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# The Golden Age of Life: Two Faces of Serbia

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the situation of older people in Serbia – development and current state of art, their marginalization and ageism in the society. Stereotypes and media are in the focus, since many researches show that their impact on the adult population is huge, and they act as a ‘massive’ adult educator in the public space. An educational measure and its impact are shown in the paper, and the results of the project are presented, where several adult education organisations took part, aiming at change of the image of elderly in the society.

**Key words:** third age, elderly, older people, media education.

## Scope of the Problem

The problem of getting older in Europe has, based on its complexity, a manifold character and aspects - it does not represent only a demographic phenomenon and a challenge, but it also has a number of psychological, economic and sociological implications. It has been shown many times, how important this development and this phenomenon are, not least through the nomination of the *European Year of Active Aging* by the European Commission and many projects, initiatives, development of strategies for elderly and establishing of organizations that deal

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with senior citizens. The reality of Europe getting older is not only constrained to the EU, it is a cross-border phenomenon that affects the entire European territory. "At the world level, the number of older persons is expected to exceed the number of children for the first time in 2045."<sup>3</sup> Despite all the differences in the political and economic development, the similarity between Serbia, several countries in Western Balkans and EU-countries comes out strongly.

The demographic data of the population census in Serbia in 2011 show that the population of Serbia belongs to the five oldest in Europe, so that Serbia shares many issues and problems related to active aging that become more important and central also in the countries of western Europe. The last data in 2017 show that average age in Serbia is 43 - men 41,6, women 44,4,<sup>4</sup> with an increase in average age (The 2013 census in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows average age for women 40,7 and for men 38,2, which is also more than in census in 1991<sup>5</sup>). At the time 17,5% of the population is older than 65 (in Bosnia and Herzegovina it is around 13%<sup>6</sup> while UN estimates that this percentage will increase to 30% in 2060<sup>7</sup>). Based on some estimations, in 25 years there will be already 29 percent. The estimation is that Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina will have even higher percentage of older people.<sup>8</sup>

These problems are taken very seriously in Serbia, but mostly by the civil society actors and in many national and international organizations that deal with the problems of elderly people. This is clearly visible in many strategic papers that were prepared and discussed in the past until 2010. In September 2006, the Serbian Government has passed a *National Strategy on Ageing, 2006 – 2015*. This document shows that the situation in Serbia has improved on the political and strategic level after signing the *MIPAA* contract. There are numerous important strategic documents that were adopted in the past 10 years: *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* (2002), *The Health Care Reform Policy* (2004), *The*

<sup>3</sup> Čanković et al. 2016. Quality of life of elderly people living in a retirement home. *Vojnosanitetski pregled*, 73(1), p.43

<sup>4</sup> Al Jazeera Balkans. 2018. Nastavljen trend depopulacije u Srbiji, stanovništvo sve starije. *Al Jazeera Balkans*, [online]. 29.06.2018. Retrieved from: <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/nastavljen-trend-depopulacije-u-srbiji-stanovništvo-sve-starije>

<sup>5</sup> BHAS. 2015. *Demografija / Demography 2015*. TB02. Sarajevo: Agencija za statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine / Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>7</sup> MHR. 2015. *Inicijalni izvještaj Bosne i Hercegovine o primjeni Madridskog akcionog plana za starenje*.

<sup>8</sup> Marinković, A. 2016. U Srbiji do 2050. trećina stanovnika starija od 65. *Politika*, [online]. 30.03.2006. Retrieved from: <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/352132/Zivot-i-stil/U-Srbiji-do-2050-trecina-stanovnika-starija-od-65#!>

*Social Welfare Development Strategy* (2005), *The Family Code* (2005), *The Law on Citizens Ombudsman*, the *Amendments to Employment Law and Amendments to Law on Social Protection of Citizens and Provision of Financial Security* (2006), *The Disability Discrimination Law* (2006), *The Strategy for the Enhancement of Persons with Disabilities* (2006).

However, it should be also noted that The European Social Charter from 1996 (with the very important article about the Right of Elderly Persons to Social Protection) was signed or ratified by all countries in South-Eastern Europe - all except Serbia and Bosnia.<sup>9</sup>

“The great step forward has been made and progress achieved which is the sound base for further action. The older people in Serbia have not been rightfully satisfied with their status or with the overall approach of the society towards the old age. On the other hand, Government of Serbia made critical progress adopting the NAS as paper with clearly identified challenges of ageing in the country and response to them”<sup>10</sup>. Certain strategic documents of the European Union and the prioritization of this group have had a positive impact on problem solving situation of the older people in Serbia, since it became clear that they belong to a target group who needs systematic support – for different reasons and in different areas. It became quite clear in for instance one of the most important EU-documents in the area of education: „*Member States should ensure sufficient investment in the education and training of older people and migrants, but above all ensure efficiency by designing education and training which matches the needs of the learner. They should also raise awareness of the important role of migrants and older people in society and in the economy.*”<sup>11</sup> Still, as a transition country (politic, economy, social) Serbia has a burden of dealing with many paradoxes related to elderly people that reflect the whole transition process in the post-communist countries – new challenges and developments on the one hand and on the other demographic processes, which are typical for the “old” EU-countries.

<sup>9</sup> Satarić, N, Rašević, M. Miloradovic, S. 2009. *They cannot wait*. Study on Poor Elderly in Serbia. Belgrade: Amity

<sup>10</sup> UN, EC for Europe. 2007. *Reporting on National Follow-up to the UNECE Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS) of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA)*. Retrieved from: [http://www.monitoringris.org/documents/imp\\_nat/risimp/SER.pdf](http://www.monitoringris.org/documents/imp_nat/risimp/SER.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Commission of the European Communities, Brussels. 2006. *Communication from the Commission. Adult learning: It is never too late to learn*. Retrieved from: [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/de/com/2006/com2006\\_0614de01.pdf](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/de/com/2006/com2006_0614de01.pdf), p. 10.

