ACTIVE AGEING OF THE POPULATION
АКТИВНО СТАРЕЊЕ СТАНОВНИШТВА

JELENA STOJILKOVIĆ-GNJATOVIĆ
Geographical institute “Jovan Cvijić” SASA
Dure Jakšića 9, 11000 Belgrade, Republic of Serbia
E-mail: j.stojilkovic@gi.sanu.ac.rs

MARIJA BELIJ
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Geography
Studentski trg 16, 11000 Belgrade Republic of Serbia
E-mail: marija.belij@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: One of the most important paradigms that emerged in demographic literature when it comes to mitigation of the population ageing in developed world is the concept of active ageing. At the core of this approach is the idea that elderly population is a very important and resourceful segment of a society because of their large experience in different fields that can contribute to the welfare of all. However, there are still no empirical studies of the population such as pensioners that can contribute the most. Even though elderly pensioners are economically inactive, they have a considerable spare time and non-negligible financial assets. In order to empirically enlighten the practice of active ageing in Serbia, we conducted a survey based on the questionnaire from Special Eurobarometer Report 378 dealing with issues of active ageing in Europe. We chose as the target population (already active) participants of the Sixth Olympiad of Sport, Health and Culture for the Third Age held in Vrnjačka Banja. As a result, we got comprehensive responses to a variety of questions, which could be used as guidelines on how to achieve active aging. Additionally, collected evidences of different attitudes of the active elderly towards family, young generations, work, pension, and the like are elaborated.

KEYWORDS: active ageing, pensioners, Serbia, interview, population policy

INTRODUCTION

Population ageing has become a core topic of demographic research recently. Global concerns are raised over the anticipated problems that accompany this
phenomenon. This process is also regarded as a danger to economy. One of the main driving forces of demographic development is a fertility rate, which have stabilized at a quite low level in Serbia. As one of the consequences of the decreasing number of births, the percentage of older population is increasing. When comparing to the rest of the world, Serbia (without Kosovo and Metohija due to data unavailability) is among the oldest countries in the world [IASA, 2014]. Still, there are certain fundamental differences between some demographically old (western) European countries and Serbia, of which the most important is life expectancy length. In Serbia, life expectancy at birth and at 65 is less than in the majority of developed courtiers [Devedžić and Stojilković 2012]. While other European countries facing with the population ageing are in more favorable position when it comes to solving this puzzle of ageing and prosperity, Serbia does not have the same resources, preconditions and highly educated migrants as it is the case in richer countries. This is the reason why the paradigm of active ageing is seen as a possible solution since it gives the framework for activation of older people.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Perception of older people’s role in a society went through various approaches, reflecting different historical contexts older people lived in. To begin with, (socio-psychological) old age was defined as a period of disengagement [Cumming 1960], meaning that older people are slowly reducing their social contacts and narrowing their social networks. It was regarded as beneficial and consensual process on the behalf of individuals and society as well. This theory was largely criticized and followed by other theories that are more in favor of active role of older people, such as activity theory and continuity theory [Havighurst 1961; Atchley 1989]. Concept of active ageing [WHO, 2002] as a paradigm that promotes healthy lifestyles, longer activity of the elderly and their full participation in society is giving policy dimension to this issue. Society’s ability to use the potentials of older people could be one thing that makes great difference in outcomes of population policy. As one of the results of Madrid International Plan of Actions on Ageing [2002], this concept will gain wider audience in the following years. Investigating attitudes of already active older people is important since they can be used as guidelines for future recommendations and directions for mitigation of this process.

