

Take Me Seriously!

Growing up in a society where the role of traditional mediators
diminishes



Paper presented at ICYRNet Conference,
Nicosia, Cyprus, May 2008

Jordan Iossifov,
ICDI, Leiden,
The Netherlands

Abstract

This study took place in Bulgaria and aimed at testing key findings from previous research, namely, a theory on bypassing traditional mediators by Van Oudenhoven and Wazir¹.

The research questions were: what is the role of the traditional mediators in the lives of adolescent Bulgarians? Are the mediators being bypassed? Are there new mediators and how do they interact and compete with the traditional ones and with the adolescents?

The methodology followed a participatory-research approach; six focus groups and individual interviews with more than 50 school-aged youth took place at six locations.

The main finding is that the role of the traditional mediators diminishes; parents are often absent, sometimes physically, often intellectually, socially, and emotionally. They are not anymore a role model for their children. The young people consider the school as extremely important: as a place to learn as well as a social environment; on both accounts they feel the school fails them. Most young people have active position on numerous social issues but think that the society in general ignores them. A massive and increasing demand for democratization of the way the society functions is being expressed by the young Bulgarians.

New agents start claiming space in young people's physical, emotional and social environments and transform a previously existing 'hierarchical introduction to the world' into a 'horizontal process', which often seems disorderly and even anarchically.

¹ Nico van Oudenhoven & Rekha Wazir (2006) Newly Emerging Needs of Children. An Exploration, Antwerp, Garant.

1. Introduction

The study sets out to test key findings from previous research, namely a theory on bypassing traditional mediators by Van Oudenhoven and Wazir². The study took place in Bulgaria.

The research questions that guided this study were: what is the role of the traditional mediators: parents, other family members, schools, and local communities in the life of adolescent Bulgarians? Are they able to fulfill their mediating roles or are they being bypassed? If so, why? Are there new mediators and how do they interact and compete with traditional ones and with the adolescents?

The term 'mediator' here stems from the interpretation Van Oudenhoven and Wazir³ give to Bronfenbrenner's⁴ concentric circles. It refers to: 'the 'buffer' ... of the microsystem and foremost of the parents... and their significance as receiver, modulator, interpreter and conveyer of messages from the 'world outside' to the child⁵. Here, the focus is on two, traditionally most important, 'environments' for the Bulgarian adolescents: the family and the school. The study was placed in a context of dealing with vulnerabilities and insecurities. This corresponds with the everyday reality of contemporary Bulgaria, a country in political, social, economic and cultural transition for already 17 years. Many of the vulnerabilities and insecurities described in this text are also familiar to young people in the greater central and eastern European region and are of relevance to other transitional countries, such as Slovakia, Romania, Poland or Albania.

2. Methodological framework

The methodology of the study stems from the described objective to test a bypassing-traditional-mediators thesis and from the effort of conducting participatory research⁶. Such research is considered 'a bottom-up approach with a focus on locally defined priorities and local perspectives'⁷ and therefore, serves to provide outputs which are not just purely academic but also meet the needs of Bulgaria and most of all - of its young people. It also corresponds to the current thinking and practices in the field of child and youth empowerment and rights-based programming, in that it invites boys and girls to take part in the research process⁸.

The actual collection of data took place in two periods in 2006: the first in May and the second in June⁹. Six focus groups with 13-19 year-olds were organized with logistical support by principals and teachers. More than 50 school-aged youth participated in these groups: one in the capital, three in middle-sized and small towns, one in a large village, and one in a small

² Nico van Oudenhoven & Rekha Wazir (2006) *Newly Emerging Needs of Children. An Exploration*, Antwerp, Garant.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

⁵ Nico van Oudenhoven & Rekha Wazir (2006) *Newly Emerging Needs of Children. An Exploration*, Antwerp, Garant.

⁶ 'Essentially Participatory Action Research is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts which make sense of it' Wadsworth, Y. (1998) 'What is Participatory Action Research?' *Action Research International*, Paper 2. Available on-line: <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html>

⁷ Cornwall, A. & Jewkes, R. (1995) 'What is participatory research?' *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 41, No. 12 pp. 1667 – 1676.