The time from 2014 until 2019 in Serbia was marked by authoritarian regime, rise of right-wing and nationalistic ideas and populism. Although among the most vulnerable groups, older people turned out to be one of the victims of the new populism, used for partisan purposes, manipulated by populist politics of the government, ‘robbed’ through several economic twists or blackmailed by use of their vulnerable position.

### **Development of the Role and Position of Elderly People**

Serbia is still substantially a traditional society with rather dichotomous perceptions and attitudes regarding elderly people. In a patriarchal society, which Serbia used to be (and partially still is), the elderly people were highly respected in the society and regarded to be its valuable members. Authority and informal power were imputed to their roles. Many sociological studies prove that: „The patriarchal and authoritative type of the family that is often found in large families... is a traditional one and based on two principles – age related rights and male domination.”<sup>12</sup> For that reason, the most important features of younger generations were *respect and/or obedience* towards the elderly based on an implicit understanding of wisdom of the elderly people. „In such a society children used to belong to an image of prosperity whereas the elderly were representing an unquestionable authority. The whole cohesion of a family was based on the following two assumptions: private property and authority of the elderly people. „The reputation of a person in the society grew proportionally to his/her age.”<sup>13</sup> These studies also explain the reasons for the great reputation of the elderly: „The relations between generations were determined by the oldest generation, which was considered to be also the guardian of the values and knowledge that it was passing on to the new generations.”<sup>14</sup> In some other cultures, elderly people had a similar status: „In China that is also considered to be patriarchal there is for example “Confucian Filial Piety”. This is a code of behaviour according to which

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<sup>12</sup> Golubović, Z. 1981. *Porodica kao ljudska zajednica*, Zagreb: Naprijed, p. 134, (author's translation).

<sup>13</sup> Mladenović, M. (1978). *Porodica i stari ljudi u savremenom društvu*. In: *Gerontološki kongres Jugoslavije*, Beograd: Gerontološko društvo SR Srbije, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Milić, A. 2007. *Sociologija porodice*. Beograd: Čigoja štampa, p. 329, (author's translation)

the younger should show respect and esteem towards the older ones and sons and daughters should serve their parents.”<sup>15</sup>

The traditional-patriarchal society in Serbia used to have also another side, which was not at all beneficial for the third age: difficult economic situation, poverty and hard, sometimes merciless, struggle for survival that lead to a negative treatment of elderly people, since they were regarded as a burden for both family and the society. Their inability to produce necessary goods for the existence of the family and to make a visible contribution to the economic development of the society was crucial for their destiny in the old age. This is why the phenomenon of a harrowing practice called “Lapot” is not surprising. There were many anthropological, ethnological and sociological studies on lapot. It was primarily typical for Eastern Serbia - according to some sources it was also a practice in the neighbouring countries. Elderly, who were no longer fit to work were indirectly killed with an item (mostly over a bread that was placed on the head of the elderly person) or they were brought far away from home and left without water and food. „This had to be done as a rule by the sons. In the upper part of the river Timok this event was some kind of a ritual at which all the adults from the village took part... The harrowing practice was done, in order to prevent elderly people to become a burden, or to prevent them from eating bread “for nothing”. There are also other opinions, according to which this action was an act of mercy – to make an end to the torture of elderly people this way. However, this explanation seems highly implausible, since economic reasons were obviously crucial.”<sup>16</sup> Today, lapot is a symbolic expression for cruel behaviour towards elderly people.<sup>17</sup>

In the age of socialism, the traditionally important role of elderly people lost gradually its importance. At the same time a systematic multidimensional framework was created for security, care and protection of elderly people (for example, secured social service, pension and health care insurance were introduced). It still represents an object of nostalgia that is often interpreted incorrectly: as a political nostalgia for “good old days, when everything used to

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<sup>15</sup> Wolfinger, G. (im Gespräch mit Collewe, K). 2009. Das Alter hat viele Gesichter. Warum älter werden weit mehr ist als ein biologischer Prozess. *Welt-Sichten*, [online]. Vol. 4/2009. 28.03.2009. Retrieved from: <http://www.welt-sichten.org/artikel/art-04-009/das-alter-hat-viele-gesichter.html>

<sup>16</sup> Živadinović, N. 1978. Lapot u prošlosti i briga za ostarela lica danas u delu Timočke krajine. *Gerontološki kongres Jugoslavije*. Beograd: Gerontološko društvo SR Srbije, S. 97.

<sup>17</sup> Jovanović, B. 2010. Antropološki aspekti starosti. *Gerontologija*, 37(2), p. 94 (authors' translation).

be better” – also for an abdicated political system. *It is more a matter of the society having a certain responsibility towards the weaker groups and promising them care and support (even if small) that was continuous and certain. Exactly that was, so to say, lost in the crises of the '90s.* The situation of socially marginalized groups deteriorated dramatically. During the war, at the time of the economic disaster and total collapse of the old system, only a few features and advantages that the elderly people used to have were preserved. They belonged to the groups that were economically most affected and helplessly exposed to the ‘wild’ years, when there were no rules and social norms for social groups in need. A widespread poverty broke out after several crises – downstream of the BDP and the standard, breakup of the Yugoslavian welfare state, wars in the region of former Yugoslavia, international isolation and bombing of Serbia etc.<sup>18</sup> Terrible impact of these events on elderly people is shown in a proportionally large number of suicides among elderly people – out of famine, defeatism, desperation...<sup>19</sup> What has changed so dramatically? The social climate, implicit and explicit goals and aspirations (both personal and social) and an entirely different system of values – they all have disturbed the generation features and roles. The desired behaviour model has grown up on a totally new system of values. The vision of a hero did not comply any longer with a patriot who acts in the interest of his country and the well-being of his fellow human beings. It rather fits into a nationalistic narrative about the young warrior who falls and dies for his nation, state or religion, up to a young “businessman” who generated his richness on the Balkan battle fields and by using the troubles and catastrophes of people. On the political and social scene of that time, the elderly did not have much to say, especially not beyond the nationalistic-patriotic context.

