

Flexibilisation of Youth Transitions in Central and Eastern Europe

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The flexibilisation of youth transitions in the post-communist half of Europe is an indication for the pluralisation of modernity. In the 1990s young people in the region were thrown sharply away from the certainty of the previously firmly structured and strictly controlled transition patterns of the state-socialist societies into the sea of the risks and uncertainties of market regulated societies. At present they face the conflicting challenges of globalisation and nationalistic mobilisation, technological advancement and economic underdevelopment, individualisation and traditional military conflicts. The risks of the transition force young people to invent flexible strategies to move through education and training, work and leisure, family and peer relationships to uncertain destinations. The flexibilisation of the passages through the life stages involves a constant shifting of established borders in terms of time and place. Neither the time limits nor the routes of the transitions are any longer fixed in the fluid social, economic, political and cultural orders of post-communism.

The first and widely accepted fact about youth condition in East Central Europe is that young people are making their life transitions at a time when the societies they live in are making societal transitions. If we want to analyse youth transitions in the region we have to study the interplay of these problematic transformations. It is very difficult to generalise about the post-communist development because the countries in the region are getting more divergent than they were before, making reforms with different speeds in different directions. Besides, comparative empirical studies in the region are rare while statistical data do not yet systematically cover all the major issues of the social transformation underway. This paper is

an attempt to tackle these limitations and cover the changes in youth career routes in post-communist societies, making use of available official statistics and data from youth research.

The waves of social transformation in East Central Europe

To define the turmoil in which people in East Central Europe have been living during the 1990s as 'transition' is perhaps too positive. The expectations and hopes about a straightforward shift from a centrally planned to a market economy and from an authoritarian rule to a workable democracy were soon lost in the aftermath of the 'gentle' revolutions in 1989. The complex and often contradictory character of the processes, which comprise this transition, challenges both people trying to manage their daily lives and politicians insisting to devise reform strategies.

The notions of waves, as portrayed by Toffler (1980), gives a better idea about the social transformation experienced by the peoples and the countries in the region. However, the waves do not come in the consecutive order envisioned by Toffler. Rather, the eastern half of the continent has become a whirlpool in which waves of economic liberalisation are often overtaken by waves of growing state interference, waves of political pluralisation are being pushed back by oligarchic trends, while nationalism challenges the moves toward European integration. While in some countries such as Poland or Hungary, the tide of marketisation is far in front of the spiral of inconsistencies and diversions of monopolism, in others the dominating trend seems to be towards a pre-modern economy, as Roberts and Fagan (1999) discern in Ukraine and other former Soviet republics. While in Slovenia (Ule and Renner, 1998) post-modern values overshadow the general normlessness of the radical break with the past, in countries such as Romania the governing wave is toward traditional values (Verdery, 1996). The diversifying processes of social change pass not only between the countries but also within them, forcing societies to react simultaneously to conflicting tendencies in the

economy, politics and culture. The underestimation of complexity is, in fact, a major risk in the post-communist social transformation (Illner, 1998).

Various social indicators reveal the mixed picture of the successes and failures of the social transformation under post-communism. The major institutions of the pluralist democracy have been built everywhere and most of the necessary legal norms and political mechanisms have been established. Civil societies are gaining in strength together with the growing respect for individual liberty, personal initiative and human rights. There are noticeable steps toward greater freedom in the market arena and a growing private sector of the economy. Despite these achievements of the reforms either in their more prolonged or 'shock therapy' forms, their social consequences represent a rather traumatic development for the populations under post-communism.

After a whole decade of reforms the governments in the transition countries have managed to achieve a standard of living for their populations, lagging far behind the levels in the EU member states. GDP per capita (in purchasing power terms in 1997) varied from 68% of the EU average in Slovenia and 64% in the Czech Republic to 23% of the EU average in Bulgaria and 27% in Latvia. In-between were Hungary and Slovakia with 49% and 46% respectively, Poland and Estonia with 37% each and Romania and Lithuania with 30% each (Eurostat, 1999). By 1997 only Slovenia and Poland had reached the 1989 figure of their national income, while in Russia and Ukraine the national income was with a third lower than in 1989 (UNDP, 1999). When estimating the social costs of the transition, national statistics provide data about the sharp drop in production and employment, the income and educational decline, the rise in unemployment, poverty and crime, accompanied by a growing gap between rich and poor, gender inequalities, worsening health status and declining life expectancy. If the curves of all these indicators could be added into one picture it will present the whirlpool of the transformation waves in the countries in East Central Europe.

The waves of the societal transitions in the region have strongly affected youth condition. One of the most significant consequences of the reforms is the breakdown of the established regulators for the smooth passage during this life stage. All former socialising agents are themselves in a painful process of restructuring to be able to impel values and patterns of behaviour on young people. Family relations are becoming strained, affected by economic hardship, unemployment and devaluation of moral norms. The new political parties have not gained enough authority and are largely distrusted by the young. The educational and economic institutions are in disarray, trying to adapt to the new market situation by deriving the best possible gains for themselves and minimising losses while expressing little concern for their 'clients'.

The shattering of the social norms and regulators swamped by the whirlpool of societal transition processes has resulted in the flexibilisation of youth transitions. Flexibility as a concept has been applied to explain changes in the labour market concerning the conduct of both the work force and company management (Atkinson and Meager, 1986; Burchell et al, 1999; Felstead and Jewson, 1999). It describes non-standard forms of employment, such as part-time, temporary and self-employment, free lancing, homeworking and others that are associated with less formal regulations, less legally binding terms and conditions. The theories of late modernity (See for example Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994) have linked flexibility to risk, insecurity, individualisation and reflexivity. The flexibilisation of labour is a basis for a reflexive and self-created biography, individual self-realisation and creative insecurity of freedom (Beck, 1999).

Within youth research flexibilisation denotes the turn toward de-standardisation and deregulation of youth transitions. Instead of linear straightforward passages typical for large groups of young people, the current trails are more irregular and winding, diversified and individualised. Youth transitions have become prolonged, more risky and insecure, with less

formal support from socialising agencies. Flexibility signifies the changing patterns of the social passages that constitute the youth phase and the shifting boundaries in terms of the time and place.

