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Professional Paper

COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN SERBIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA ANALYZED ACCORDING TO NUMBEO DATABASE

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ABSTRACT: In economic theory and practice, the term standard of living has emerged in recent decades. It was created as a suitable response to problems related to people's lives, regional inequalities in the level of development and served as an acceptable concept for more complex valorization of development potentials, especially in rural areas. The subject of the research is a comparative analysis of the quality of life in Serbia and Northern Macedonia according to Numbeo database. The aim of this paper is to point out the importance of living standards from both economic and sociological aspects, as well as to review the position of Serbia and Northern Macedonia in relation to other countries in the region based on the analysis of collected data and research. The reason for the comparative presentation of Serbia and Northern Macedonia is that the quality of life is at an approximate level. The salary of employees in education in these countries represents an average income that is sufficient for a satisfactory quality of life. The standard of living of a country depends on a number of factors such as political factors, economic factors, demographic, environmental and cultural factors.

Keywords: standard of living, Serbia, North Macedonia, economy, quality of life

JEL classification: F14, F15

INTRODUCTION

As a rule, the standard of living is higher in developed countries, which is logical. Indicators of living standards are Gross domestic product per capita, income earned by companies and other institutions, salaries of employees, unemployment, life expectancy, environmental quality, climate, political and religious freedom, security of the population, prices of products and services. The standard of living of a country is influenced by numerous and various factors that originate from the economy itself, but also from other parts of society with which the economy is connected, for example, health and education. With the process of globalization, technological progress is especially important for economic development. Its importance increases over time. What is characteristic for Serbia and Northern Macedonia is unfavorable demography, migration of the population from rural to urban areas, brain drain, insufficient domestic investments and mismatch of employment and wages, which contributes to the stratification of the population into rich and poor.

These changes were conditioned by changes in the political system, as well as the development of socio-political relations. The justification for changing the standard of living has always been the need to provide funds for strengthening state independence and its defense power, strengthening the state economy, material and cultural uplift and social security of citizens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the same time, globalization reveals the existence of social and political ones problems that transcend national borders and become a concern of the whole world: some of these problems are accelerated demographic growth, exploitation of nature, poverty, control of atomic weapons, terrorism, oppression of the people (Avramović, 2012). Many countries and international organisations are becoming increasingly aware of the vast consequences that population ageing may have on societies and problem of longterm care for old people and ageing population have been examined in a lot a number of papers (Arsenović et al., 2011). Migration flows are observed in the context of semi-peripheral position of Serbia in the global system, and hindered transformation and development (Bobić & Babović, 2013). As with other populations, the current age structure in Serbia and North Macedonia is formed under the direct influence of all three components of population change (fertility, mortality and migration), but also under the strong influence of the inherited age structure, manifested by the population momentum.

Living standard it was based on changes in ownership of the means of production and then on the existing political, educational, health, social and cultural subsystems. This meant creating a new class and new layers of the structure of society, whose interests were woven into the concept of transition and privatization (Maksimović & Novaković, 2020).

In essence, basic living standard measures, such as GDP per capita, are often used to define the differences between more and less developed countries. The influence of transnational actors in Serbia and Northern Macedonia is visible in a wide range of economic and social policies, and in this paper the research focuses on reforms in the field of creating policies to reduce poverty and social exclusion, especially those living on the margins. The transformation of the social and political systems of nation-states in the former socialist countries, at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, took place under the strong influence of international organizations, as one of the main actors of globalization (Maksimović & Novaković, 2020).

Economic growth over the past years, has been the main focus when analyzing the well-being of a country (Hysa & Mansi, 2020). Even though that seems to be one reason, we notice different results in our two cases. GDP per capita, and other quality variables do in fact positively impact the levels of happiness in European Union countries (Hysa & Mansi, 2020).

Having a higher education degree significantly reduces the risk of poverty. As the level of education of the household head increases, the poverty index decreases to 5.4% (high school), 2.5% (high school) and 1.6% (university education) (Matković et al., 2010). The concept of poverty has been challenged due to its focus on meeting and depriving material needs, while recent research shows that in the most developed countries in recent decades a large part of the population lives in material well-being and that postmaterialist needs and values come to the fore (Janković et al., 2020). Over 70% of urban and 50% of rural families own the Internet, which was unthinkable only a few years earlier. Possession of mobile phones is even more common and imposes itself as a kind of consumer imperative, both in urban and rural areas (Janković et al., 2020). Recognizing the negative experiences of the past and the external sociospatial effects of social housing residualization (segregation and ghettoization, discrimination, unemployment, crime, housing collapse, etc.), international guidelines for sustainable housing 74 51-2020 AU policies recognize the role of urban and architectural practice in building long-term sustainable housing stock for this purpose (Njegić, 2020).

