MANAGING UNCERTAINTY OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD IN BULGARIA

Upravljanje neizvesnostima tranzicijac u odraslost kod mladih u Bugarskoj

ABSTRACT The paper examines the strategies of young people in Bulgaria for responding to and dealing with uncertainty in the passage to autonomy. It focuses on the active engagement of the young in the processes of identity formation and gaining independence, thus initiating a change in the common patterns of growing up. The biographical choices that the young make are analysed as embedded in a multilayered social context involving the interplay of macro societal changes, shifts in organisational policies and practices and restructuring of gender and generational relations in the family. Theoretically this paper builds upon the concept of uncertainty in understanding the dilemma of structure and agency in youth transitions. The analysis is based upon official statistical information about economic and demographic trends in 21st century Bulgaria and the findings of an organisational case study of a social service agency and biographical interviews with young working parents, which were conducted within the framework of the international Transitions project. Two case studies of individual strategies of young women – one from a working class family and the other from an ethnic minority - are presented in more detail in order to examine the agency they apply in coping with uncertainty and the resources they mobilize in devising (everyday and short-term) life projects. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data allows a reflection on the process of managing uncertainty with regards to the past experiences, present meanings and future aspirations of young people as influenced by the contracting state support and contradictory company policies in Bulgaria.

KEY WORDS uncertainty, agency, youth transitions, social change, organisational policies and practices, individual strategies

APSTRAKT U tekstu se ispituju strategije koje mladi u Bugarskoj primenjuju u odnosu na neizvesnosti u procesu osamostaljivanja. Fokus je na aktivnom angažmanu mladih u procesu formiranja identiteta i sticanja nezavisnosti, koji unosi promene u uobičajena obrasce odrastanja. Izbori koji u svojim biografijsama prave mladi se analiziraju kao uklopljeni u višeslojni društveni kontekst koji uključuje međudejstvo makro društvenih promena, promene politika i praksi organizacija, kao i restrukturaciju rodnih i generacijskih odnosa u porodici. U teorijskom smislu, članak se oslanja na koncept neizvesnosti u pokušaju da se razume dilema između struktura i delanja u tranzicijama u odraslost. Analiza se zasniva na

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Introduction

Studying changes in youth transitions at the time of societal transition has proven to be a highly heuristic approach to understanding of the wider social change (Tomanović and Ignjatović, 2006; Ule and Kuhar, 2008; Roberts, 2009). The diversification of the pathways from education to the labour market and there of the forms of employment and unemployment that young people concentrate in, the multiple housing and family arrangements preceding the independence from the parental home, the delay of family formation and the reduction of the number of children are immanent features of the social transformation that took place in the countries in the South-East of Europe in the 1990s. While academics in Bulgaria still argue whether or not the transition to capitalism has been accomplished towards the end of the second decade after the 1989 revolutions, it is clear that youth as a life stage has been significantly transformed in the societies in the region, departing from the previous strictly controlled and highly protected transitions of the communist past (Kovacheva, 2001). One of the features that young people in Bulgaria and other countries in South-East Europe share with their peers in the West is the increasing uncertainty of their lived experiences and future expectations.

In this article I examine the ways in which young people in Bulgaria respond to and deal with uncertainty by focusing on active strategies for managing their complex journey in social time and social space. Young people’s active engagement in the processes of identity formation and achievement of autonomy is manifested in their choices to initiate a change in the available patterns of growing up and to mobilize diverse resources in their (everyday and short-term) life projects. The choices which young people make are studied as embedded within a framework of opportunities and constraints arising from the social context in which their lives unfold. The social context itself is multilayered and its examination requires taking into account the interplay of household, organizational and national context, and the influences upon them coming from the process of globalization. Sources of
The uncertainty of youth transitions in late modern societies is arising mainly from economic trends conceptualized as globalization: intensified market competition, accelerated spread of new technologies, rising flexibility and intensification of work (Castells, 1996; Guillén, 2001). While these trends have affected all social groups active in the labour market, those who have been considered as newcomers have been hit considerably hard (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2009; Bell and Blanchflower, 2011). Rising job insecurity and wider economic uncertainty are accompanied by major value shifts in the life horizons of young people. Social research (du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Leccardi, 2005) has established a shift away from long-term plans toward short-term projects and less binding commitments to work and partnership and a tendency to view the future as ‘indeterminate and indeterminable’. In a way, the future as something manageable and under one’s control is revoked and the young are forced to live in the present. This new time orientation towards a life in an ‘extended present’ (Leccardi, 2006) is a manifestation of the temporal insecurity which the current generation is experiencing. It does not allow them to construct their own biography in a consistent way and develop a coherent self identity. As a result, youth biographies are now less linear and more de-standardised with shifts in different directions rather than built step by step upon the previous one in a sequenced progression. Youth transitions are becoming ‘yoyo’ trajectories of oscillating between autonomy and dependency, between different forms of education, training, unemployment and employment (Walther and Stauber, 2002).