Flexibilisation of the time span of youth transitions

The first borders that were beset and changed were those of the time span of youth. The time limits of this life stage in different societies are strongly related to the ways in which it is socially constructed. Youth emerged as a social construct in the course of modernisation in Europe. While in the West deliberate intervention into this life stage was prompted by a fear of disruption and 'moral panics', in the communist countries in the East, young people were given the mission of building a 'brave new world' (Wallace and Kovacheva, 1998). In the 1960 Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, young people were declared to be the first generation to become citizens of the classless, just and prosperous communist society, which was expected to be fully developed by 1980. To reach this destination, young people had to become members of the official youth political organisations that were formed in all countries following the model of the Komsomol in the Soviet Union. Although participation rates in the formal youth organisations varied among countries, they towered well above 80% and it was the age limits for membership in the Komsomol that defined the status of youth - persons aged 14-28.

This time span covered the most prolonged transitions from school to work for those who opted for higher education and professional jobs. Obviously, those with basic or vocational education – the working class and peasant youth – had shorter transition paths to employment but could enjoy the privileged access to the state provided leisure and housing till the official upper limit of youth phase. These age boundaries were accepted by both youth policy and youth research.

With the collapse of the communist regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s followed by the dismissal or disintegration of the official youth organisations, youth lost its clearly defined borders as an age group. A recent survey (Kovacheva, 2000) conducted by the Youth Forum among state agencies and nongovernmental organisations working with youth in East Central Europe, showed that there was no widely accepted definition of this life stage. The lower limit was set between 12 and 18 while the upper limit was between 18 and 35. In some countries where the concern for 'nation building' required a strong pedagogical approach of the youth policy such as Estonia, the lower limit was pushed as early as 7 years of age (Youth Work Act). If we move to the south of the region where youth transitions are more prolonged, individuals in their late thirties are commonly defined as youth. The limits differ not only among countries but also within them in the concepts of the various agencies concerned with youth problems. Quite often even one agency works with different age definitions of youth when applying programmes affecting different forms of youth transitions.

Such seeming inconsistency is shared by youth researchers in the region as well - the other significant factor for the construction of youth (Dalu, 2000; Machacek, 1998; Mitev, 1996; Ule and Rener, 1998; Zubok, 1998; etc.). These diverging views reflect the process of flexibilisation of the time span of youth (Figure 1). It involves not only stretching the borders in both directions but also making them elastic to adapt to the changing situations in various spheres of youth life.

Figure 1. Flexibilisation of Time

Flexibilisation of Youth Transitions in Terms of Place

Youth transitions in post-communist East-Central Europe are also marked by a flexibilisation of place. The youth phase is no longer characterised by the straightforward passage from one sphere to the other: from school to work, from family of origin to family of

one's own, from parental home to independent housing. The process of flexibilisation concerns the borders both between and within the social spheres and the routes which youth transitions follow (Figure 2). Rather than moving from school to work, young people navigate within education and training, moving between various stages and forms of studies; and also within the labour market, moving between formal and informal employment, between part-time and full-time jobs. The routes of these transitions are strongly affected by the choices young people make when conducting family and housing transitions and when moving within and between subcultures.

Social research in Central and Eastern European countries has documented the flexible stances and behaviour of the young generation when managing their life transitions (Chuprov and Zubok, 2000; Mitev, 1996, Ule et al, 2000). It is the young generation that demonstrates the greatest readiness to shift from one career plan to another, to venture upon self-employment, to leave the labour market and return to full-time or part-time education or to combine work and studies.

Figure 2. Flexibilisation of Place

This paper considers only the split up of the previous well structured and relatively short transition from school to work into two loosely linked and limber types of transition: the first, between the grades and forms of the educational system and the second, in the labour market and between formal and informal work.

Flexibilisation of young people's routes through the educational system

In the 1990s young people experienced a change in the forms and length of their movement through the educational system. For many it is getting longer, for some shorter than before, while for all it is not a simple climb up of the grades, destined to provide an

uncontested qualifications certificate. The wide-scale educational reforms in conjunction with the political and economic restructuring weakened former regulations while new mechanisms are not easily instituted. During communism the state guaranteed free access to schools and school materials and a generally high quality of education which however was based on a strict army-like discipline, on uniform programmes, uniform methods of teaching and studying, uniform clothes and uniformly encouraged behaviour of young people. Education on all levels was centrally controlled and highly bureaucratic, and was particularly influenced by the need for an instrument of ideological indoctrination.

Above all, the educational system served the task to prepare young people for the entry into the centrally planned economy. In the 60s and 70s it was realised through the expansion of secondary education, which was made obligatory in some countries, and in the rest was standard for the majority of youth. It distributed young people among three career tracks (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Career Tracks during Communism

The reforms in the 1990s changed this system in no uniform way in the different countries. In most of them there was a prolongation of obligatory schooling to 16 and even to 18, as in Poland and Hungary. Russia made a turn in the opposite direction - the length of obligatory schooling there was reduced by two years. There were also changes in the established educational tracks. Countries with traditions in vocational education such as Romania and Poland demonstrate a tendency to enhance the development of general secondary schools (Slowinski, 1999). In the Russian Federation the share of those who do not study any speciality while at school grew three times in the 1990s (Kharchenko, 1999). Not only the state withdraws from financing such an expensive education, but also young people themselves are getting more interested in the general schools as providing a more flexible

basis on which they can build various types of post-secondary or higher education. The specialities offered by vocational schools are lagging far behind young people's aspirations. Thus, in the mid-90s in Bulgaria for example 82% of the places in the three-year vocational schools and 64% of those in the four-year vocational schools were preparing young people in industrial specialities (Genov, 1996). The shares of students in industrial specialities were 54% in Hungary and 39% in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Chvorostov, 1994). At the end of the 20th century the countries with the lowest participation rates in vocational education and training were the three Baltic States and the highest participation rates are found in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia and the Slovak Republic (ETF, 1999).