⁸ International Save the Children Alliance (2002) *Child Rights Programming. How to Apply Rights-based Approaches in Programming*, Stockholm, Save the Children Sweden.

⁹ I would like to thank Svetlana Tacheva, an educational sociologist from the Free and Democratic Bulgaria Foundation, for her inputs before, during and after the interviews and focus groups.

village¹⁰. The choice of the settings was based on the original objective to test the findings of the previous study in rural as well as in urban areas. In addition, the participants were invited for individual interviews, resulting in various semi-structured, open-ended sessions with 32 young people¹¹.

These interviews followed a list of tentative questions, used also for the focus groups, but the boys and girls could go into depth on any topic they had special interest in or reflect on opinions or statements made by their peers. Crucial parts of the interviews were the beginnings; they were requested to start with their life stories or with a reflection on their own life.

In the beginning of the first focus group the participants were asked if they would mind recording the conversation. They did not express objections but were passive; after 15 minutes the recorder was switched off and their behavior changed immediately. On the basis of this experience it was decided not to use tape-recorder anymore.

Two of the focus groups started with some teachers present but confronted with the hesitation of the participants to talk in their presence they left.

3. Findings

3.1 The adolescents of Bulgaria

According to the official statistics, Bulgarian adolescents typically live with their family, study in a high school¹². Although they are not fond of their school, most of the boys and girls consider continuing their education at a university. They dislike the life of their parents even when they have respect for their efforts in providing them with food and shelter and in bringing them up. Bulgarian adolescents do not like the society they live in, neither do they have respect for it; most believe that the lack of respect is mutual and the expectations from society are usually minimal or absent.

Encouragingly though, there are signs that young people are beginning to appreciate the benefits -for themselves as well as for the society- of voluntary social engagement. Eleonora's story illustrates this change in attitudes; it is also, in many ways, a typical Bulgarian teenager's life-story.

Eleonora

I like the name Eleonora, beautiful name, isn't it? ☺ I study in the high school you see behind my back. I do not live in this town but in a nearby village. My father is a truck driver and he travels a lot abroad, most of the time he is away... and when he is not, there are other things to do. My mother is a teacher. I have a little sister. My parents are liberal with me and sometimes I want them to forbid some things for me. Before I felt embarrassed that I come from a village but I think I overcame it. My parents are afraid to let me go to a discothèque in the town in the evenings but they let me go anyway so that I do not feel different because I grow up in a village. I like my life; my family is not rich but I miss nothing. I do volunteer work for the Red Cross but maybe our society is not yet ready to appreciate volunteer work; instead of supporting the weak, we as society marginalize them; I hope volunteer activities is one way to



¹⁰ These are not listed in order to protect the interviewees. Many of sites where the interviews took place are of such size that all people there know each other and it is not difficult to recognize interviewees even only by details of their stories.

¹¹ On few occasions our respondents wished to be interviewed in pairs and once - even in a trio.

¹² The statistics shows that almost 75 % live in a town or city and 83 % of the 15-18 year old study in high school. National Statistical Institute (2006) Sofia, available online: <http://www.nsi.bg/Population/Population.htm> and <http://www.nsi.bg/SocialActivities/Education.htm>

overcome this; I also feel better doing this. There are not many chances for social or extra-curricular activities; it is money that is important for people.

It is different in Sofia – the city is bigger and it is not the case that everyone knows everybody else. I would like to be a surgeon but I hear that it is extremely difficult for a girl to become one, especially if there is no one to help you. If I can't reach what I wish here I would go abroad if this would help my family.

There is a colleague of my mother who is my friend and I can talk to her about everything, including boys and sex and such stuff. She behaves as equal to me and even sometimes asks me to give her advice.

To be an adolescent in Bulgaria nowadays is not easy. One has to be strong enough to survive in a society that does not have compassion or simply does not know how to help the weak, both individually as well as collectively marginalized. The story of J_OZ illustrates how easy vulnerable young people are pushed onto the rims of society. Her story is not the most typical one but it is not unique either¹³. The way she talks is eclectic and it is easy to detect how family, school and society failed her. In many other cases adolescents' perspectives are predetermined not by their individual situations but by their social status, location – in the most appalling case – ethnic origin¹⁴.