SURVEY CHARACTERISTICS AND RESPONDENTS  
STRUCTURE

This is a pilot survey in our country, based on the questionnaire from Special Eurobarometer Report 378 [2012]. Active ageing is a separate topic in this report because 2012 was declared “European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations”. The need for such report came from a (mis)perceived threat of population ageing, instead of an achievement. Unfortunately, Serbia was not one of the countries where this research was conducted, since this report covered EU Member States and five non-EU countries (Cro-
The main themes of this report were concerned with overall perceptions of age and older people, older people in the workplace, retirement and pensions, voluntary work and support for older people and age friendly environment. The main difference between this report and our research is the scope of interviewees, since we included only pensioners while original report encompassed respondents aged 15 and above. Some of the questions were adapted and some, considered not necessary for this research, were omitted. All respondents were very cooperative, giving us the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews as our main goal, which enriched our findings.

Demographic characteristics of respondents show that 58% were male. Average age of respondents was 66.6 years (ranging from 56 to 80). Geographic distribution of respondents was quite scattered and covered most regions of the Republic of Serbia (22 municipalities). Half of female respondents were widows, 29% married, while 14% were never married and the rest was divorced. Marital structure of male respondents was different, since 70% were married, 20% widowers and the rest equally distributed among the divorced and never married. Educational attainment of respondents also varied, 5% finished only elementary school, half of respondents have a secondary school degree, 30% high school and 8% hold a university degree (2 respondents finished postgraduate studies). The majority of respondents had children and grandchildren (one of them even had a great-grandchild), 15% had no grandchildren yet, and 70% had at least one grandchild. Interviewees without children were never married or were divorced. Age at which the respondents attained pensionable rights varied from 45 years (one respondent on disability pension) to 65 (only two respondents), while the rest were mostly aged between 54 and 60 years. There was a noticeable difference between male and female age of retirement, as supposed, due to legislative framework of pension law.

**SETTING OF THE OLYMPIAD**

In order to investigate attitudes of active older people, survey was conducted during Sixth Olympiad of Sport, Health and Culture for the Third Age. This event was held in Vrnjačka Banja from September 30 to October 4, 2013. In order to participate in the Olympiad, one had to be a pensioner belonging to a 5-member team competing in different sport sections. Only one of the team members could be younger than 60 years, and gender balance was mandatory (at least one member had to be of opposite sex). Most of the teams represented their municipalities, but there were also representatives of NGOs for example. Competition categories were relay, chess, archery, darts and penalty shootout (there was also fishing, but being an individual sport it was not part of the overall competition score). One of the reasons why we chose this form of gathering of older people was because the most of them were physically fit to compete in moderate demanding sport disciplines. This proved that their health and condition were good enough, so they could be regarded as active and healthy older persons and as ordinary models for active ageing. There were roughly 700 participants in this event, and 5% of them were interviewed for the purpose of this research.
RESULTS

The analyses of answers to various questions we asked were grouped according to different research fields. The first block of questions dealt with self-perceived health, living conditions, life in general, personal relations and independency. Also, there were questions about the perception of age, like “When someone becomes old/young” and personal feelings about one’s life stage. The next block of questions inquired about the attitudes of people aged 55 and above about their role in different spheres of society (in politics and in family) and what they personally thought whether their role in these fields should be greater or not. The questions that followed were about the contribution to different fields, so respondents were asked to what extent people over 55 financially supported their families and cared for their grandchildren. The following block was concerned with individual knowledge about the share of people over age 65 and about life expectancy in Serbia. The next set of questions dealt with retirement and personally perceived ability to continue with work before retirement. The last set of questions dealt with intergenerational perspective in the workplace from the point of view of our interviewees.

Answers to the question about self-perceived health showed that most of the respondents were satisfied with their physical condition (average grade 2.5 out of 3) and this should be highlighted because 20% of interviewed pensioners were in disability pension. Still, the older the respondent, the worst self-perceived health was, with only a few younger participants who said that they had health issues. The worst average grade we got for the question about life in general, and in in-depth interview most of respondents revealed that financial constrains were the reasons for this dissatisfaction. Still, average grade for living conditions was quite high, which mostly reflected the fact that the majority of respondents had their own housing. The greatest satisfaction was noted in answers about personal relationships and ability to perform day to day activities, where almost all of the respondents, regardless of age, were very satisfied with family and neighborhood relations and could live on their own without the help of others.