The impact of globalisation on youth transitions is filtered through the institutions of the welfare state, employment, education and family systems that operate in each country during the transition to adulthood (Blossfeld et al, 2005; Esping-Andersen, 1999). There have been various typologies of the welfare state regimes in the academic literature (see Abramson, 1999) none of which has been fully able to reflect the institutional arrangements in all policy domains and all
countries. What is more, the national welfare states are in a process of change, accepting common features under the often contradictory pressures from the European integration and globalization, and being hit hard by the austerity measures and other policy efforts to respond to the current economic crisis. There are attempts at classification of the institutional contexts of youth transitions (Walther, 2006; Wallace and Bendit, 2009) which distinguish between four types of youth policy in the old member states of the EU and place the organization of youth policy in Central and Eastern European countries in another broad ‘post-socialist’ type. The latter group, however, is particularly diverse, despite sharing some commonalities from the socialist past (Ferge, 2001; Potuceck, 2004; Kovacheva et al, 2011). For example, the youth policy in Bulgaria demonstrates a disharmonious development in the past twenty years, oscillating between liberal reforms and familialistic trends while still preserving some social-democratic elements (Mitev, 2005; Kovacheva, 2010).

The uncertainty in the social context of youth transitions in Bulgaria twenty years after the change of regime arises from the globalisation pressures in a similar way as in the developed Western countries. There are, however, at least two specific factors added to the degree and forms in which uncertainty is experienced by young Bulgarians: the regime change causing dramatic transformation of the social expectations that are taken for granted, and acting as a generator of uncertainty *par excellence* (Reiter 2010); and the inconsistency of the welfare reforms bringing about low trust in public institutions by the young and their parents (Tilkidziev and Dimova, 2010). Rather than following linear and well structured school-to-work transitions, young women and men in early 21st century Bulgaria are experiencing a diversification of educational paths by mixing formal with non-formal education and training, as well as by combining work and studies. Young people’s employment careers are now shaped by the spread of unemployment and underemployment, the growth of precarious jobs and high mobility within the enlarged Europe and beyond. The passage from dependency to autonomy is now characterized by a rising importance of leisure in the process of identity formation and the spread of consumerism and global cultures, more individualised forms of religious affiliation and more expressive forms of political involvement (Mitev, 2005). The sharp withdrawal of state intervention as regards the youth after 1989 has resulted in more freedom and less control but also in less support, leading to individualization and privatization of youth problems.

The youth in present-day Bulgaria do not benefit much from the pluralisation of schools and universities, the opening up of access to higher education, the democratization of teaching and the new opportunities for non-formal learning. Many young people fall out of the system and the country lags behind the EU average enrolment rates. Thus, the enrolment in primary school (ISCO-1) in Bulgaria in 2010-11 was as low as 91.5%, in secondary school (ISCO -3A, 3C) 80.3% and in university (ISCO-5A) 34.6%. The National Statistical Institute (NSI,
2011a) classified 14% of young people as early school leavers. Lifelong learning was a rare practice and only 1.2% of the population aged 25-64 was enrolled in some kind of education and training. Twenty years after the start of reforms the labour market in Bulgaria continues to be unfriendly to the young entrants who felt the crisis in employment most strongly. Statistical data show that the activity rate in the age group 15-24 in 2010 was only 22% while it was 59.7% for the whole working age population (15-64), which was in turn 5% lower than the EU average (NSI, 2011b). Young people tend to concentrate in the precarious sectors of the labour market holding insecure temporary jobs, with flexible working schedule, often without employment contracts (Kovacheva, 2006; Sotirova, 2007). With the economic crisis, unemployment in the country rose from 6.3% in 2008 to 9.5% in 2010, and the unemployment rate among young people aged 15-24 reached 23.2% in 2010, which was more than two times higher than the general unemployment rate (NSI, 2011b). In the group of the young unemployed, those with low or no education are at the greatest risk of long-term unemployment. The unemployment rate among the youth with university education is not as high in Bulgaria as in the South European countries such as Greece, Portugal or Spain. Nevertheless there are no official data on how many of the young with a university degree have low-skilled jobs, for example in catering and security.