The crucial political changes in 2000 brought a new order and principles, and redefined the roles of various groups of citizens of the Serbian society. The capitalist forms of production, which came out in a primitive and brutal form, brought the elderly people once more in a precarious situation. After the first successes of the new government (with international help) and the initial

<sup>18</sup> Satačić, N. 2010. Siromaštvo starijih i ostvarivanje strategije za smanjenje siromaštva. *Gerontologija*, p. 185. (authors' translation)

<sup>19</sup> See for example: Gerontološko društvo Srbije. 2010. *Zaključci osmog nacionalnog gerontološkog kongresa 2010*. Retrieved from: [http://www.gds.org.rs/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=27:-2010&catid=2:2012-02-21-13-18-00&Itemid=10](http://www.gds.org.rs/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=27:-2010&catid=2:2012-02-21-13-18-00&Itemid=10); Also in Penev, G, Stanković, B. (2007). Samoubistva u Srbiji početkom 21. veka i kretanja u proteklih pedeset godina. *Stanovništvo*. 45(2).

enthusiasm, as of 2003, the development took once again a negative turn (politically and economically). First ones to become redundant were elderly people. With the decreased system of social protection, elderly people became one of the weakest social groups. It all had an impact on the social vision of getting older and being old. The role and function of the family, of generations and the community have changed dramatically. As Mladenović explained, the numerous social and economic problems, and a large concentration of population in urban areas, have “swept away” the old family model from the historical scene, while the preconditions for the “survival” of a new family model were not provided on time.<sup>20</sup> The galloping dominance of the materialistic values, the cult of youth and beauty, reduced to pure physical attributes, took the elderly people the possibility away to contribute to the social development and to get a new orientation. By uncritical rejection of everything that used to belong to the ‘old times’, a whole system of values had disappeared. The values related to traditional ethics, good education, patience and wisdom – it all disappeared, drowned in the *yuppie* – model of the young, suspiciously successful and rapidly enriched people.

Today’s image of elderly people is a result of such development. The existence of traditional positive perception of the elderly people is still there, but it only exists in traces. The image of the elderly people is strongly dominated by their real or attributed helplessness. This partially justifiable idea relates to the fact that elderly people are the weakest group of citizens – from the economical point of view. In the report on implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging (MIPAA) in Serbia it was stressed that the elderly people in Serbia have a strong feeling of being discriminated, be it only by a physician, in the public transport or simply in different situations of the daily life. “If I take the bus nobody lets me take a seat, and when I go to doctors the first thing they ask me is how old I am.”<sup>21</sup> Age-related poverty represents a problem both in urban and rural areas: the Serbian Government admitted already in a report from 2007 that elderly people are disproportionately affected by poverty with almost 11%. One of the many causes lies, according to opinion of experts, in the economic and social upheaval after the Yugoslavian wars. Particularly people between 55 and 59 years have lost their jobs or have been sent to an early retirement. “In

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<sup>20</sup> Mladenović, M., *ibid.*, p. 28. (authors’ translation)

<sup>21</sup> UN, EC for Europe (2009). *Ibid.*

Serbia poverty is more prevalent amongst older citizens (10.9 percent of older population, 2002). The structure of costs and housing conditions of the elderly are worse in comparison with the rest of the population. Simultaneously, there are obvious gaps in the institutional and instrumental level of fulfilment of the basic needs of the elderly, and drawbacks in the overall response of the society to the impact and consequences of ageing of population.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, there is a “leaking” system of social protection, which holds elderly people almost in the ghetto of physically weak and socially sensitive groups.

The development described above has various negative consequences in many areas: the neoliberal form of capitalism affects this group substantially in both economically and sanitary way. In addition, the war, diverse conflicts, authoritarian regime and degradation of the value system and living conditions in the ‘90s, have left a trace of violence, whose victims became in many cases elderly people.

From 2014 onwards, the situation of the elderly people has deteriorated, since corruption, nepotism and brutal neoliberal economy became worse. Older people were especially struck by the law on pension reduction as a part of a package of government austerity measures. Further on, social protection and health services have deteriorated drastically, and they are at “risk of housing exclusion because of unaffordable rents in the completely unregulated private rental sector, and because access to social housing has been dramatically reduced as a result of housing privatization.”<sup>23</sup>

Since older people are perceived as a ‘alive voting machine’ for the ruling party, there are no efforts to implement the principle of respecting diversity and different needs of the elderly population, to improve their life conditions, and to change the perception of older people in media. On both sides of political spectrum – as naive and obedient voters of ruling party, or bitter opponent of the authoritarian regime that has pauperised them and the country, they are powerless and not perceived as a group with the potentials for further development of the society. Although the dominant narrative pretends to picture them in the positive and inclusive way, the reality reveals the other face of the policy towards them.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Petrović, M. and Timotijević, M. 2013. Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in Serbia. *European Journal of Homelessness*. 7(2), p. 267



## Stereotypes and Media Image of Elderly People in Serbia

Different researches show that media often shape the idea of being old and getting old in the society and in the public and participate in the age discrimination. This relates strongly to Serbia, where media have a negative impact and support prejudices on elderly people or even produce them. Marginalization and *ageism*, or in the best case paternalism dominate in many media. Since many people have great confidence in media and see/read the media reports and analyses uncritically<sup>24</sup>, media are accomplices in the severe situation the seniors are in today. Very often it happens unconsciously, since the journalists don't reflect about the contents of their programs and their consequences in the sense of social responsibility and the creation of the *public sphere*. „Sometimes we see in the morning show of the state television programs with elderly people – mostly the inhabitants of a gerontological centre or a retired people's club. If we analyse the behaviour of the presenters, we will find it unnatural. In their aspiration to be kind and friendly, they act unnecessarily caring and paternalistic. Such a communication is offensive, since it makes an impression, as if adults would speak to a “less adult” person.”<sup>25</sup>

The elderly people are not only represented as old and helpless, but also as ugly and often evil. Getting old has its negative sides and consequences – both for the affected persons and for the society. Even some kind of animosity is constructed in the media between the young and the old, as if they were two natural enemies. Accordingly, the younger ones were exploited, since the retired ones take them their place in the society, the time and the attention away and in particular they claim their pensions – the money that future generation actually had to become. „The relations between the generations are based on a generational separatism, where pretty “shaky” authority of the ancestors is preserved.”<sup>26</sup> This image created with the help of media is supported – and sometimes also co-designed – by different communities and professional groups that work with elderly people or should work with them: starting with families up to the persons in charge in various institutions and organizations.

