

*The articles in the thematic issue “Well-Being in the Balkans in a European Perspective” are reworked papers from the international conference “Trust and Well-Being in the Balkans”, organized by the Bulgarian Sociological Association and supported by the International Sociological Association.*

*Representing a complex picture of similarities and differences, interwoven with historicity and projects oriented towards the future, the Balkan region is challenging for the sociological imagination. Accepting the research challenge of the region’s multilayered identities, social structures and mechanisms, the authors included in this issue aim to understand better and learn more about the specificities of the Balkans by placing them in the context of European integration and disintegration, the struggles over interpretations, and the impact of high inequality levels. Many of the authors in the thematic issue have used European Social Survey (ESS) data for their analyses, as the survey allows for international comparability based on a common scientific methodology. The thematic issue is organized in six parts, covering the widest possible range of research approaches and interpretations. The topics of these sections are related to: well-being, inequalities and the subjective perception of justice; EU integration and enlargement in the context of post-truth, fake news and disinformation; political culture and the welfare state; social challenges stemming from digitalization and the COVID-19 pandemic; and the dilemmas young people face in contemporary Bulgaria.*

*In addition to the regional focus, the issue endeavours to offer a more general diagnosis of contemporary European societies. We often depict these as individualized, fragmented, and pondering whether they are not losing the secret of the social bond, solidarity, justice and shared values, that bring societies and regions together. This thematic issue of the journal *Sociological Problems* provides an opportunity for engaged academic debate on the theoretical questions and challenges facing the social sciences today.*

*The first paper in the volume, written by Pepka Boyadjieva and Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, begins with the question: “Is There Anything beyond Happiness?” A European comparative analysis of the multi-dimensional character of subjective well-being allows for an answer. The authors’ study establishes that subjective well-being is positively associated with individual achievements such as employment status and educational attainment. Subjective perceptions of justice are shown to contribute to individual well-being and social cohesion. Rumiana Stoilova and Kaloyan Haralampiev investigate the interrelation between inequalities and social justice in the Balkans. The results of their study demonstrate that meritocratic beliefs predominate over egalitarian ones, and that the former are shared by different income*

strata in the five Balkan countries under comparison. By contrast, in all compared countries, there is an observed discrepancy between income strata as regards the egalitarian beliefs they share. However, high levels of existing inequalities decrease perceptions that the earnings people receive are fair.

Vesselina Kachakova and Svetla Koleva problematize social justice in and through education by studying the Bulgarian socialist state's educational policy towards African students. The authors' conclusion is that the proclaimed principles of social justice in education were used by institutional actors to pursue state, diplomatic, economic, and political goals. Martin Heidenreich also points attention to the topic of inequalities, asking the question, why are wage and income inequalities in Bulgaria so high? He answers by discussing the polarization of sectoral, educational, and occupational structures, the pluralization of lifestyles and the low impact of egalitarian institutions, all of which factors are seen as drivers of the country's high inequality levels. This article highlights the extraordinary challenges and social risks that the post-socialist transition posed for certain groups and nation-states, as well as for European cohesion.

The section dedicated to EU integration features three authors. Richard Münch focuses on the challenges faced by the EU during the 2020s in regard to processes of transnational integration and national disintegration; Rumiana Jeleva analyses the perspectives for EU enlargement and its impact on European integration. Michel Wieviorka delves into the understanding that the present cultural context, defined as a non@- and post-truth situation, a crisis of universal values, including memory and history. In this context the role of elites is crucial for overcoming the relativism that appears as truth, and for providing the best future for European integration.

The interrelation between identities, welfare and political culture is intrinsic to studies of the European social model. In this framework Nikos Nagopoulos and Georgios Chatzichristos conceptualize European identity as shaped substantially by collective memory, which pre-defines contemporary political culture and misunderstandings. The authors hold that the post-2000 EU enlargement has improved the well-being of Eastern European countries, but the challenges to cultural identification remain. The demand for a transnational European identity across the Balkan EU member states sparks the research interest of the two authors. Martin Konstantinov proposes a conceptual framework for the study of the ideological orientations of citizens in Bulgaria. The values-based model of ideological orientations distinguishes between political attitudes in the social and in the economic sphere. The article presents the findings of an empirical study on political party membership, providing evidence that statist beliefs in Bulgaria are conservative. Andrea Walter and Klaus Schubert distinguish between

*“freedom of...” and “freedom for...” as two modi of the interrelation between civil society and the welfare state, observed in Eastern European and Western countries. The authors argue that these two concepts of civil society are mutually closely linked in the course of an ongoing transformation process, in which civil society demonstrates its great potential to stabilize European welfare states.*

*The section dedicated to comparative welfare research includes four papers: Michalis Christodoulou, Manos Spyridakis, Giorgos Bithymitris, and Panagiotis Koustenis investigate the class-based vulnerability of biographical agency; for this, they apply a case-study mixed-methods research design. They study working-class people living in the regional units of Piraeus and West Attica, Greece, two areas that share a rich industrial past but have experienced the painful impact of the recent economic crisis. Vladimir Ivanovic, Bruno Simac, and Tijana Trako Poljak investigate subjective well-being in Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia, exploring rural-urban differences in a cross-national comparison. Based on available ESS data, they have constructed the Subjective Well-being Index, which covers three domains: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, and financial and material stability. Emilia Chengelova investigates the subjective perception of happiness under COVID-19 conditions in Bulgaria. Lilia Dimova and Martin Dimov compare tolerance across the Balkans. Their conclusion is that the top common vectors for higher tolerance levels are trust in people and in national institutions.*

*The challenges of digitalization for individuals and societies in the Balkans have been analysed from the perspective of: the acquisition of digital skills (Valentina Milenkova); digital literacy as related to Internet safety (Olga Bogdanov); and the opportunities for decent work in the food delivery industry in Bulgaria and Serbia (Vassil Kirov, Branka Andjelkovic, Tanja Jakobi, Margarita Kosheva). With the growth of digital inequalities in the Balkans, this topic will certainly continue to attract the attention of scholars.*

*The last section includes articles that address contemporary dilemmas faced by young people in Bulgaria; it comprises studies on both “old” and “new” dilemmas. Darena Hristozova explores the school-to-work transition among young people in Bulgaria today. Elitsa Dimitrova and Tatyana Kotzeva address voluntary childlessness, a relatively new phenomenon in Bulgarian society, and reveal that positive attitudes towards it are becoming more widespread. Veronika Dimitrova and Maria Martinova discuss another new phenomenon – hesitations regarding the mandatory childhood immunization calendar, and show it is related to distrust in parent-physician interaction and to a shift in the parental role. These taken as real societal issues,*

*whether new or persisting for all transition generations, require deeper research in the future, including in a comparative perspective.*

*The thematic issue “Well-Being in the Balkans in a European Perspective” is of key importance for the sociological community, insofar as it presents an opportunity to spark academic interest in comparative international studies; to deepen the understanding of the region; and to develop new theoretical concepts and research approaches to the study of contemporary societies. For neither “transformation societies” nor “new member-states” are adequate terms to describe the countries in the Balkan region. We hope that, with this thematic issue, we will contribute to making the work of researchers from the Balkans available to European academe, and to balancing between catching up, provoking and leading the debates on pressing social issues, such as the high inequality levels and low social trust, which deteriorate individual and collective well-being.*

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