Among the structural factors in youth disadvantage, ethnicity has the greatest influence on the opportunities for social integration of the youth in Bulgaria. Most disadvantaged are young people coming from families of ethnic Roma and Turks who comprise respectively 4.9% and 8.8% of the population in 2011 according to the last census (NSI, 2011c). To belong to such a group means to have several times higher risk of early school leaving, long term unemployment and poverty (Tilkidziev et al, 2009). In the Roma group, less than one out of ten has completed education higher than elementary, and the illiteracy rate is greater than 18% and rising since 1991 (Simeonova et al, 2011). The same report calculated ten times higher poverty rate among the Roma than among the ethnic Bulgarians and the ratio is similar between unemployment rates for the two ethnic groups. The relevant rates for the Turkish minority have values between those of ethnic Bulgarians and the Roma.

Gender differences in employment and unemployment constitute a mixed model and are often not as visible in Bulgaria as they are in many advanced economies. Thus the Eurostat data show that women’s employment rate in 2010 was 8% lower than the rate for men, and that the gender pay gap was 15%, which is less than the EU average of 17% (Eurostat, 2011). The average number of working hours per week is 41 for both women and men, and the predominant employment pattern for households in Bulgaria is still full-time jobs for both partners. Flexibility in terms of time, place, and legal conditions for men and women is very low and does not differ much. Thus, only 1.5% of the employed held part-time jobs in 2010. However, what contributes most to the imbalances between women and men in Bulgaria is the unequal division of housework among the partners and the traditional
gender ideology about family roles (Stoyanova and Kirova, 2008). The European Quality of Life Survey (Eurofoundation, 2007) found that women did about 6 hours of housework more than men every week. Respondents from Bulgaria in the European Social Survey (Tilkidziev & Dimova, 2010) scored among the lowest on the scale measuring attitudes to gender equality. The dominant culture assumes women’s greater commitment to unpaid care for dependent family members and men’s greater responsibility for career advancement and entrepreneurship.

The increasing uncertainty of the transition to adulthood has brought changes in the strategies for family formation of the young in Bulgaria. Cohabitation has become a preferred option for many young people as it allows a greater freedom for individual partners (Mitev, 2005). This value change is confirmed by official statistics (NSI, 2011c). Thus in 2010 de facto marriages comprised 70% of the young households and more than 50% of all children were born to unmarried parents which is a steep rise from the share of 12% in 1990. Another strategy employed by young people is having children later in life. The average age of mothers giving birth for the first time grew from 21 years in 1990 to 27.5 in 2010 (NSI, 2011c). Studying this trend, Stefanov and Dimitrov (2003) attributed it to the aspirations of the young to get higher education, a proper job and to start a career. Another important factor is the high emigration rate of young people from the country which, however, has not been studied from the perspective of their transition to parenthood. At the same time, young people decide upon having fewer children although this trend is not linear. The official demographic data show that the coefficient for total fertility rate, measuring the number of children whom a mother would give birth to, was 1.81 in 1990, it reached its minimum of 1.12 in 1997, and it has been slowly rising since then to reach 1.49 in 2010 (NSI, 2011c).

The strategies for delaying parenthood and reducing the number of children in the family are not unanimously applied by all young people in the country. Most widely discussed in the media are the diverging patterns between the Bulgarian and Roma ethnic groups, although there are no reliable enough research data (Mirchev, 2005; Tomova, 2005). Based on his own calculations of statistical data, Mitev (2006) contends that at the age of 18 only 4% of Bulgarian women have given birth to a child while already 34% of Roma women have done so. At the age of 25, half of young women in the Bulgarian ethnic group have no children yet, while only one eighth of the Roma minority have not given birth. At the same age, 11% of Bulgarian women have two or more children and 41% of Roma women. Stefanov and Dimitrov (2003) provide data from the value survey demonstrating that the Roma want more children than ethnic Bulgarians. However, it should be noted that young people in the Roma minority at present have fewer children and later in life in comparison with the previous generations of ethnic minority parents.
Data and methods