J_OZ

Call me J_OZ. I am 17, and study in the town's evening school. I am a prematurely born child and was a very ugly baby. From the very beginning everyone was disappointed in me. After the primary school I did not succeed to get into a high school in a bigger city and I had to stay in this town. To stay here was a failure.

I was not part of my previous class. I liked to be expelled, ignored. ... I gradually stopped going to school. Before starting at the evening school I was in the regular high school in the town. I spent a lot of time surfing the internet and this was a huge illusion and now I regret it because I wasted so much time.

I started taking grass because I got interested in ... I just tried. It wasn't because others do it. Doing it is more a matter of a moment and mood. It is important to know that you are not alone and there are others like you.

There are prejudices towards me, which will remain even if I stop doing what I do now. It is important to reach my objectives, gradually, one by one.

I am very afraid from the access-to-the-university exams because if I do not become a student my family will take it badly – all of them graduated from a university. If I do not succeed they will expel me. Their expectations are great and I am not satisfying them. I think that studying in a university should not be done at all costs, it is important to be happy. Here the education is not of a quality, even at the high school. There are no elite schools around. I wanted to study at the Sofian Mathematical High School, but with my grades it wasn't possible.

Everyday here is a self-deception. At school I was in conflict with teachers and classmates, at the same time I did not receive quality education and on the top of it I had to do the same thing over and over again and to take into account the people around me. I decided it wasn't worth it and moved to the evening school. I am afraid to take responsibilities, because I am always in a mood and can't think clearly. I want to feel important and needed by someone or for something.

There is no Bulgarian society, everyone is lying to everybody else that she or he is doing something important. People do not care about each other. I was in Italy – it is different there. My father lives in Italy. I do not talk to him anymore, he is dull and without values.

When asked what separates children from adolescents and adolescents from adults, it was pointed out that a core indicator was *the level of dependence*, not only financial but also, *emotional, social, intellectual*. The more independent, the more responsibilities, *the older* one is (older in social sense and not in terms of age). At the same time the young people understand that their age is associated with some restrictions and when the reasons for these are clearly communicated, they consider the restrictions reasonable. Some of them even believe that the parents are not strict enough as pointed out earlier by Eleonora. When they are confronted with *nonsensical*

¹³ In an upcoming publication, with working title *Improving the Methods of Team Work with Children*, Vessela Banova describes similar cases.

¹⁴ Billions Buried in the Ghetto, Capital, 35, 1-7 September 2006, available online: <http://www.capital.bg/show.php?storyid=280209>

requirements or situations - at home, at school, in wider society they are not afraid to express their criticism. There is certainly no lack of critical thinking.

How do the present-day Bulgarian young people fit into the social perceptions? A director of a prominent Bulgarian NGO¹⁵ states: *This generation is totally different from the previous ones. There have always been differences between generations and this is also natural, but so far the generation borders have been blurry and the transitions from a generation to a generation have been smooth. This time is different: this generation, I call it 'the generation of the transition' has very little to do with the generation before. There is a huge gap.* The generation itself, in the words of a 17 year-old boy from a middle-sized town, explains the difference: *Our parents have lived in a different time. Socialism formed them as people, made them different; they did not enjoy our freedom; we do not have their restrictions.* This process seems almost biblical: after 17 years of wandering in transition, will the young 'free' Bulgarians find a 'promised society'?

3.2 Is there a role for traditional mediators?

Parents

The respondents know that they live in a rapidly changing society with little or no space for family, children and enjoyment of being together. Parents are overstretched, and this is seen by the children; while appreciating parents' efforts, children fail to see them as role models or to be guided by them. *I do not want to live the life of my parents*, is a phrase repeated from the very first day of interviewing to the very last.