The law provides for an increase in sanctions imposed for violating the provisions of the law on food safety, in order to increase the efficiency of control over their implementation (Kirov, 2020). All the countries of the Western Balkans have a permanent and mild, but also a continuous increase in HDI indicators, which will lead to further progress in human development. In order to ensure the comprehensive growth of all HDI

components, the countries of the Western Balkans must continue to adopt global strategies and laws, realistic action plans, roadmaps for their implementation and the use of knowledge that encompasses a set of skills, competencies, and interests aimed at expanding people's choices and general welfare (Dasic et al., 2020).

On the other hand, only GDP per capita and Education seemed to positively impact Happiness, with other variables having a negative impact on it. does not imply higher levels of Happiness, in fact it had the opposite impact (Hysa & Mansi, 2020). Individuals with a higher education level generally have higher expectations which are harder to fulfill and less satisfied with their work (Hysa & Mansi, 2020). However, this appeared not to be the case in developing countries such as Western Balkans where Education appeared to have a positive impact, due to the fact that higher levels of education interpret in higher income and the population is focused more on it that in other sectors of life satisfaction (Hysa & Mansi, 2020).

QUALITY OF LIFE IN SERBIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA IN RELATION TO OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE REGION

Emerging market economies usually see an increase in living standards over time through so-called industrialized economies. We will observe the quality of life index in Serbia and Northern Macedonia through indices of purchasing power, security, health care, climate, cost of living, property and income prices, travel time to work and pollution index. The index is determined based on the minimum and maximum value of the measurement.

The quality of life index in Belgrade, Serbia in March 2021 for each of the following items is (<https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/rankings.jsp>):

- *Purchasing power index* 35.74 very low;
- *Safety index* 61.96, high;
- *Health care index* 51.54 moderate;
- *Climate index* 83.23 very high;
- *Cost of living index* 37.86 very low;
- *The ratio of property price and income* 16.29 is very high;
- *Travel time index* 30.90 low;
- *Pollution index* 61.44 high.

The minimum value of the measurement is: 271, while the maximum value is: 704. In March 2021, when we summarize the above values, we come to the data that the Quality of Life Index in Belgrade, Serbia is 117.15, which is assessed as high and is proof that Serbia is still a country in transition.

Western Balkan countries—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia—have already realized that reforms such as creating a market economy and increasing the role of the citizen in the society are the guarantee for a new future with peace, stability, prosperity, and freedom. In the last decades, the EU has set the same goals and has supported its activities in the same principles, while recently, it is widely supporting the efforts of the Western Balkan countries by planning to accept them as member states once they meet the conditions for such a thing (Feruni et al., 2020).

Economic freedom has a significant positive impact on the economic development of both the Western Balkan countries and the EU countries, but the Western Balkans benefit more from economic freedom (Feruni et al., 2020).

The quality of life index in quality of life in Skopje, North Macedonia in March 2021. for each of the following items is (<https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/rankings.jsp>):¹