Table 1. Average score for answers on the question about the satisfaction with various spheres of life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How satisfied are you with:</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life in general</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living conditions</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal relationships</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to perform day to day activities</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to establish overall perception of old age, all respondents were asked the following question: “In your opinion, thinking about the age when
one starts to be regarded as ‘old’, at what age would you say that happens?’

Unfortunately, some of the interviewees (3 of them) did not provide answer since this question was too abstract for them, and others had vague ideas about their perception of old age and gave answers in terms “about x age” or “between x and x+t age”. Nevertheless, the main finding was not blurred by these limitations, since the rest of respondents answered uniformly in one very important aspect – they determined old age as the age above their own.

The following question dealt with the age when someone was not regarded as “young” anymore. Similar like delimitation of “old”, some respondents did not answer, since they could not decide the exact age when someone was not young anymore. The responses of those who answered ranged from 20 years to 80, but with greatest distribution of answers between 40 and 60 years.

We believe that next question was very important, since it highlighted individual perception of respondents about their own stage in life cycle: young, middle-aged or old. Most of people in this interview were over 60 (65) years old, the age used in demography for classification of old age (only two were younger than 60). Although we expected that, on average, our responders would define their “life moment” as old age, even 80% of them described themselves as middle-aged. This characteristic of active old people should be underscored, since the self-perception of individual age can play an important role in people’s life. As a result of in-depth interview with one female respondent, we are citing her own words when asked if she felt old: “I do not feel my calendar age, I feel much younger, the number in my ID card does not mean much”.

For the next question we asked whether perception of people aged 55 and over was positive or negative in our society. One quarter answered “very positive”, only 8% said “fairly positive”. On the negative side was one third of respondents with answer “fairly negative”, and 17% who said “very negative”. The rest were undecided. The results from Eurobarometer showed that Europeans had somewhat different idea about this perception, since their answers were concentrated in “positive” segment.

When asked what the role of older people was in Serbian political life in terms of participating and voting, the majority thought that elderly play major role. Some of them said that this role was minor, and only few answered that people over 55 did not have any role in political life in our country. This is quite in accordance with the fact that there is a political party of united pensioners and that older people are very active when it comes to voting. The assessment of our respondents was very similar to the results of European Survey, since most of the Europeans also believed that older people have major role in this field. Also, most of our interviewees believed that older people should have more influence in society, one third would not mind if this role remained the same, and only 9% said that this role should be smaller.

In order to place the role of older people in family context, as another aspect of everyday life, we asked our interviewees how they saw the importance of older people in families in general. Almost all respondents answered that older people played major role in their families, a few said that this role was minor, and only negligible number said that the elderly did not have any role in the family.
When they compared the existing role of the elderly in families to the optimal one according to their opinion, the half would be for status quo, one third would like that this role was bigger, and the rest were for option “less of the role”.

Next set of questions dealt with the contributions to society made by the elderly in different spheres. Firstly, we asked question related to work, where half of participants in our study said that they believed that people over 55 were contributing greatly as workers, while the rest thought that they contributed a little. We would like to stress that this was one of the rare questions where one of possible modality (do not contribute at all) was not selected by any respondent. The answers from Eurobarometer were quite similar, where only a few percent thought that older people did not contribute, but the rest of the answers were more concentrated in “contribute greatly” than in our research. The same as previous, answering the question “To what extent do you think aged 55 and over contribute as financial support for their families?” no one thought that they did not have any contribution, but it is interesting that 80% believed that people over 55 were contributing greatly to their families in economic terms. Again, this is very close to EU 27 average from mentioned survey. The next question was about taking care of grandchildren, where 91% of our respondents were convinced that people over 55 were contributing greatly (again, “no contribution at all” was not chosen).