The problem of overstretched families appears to be global: 'despite the consistent reliance on family as a source of social cohesion and order, there is a strong evidence to suggest that this form of security is collapsing'¹⁶. However, Bulgaria seems among the countries hit worse. The transition and economic hardship forced a high number of Bulgarian adults, usually between 20 and 50 years old, precisely the parental age period, to leave the country temporarily or permanently. The problem already attracts the attention of the international media. Recently International Herald Tribune devoted an article on the depopulation in Bulgaria, 'where the overall population decline is considered to be one of the most severe in the world'¹⁷. Usually one of the parents goes to work for a summer, in Greece, Spain or any other EU country. A following year they might take the other spouse and the duration of their stay might expand to nine months or one year. Sometimes they work illegally and, for this reason, are afraid to come back.

In this situation they 'are forced' to stay abroad years even decades: *my father is already 16 years abroad, this will be my mother's seventh year, she comes from time to time, he doesn't, ... by the way I am 17.* Economic migration and family separation is not a uniquely Bulgarian problem¹⁸; apparently it is a common drawback of 'the transition' and

The Romanian syndrome of children left behind*

More recently, a social phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the 'syndrome of the children left behind' has become more visible. Currently, an estimated two million Romanians are thought to be working abroad. The massive flux of economic emigration to EU countries, such as Italy and Spain has led to thousands of children left behind, in Romania, without the care and daily support of their parents. The parents who are in an irregular status are constrained to remain far from their families for long periods of time because they try to avoid the risk of being sanctioned by the authorities and are prevented from traveling abroad. This situation contributes to family disorganization and to problems with the education of children left at home. Recent research has also showed that children left behind are more likely to engage in socially deviant behavior.

*Civil Society Development Foundation (2006) Project Children and Youth as Builders of Civil Society, Second Progress Report, Bucharest.

¹⁵ Lenko Lenkov, in a Focus Group on NEN 1, Sofia March 2005.

¹⁶ David Denney, (2005) Risk and Society, London, Sage.

¹⁷ International Herald Tribune (2006) 'In shrinking Bulgaria, where are the people?', October 10. Available online: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/10/10/news/bulgaria.php>

¹⁸ An interesting 'mirror story' is provided by the BBC Photojournal: BBC (2006), 'El Gusano, a Living Ghost Town', available online:

neighboring Romania provides yet another example. In some villages all of the interviewees had at least one close relative abroad. The lack of parental presence cannot be compensated by the short telephone calls and the presents: *I prefer having my parents around to having a fancy mobile telephone*, says a fashionably dressed 16 year-old girl, with a shiny cell phone hanging on her neck.

The emotional burden of separation is aggravated by the care arrangements made for these children. A recent Innocenti report¹⁹ names migration and its causes as reasons for the child abandonment. The luckier are moved to another household, most often to grandparents or other relatives. Their 'luck' is relative: often they have to go to another location, braking existing social contacts, moving to a new, not always friendly environment. In one situation, an elderly couple was left to care for two sets of grandchildren in a semi-desolate rural mountain village, while their daughters were making an income abroad. Yet, even when the young people leave the country with their parents the social and emotional costs prove to be too high, as 16 year-old girl pointed out: *my mother often goes to Cyprus and then it is very hard for me; I go sometimes too during the vacations but I could not stay there permanently; here, at least, I have my friends. Emigration influences you negatively, it makes you weaker.*

Young people are willing to talk about this issue. For some of them this was the first time when anyone asked them how they felt about the emigration of their parents. Apparently, a generation, growing up without parents, finds little compassion by the society and an unaddressed psychological burden is building up.

Factors, out of reach for previous generations, such as freedom of expression, abundance of consumer choices and openness in society make the young people growing up in the rural areas question their dual roles as students and as laborers. Many youth spend the morning at school learning languages, science and computers and the latter part of the day working in the fields helping their families. Some accept this while others hold their education as the first priority for a brighter future, *They [the grandparents] say it is necessary for our survival but I find it meaningless work; if my parents were here I most probably wouldn't have to do it; I can spend my time better, for sure; I can study for example.* Their tone reflects bitterness of being left behind by parents and of lagging behind in a rapidly changing world.