The research data analysed in this paper were collected as a part of the comparative eight-country project Transitions (Lewis et al, 2009). Following a common research design and methods (Brannen et al, 2009), the organisational layer of context in Bulgaria was targeted by case studies of a private bank and a state agency for social assistance. This paper focuses on the public service organisation which had seven centres for social assistance in the territory of one large city in the country, one centre for home patronage and one department for child protection (Kovacheva, 2009). The methods for the case study involved interviews with the Director and the Human Resources Manager of the regional agency and five of the other directors and line managers who also provided a variety of organisational documents. In addition, four focus groups were conducted with 26 participants who were employees of the agency and also parents of children up to 6 years of age. Later we selected from these twelve parents in high and low status jobs to take part in biographical interviews. Specific characteristics of the fieldwork in Bulgaria were that the permission to conduct the study had to be given from the top of the ministry rather than from the regional level only, and that the Human Resources Manager, when asked for a list of young parents, gave only names of female employees. The latter fact reflects not only the predominantly female profile of the workforce in the agency but also the cultural understanding of parenthood responsibilities for young children in Bulgaria. Fathers had to be recruited additionally (their interviews are not included in the analysis here).

The individual in-depth interviews followed a guide which allowed the flow of conversation in different time frames (Nilsen et al, 2012). The guide started with questions about the present, then it led the respondent to reflect on the past and from there to take a look at the future and share their expectations. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and then fully transcribed. The data were subjected to a thematic analysis focusing on different types of transitions and in different domains. Most important, however, was the biographical approach which had the advantage that, while following the individual life trajectories, it allowed revealing different models of social relationships in their dynamics (Bertaux and Kohli, 1984). Thus we analysed the links and differences between the events in one’s life, the meanings that these events had for the interviewee and the way the story was told. A special focus was placed on the key moments (Giddens, 1991; Devadson, 2007) on which the interviewees reflected in order to explain their life strategies. Other country specifics worth mentioning were that the working parents in Bulgaria were younger than those in the other countries, reflecting the earlier average age of giving birth in Bulgaria, while the managers were older, which in turn points to the methods of career advancement in the Bulgarian company.
The organisational context

The organizational context acts as a lens refracting the influences from the wider social context of national institutions, employment and demographic trends and public policies, and it can increase or reduce the uncertainty of youth transitions. The agency for social assistance in Bulgaria itself was affected by the numerous reforms in the welfare system and has undergone many changes in its structures, functioning procedures and the number of personnel, which amplified the structural uncertainty.

While social care in Bulgaria was underdeveloped during communism, in the first years of market reforms social care offices were created under the auspices of the local municipalities which recruited staff without any qualifications in the field. Since then, the offices have been renamed several times and their supervision has been shifted between the ministry and the local authorities, accompanied by personnel reshuffles among high- and middle-level management, while the employment contracts changed from permanent to temporary. The fieldwork was conducted in 2007-2009, after a staff reduction and a slight rise in the salaries. The latest structural change was executed without consultation with local units and the rumours were the main channel of information about its objectives and methods (Kovacheva, 2009). While most employees had already received permanent contracts with 40 hour-working week, there was a common feeling of insecurity and employees at all levels learnt that ‘there is no such a thing as a secure job in the state sector in Bulgaria’, as one of the focus group participants put it.

The agency for social assistance was commonly defined as a ‘good employer’ in the focus groups because it complied with the national legislation on labour protection and childcare policies. The legal arrangements for social protection of the employees were in force in the private sector as well, but many focus group participants cited cases of breaking the law by small private employers, in particular discrimination against young women who were expected to become mothers and take long parental leaves, or cases of sacking mothers after coming back from such leaves.

At the time of the fieldwork, almost twenty years after its establishment, the organization has become more professionalized with many new recruits with university qualifications in social care and more developed regulations for providing social assistance. The reorganizations led by efficiency drives and tightening of budget restrictions have resulted in work intensification and stricter administration. These changes were accompanied by a cultural shift towards a business-type ethics focusing on cost-efficiency. This was particularly evident in the dominant discourse among high level managers. The head of the regional agency explained that under the conditions of a market economy the family friendly measures in support of the personnel were a thing of the past:
‘We are supposed to care for our clients in need, not for our staff. It is enough that we ... keep to the legislation.’