In the course of market reforms the local links between schools and enterprises have collapsed and new demands have arisen for computer skills, languages, accounting. Private schools teaching new skills and better equipped with educational materials and new technologies have been founded, creating new divisions among young people. All those schools charge fees, which are high for the impoverished population. Parental donations are not particularly new and might be perceived as a continuation of the previous system of official and unofficial sponsorship. However, it was post-communist reforms that gave unprecedented impetus to private tuition and private lessons. The proportion of pupils in private primary and secondary schools does not exceed 4% in the countries in the region (European Commission, 2000) but taking private lessons additional to state education has become a common practice for those preparing for entrance exams for colleges and universities. This is a flexible informal strategy of young people supported by their parents to add up to the quality of their preparation in state schools.

When analysing the expansion of secondary education, it is necessary to consider the contrasting process of a growth in the numbers of those leaving school before the compulsory age. Although there are not exhaustive and reliable comparative statistics for the region in

Eastern and Central Europe, this tendency is becoming a significant social problem, affecting young people in the region (Kovacheva, 2000). In Slovakia this concerns approximately 4% of school age youth, in Russia official figures report 0.01% but experts (Chuprov and Zubok, 2000) consider that it is closer to 10%, affecting between 2.5 and 4 million young people below the age of 15. A study of ETF (1999) reveals that every year about 5% of young people in the region give up education at the age of 15. In Bulgaria and Romania school leaving rates are high at the beginning of the educational career, while the pattern in Estonia, Latvia and Slovenia is different. They have high participation rates in basic education and high levels of transition to secondary education from which, however, the drop-out rates are very high.

Young girls are more likely to finish their compulsory schooling and show lower dropout rates from general and vocational educational programmes. In most countries the process of dropping out affects primarily young people from ethnic minorities and those from families living in poverty. One reason is that the opportunities to be educated in their own languages are limited for ethnic minority children. Romani youth appears to be the most disadvantaged group in most Central and Eastern European countries - both educationally and in the labour market. The problem of non-attendance is particularly acute in the conflict zones of Russia and Yugoslavia, among refugees and migrants.

One prominent feature of educational reforms under post-communism is the phenomenal boom in higher education. During the early 1980s the number of students decreased in most countries but since 1985 it has been on the increase in all countries (with a short decline in the beginning of the 1990s in some countries). At present the proportion of university students in CEECs is high, almost reaching the average for the EU of 14%, (See Figure 4).

Figure 4. Students in Higher Education

A study of ETF (1999) shows that the gross participation rates from upper secondary to tertiary education (measured by the percentage of graduates from secondary schools who continue their studies to higher education) ranges between 21% in Hungary to 55% in Bulgaria. Two models of participation rates in education can be identified:

- The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia form the first, Central European model in which young people have low participation in higher education but high participation in vocational education and training at secondary level.
- Bulgaria and the Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania represent the other model which show low participation rates in secondary vocational education and high participation rates in post-secondary and particularly in higher education.

The expansion in higher education is closely related to the introduction of market reforms in the region. During communism the numbers wanting higher education were far higher than the places at universities which were all state supported and with no fees. The narrow access to higher education was guaranteed by highly selective entrance exams. This raised the Communist Party's concern to equalise opportunities by allowing special access to children of workers or peasants via the so-called 'workers' faculties', but which were also used by nomenclature children to pass easily into tertiary education. Under post-communism entrance exams to universities remained but everywhere more places became available. The remarkably high share of young people in universities in Bulgaria was secured by opening two new universities each year in the first half of the 1990s and by recruiting more students in the old universities.

In all countries the significant increase in young people's participation in higher education is realised by expanding enrolment in state universities and establishing new private institutions. Many state universities introduced paid forms of study so that part of their

students are financed by the state as before and another part, sometimes over a half finance their studies themselves by paying fees to the university. In Bulgaria all state universities introduced fees in 1999. The same measure was implemented in Hungary in 1996 but was abolished in 1998. The diversification of the sources of financing has resulted in the blurring of the borders between state and private institutions, public and self-paid forms of study.

The greater versatility of the educational system was manifested in the opening up of branches in smaller cities and towns, in offering more part-time courses and forms of distant education. There is a growing diversity and flexibility in the curricula and in the contents and the organisation of lecture courses and seminars. Women profited the most from the expansion of higher education. In Poland and Bulgaria, women have been in the majority in higher education since 1975. In the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia, although the numbers of women students have increased recently, they are still outnumbered by men (European Commission, 2000). The new multiplicity of educational forms has allowed greater flexibility for young people and women in particular to combine studying with other commitments such as having a job or caring for children.

The opening up of new educational opportunities under post-communism does not empower young people to build up a step-like upward educational career. Often their routes through the education system result in the mere adding new diplomas to the old ones. Having a second higher education is not uncommon, as is the completing of some vocational course (for example in sewing) after graduating from college in public administration. The multiplication and diversification of institutions and forms of study poses the problem of the quality of education and the legitimacy of the diplomas received which makes insecure the very result of the study. Staying on in education evokes the danger for the young of becoming 'perpetual students' (Roberts et al, 2000).

Another form of flexibilisation of youth transitions is the combining of education (not only part-time but also full-time studies) with paid work of some kind. This practice is becoming common, affected by economic pressures on the households. It is parents and students who cover the rising costs of study. In many countries student loans are still only a formal possibility, as the conditions set up by banks are very hard to fulfil. Students take part-time jobs or do trading on their own account. Experts estimate that in Russia 15-20% of all students work, and in Latvia over a third do so (See Kovacheva, 2000). While in Hungary some colleges develop their own small enterprises to allow part-time work for their students, in most countries there are more students willing to add to their income by working than the number of jobs available. Most of them are in the grey economy, which is more flexible in responding to the irregularity of students' free time.

Flexibilisation of young people's routes in the labour market

The development of youth labour markets in the transitional societies in Central and Eastern Europe is also in the direction of a growing flexibility. It is a result of the economic liberalisation, which put an end to the comprehensive system of state allocation of graduates to places in the centrally planned economy. During communism the state enterprises provided training and employed young people, as well as supported a great proportion of students in secondary vocational schools and at universities with stipends guaranteeing them employment upon graduation. Work mobility was very low – full time employment was the norm and life long jobs were the ideal. Changing jobs was strongly discouraged as an undesired ‘fluidity’ of labour while combining jobs was sanctioned as a lack of full devotion to the goal of ‘work self-realisation’ of the personality.