In a way many young people are also left behind in terms of modernization. Those who are raised by grandparents most often cannot benefit from the accomplishments or accumulated experiences and wisdom of their parents. As a bright exception one parent tells how she deeply regrets that her parent's *deprived [her] from a future* by ending her education at the completion of high school. She says for her own children, *they will study as long as they wish and we, my husband and I, will do everything we can to support them in this.*

The 'absence of parents' is not only physical; it can be emotional, intellectual or social. Even the children whose parents did not emigrate indicated that there is too little time spent together with family. Adults are too focused on providing resources for –physical- survival, and are too stressed to pay attention to their kids or enjoy the time together. *Yes, I see my father sometimes, but do not spend time with him; he has such a working schedule that his free time does not overlap*

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/picture_gallery/06/in_pictures_el_gusano0_a_living_ghost_town/html/1.stm The problem of families broken by the pursuit of economic welfare seems to appear almost universally where rich countries border or are in close proximity to the developing or transitional countries.

¹⁹ UNICEF (2006) Innocenti Social Monitor 2006: Understanding child poverty in South-Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

with the family/s... I do not miss him much, not anymore, these words of a Sofian girl are echoed by her peers from the rest of the country, similar to the stories of Eleonora and J_OZ.

School

Almost unanimously the boys and girls defined the educational system as the weakest link in their environment. From the smallest village to the capital, they named the quality of education, the lack of discipline, the lack of respect of the rules and respect among the participants in the educational process as problems requiring immediate attention. They clearly see that the educational system in Bulgaria has deep structural problems. Sometimes the problems were personified in stories about corrupt or incompetent teachers, but everywhere, every time, they pointed out that their assessments were based not on a single incident with a particular teacher but on their experience within the system for many years: *you know, the problem is not just this teacher, it is the school and I do not mean just this school but THE SCHOOL*. Interesting enough, even in the middle of a malfunctioning system, the students were able to appreciate the enthusiasm, energy and integrity of a particular teacher, principal or other educator. *But, you know, the bad thing is that such people are too rare, too far in between and the system smashes them*, reasons one boy who tells a story of an enthusiastic teacher who organized extra-curricular activities, made her lessons interactive and stimulated students to look for inspiration beyond their textbooks.

Often, the inability of the teachers to teach is mentioned as a problem. *The quality of education depends on our teachers*, say Sofian students, participating in a focus group. This, and similar statements, are interpreted as 'a lack of institutional conditions and mechanisms guaranteeing quality of education; the quality of education becomes dependent on the individual skills of concrete persons'²⁰. A sixteen year-old boy confirms this analysis directly and blatantly: *many of our teachers are unmotivated and right away I can think of several examples of teachers who know less than I do in their subject. Sad, isn't it?* The motivation and competence of the teachers come often as a major issue and even teachers, although unwillingly and with reservations, admit that a problem exists.



Surprisingly, the motivation of the teachers does not seem to be the biggest problem. Practically all agree that *the biggest problem at school is the discipline, or rather, the lack of any*, says a girl in a middle-sized town. Variations of this

statement are made in any location. Some go further: *We lack discipline at school. Yet it is not possible to have discipline at school if there is total anarchy in the society. The anarchy in school is a result and the same time a cause for the anarchy in the family, on the street, if you want in the Parliament too ...* reason students from a Sofia high school. Their peers from a middle-sized town agree that discipline is an issue requiring immediate intervention. They also see the lack of discipline as a reflection of what is going on in the society but here the conversation is different: the lack of discipline is exemplified by lack of respect among the students, towards teachers, towards others in general, and especially towards the weaker and the poorer.

The current environment reflects negatively on everyone, including the perpetrators. *Well, mostly on them, right?* adds an outspoken girl from a middle-sized town. *It will be good if everyone respects the rules*, summarizes a 15 year-old girl from a rural community. They agree that what is needed is a change in the *school culture*. Previous studies, for example by Dupper²¹ and by

²⁰ Written communication by Svetlana Tacheva, July 2006.