Population ageing represents major shift in demographic balance, and as such this process is frequently mentioned in media. We believed that it was important to examine whether interviewees were acquainted with this notion and what it represented. The questions imposed were as follows: "Over the next 20 years, do you think the proportion of people aged 65 and over is going to increase/decrease/stay the same? How concerned are you personally about a possible increase in the proportion of people aged 65 and over?" It turned out that 73% of respondents thought that share of people aged 65 and over was going to increase, which was very close to average for EU-27 (71%). The degree of concern with demographic ageing was measured on the basis of answers in range showed in Table 2, revealing that two-thirds of all interviewees were anticipating future problems as consequences of population ageing. Two-thirds of respondents thought that the indicator of the trajectory of life expectancy increased in the last 30 years. When asked about future developments, the answers were evenly distributed between increase/decline of this indicator.

Table 2. Distribution of answers of respondents on question about their concerns regarding population ageing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How concerned are you personally about a possible increase in the proportion of people aged 65 and over:</th>
<th>Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>very concerned</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fairly concerned</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not very concerned</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not concerned at all</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions about retirement aimed at discovering important characteristics of active pensioners and how well they were informed about issues concerning retirement. Answers about average use of pension showed that most of respondents were right about the period that pensioners spent in retirement. The next question asked tried to highlight whether respondents could continue to work after getting right to pension. Only one of them gave negative answer. Regarding the possibility to choose whether people were going to retire or continue to work after getting right to pension, more than two-thirds of respondents thought it should be a matter of individual choice. Very interesting finding is that only one-third of interviewees agreed that the retirement age needs to increase by 2030, the same share as in European study. Also, the following answers showed that most of the participants in our interview thought that official age of retirement should be as it was at the time of survey (60 for women and 65 form men in October 2013) or less. Only few said that it should increase in the future. This is a kind of paradox, since the respondents were aware of the incoming problems connected with population ageing, but they would not like changes in age of retirement. What hardly can be comprehended is the fact that 60% of interviewees stated that retirement age should be lower than current, with most frequent answer being 55 for women and 60 for men. When we analyzed this data in relation to education of respondents, the result showed that only those with the highest education thought that age of retirement should be higher than current. However, thanks to in-depth interviews with respondents, there is a simple explanation for this finding. Almost every respondent who said that retirement age should be lower than current was convinced that younger generation should be given chance to work, while older should have time to enjoy rightfully gained pension. We stress this conclusion since we believe that it is very important that active, (self-declared) healthy pensioners did not want to go back to labor market because their perception was that work should be reserved for younger generations. Still, there was some flexibility in their attitudes, since half of respondents would support the possibility to combine a part-time job and partial pension instead of full retirement.

Another set of questions aimed at shedding some light on intergenerational relations in the workplace. The interviewees were asked to compare younger and older workers on the basis of different abilities, characteristics and capabilities. The summarized overview of questions and answers is as follows:

- First question was about reliability, where two-thirds of respondents believed that older people (over 55) were probably more reliable than younger ones.
- Next question can be called a control question since the answer was quite obvious. All respondents thought that older people were more experienced than younger workers.
- Our interviewees seemed to have realistic views, since two-thirds admitted that younger generation was much more up to date regarding technologies. Actually, most of them stressed that this was very important and that experience of older people and technological knowledge of younger generation gave wide opportunities for collaboration.
Another aspect of generational view that we investigated was connected with ability to make decisions in the workplace. More than half of pensioners from our survey (60%) believed that younger workers made decisions more easily but they contributed this to the inexperience of their younger counterparts.

Next question was tricky because it demanded from our interviewees to decide who – older or younger workers – were more capable of team work. Most of them said that there was no difference, but the rest were leaning to the side of older workers.

Answers to the question about ability to find solutions to the problems showed that 65% believed that older workers were better at finding solutions than younger, while the rest of answers were evenly distributed between those who thought that there was no difference and those who “voted” for younger workers when it comes to fixing the problems.