There were shortages of labour in many sectors of the economy and enterprises provided incentives for young people with or without qualifications to take up jobs. Instead of

searching for openings in the labour market which as an institution did not exist, young people and their parents made efforts to avoid the state allocation system when they wanted better and more challenging jobs. These could be obtained either by taking part in a competitive selection process or (more often) through the social contacts of the family. Social research at the time interpreted young people's dislike toward the state allocation system as mismatch between youth aspirations and the needs of the economy (Mitev, 1988; Kharchenko, 1999). However, all this collapsed in the waves of the transformation. The new labour markets appeared to be unfriendly particularly to the young. The job seekers found out that not only the former system of obligatory placing had disappeared, but also a wide range of jobs previously accessible for the young had evaporated.

In all countries in the region a process of rapid de-industrialisation is under way since the start of the social transformation. The cuts in industrial employment were most drastic in Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania - from over a third to a half of the employed in this sector. In many countries there is also a process of de-agrarization and at the end of the century in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Estonia and Slovakia the share of agricultural employment has become similar to the EU average. Elsewhere employment in agriculture grew due to the lack of jobs in other sectors - e.g. Bulgaria, Lithuania and particularly in Romania where it rose to 40% in 1998 from 18% in 1989 (Eurostat, 1999). Service sector employment grew in most countries of the region except in Romania. Private sector employment reached 70% in Poland, Latvia and Lithuania in 1998, it was over 60% in the Czech Republic and Slovenia and more than a half in the rest.

The economic restructuring in the region resulted in a sharp decline in employment in the first years of reforms, which gradually stabilised in the second half of the 1990s. In Estonia employment has been on the decrease for the whole period while Bulgaria reported the highest employment reduction among the countries in the region in 1998. There was a

slight increase in employment only in four countries, particularly in FYR Macedonia, while in others such as Slovakia despite the rise in output, employment declined. Another problem in post-communist countries is the growth of regional disparities in opportunities in the local labour markets. Big cities are usually privileged while rural areas are disadvantaged. Activity rates of young people are significantly lower than those of the rest of the population. In 1997 they ranged between 32% in Bulgaria and 48% in the Czech Republic and Romania. The biggest differences between the activity rates of the young and the adult population are in Estonia and Lithuania (ETF, 1999).

The market reforms in the region created a larger diversity of employment opportunities for young people. There are five typical career options in the new labour markets in post-communist countries (See Roberts et al, 1999):

- Employment in substantial (Westernised) private businesses
- Public sector employment
- Self-employment
- Employment in small private businesses
- Non-employment

The change caused by post-communist reforms is not only in the greater variety of options for the young. There is an increasing flexibilisation of the career routes. First, unlike communism, employment careers are not rooted in young people's educational and family backgrounds. There is a growing individualisation of choices, which are getting more risky than before. Second, the chosen options do not represent life-long destinations. In fact, they are no longer the stable career tracks in which the young were placed during communism. Rather than following the started career route and often staying in one job till retirement young people now switch between tracks moving between various employment statuses. Often

their transitions are only flitting from one job to another with frequent spells of unemployment, without building a career or accumulating skills.

The new options are not equally accessible to youth. Very few young people enter Western or mixed ownership companies offering higher pay, more social benefits and better career prospects. Entrepreneurship is an attractive opportunity (Machacek, 1998; Kovacheva, 1998; Semenova, 1998), but young people are underrepresented among the self-employed and particularly among employers. Jobs available to the young are mostly in small, locally owned and managed enterprises (Bilsen and Konings, 1996; Gerchikov, 1999). These are not jobs requiring high qualifications and offering high pay. Recent graduates and young workers are found more often in casual, seasonal jobs. Most of the job offers are for fixed, usually short terms and do not require high qualifications. In 1996-1998 more than 90% of the openings in the Labour Offices in Bulgaria were for periods of 6 months or less and there was a decline in the jobs that required high qualifications while there was a rise in proportion of the offers which required no qualifications (Roberts et al, 1999).

Young women in central and eastern European countries are disadvantaged in the labour market and on the workplace. During communism women in general earned 79% of men's wages (Corrin, 1992) and this share has declined in many countries in the course of the transformation. Independently of their qualification level, women have lower activity rates than men. In Hungary even highly educated women are much less active than men. Women are much less often found among the self-employed and even less so among the employers. It turns out that while women are the main beneficiaries of the educational reforms, they are not in a better position in the labour market. An ILO survey (cited in UNDP 1999) have found out that during 1991-93 managers in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic preferred to select men when it came to choice between men and women. Young professional women encountered difficulties when looking for a job because employers expected that they would get married

and have children and eventually take a long leave. In 1992-1996 women comprised 27% of administrators and managers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, 28% in Slovenia and Romania, 34% in Hungary and Poland and 39% in Latvia (UNDP, 1999). And this is despite the high career aspirations among young women in the region. A survey among young people in Bulgaria (Aadnes, 2001) found a wide gap between women and men concerning their attitudes to gender roles. The author argues that the traditional attitudes among men are a significant barrier to young women's efforts to combine career and family under post-communism.

Unemployment in post-communism remains a predominantly youth phenomenon. In this aspect the countries in Central and Eastern Europe resemble that in the European Union where unemployment affects the younger population more often than other age groups. However, youth unemployment in post-communist societies turns out to be much higher than that in the West when unregistered unemployment is taken into consideration. It can be expected that the true rate is double the official one (Roberts et al, 1999). Most of the young unemployed in the comparative study of youth unemployment in East Europe (Roberts et al, 1999) have had periods of not registered unemployment. Whether individuals registered depended on whether or not they were entitled to benefits while most of the young respondents did not believe that the Labour Offices would assist them in their search for the kinds of jobs they wanted.