²¹ David Dupper (2002) *School Social Work: Skills and Interventions for effective practice*. Hoboken, NJ, John Wiley & Sons.

Walker²² confirm their intuitions. A recent publication by Frey and Walker²³ also emphasizes that improving the environment and not dealing with individual students should be the main target of interventional programs at school.

Students are well aware that having discipline, obeying the rules, and demonstrating respect for others are not contradictory to a democratic way of living and they want both. In a big village, two girls speak about their experiences from 'the day of student self-governance'. The core of this initiative of the Ministry of Education, which took place across the country, is that students and teachers exchange places for a day. The students were enthusiastic about the idea; they invested a lot of time to prepare and were looking forward to it. Yet, at the day itself, they found the attitudes of some teachers disappointing: *there were teachers who did not take us seriously, we were supposed to be treated as full-right teachers, and our opinions and our marks were supposed to matter. Indeed, there were teachers who were supportive but for other teachers it was a big joke.* The lack of respect and absence of democratization are linked and reinforce each other. Another girl tells that she got into problems after she put a 'fail' mark to a classmate who happened to be a daughter of a school administrator. She felt betrayed but had no regret for not acting in a conformist way.

Society

It is encouraging that young Bulgarians want to be consulted on issues like running their schools. They want that their voices are heard not only pro-forma but also taken seriously. Actually, they want more: *I want my opinion to be heard, not necessarily agreed with but heard and discussed. No one asked me so far for my opinion on issues that go beyond my immediate needs. No one asks me what I think about the city I live in or about the society* says a senior high-school student.

Although the young people universally believe that 'society' means different things depending on where you 'experience' it, there are also a few characteristics to which everyone points out. *Our society is too materialistic and it is obsessed with short-term, shortsighted effects; the adults are tired of the transition and lack of respect for the rules.* A student from a middle-sized town mirrors this sentiment: *People are getting more aggressive, more evil, and freer; the threshold of saturations is getting higher and higher and people are getting more and more selfish. The Bulgarian society is not united, everyone is focused on one's own survival or well-being; we are a selfish society.* Others think alike: the society – just like their schools - lacks discipline, respect for others, lacks initiative, and fears innovative approaches.

When it comes to the differences, Sofia stands apart and this is obvious to everyone. Sofian teenagers are *lucky to live in the capital, where there are a lot of opportunities for everything.* They express regret that their peers from the rural areas have to work in the fields instead of enjoying their free time. However, the expression of regret sounds somewhat hollow.

The ones who live in smaller places have to cope with communities that have difficulty finding the balance between overbearing small town politics versus social isolation and lack of community life. The most common wish of a teenager living in a small town is to leave it and to go to a big place where they can enjoy some degree of anonymity, or at least some respect for privacy. Moving to a big city is seen as a rational solution. There is also an element of curiosity and the desire to test oneself. Many, at the age of 15, 16, and 17 have never been to Sofia. About a third of them have never been to a big city, or regional center and less than half have ever seen the sea. The main motivation in studying at university level is to get away from a place *where everyone is sticking their nose where it does not belong*, as a much-cited Bulgarian saying goes. A 16 year-old girl from a middle-sized town, considered by many Bulgarians an attractive and prosperous place, states: *The most important thing for me is to get away from this place. The town is too small – in the sense that everyone is more interested in other people's lives than in their own. Even our peers like to gossip, make intrigues and are hypocritical. Maybe in Sofia it is the same but the city is bigger: here the*

²² Hill Walker (2001) School Safety Issues and Prevention Strategies: The Changing Landscape of What We Know. Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior.

²³ Andy Frey & Hill Walker (2006) in Jeffrey Jenson & Mark Fraser (eds.) Social Policy for Children and Families. A risk and resilience Perspective, London, Sage.

intrigues unfold faster. Everyone agrees that the girls are much worse hit than the boys. It is very bad for the girls here, says a 15 year-old boy from a rural mountainous area. They gossip too much about our girls here, says he meaning the adults and especially the elderly, they gossip much more about them than about boys, the stories are exaggerated, it becomes awful. If they slander you once, you are damned forever.

