PARTICIPATING IN SOCIETY

“I do not want to live in any other country, and I want to dedicate my life to my country. I need to get appropriate education and experience for this.”

Mara, 21

Preparations for this year’s Regional Monitoring Report, Young People in Changing Societies, included two Focus Group discussions and three individual interviews in Latvia on the subject of participating in society. Most of the young people taking part in the discussions were involved in voluntary work of some kind and most were optimistic, idealistic and committed. Many of their responses are featured in Chapter Six of the Report, which focuses on young citizens.

The ‘transition generation’ is the first new generation in the region to have the right to citizenship in its fullest sense. What it does with that right has implications for the future of the region as a whole. The new global focus on youth participation is particularly relevant to the new democracies of the transition region, where young people have vastly different expectations, and opportunities, from those of their parents. The presence of younger adults in high government posts shows that the doors are opening, and that many young people are grasping the new opportunities.

The Report finds that young people support the reforms of the last decade. Like young people in other regions, however, this does not necessarily mean that they vote. Opinion polls in 1995-97 found young people less prepared to vote than those over the aged of 25 in 15 transition countries. Some studies suggest, however, that the generation gap between youth and adult turnout rates in the region throughout the 1990s was equal to or smaller than in the West.

It is also clear that many young people show a deep distrust of the new democratic institutions. A survey of young people aged 18-25 in Latvia in 1998, for example, found that 89 per cent thought that the activities of political parties had no relevance to them. Even so, the survey also found that 85 per cent of young people were interested in the political life of the country.

Click here for discussion guidelines on participating in society.