The sharp increase in unemployment found societies in the region unprepared both in terms of legislation and psychological tolerance. While at the start of the reforms some economists welcomed the prospect of unemployment as a mechanism to repair the inefficient labour distribution during communism, the stubborn persistence of high rates quickly raised public concerns. In 1997 the average unemployment rate in the region was 12.7%, the highest

in the FYR of Macedonia (36%) and the lowest in the Czech Republic (6%), but the latter has been on the increase for a second consecutive year (Eurostat, 1999).

Figure 5. Youth Unemployment in 1998

The average rate of youth unemployment in the region exceeds 25%, with extremes in the FYR of Macedonia and Bulgaria. Even in the Czech Republic there are twice as many young unemployed as other groups. Most of the young unemployed find themselves in this situation right from school or after finishing the obligatory military service. They cannot accumulate work experience and skills, which makes them de-privileged in the labour market. Young women are particularly vulnerable, as women unemployment rates are higher in most countries except in Hungary.

The comparative survey (Roberts et al, 1999) measured the socio-demographic profile of the young unemployed in the region and found it significantly different from that of the young unemployed in the West. Ninety per cent of the young unemployed in post-communist countries were from the national and religious majorities, came from families whose parents belonged to all the major occupational groups and had varied labour market experiences. The young unemployed had varied educational backgrounds and were not concentrated only on the lowest educational level, nor were they with specialities in a limited range of fields. The most vulnerable group, the most pessimistic and detached from the labour market, were those who had never had a proper job, were younger, from a disadvantaged area, with no speciality, were unregistered, and had received less support from family or friends, and even less from state agencies.

However, passive stances and behaviours were not dominant even among this most underprivileged group. There were three typical flexible strategies applied by young people in post-communist societies to find a way out of persistent unemployment:

- Back to education,
- Work in the informal economy, and
- Emigration abroad.

Rather than registering as unemployed, many young people sign up for courses to acquire additional skills, further qualifications or just to get a different and more acceptable status. Bilsen and Konings (1996) argue that investments in education are becoming well founded for the countries in the region. The study of the young unemployed in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Bulgaria (Roberts et al, 1999) found a wide spread readiness to involve in educational and training courses and these were more often financed by the young people or their parents, rather than the state employment agencies.

The other exit from unemployment available to young people is work in the second economy. Over a half of the sample of Roberts et al (1999) study have worked off the record in some stage of their unemployment. They have been earning on the average less than they would have expected from proper jobs but more than the unemployment benefit. Such jobs were valued for the money but also for the opportunities to develop skills, acquire experience and establish contacts. Such jobs were usually short term and the workers had no protection - if they did not abide to employers' insistence to work longer hours or night shifts, etc, they would have been thrown out without pay. The same - if they made mistakes, they could find that they had worked for nothing.

The unofficial economy is becoming a very significant form of post-communist flexibilisation of work. When official employment is drastically contracting, the young workers are forced to turn to informal economic activity. The estimates of this activity are

only unofficial but nonetheless impressive. In Croatia experts judge that 15% of employment is in the shadow economy and in Bulgaria this figure reaches almost a third of the active labour force. A survey of the Institute for Market Economies in Bulgaria (Genov, 1998) revealed that every tenth legally employed person received from the employer additional remuneration that both sides concealed. The share of young people working in the shadow economy is higher than that of the general population (Kovacheva, 2000). In the Russian Federation in regions with higher unemployment criminal structures are the only employers for young people (Zubok, 1998).

Emigration abroad is the third flexible strategy in the unfriendly labour markets in post-communist countries. For those in Central Europe it takes the form of small trade and seasonal work abroad with which young people aim to earn money or learn languages. In other countries where visas are required, permanent or long-term illegal emigration is sought. Outward migration is high especially from regions with ethnic conflicts and wars. Throughout the 1990s cross-border trading between the countries in the region has been thriving, carried out both legally and illegally, individually and through international networks. All countries in Central and Eastern Europe have the so-called 'Russian markets' in which people from the former Soviet Union (Russia, Belarus, Ukraine) sell electrical goods, car parts, and other small wares. The mobility also takes the form of migration within the region, the most desired destinations being the Central European countries: Hungary, the Czech republic, Slovakia and Poland turning them into a buffer zone between East and West Europe (Wallace, 1998).

It is the constrained labour market opportunities that force young people to devise flexible career strategies while waiting for the high quality jobs for which they aspire. Interviews with unemployed youth young people (Roberts et al, 1999) showed that they believed that the new market economies should bring more and not less chances for better careers than were available during communism. In the meanwhile, while their countries were

making the transitions to the developed market economies, they relied upon traditional, informal sources of support to navigate in the labour market.

Figure 6. Main Source of Assistance

As Figure 6 indicates, everywhere parents have been of most help both during unemployment and self-employment. Friendship circles were also of great importance, while the young rarely mentioned the new market institutions such as employers, banks, state and private employment agencies and nongovernmental voluntary associations. The family offered advice and information, financial support and contacts. Parents usually offered free housing and food, also money for leisure and clothes to the unemployed and were the most important source of start up capital and business contacts for the self-employed.

Conclusions

The waves of social transformation have destabilised the former orderly transitions of young people to adulthood. The clear-cut career tracks from school to work have gone pliant providing more choice and more risk. The flexibilisation of transition patterns in the Central and Eastern Europe has led to greater diversity and individualisation. Social inequalities have widened dramatically without an evident link between merits and achievements. While some manage to gain quick success in business unthinkable in established market societies, others move on within the educational system, between marginal jobs and back to education without clearly advancing towards the quality jobs they see as their desired destinations in adult life. .

Post-communist societies are experiencing the influence of many of the processes leading to flexibilisation in the West: increased international competition, privatisation of state owned companies, diffusion of new information technologies (Burchell et al, 1999) or more

generally, globalisation, individualisation and underemployment (Beck, 1999). At the same time, they face the specific risks of transitional societies: mass impoverishment, 'feudalisation' and 'criminalisation' of businesses (Chavdarova, 1996; Clarke, 2000), 'educational decline' and 'depopulation' (UNDP, 1999). Under these conditions young people's 'reflexive' biographies are created amidst greater risks and insecurity than those of their Western counterparts. Added to the global risks are severe material concerns, grave health disorders and crime threats. This clashing and overlaying of waves is sound evidence against the assumption about a linear and simplified pattern of modernisation.