<sup>24</sup> Research „New and old media and dependency of the audience”, done by Lj.Bojić in 2011, shows that ca 67,9% of citizens have some kind of dependency on media. - B92. 2011. Građani Srbije zavisni od medija?. B92, [online]. 12.10.2011. Retrieved from: [http://www.b92.net/zdravlje/vesti.php?yyyy=2011&mm=10&nav\\_id=548971](http://www.b92.net/zdravlje/vesti.php?yyyy=2011&mm=10&nav_id=548971)

<sup>25</sup> Komatina, S. 2003. Dominantne predstave o starosti, *Stanovništvo*, 41(1-4), p.147. (authors' translation)

<sup>26</sup> Milić, A. 2007. Ibid.

There is even a bigger problem than that – the problem that elderly people accept this image on their part. Not recognizing or underestimating their skills and possibilities, consent to socially imputed and negatively defined role, sometimes even victimization – these are often barriers and stereotypes that are difficult to overcome in the heads of many people. The difficult economic and social situation of the elderly people represents a problem and requires an even bigger engagement for their overcoming in the countries of Western Europe. An important step in this process being actually recognition and acknowledgement of their own values and potentials by senior citizens as well as development of an image based on positive aspects of getting and being old.

This simply dramatic deterioration of the situation of the media image of elderly people has led to a paradox transformation in 2008. A political party of retired people came up (Party of United Pensioners of Serbia – PUPS). Founded in May 2005, it grew quite fast – it has over 280.000 members at the time<sup>27</sup>. This party got in 2008 an unexpectedly high number of votes and made it to the Parliament.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, this had not brought any improvement of the situation of elderly people, since the actions that were undertaken showed a rather palliative feature, and they were instrumentalised by the regime for the populist purposes. In the area of media this development brought a new wave of negative impacts – the elderly were shown as greedy people, who recklessly claim the pension money for themselves and empty out the already shrunk budget. A deep gap was created between them and other generations, whereby they all stand on one side alone, regarded as enemies of other generations.

### **The Golden Age of Life – Project and Research**

The *NGO Adult Education Society* from Serbia, which coordinated the Network of the Universities for the Third Age from 2002 until 2006, began in 2011 a project of changing the image of elderly people in Serbia.<sup>29</sup> This project was inspired by experiences of many Western European countries (Germany and others). These

<sup>27</sup> PUPS - Partija časnih namera. <http://www.pups.org.rs/index.asp?pageid=A2&clang=latin> (authors' translation)

<sup>28</sup> Radio Televizija Srbije. 2012. Srpski izbor(i) 1990–2008. RTS, [online]. 13.03.2012. Retrieved from: [http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/ci/story/1948/Избори+2012/1061954/Српски+избор\(и\)+1990–2008.+html](http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/ci/story/1948/Избори+2012/1061954/Српски+избор(и)+1990–2008.+html) (authors' translation)

<sup>29</sup> See also: Živanić, S. (Ed.). 2004. *University of the Third Age*, Belgrade: Adult Education Society

countries have undertaken many things to improve the situation of the target group. Various documents and strategies were adopted and implemented, many projects for active aging were started, and the necessary financing of institutions in the field of adult education was regulated by law (i.e. Adult Education Centres in Germany). Their further features are fostering social and educational policy, focus on *active aging*, European lobby for lifelong learning, whereby positive aspects were stressed: various *benefits*, that the society has thanks to its senior citizens (economic or by supporting the family), various engagements in the society, local municipalities or on higher state level, *intergenerational learning* and transfer of knowledge between different generations, etc. This synergy is responsible for the positive change of the image about elderly people, then if we talk about the demographic change in these countries, we don't talk about one problem, but rather about different challenges that would sooner or later affect all the members of the society.

Getting old in Serbia is also a process with some positive sides, but it is as well a process with numerous challenges and risks that manifest themselves in different situations of the daily life. It is a phenomenon, which is not restricted only to an individual *habitus*, but it also takes place between an individual and the society – to draw more attention to it seems to be an important task for those numerous projects and initiatives.

The main target of the project The Golden Age of Life was to fight against the discrimination of elderly, to overcome stereotypes and to contribute to an inclusive society in Serbia. The project was implemented in five cities in Serbia: Novi Sad, Užice, Leskovac, Bor and Belgrade. The international partner on the project was *DVV International* from Germany. Another four local partners were acquired in the four cities for a partnership: *EDIT centar* from Novi Sad, *Keramika Zlakusa* from Užice, *Leskovački kulturni centar* from Leskovac, *Društvo mladih istraživača* from Bor. The financing provided the European Union within the program *Support to Civil Society*<sup>30</sup>.

The project was organisational frame for the research on possibility to change the image of elderly people in Serbia through a set of targeted activities. A kind of action research was conducted, through the procedures organized in two main groups of activities:

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<sup>30</sup> Project Reference: EuropeAid/130847/L/ACT/RS

1. Photo-contest and mobile exhibition;
2. Workshops

The research was based on the results of theoretical analysis of the image of elderly people in Serbia and the double-bind outcome. The educational interventions in the action research aimed the increase of positive attitudes and deconstruction of the negative and stereotypical ones. Partners in the activities were organisations with relevant experience in adult education and in media targeted actions, thus the changes were more likely to occur as the outcome of the planned interventions than other intervening factors.