The long parental leaves allowed by the national legislation and generous child sick leaves were valued highly by the focus group participants, but they all reported to have reduced their take-up, having been afraid for their jobs. Unlike the western companies in the study, there were no flexible working arrangements introduced formally and the young working parents had to rely upon the informal help from line managers and colleagues in cases of family emergencies. The gap between the formal state policies and unsupportive organizational culture further increased the general feeling of insecurity. The focus group participants commonly expressed a belief that the problems with managing the transition to work and to parenthood had become individual responsibility and they did not get an impression from their employers that they are entitled to support. In the words of one social worker, mother of a 5-year-old child:

‘Previously it all boiled down to one and the same way: you complete your studies, start to work, have children, look after them at home for the whole of the maternity leave, then go back to work and take all the sick leaves that your child needs. Now the social state is gone... You are left on your own.’

**Individual strategies for managing uncertainty**

The biographical interviews from the Bulgarian study have been previously analysed in order to examine linear and non-linear transitions to parenthood and a multiplicity of patterns of reconciliation of work and family life (Kovacheva, 2010). In this paper I look into the qualitative data from the perspective of biographical uncertainty. My goal is not to offer a new classification of strategies for dealing with uncertainty (See the empirically grounded typology of Reiter, 2010), but to explore how similar macro (societal) and meso (organizational) contexts interact with micro contexts of individual young people in their transition to autonomy. I present two cases both belonging to a type which can be defined as actively managing uncertainty. I explore the trajectories of a high status social worker and a low-qualified care worker, both of whom have succeeded to achieve a work-life balance - satisfactory according to their own evaluation – through mobilizing a multiplicity of resources on the state, organizational and household levels.

The case of Nelly

Nelly is 28, a social worker in the child protection unit of the agency for social assistance in a big city. She is living with her partner and a three year old daughter in a rented flat. In her own words, Nelly had a ‘protected childhood’ in her
working class family in a small town in the northern part of the country and was not affected ‘significantly’ by the regime change in 1989. She experienced uncertainty for the first time when she left her home town at the age of 15 to study at a designer vocational school in a large city in South Bulgaria. Nelly describes her choice as ‘just following the tide’. The geographical move turned out to be a shift in the social space opening up new opportunities but also bringing about many new risks. She started combining studies and work because her parents’ financial support was insufficient. From her present perspective this was again accommodating to a form of behaviour widespread among her peers. She changed several jobs, all in the informal economy, while at school and then at university. Nelly explained that she valued those jobs for the financial independence and the experience of meeting different people. Her choice of speciality at the university – ‘social pedagogy’ – was also largely accidental as at the time ‘nobody knew what it was really about’.

Nelly took an active stance in managing her own biography one year after graduation. She was working as a waitress when she decided to leave her current job and look for an opening in her university speciality. This decision meant leaving behind the financial security, even if limited, that her precarious job provided and accepting the uncertainty of unregistered unemployment. Nelly defined this as a critical moment in her life, a moment of self-exploration and a key choice.

One day I told myself: ‘Is working at a restaurant… your goal in life? No! Then you should do something to make use of your university degree.’ And I quit the job in order to look around and search for an opening for social workers.

Nelly’s risk-taking was successful – she found an open competition for a social worker at an NGO dealing with children. She immediately liked her job which turned out to ‘suit her personality, her understanding of the world’. Later, the non-governmental organization has been co-opted to the newly formed state agency for social assistance and Nelly had to apply for the new position again through a process of written and oral exams just at the time when her daughter was six months old.

Nelly’s transition to parenthood was also not very traditional and required choices, reflection and negotiation on her part. Her conscious strategy was to delay parenthood while focusing on her career. Since the last year of high school she had a stable relationship with a young man who was a skilled worker in a construction company and they started cohabiting after he came back from the one-year military service for men in Bulgaria obligatory at the time. Having lived together with her partner for about seven years, she found herself pregnant. Nelly reflected upon this situation:
I had always wanted to have a child but tended to see it always in the future tense [laughs]… When I found out [that she was pregnant], I felt that I was ready, that if it comes I will cope with it though it wasn’t especially planned, it was not an aim…

Nelly took on the responsibility of parenthood but did not want to give up her career: ‘I never thought I would be a stay at home mom, absolutely never’. Her agency in dealing with uncertainty is best manifested in all the negotiations she had to initiate in order to find a satisfactory work-life balance after she became a mother. She asked her parents to take care of the baby for two months until it was eight-month old – the age limit required by public crèches. Then she had to overcome the reluctance of the managers in the state department for child protection to take her on when they realised that she had a very young baby, and she convinced them that she would be fully devoted to the job. She negotiated with her partner to start picking up their daughter from the kindergarten in the evenings, as Nelly often worked long hours. She was very proud of her partner who accepted a reduction in his salary in exchange for not going on long business trips, so that he would be able to look after their daughter in the evenings. This modest accommodation in his career was a big step in the direction of the ‘new fatherhood’ – which is another silent issue in the public debate in Bulgaria unlike the discourses in the Western countries included in the project (Lewis et al, 2009). Nelly gradually built a network of neighbours, colleagues and friends on whom she relied in the case of emergency.