What young people in the region have as an advantage over youth in the West is that they commonly view their own situation as 'transition' and prefer to remain in it while their own countries are also 'in transition'. Instead of withdrawing altogether from the labour market, they devise flexible strategies for the transition period without identifying with any of them. This helps them keep their high aspirations while coping with the increasingly risky environment of the post-communist world. They believe that when their countries succeed to finish the transition, they would be able to take up the more successful careers they crave for.

In these efforts they are supported by their parents mostly while the state is generally retracting from its active role. The post-communist governments are not eager to invest in youth policies when the cost of supporting an increasing population of pensioners goes up. The transitional societies lack well devised strategies which can expand opportunities and diminish the risks facing young people in their life transitions. The flexibility of post-communist career routes is blended with persistently high unemployment rates together with increasing length and recurring spells of unemployment among young people, extended periods of working in the informal economy at home or abroad. It is a challenge which should be met by the co-operation of the central and local authorities with the new voluntary sector,

especially with youth groups and organisations, in order for the young generation to be able to swim with the waves of the ongoing social transformation and benefit from the reforms.

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Figure 1. Flexibilisation of Time

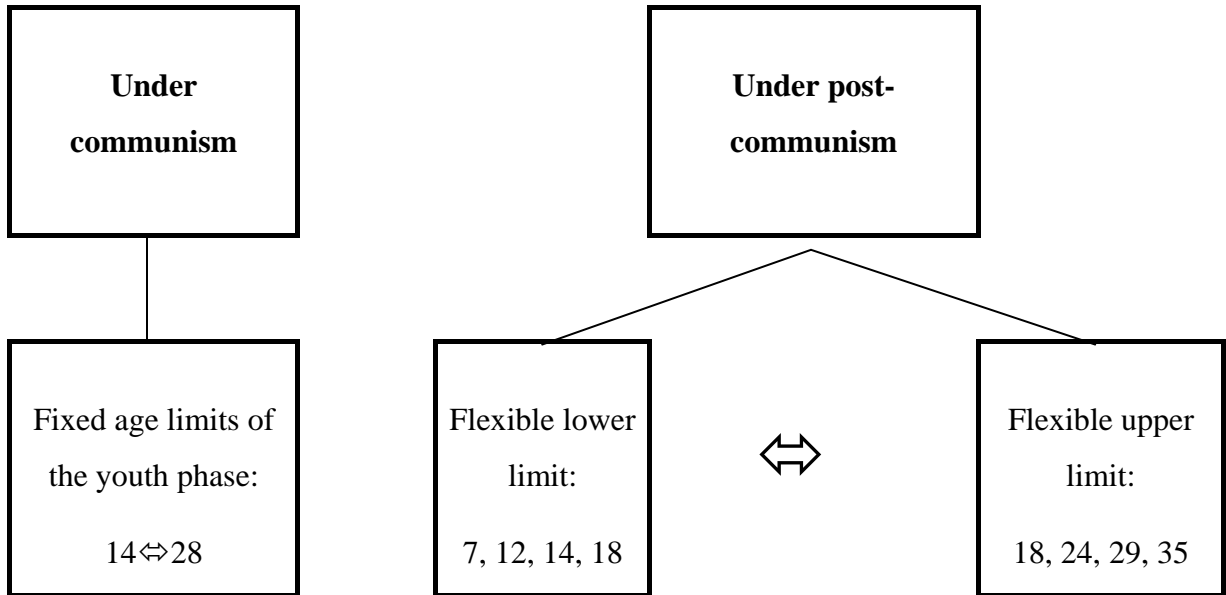


Figure 2. Flexibilisation of Place
The Change in the Routes of Youth Transitions:

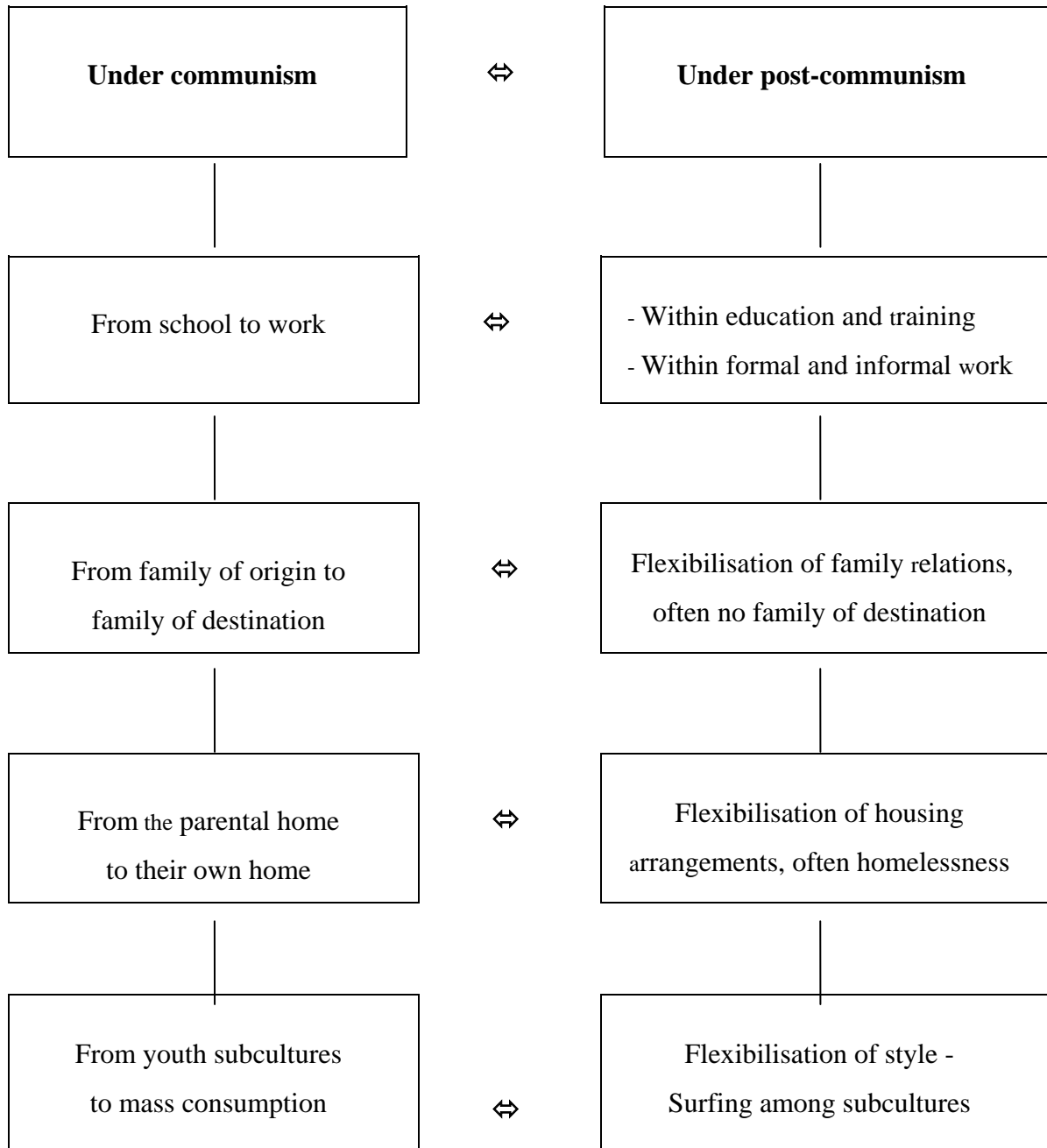


Figure 3. Career tracks during communism

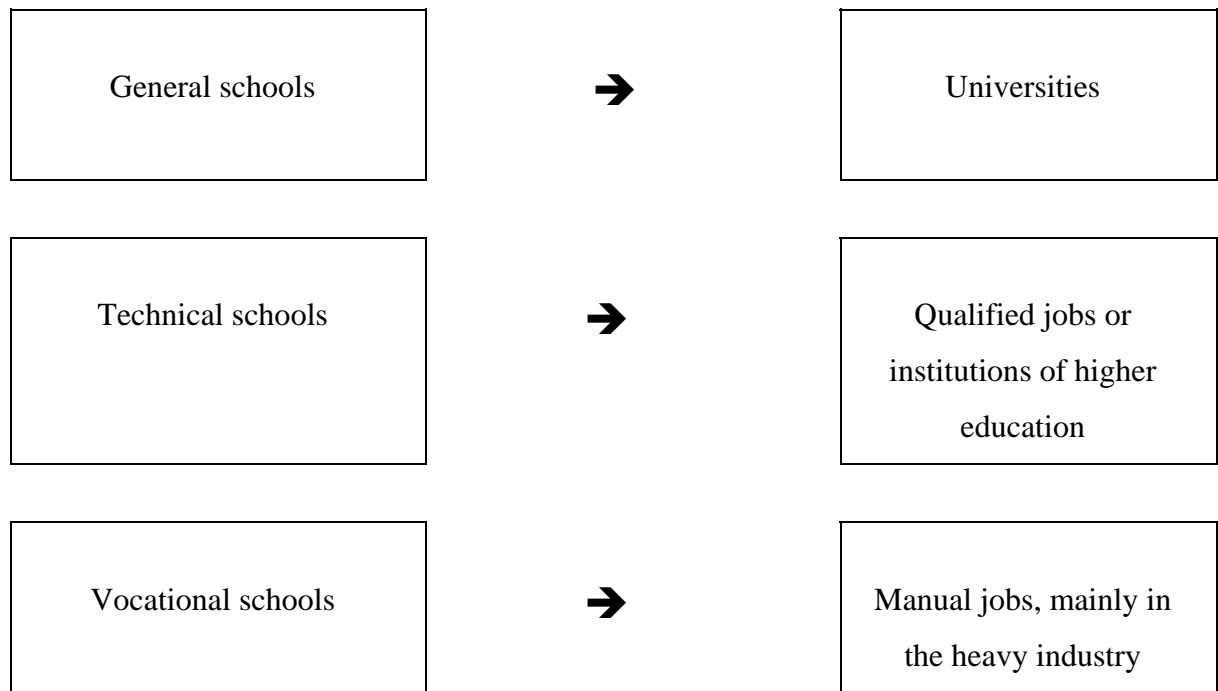


Figure 4. Students in Higher Education
(in thousands and as a percentage of the total population in education)