#### *Photo-Contest and Mobile Exhibition*

In the preparatory stage, the experts from the Adult Education Society have conducted various analyses that have confirmed the described paradox of the double attitudes towards elderly people. Based on these analyses the goal and therewith the subject of the Photo-Contest were clearly defined – to show active aging and its nice and positive sides.

Although the authors from all over Serbia were encouraged and motivated with good winning prizes to send their photographs that correspond to the subject, many pictures have only displayed the sad reality of Serbia. Most of them presented elderly people as lonely, poor, run-down and sad people, showing the appearance of the most negative aspects of getting and being old in the history and the present. In the second group there were pictures, in which the subject was recognized, where elderly people were shown in a positive way, still these tries didn't stand out from the crowd of the stereotypes: i.e. by the sports and recreation pictures dominated those displaying chess and boccia-game, seldom biking (in the rural areas). Feeding the pigeons or simple but hard physical activities in the rural areas are classified, according to photographs, as a "normal" activity of the elderly people in Serbia. Intergenerational pictures belong mostly to the category that confirms the traditional role – since the elderly were mostly shown as service and care persons for their grandchildren. Only in the third, compared with the other two relatively small group of photographs, *active ageing* was really shown – elderly people are active sportsmen, even marathon runner and skydivers, pretty, good-looking, made up and fashion-styled people, strong individuals who laugh,

who are creative, charming and humorous, etc. This photo-contest, for which over 340 photographs were submitted, confirmed the results of the researches and analyses about the stereotypes on elderly people in Serbia, which were conducted by the Adult Education Society in the run-up.

A selection committee consisting of five members made a choice of 30 photographs, out of which the mobile exhibition was created. Among them were two renowned photographers and artists, two experts for program and work with elderly people and a project coordinator. The photography exhibition migrated through different locations in Serbia: Novi Sad, Užice, Leskovac, Bor and eventually Belgrade. The exhibition was staying for three weeks in each of these towns. During this period, the visitors had the possibility to vote for their three favourites. The pictures with the most votes were awarded with a prize at the final conference in Belgrade.

### *Good Practice Book*

The local partner organizations have implemented a comprehensive accompanying program to the exhibition and conducted workshops on the subject *Age Discrimination*. The existing experience with the successful anti-discrimination measure was published in a publication *Treasure Chest of the Experience* i.e. *Good practice book*. The book should make the voice of elderly people audible and their attitude and experience public. On the other side, the best practice examples for *active aging* and the experience from the work with elderly people – the tested solution models for fighting *ageism* – bundle all the interested available parities in Serbia or over the borders of Serbia. The structures, the language and the reality connection of the book, as well as the functionality of the examples make it applicable for a wide range of users, increase the transferability of the project, and should contribute to the media education in Serbia.

### *Workshops*

The workshops had a joint overall objective – to highlight the problems of elderly people, including discrimination in the Serbian society, and to search jointly with partners and *stakeholders* (educational institutions – at all levels, social partners

and social workers, local decision makers, representatives of the gerontology centres, etc.) for possible solutions and ways of implementation. In each local municipality, at least three workshops took place. Depending on the groups of participants various topics were treated with different objectives: in the workshops with children we wanted to establish whether and what kinds of prejudices already exist in the early age; with the youth – what is their attitude towards the elderly people and to what extent was it shaped by prejudices; with the elderly people themselves – do they feel discriminated, how can they influence discrimination and fight it, where do they see their own strengths and potentials etc. In the central workshop we wanted to identify and address the daily problems of the elderly people, and to try to find a solution for them, together with all the partners. The positive approach, the search for solutions and *best practice* examples, gave accent to all the sessions. „Each organization chose the activity, program or project, which with its outcomes, reasons for success and viability represents a genuine example of the implementation of the concept of active ageing and successfully challenges the prevailing stereotypes of old age. An important criterion for the selection of good practice was the possibility of applying ideas and initiatives they are based on in other local communities, by various organizations and institutions already involved in this area, or which will become involved in the future. Considering the conclusion reached at one of the local workshops set up during this project, that older people should not be viewed as a homogenous group, we strove to gather and present examples which comprise a wide range of activities and promote active ageing in diverse ways. Given the unenviable status of the elderly in Serbia and the vulnerability of this age group, some of the activities are illustrated by examples of experiences in the field of social care. Particularly topical is the subject of intergenerational cooperation and this book therefore includes many of such examples, emphasizing the importance and value of such interconnection. There are also examples, which demonstrate independent activities by older people, their self-organization, initiative and determination, as well as examples which offer a positive image of ageing, showing older people as participants in various public events and cultural activities at the local, municipal or borough level.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Nikolić Maksić, T., Maksimovic, M. 2012. *Ideas for an enjoyable and active old age*. Belgrade: Adult Education Society, p. 7-8.

## Data and Result Analysis

The analysis was done by using the qualitative methodology - descriptive approach and content analysis, and it was conducted for every single activity and intervention.

### *Results of the Workshops*

The analysis and the evaluation of the workshops with partners drew the attention to an important fact – the necessity of social partnerships and cooperation for prevention of the *ageism*. Equally important appeared the exchange and the implementation of *best practice examples*, since these were action scenarios that were tested in the practice.