Negotiating new practices and new roles in work and family is at the same time a process of biographical learning. The case of Nelly’s transition to parenthood demonstrates the significance of both formal and informal learning. In her interview she pointed out the mutual enrichment of her experiences as a social worker and as a mother. She explained that she learned how to deal with critical situations at home in the process of managing conflicts with clients and discussing cases with her colleagues. It goes the other way round as well – the security and the support she felt from her family helped her deal with stressful circumstances at work. She was very pleased with her daughter’s achievements and wished to see her grow up to be an ‘autonomous and happy person’.

At present Nelly manages to combine many activities – she works full time at the state agency, studies part-time MA programme in human resources management and manages her family life successfully.

*When I don’t do anything, when I am in doubt, I do not feel solid ground beneath me, I feel horrible. When I have reached a decision, when I can act, it is exactly the opposite – I am calm, I feel responsible, I feel in charge, I can change the world...*
The case of Filiz

The second case study is of a 23 year old woman belonging to the most disadvantaged ethnic minority in Bulgaria – the Roma. Filiz is employed on a temporary contract as a ‘social consultant’ in the agency for social assistance where her job is to help qualified social workers deal with clients from the Roma minority. She is a mother of two children aged 6 and 4. Filiz was born and grew up in one of the most deprived city suburbs with widespread poverty and high unemployment rate. Even though it is very close to the city centre, the suburb is highly isolated in a ghetto-like way where about 30,000 people, mostly Roma and Turks, occupy a few square kilometres filled with small clay houses and narrow streets.

Filiz started following the traditional life course transitions of the young in her ethnic community (Tilkidziev et al, 2009) - left school at 15 and got married the same year. For less than a year Filiz formed a family, moved to live with her husband and his parents, became a housewife and a mother. Like Nelly, Filiz felt she was moving with the tide and marriage was not a self-conscious strategy to reduce insecurity.

I wasn’t ready yet for all that, not at all, but it happened... And I had to deal with it.

In the new family there was a traditional division of labour with Filiz taking care of the children and all domestic tasks. Her husband is from Turkish ethnic group and is two years older than her. He is an unskilled worker, has an insecure low-income job, and unlike Nelly’s husband works long hours at the job and is involved little in childcare and housework. Filiz found this ‘natural’, thus sharing more traditional values concerning gender roles in ethnic and particularly Turkish minority families (Tomova, 2005). She, however, suffered from a feeling of social isolation, having contacts mostly with her mother-in-law who was also a housewife.

Her biographical transition to adulthood could have ended here had not Filiz accepted uncertainty and ventured into a new road. She found herself capable of agency and social innovation and managed to mobilize personal resources despite cultural and economic constraints. Once her second child became three years old - old enough to be placed in a public kindergarten, Filiz decided to take charge of her life and initiated many changes. She signed up as a private student to get secondary education and found a job in the agency for social assistance. Filiz explained the change by ‘being tired to be looked upon by my husband’s relatives’ although she could not point to a definite moment when she took the critical decisions. She is still being traditional in many ways. Her role as a mother is very important for her own identity and her place in society. She misses the opportunity to make nice cookies for her children, to have warm meals every evening. But Filiz has employed agency
in many new ways and considers her job also very important for her identity and self-fulfilment:

‘I like it a lot that we communicate with people and help people... Some come and complain and argue that we are not doing enough but there are also people who are grateful. There are people who did not like me that much before but are now friendly and respectful.’

Her job changed her relationship with her husband as well. Filiz managed to reshape the power relations at home and to bring innovations in the gender relations in the family, thus shattering the patriarchal gender norms. In her narrative, the young woman underlined that she valued her newly gained freedom very much. She felt more mature and had higher self-esteem.