Only 10% of respondents were convinced that older workers were more open to new ideas, while the rest were prone to believe that younger generation accepted new ideas more easily.

About a half said that it was much more likely that older workers were more flexible than younger, while more than half said that it was more likely to be the opposite (neither age group favored by the rest of respondents).

Interest in productivity of different age groups was more than justified, which was the reason why we asked whether younger or older workers were more productive. Even though we did not get uniform answers, there were more pensioners who believed that it was more likely that younger workers were more productive than older workers.

The last question revealed that two-thirds of respondents were in favor or older workers when asked about who was better in managing stress. Additional comments they made were concerned with the fact that younger workers were impatient, which made it harder to manage stress in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

The concept of active ageing is two-dimensional, meaning that it is good for individuals, and consequently for society, to embrace active way of life and use the advantages of active (old) citizens. In this paper, we presented findings from interviews conducted with participants of Sixth Olympiad of Sport, Health and Culture for the Third Age in Serbia, pensioners who can be regarded as “prototype” models for active ageing approach. Their lifestyle and point of view can be quite useful because it seems that their experience lead them to the state we can call successful or healthy ageing. Their “recipe” for active ageing can be used as a guideline for future recommendations when it comes to population policy. We noticed that their activity and participation in society were important features when combined with social awareness (they were aware that youth unemployment was high and this was reflected in their understanding of retirement issue). Future research of this topic is welcome and planned, since participants in these interviews stated that they felt the older people were rarely asked any questions, and it seemed they had a lot of useful and practical answers.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study is a result of research carried out within the scope of the project no. 47007 funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

REFERENCES:


INTERNET SOURCES:

NS Opinion and Social (2012). Special Eurobarometer 378: Active Ageing
Madrid’s International Plan of Actions on Ageing (2002),
<http://undesadspd.org/Portals/0/ageing/documents/Fulltext-E.pdf>
активног старења у Србији, спровели смо теренско истраживање базирано на упитнику посебног истраживања Еуробарометар, које се бавило питањима активног старења у Европи. Током Шесте Олимпијаде спорта, здравља, животним условима и могућношћу да обављају свакодневне активности. Методом дубинског интервјуа сакупили смо емпиријску грађу која се односи на прaksу активног старења, као и на ставове испитаника према послу, породици, пензији и младима. Испитаници су дали оцене свог личног задовољства животом (генерално), личним везама, здрављем, животним условима и могућношћу да обављају свакодневне активности. Постављена су питања о почетку старости, трајању младости, о томе да ли се осећају младим, средовечним или старијим, колико су цењени и која је улога старијих људи у друштву, да ли постоји забринутост због могућег повећања броја старијих од 65 година, да ли ће очекивано трајање живота у Србији расти итд. Одређени број питања односно се на њихов став о пензионисању (нпр. од колико година је пензионисање потребно законски прописати), као и на упоређење карактеристика старијих и млађих радника. Резултат истраживања показује да су (већ активни) учесници највише задовољни могућношћу да обављају дневне активности и личним везама, док су најмање задовољним животом (генерално), што приписују лошијој материјалној ситуацији. Већина испитаника сматра да старост почиње у старости „старијој“ од њихове, па је већина себе класификовала „средовечним“. Сматрају да старији људи имају прилично велику улогу када је у питању учествовање у политичком животу, посебно у сегменту гласања и ту улогу не би мењали. Такође, чувана потомак издавају као велики допринос старијих код нас. Свесни су проблема старења популацији, уздржани када је у питању пораст очекиваног трајања живота и сматрају да би старост за пензионисање требало да буде нижа него данас. Иако звучи парадоксално, дубинским интервјуом сазнали смо да је разлог за овакав став велики број незапослених младих. Даља (или континуирана) истраживања ове проблематике свакако би добродушила, ако се узме у обзир потреба за сагледавањем активног старења из више углова, као и изразита кооперативност коју су старији показали током овог истраживања.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: активно старење, пензионери, Србија, интервју, популациона политика