percent, respectively. On average, in the 15 Western countries surveyed, 20 percent more girls reported smoking daily or weekly in 1997-98 than four years earlier; in the seven transition countries surveyed the ratio of girls who smoke almost doubled.
18. By the mid-1990s about 10 percent of the secondary school-age population had used cannabis in various countries in the region – up from near zero in 1989. In 1994 a survey in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, found that 2 percent of secondary school students experimented with psychoactive substances; the share jumped to 12 percent over the next two years. A 1999 survey found that 25 percent of 16 year-olds in Hungary had used drugs, with the use of injected drugs three times more frequent than it had been in 1995.
19. In 1998 there were a half-million newly registered cases of syphilis in the region, with 15-17 year-olds accounting for an estimated 40,000 cases and 18-24 year-olds another 200,000. Doctors also found about 3,000 cases of syphilis among 10-14 year-olds. In Russia, almost one in 100 young women aged 18-19 is infected with syphilis annually.
20. More and more young people are living with HIV and dying from AIDS in the region. Altogether, an estimated 360,000 persons had been affected by late 1999, with infections heavily concentrated in Ukraine and Russia, and rising rapidly. Only a small portion of those who are infected are registered and treated. Among the people known to be infected, from one-third in Latvia and the Czech Republic to two-thirds in Belarus are aged under 25.