*Before, when I was a housewife, my husband was very jealous. He didn’t want me out of the house. After I started working, things have changed. Now I can go out whenever I want. I often go to cafes with the girls [from the job].*

Acting in a new way involves a process of informal learning. Filiz reflected upon how widening of her contacts broadened the information about managing motherhood. Previously it was only her mother-in-law whom she could turn to for advice on dealing with her children. At present, she exchanges experiences and learns a lot from her colleagues as well as from other mothers bringing the children to the kindergarten or taking them back home in the evening. The young woman hopes that her employment contract will be renewed for another year and although she cannot expect that it will be changed to the permanent one, by the time the next contract ends, she would have a diploma from the secondary school which will open new opportunities for work.

Like Nelly, Filiz is managing uncertainty in an active way. Her personal agency allows her to overcome some of the restrictions which are much stronger in disadvantaged groups of the ethnic youth.

*To make things better for myself, I have to act. This is the truth that I have learnt... But sometimes acting can only hurt you. When you want to do something, to change something, they start piling things against you... I can achieve only a little, but I feel satisfied.’*

**Conclusions**

Under the conditions of an open market economy and weakened socialising institutions, youth transitions to autonomy in 21st century Bulgaria are no longer viewed as ‘self-evident’ and ‘natural’. Uncertainty has marked young people’s
perceptions of the present as well as of the future. Neither their own past experiences nor their parents’ knowledge provide enough guidance for dealing with uncertainty. The changed social context has not removed the structural barriers confronting the biographical constructions in which the young are engaged in searching for autonomy. Family background, educational achievements, and access to social networks are still playing a significant role in shaping youth transitions. Yet the uncertainty today provides more possibilities of both success and failure than in the past under the strict control of the omnipotent state. The two case studies from the Transition project are of young women who managed to make reflective choices and to beget social innovation in sequencing the transition steps and combining work and family responsibilities. They belong to the group of young people actively searching for opportunities and consciously developing capabilities of managing various demands and achieving social integration.

Our analysis showed that in order to manage the uncertainty in their transitions to autonomy, the two young women used a variety of resources at different levels of the social context. On the macro level, what proved to be significant for Nelly were the widening opportunities for university education, when the low limits from the past were removed in the early 90s and the number of students multiplied. Filiz benefited from the spreading form of a ‘private student’ which, however, still lags behind the level of dropping out of formal education among the Roma population. In Nelly’s transition to employment, stepping stones included informal jobs and the work for a foreign voluntary association until she has established herself at a permanent job in the state sector for social services. Filiz secured her entry into the unfriendly labour market by getting involved in the state sponsored programme for social assistance targeting ethnic minorities. In combining work and parenthood both women used the public kindergartens taking care of children from 3 to 6 years of age. Nelly started using the formal services much earlier signing her 8-month daughter in a public crèche. While the fixed working hours of the state agency and the kindergarten suited Filiz perfectly, they were a problem for Nelly, the high-status and career oriented social worker, and she had to rely on the help of her extended family – her parents for full-time care of the baby for two months, and her husband in the evenings when Nelly was delayed at work. On the organisational level, there were no formal policies in support of working parents and the women used informal help from colleagues in cases of child sickness or other family emergencies. Both women pointed to receiving and giving support in the community where they lived.

The cases of the two young women revealed the importance of young people’s agency in dealing with uncertainty. In Bulgaria, like in other modern societies, the competence for negotiating and communicating is widening the space for action and choices, allowing young people to swim between constraints and resources. Learning how to balance between one’s goals and the agendas of various institutions is of even greater value in the post-socialist context where the reformed
state administrations and newly formed private companies still lack enough established and legitimate practices. Under such circumstances, the effective action depends a lot on the capacities and good will of individual actors within the institutions. Investing in networks and building trust between actors lie at the heart of the concept of social capital and it also proved to be a significant factor in managing uncertainty (See also Reiter, 2010b; Tomanović, 2010).

The findings of this study confirm the conclusions from other research that young people should be treated as actors, not as victims of the uncertainty brought about by social change in European societies (Walther et al, 2009; du Bois Reymond and Stauber, 2005; Reiter, 2008). Therefore, the state policy should devise more flexible policy measures allowing for choice and space for negotiations in order to match up with the individualized strategies in dealing with uncertainty. There is also a need for greater involvement of employers in social policy by taking responsibility for lifelong learning and family-friendly measures, particularly for young employees who are making simultaneous transitions to employment and to parenthood.

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Siyka Kovacheva: Managing uncertainty of young people's transitions to adulthood in Bulgaria


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