The analysis clearly shows, what the participants perceive as the biggest problems in fight against age-discrimination:

- “• Negative image of aging and elderly in media
- Generalization of elderly
- Lack of current data and indicators
- Insufficient cooperation of civil society with academic community
- Discrimination against the elderly by health workers, police, etc.”<sup>32</sup>

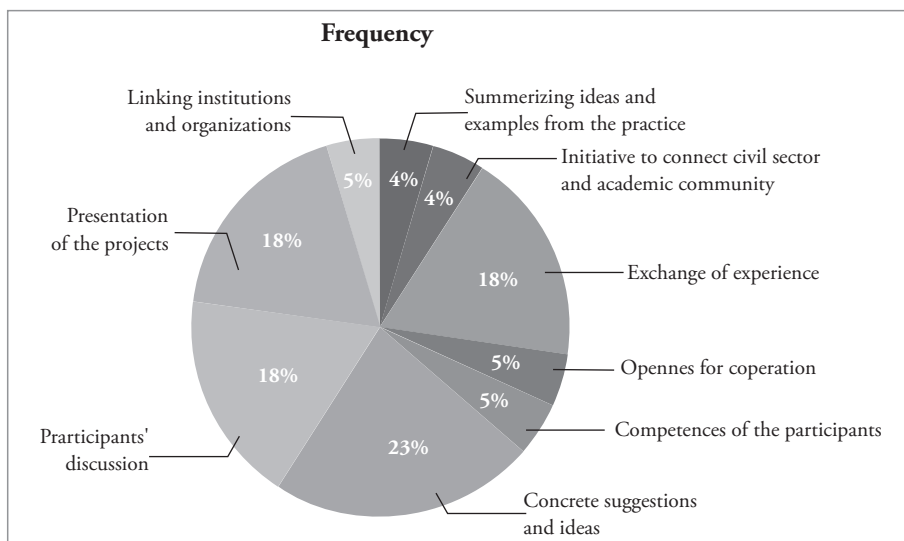
The impressions of the participants of the workshops indicate what they and the social partners appreciate and need within the project work with seniors:

- “• Summarizing ideas and examples from the practice
- Connect civil sector and academic community
- Regular exchange of experience
- Openness for cooperation
- Competences of the participants
- Giving concrete suggestions and ideas
- Increase participants' discussion
- Intensify presentation of the projects
- Linking institutions and organizations”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Adult Education Society. 2012. *EliS, Final report of the project*. Submitted to Delegation of European Commission. Belgrade: internal documents of the Adult Education Society.



The recommendations of the participants go also in a similar direction:

“Recommendations:

- Creating a positive image of elderly and aging in the media
- Deconstructing identity of the elderly in public
- Achieving better co-operation between civil sector and academic community
- Raising awareness about stereotype on elderly between public service employees

Initiatives:

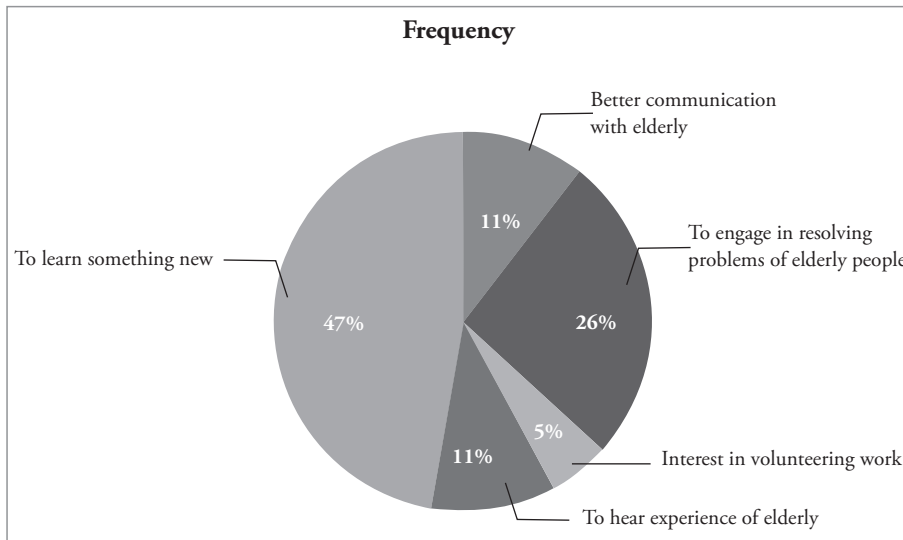
- Continuing education of journalists and editors
- Showing the diversity of the third age in the public
- Conducting research on the issues of elderly
- Continuing education of public service employees.”<sup>34</sup>

The evaluation of the intergenerational workshops has shown the motives for participation that were slightly different with different age groups:

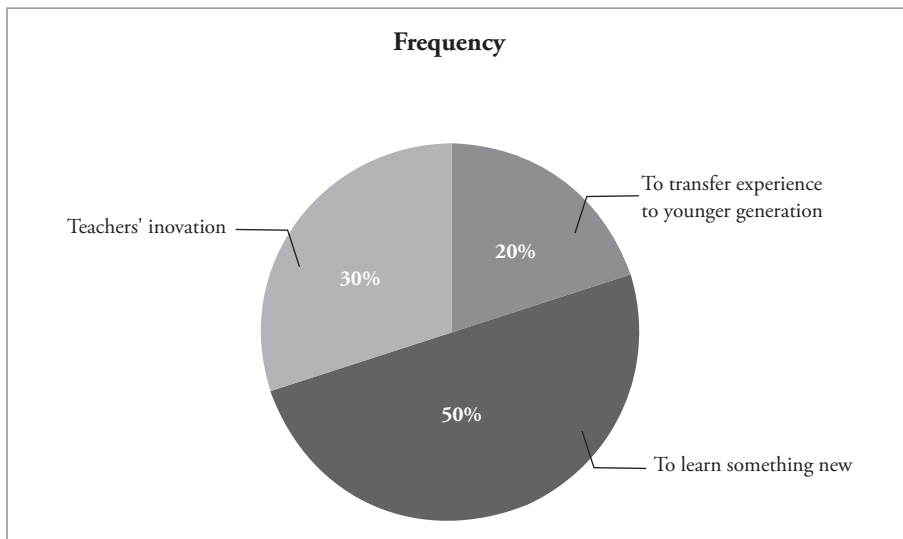
<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



Reasons for participation – young people:



Reasons for participation – elderly people:



It is however interesting that both groups wanted to “learn something new”, which proves that the educational measures are a very efficient instrument for bringing together different generations and developing a meaningful cooperation

with/between them. “Transfer of experiences” is also compatible, both groups strive thereto. Considering this motivation and this need various measures based on the transfer of experience can be organized. Thereby it is important to design them in an authentic way, attractively and addressing both “sides”.