At the same time smaller places appear to be more tolerant when it comes to ethnic relations and respect for the marginalized. When asked if they have ever worked as volunteers or have been involved in an NGO or any other civil society initiative, Sofia respondents are uncertain in their responses. On the other hand, many boys and girls in the smaller places have already been involved in different civil society initiatives and have a clear understanding of their importance: *there is a lot of work to be done in our society.*

Also the ethnic relations are perceived differently. The findings suggest that the smaller the place and the more ethnically diverse, the more tolerant the people. Surprisingly, the most ethnically intolerant are the young people in Sofia. The teenagers from rural areas, where Bulgarian Muslims and Christians, Turks and Roma live side-by-side, point out, *we do not have problems with people from different ethnic or religious background.* A 15 year-old boy explains: *We, the Muslims, feel ourselves Bulgarians. My best friends are Christians. Religion as a factor in personal relationships is an old-time matter.* Next to him sits his best friend, a 16 year-old, a Christian, who adds: *Someone is either your friend or not, this is not an issue of religion. I know that in earlier times people separated according to their religious background but now this kind of tension fades away. Now the bad thing is the ghetto-isation of the Roma community. When they separate physically, they also isolate socially... you know what I mean, right? When they live among other people they do not get embittered. ... We should not complain of the Roma here – they have their pieces of lands, they work there and there is no trouble. The trouble is up there in Sofia, there the ghettos should be abolished, the state should be put back on track and there should be work for everyone.*

The awareness of the painful socio-economic problems of society is widespread. The most frequent given answers to the question, 'what do you want to change in your own country?' was *to improve the economic conditions, so that people are not forced to work abroad.*

When it comes to the social attitudes towards young people, the predominant opinion is that they are largely ignored. The young people felt pleased to participate in the interviews and focus groups and when asked in the end if they would do it again all answers were affirmative. In the course of the time it became clear that they needed to share their opinions and feelings. In this respect it was a pity that a coincidental research project provided a unique chance for them to speak their minds and hearts. Again, family, school, community and society at large appear not to invest enough time, effort or patience to listen to young Bulgarians. Yet, the youth definitely deserve to be listened to with respect.

Simply not there

How to interpret these findings in Bronfenbrenner's terms, where 'traditional mediators' represented as 'concentric circles' interplay and give meaning of the world to the youth? Van Oudenhoven and Wazir²⁴ have already pointed out that Bronfenbrenner's circles are not what they used to be and more often than before children and adolescents have to find their own way to make sense of the world and in doing so the traditional mediators are passed by. The observations in Bulgaria point to even stronger conclusions: for a variety of reasons the parents, the school and the society have lost their functions as 'traditional mediators' altogether.

²⁴ Nico van Oudenhoven & Rekha Wazir (2006) *Newly Emerging Needs of Children. An Exploration*, Antwerp, Garant

Intuitively, one would expect that the absence – physical or otherwise- of parental presence would be experienced as most painful. Surprisingly, the young people pointed out that they regret most the lack of adequate education. The lack of parental presence or attention is felt acutely and often painfully in early stages, but the more time goes by, the more the adolescents are able to compensate with internal resources and external substitutes, such as adult friends, extended family or sometimes even a befriended teacher. Many of the young people try to justify their parents' absence. The attitude towards the school is much harsher. The predominant, practically universal verdict is that, although there might be sympathy for individual educators, the school fails them as a place to learn as well as a social space.

Large parts of the Bronfenbrenner's 'concentric-circle' structure have gone missing or structurally broken and these children have no choice but to look elsewhere for valid references and explanations of how the world functions. Often in the course of this research it became clear that they would have preferred to have more 'traditional mediation'. How to explain such a need? An overview of recent research on resilience provides a clue: 'Resilience is recognized as depending on both individual and group strengths and is highly influenced by supportive elements in the wider environment. These positive reinforcements in the children's lives are often described as 'protective factors' or 'protective processes'²⁵. Clearly, the young people mobilize their 'individual' strengths but at the same time they actively look for the 'supportive elements in their wider environment'.