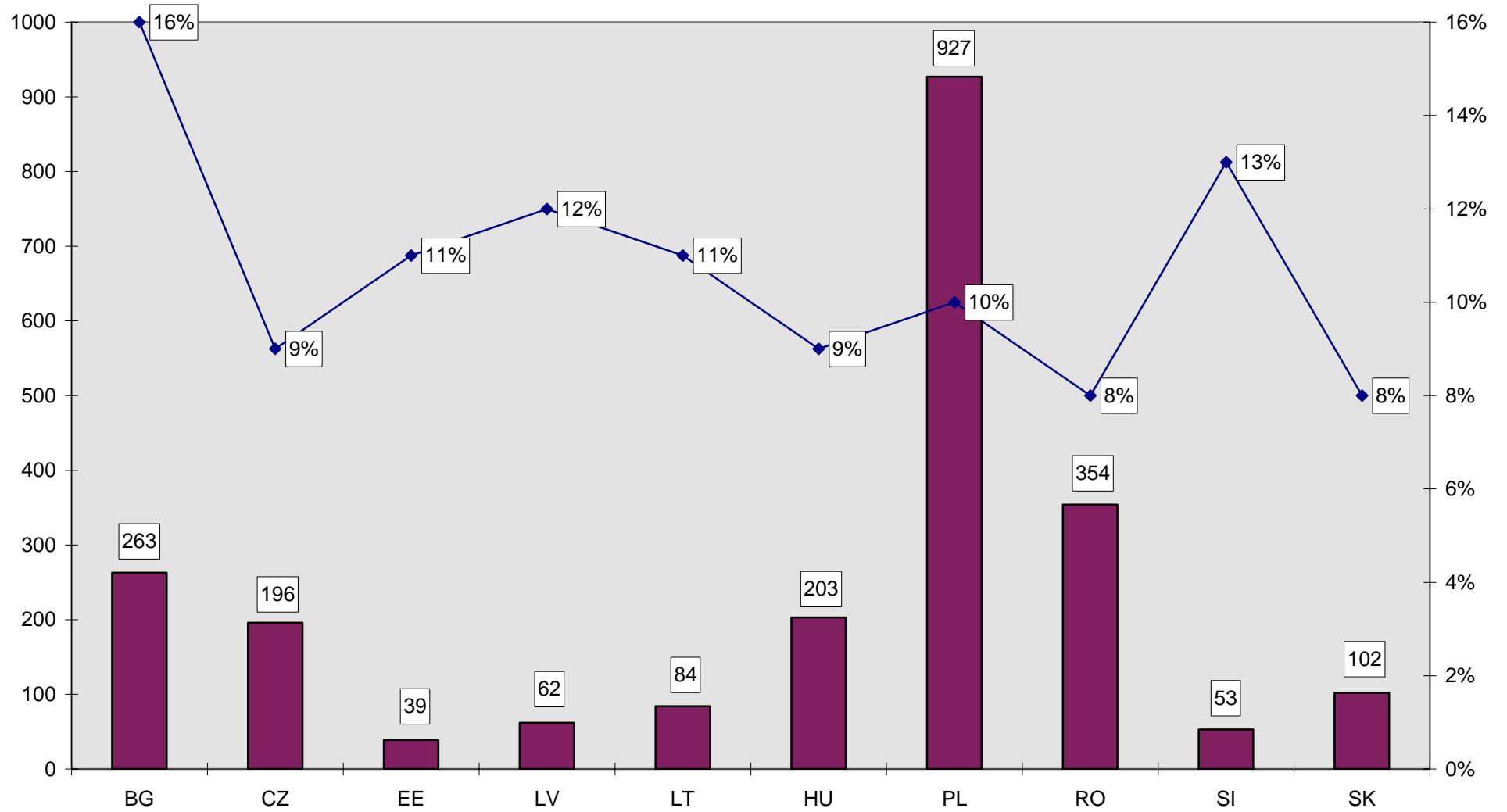


Figure 5. Youth Unemployment in 1998

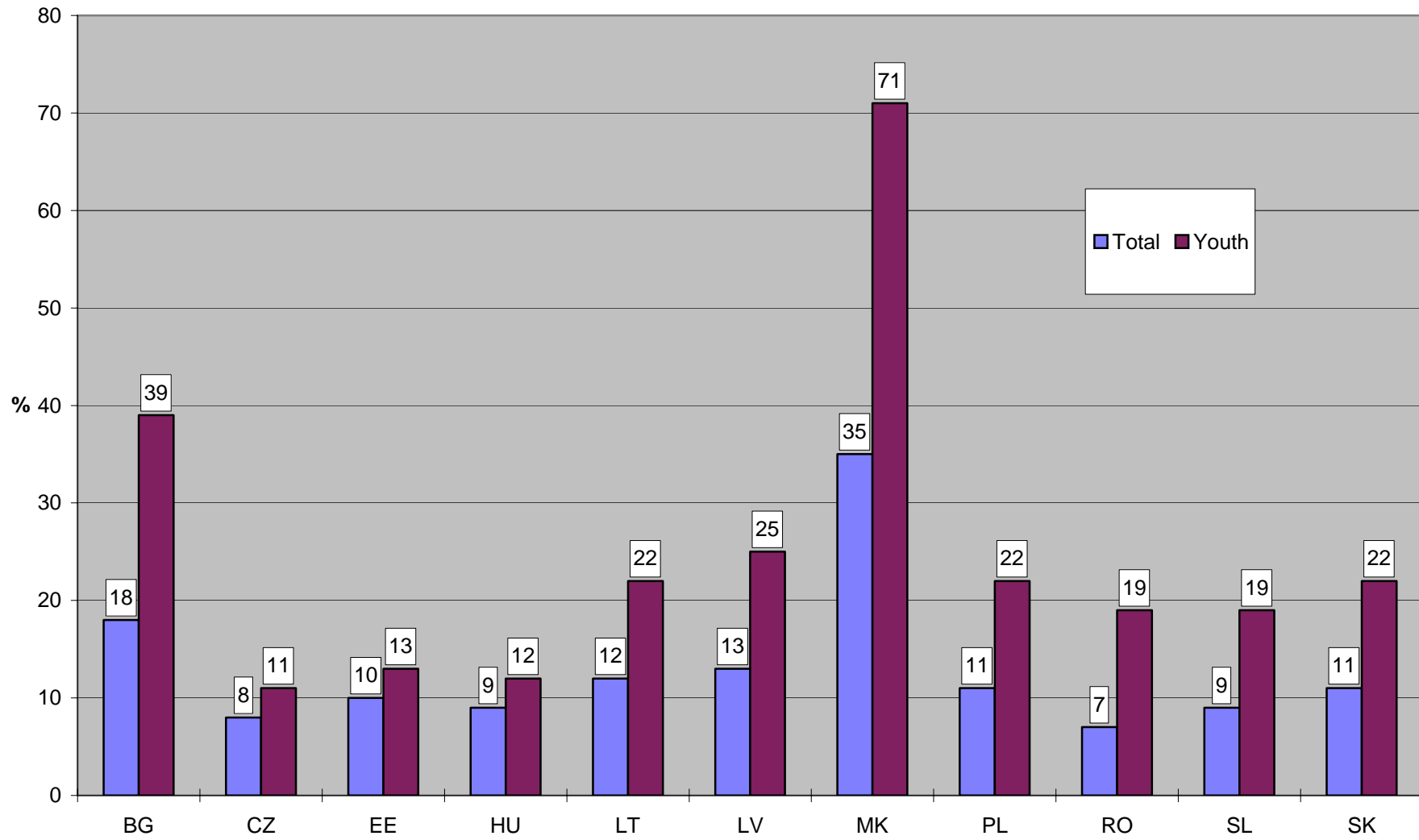


Figure 6. Main source of Assistance