Related to other questions the participants gave also mainly positive comments. Approximately 4,39% of the participants stated that they would recognize their own stereotypes towards elderly people, but also the group of the elderly people was self-critical („It depends on us how young people will think about elderly people”). All the age groups have shown increased motivation for further engagement („This workshop inspired me to think about possibilities”)<sup>35</sup> and it became clear that “participants were moved to think about elderly discrimination and motivated to think about possibilities to engage in order to overcome it. The first step was to understand responsibility and to be proactive.”<sup>36</sup> Many of the questioned emphasized that it was very important to address these problems in an open manner, i.e.: “It is also important to overcome somewhat romantic image of grandparents whose duty is to take care for grandchildren, but to see them in different light as different persons who have their own interests and needs.”<sup>37</sup> For further similar activities the participants commented and suggested as follows: „Include *middle generation* in intergenerational workshop; Think about *invisibility* of ageism and discuss openly about it in different settings; Intergenerational workshops are important as *impetuses for future activities*; It is essential to organize a workshop *follow up*; Use intergenerational learning *as a model* for various topics and events” etc.<sup>38</sup>

The workshop results have emphasized the need for a stronger connection with the academic – science institutions as well as public presentation and dissemination of the research results, in order to advise the decision makers in a better way and to be able to create policy for seniors more *evidence based* in the future. An extremely important role of the media in creating the social image of the elderly people, was confirmed during the project. Sensitization of journalists for questions and needs of elderly people, and if possible further training for

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

journalists on these subjects, belong to the priorities. The need for synergetic actions is noted in the recommendations.

### *Results of the Media Campaign*

Systematically prepared and implemented *media campaign* as an important part of the project was precisely pursued and evaluated by the Adult Education Society and its local partners. The results showed the almost anticipated current situation – the problems of elderly people don't belong to the “attractive” subjects for media, especially if they don't relate to the daily and political-party subjects, or even scandals. This is why a complex engagement was necessary, in order to attract the attention of the media. Still thanks to various modern communication techniques and possibilities, as well as the excellent engagement of the local partners, despite all the hurdles the project has gained a lot of attention and publicity. Several thousand of visitors were recorded on the home page, on the *Facebook*-account there were over 1.000 friendships, over 40.000 flyers and 20.000 *leaflets* with information on project goals and activities were printed and distributed in 5 cities. In the last project phase in all five cities *billboards* with winner photographs on *active aging* were posted for 3 weeks. Based on estimations 100.000 citizens have seen these billboards.<sup>39</sup>

### *Evaluation of the Exhibition*

The evaluation of the exhibition was conceptualized, implemented and analysed in cooperation with the methodical-didactic experts of the project team (development of questionnaires and direct monitoring of the visitors). The results have clearly shown, how positive the impact of the exhibition was to change of opinion of the audience.<sup>40</sup>

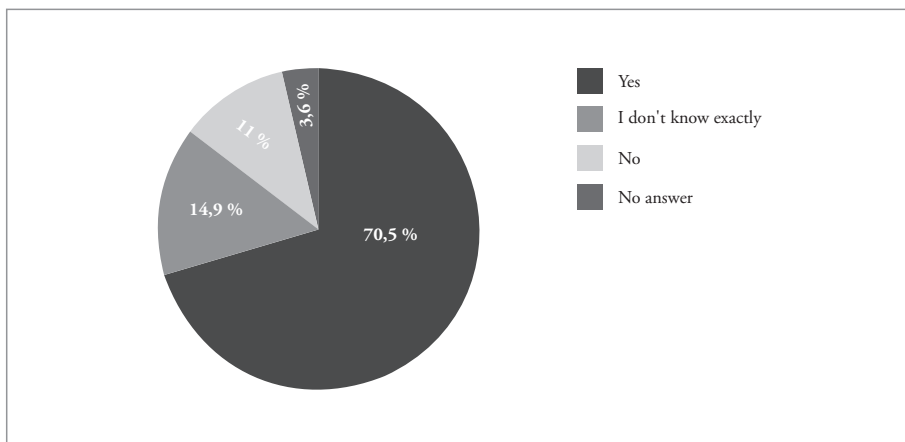
Among many questions and aspects, that had to be answered by the audience and evaluated, a few should be mentioned. For example the answers to the question, whether the exhibition inspired them to think about the discrimination and the stereotypes towards the elderly people:

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

1. Yes – 70,5 %
2. I don't know exactly – 14,9%
3. No – 11%
4. No answer – 3,6%



68,3% of participants will reflect their own conception i.e. perception of elderly people and 64,5% of participants will critically think about their prejudices.

The visitors were also asked to formulate concrete messages for elderly people, to which they were inspired by the visit of exhibition. Depending on their age, some differences were established.

The younger ones, up to 18 years, have written more emotional and encouraging messages for the elderly people: they are beloved, their families need them, or they can do so much more in their lives, they should try out something new, stay active and so on.

The second group of the questioned persons, age 18-30, has given similar answers. However, motivating messages for active aging - to have an active life - were dominating. In this target group the consciousness about the necessity of the personal engagement both in younger and older age was obvious.

Pretty similar were the answers of the questioned persons from the largest group of visitors, age 30-65, whereby the active aging and various possibilities in the later age was emphasized. The fact that retirement does not mean end of life – for many it is only a new beginning – was underlined in many messages.

In the last group, age 65 +, the answers of the questioned persons were more emotional – terms such as happiness, life for and with others, respect, optimism and joy appeared often, etc.