Internet

Everybody had some experience with the Internet. No clearly defined pattern of use can be established on the basis of this study but there were indications that use of internet depended on the age and residence. The older the respondents and the bigger the place, the more the Internet was used for information search and as a support tool in the educational process. The younger ones, especially those from more isolated areas, use the Internet mostly to chat and children from smaller places were more inclined to deal with unknown people.

The parents or other caretakers rarely had an idea what their children do online. A large number of the adults are Internet-illiterate, although on several occasions the young people, with a certain degree of pride, reported that they were teaching their parents or caretakers how to use the Internet.

3.3 Filling in the gap: are there new mediators?

Where the traditional mediators fail, new ones appear. Internet, surrogate parents, media, and NGOs fill in the gaps. The new mediators do not enjoy universal trust and do not totally replace the traditional ones. What is left from the previous system of structured, even hierarchical, introduction to the world becomes part of a new, horizontal, seemingly unstructured, even anarchic environment. All mediators compete on a kind of free market for trust and attention. Some young people, as pointed above, enjoy more than ever the freedom of choice to decide whom to let in, while others feel abandoned and seem to have lost their bearings.

What remains stable is that young people look for mediators or counterparts to build up their resilience and to satisfy such basic needs as self-respect and self-esteem; also for adults who act as reference points for meaningful communication. Ultimately, above all is their need to be taken seriously.

4. Conclusions: more research, better policies, real implementation

The most inspiring conclusion is also the most obvious one. The young people demonstrated the ability to critically think and assess their own situations. They also expressed, at multiple

²⁵ Jo Boyden and Gillian Mann (2005) Children's Risk, Resilience and Coping with Extreme Situations. In Michal Ungar (ed.) Working with Children and Youth. Pathways to Resilience across Cultures and Contexts, London, Sage.

occasions, that they enjoyed contributing to this study. For virtually all of them this was their first experience with participatory research and they clearly stated that they would be willing to do it again, especially if this would assist policy makers in taking adequate decisions. This, together with the valuable feedback provided by the young people, point to the underused potential of participatory research as a tool for forming youth and education policies in Bulgaria.

Another, equally important, conclusion is the strong need for democratization of society on various levels. Young people demonstrated an impressively mature understanding that democracy is more than a constitutionally defined procedure of electing the government. They are interested into turning democracy into a reality, in each village, each school, and each family. They make it clear that the society should prepare itself to interpret the democracy in a broader context: respect for diversity, space for the voices of those who are perceived weaker or less knowledgeable, response to the needs as seen by those who are in need, respect for the rules and equal treatment for all. This sounds as a challenge to the ones who are in charge now but it brings hope for the future. In brief, according to the youth, the Bulgarian educational system needs:

- ✓ investment in better education has to be on top of the government's priority list,
- ✓ participatory research on the needs and interests of the students to establish adequate curricula,
- ✓ democratization of the educational process mostly by listening respectfully to the feedback from the students; initiatives such as the day of 'students self-governance' could be very successful if the educators and administration support them. However, such initiatives could backfire if the educators do not take them seriously,
- ✓ better cooperation with NGOs, and grass-root organizations. Opening the school to the structures of the civil society might bring long-term positive effects since it will also reinforce the emergence of democratic attitudes,
- ✓ reorientation of the focus from transfer of knowledge towards development of skills and competencies.

Another obvious area that needs attention is the child- and family-protection field. The biggest concern here is the expansion in the last decade or so of the phenomenon of children left behind by emigrating parents. It is understood that the much expected increase of incomes and improved standard of living will fade away this phenomenon. Yet, before this happens a generation or even two may suffer. The society - and the state - should not close their eyes for the distress and pain inflicted on children; neither can the country afford such a colossal loss of potential.

Participatory research and broad social discussions should contribute to the formulation of a sensitive policy response. Open exchange of experience with other societies and countries facing identical experiences should help, if only to form purpose-driven alliances, generate political will and move away from rhetoric.

One thing is sure - young Bulgarians are ready to provide their fair contribution to making their country a better place to live and it will be unforgivable to lose such a chance, and with that, and yet another generation.