Many visitors, whose attitude was positively influenced by the visit of exhibition, have left their messages or simply their opinion and impressions. Some of them are:

- I will respect elderly people much more in the future.
- I will not laugh at them (elderly people) as much.
- Continue to teach us and learn from us.
- Stay beautiful and healthy – the age relates only to years, not to the spirit.
- Love, happiness, attention and need for those things don't stop, if you get aware of the need for them
- We are all on the same side – the side of life!
- The life is what we make out of it.
- We only live once. We should make the best out of it, have a nice and satisfied life, and respect the younger ones.
- It is never too late to change and to try out something new and interesting.
- Active aging changes life!
- You will get old only when you decide to do so.<sup>41</sup>

### **Lessons Learned for Media Education in Serbia**

Media education was not the main purpose of the activities and the research, not in terms of educating people for and about media, or developing media literacy among target groups, so they could critically understand the nature, techniques and impacts of media messages and productions.<sup>42</sup> Yet, the results did show significant potential of educational intervention through media, contributing thus to the broad area of adult education and complexity of the issues belonging to the field. The research did not focus on teaching about the media, but rather used media as a tool to enable educational intervention aimed

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Frau-Meigs, D. 2006. *Media education: a kit for teachers, students, parents and professionals*. Paris: UNESCO.

at changing the perception of older people. The main idea of the media education was still applied to the research: “People need the ability to access, analyse and engage in critical thinking about the array of messages they receive and send in order to make informed decisions about the everyday issues they face regarding health, work, politics and leisure”.<sup>43</sup>

Supporting critical thinking through challenging the stereotypes is already common approach in creation of media messages, and in the educational context, it showed its power by creating other image of elderly people, exactly the opposite of the usual or traditional one. By drawing attention of recipients, creating a cognitive dissonance and maybe even taking them out of the comfort zone, the photos inspired reflection, analysis and readiness to give up the stereotype. But the ‘space’ wasn’t left ‘empty’ – another, positive image was offered instead, as a kind of new learning guided through media action.

Other elements of the media education were included as well: “the ability to engage in reflection and ethical thinking; as well as active participation through teamwork and collaboration”.<sup>44</sup>

The results show that analysis of the target group is the crucial starting point, which in this context means the analysis of the active recipients of media content. Furthermore, focus on the main problem perceived and conceptualising of the main message is of utmost importance. The learning ‘path’ from ‘deconstruction’ of stereotypes to the creation of positive image has elements of transformative learning, where appearance of the images that oppose the usual, expected, traditional ones, play the role of the disorienting dilemma as described by Mezirow.<sup>45</sup>

In the context of Serbian media reality, with extremely limited spaces for free and critical thinking and transformative learning, lessons learned from this research and project activities could have a potential for broader use and implementation in other fields.

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<sup>43</sup> Hobbs, R. 2010. *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action*. A White Paper on the Digital and Media Literacy Recommendations of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy. Washington: The Aspen Institute

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> Mezirow, J. 1981. A Critical Theory of Adult Learning and Education. *Adult Education*, 32(1), p. 3-24  
Mezirow, J. 2012. Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory. In: E. D. Taylor, P. Cranton & Associates (Eds.). *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Ch.2

## Conclusion

The project and the conducted analyses have only enlightened one aspect of the situation of elderly people in Serbia. The problem however is much more complex and eclectic, thus the solution requires a lot of work and efforts. A very important part of problem solving is the change of perception of the third age and reduction of stereotypes. The project results showed that not only the image conveyed in the media has to be changed. There is also a great need to change the self-perception and self-awareness of the elderly people after overcoming their own stereotypes about their role and position in the society.

In the course of the project three important target groups have also emerged, that could be in the focus on the future projects, researches and other initiatives (above all the education and sensitization measures):

1. The first and the most important - media
2. Social partners and local decision makers
3. The elderly people themselves.

There are indications that the situation is very similar in the countries of Western Balkans and that the need for similar action exists in these countries as well.

One of the important *lessons learned* of the projects relates to the medium used. The visual form to make people think about, reflect and inspire, has proven to be very effective. Visual communication is a powerful tool for messages that should not include only cognitive aspects, but also emotional and volatile. On one side, visual means show the effects related to individuals; while on the other side they have – based on their aesthetic attractiveness – a certain appeal, which is important to journalists and in the mass media. Financial aspects should not be underestimated also. Although it is possible with limited resources, as well as with goal-oriented and attractive measures, to reach the desired objectives that comply with the context and address the right problems. Last but not least, the emotional force of a visual medium enables (relatively easy) sensitization and *awareness raising*, but also a fast and simple dissemination in many circles.

Contemporary approach to media education confirms the importance of use of visual communication, which matches a lot with the research results about the effectiveness of learning process.

Apart from the fact that the conclusions and results from the project apply primarily to Serbia, the processes such as demographic change and the growing global, economic and social problems make it relevant and interesting for many other countries. The message of an exhibition visitor expresses this cross-border intercultural character in a good way and shows universality of the endeavours of the human spirit, regardless of gender, age, culture...: "I'm trying never to get old in my soul – the same as the people on these photographs do."

## Zlatno doba života – dva lica Srbije

**Sažetak:** U radu se razmatra položaj starijih ljudi u Srbiji – razvoj i aktuelna situacija, naročito njihova marginalizacija i problem *ejdžizma* u društvu. U fokusu su stereotipi o starima i uloga medija, zbog činjenice da veliki broj istraživanja pokazuje utjecaj medija na odrasle građane, zbog čega oni djeluju kao 'masovni' edukatori odraslih u javnom prostoru. U radu se prikazuje mogućnost obrazovne intervencije preko medija i njen utjecaj, preko rezultata projekta u kojem je učestvovalo nekoliko organizacija za obrazovanje odraslih. Cilj je bio promjena slike o starima kroz intervenciju u medijima.

**Ključne riječi:** treće doba, stariji, stari ljudi, medijsko obrazovanje.

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