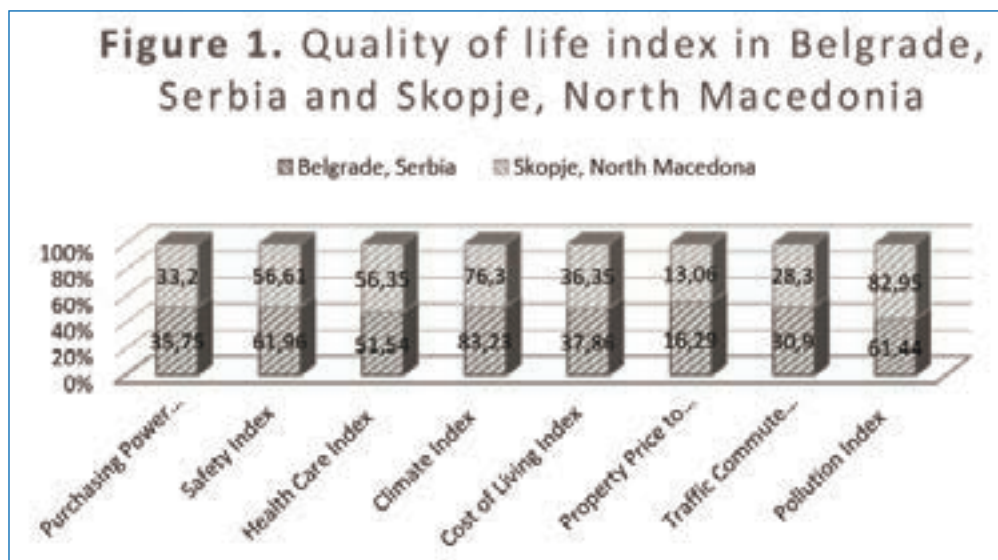
- *Purchasing Power Index* 33.20 very low;
- *Safety Index* 56.61 moderate;
- *Health Care Index* 56.35 moderate;

¹ The scale consists of the variables Very High, High, Moderate, Very Low and Low.

- *Climate Index* 76.30 high;
- *Cost of Living Index* 36.35 very low;
- *Property Price to Income Ratio* 13.06 high;
- *Traffic Commute Time Index* 28.30 low;
- *Pollution Index* 82.95 very high.

Minimum contributors for an underlying section: 46; Maximum contributors for an underlying section: 204; n March 2021, when we summarize the above values, we come to the data that the Quality of Life Index in Skopje, North Macedonia is 103.41 which is assessed as high and is proof that North Macedonia is still a country in transition.

We can illustrate it as follows:



Source: Autor

In the analysis of living standards in the Balkans, we will take a sample from the Numbeo database² for the capitals of 10 countries, including Serbia and Northern Macedonia. The sample was taken from a database representing 595 cities with the Cost of Living Index, Rent Index, Cost of Living Plus Rent Index, Groceries Index, Restaurant Price Index and Local Purchasing Power Index. Based on Table 1. when it comes to the cost of living index we can see that the best ranked capital of Skopje, in North Macedonia is worth 36.35, which ranks it 150th on the list of 595 countries, while the highest cost index has the capital of Ljubljana, Slovenia in the value of 51.38. Unlike Northern Macedonia, the cost of living index in Serbia is higher and amounts to 41.52, which is why Serbia has positioned itself at 200 positions in relation to Northern Macedonia.

² Numbeo is a collection of Web pages containing numerical and other itemizable data about cities and countries, designed to enable anyone to contribute or modify content. Numbeo uses the wisdom of the crowd to obtain the most reliable information possible. Numbeo then provides you with a statistical analysis of the data collected. In addition, Numbeo provides a variety of systematic research opportunities for its readers with its compilation of worldwide information. *6,876,935 prices in 10,012 cities entered by 572,406 contributors*

Table 1. Comparative overview of the Cost of Living Index in the countries in the region for March 2021.

Number	Rank	City	Cost of Living Index	Rent Index	Cost of Living Plus Rent Index	Groceries Index	Restaurant Price Index	Local Purchasing Power Index
1	150	Skopje, North Macedonia	36.35	9.15	23.69	29.37	27.14	33.20
2	176	Sarajevo, Bosnia And Herzegovina	38.89	9.21	25.07	31.65	27.00	49.99
3	197	Podgorica, Montenegro	41.30	12.31	27.80	32.39	32.86	34.72
4	200	Belgrade, Serbia	41.52	12.88	28.19	30.10	35.19	35.59
5	210	Bucharest, Romania	42.23	15.24	29.66	34.75	41.21	46.72
6	216	Sofia, Bulgaria	43.31	14.61	29.95	36.40	37.35	45.22
7	217	Budapest, Hungary	43.38	16.70	30.96	35.34	36.16	51.16
8	320	Zagreb, Croatia	51.38	17.87	35.78	42.69	42.84	49.21
9	296	Athens, Greece	58.94	16.50	39.18	46.49	58.04	41.12
10	300	Ljubljana, Slovenia	60.09	23.60	43.11	50.23	54.83	54.94

Source: (<https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/rankings.jsp>)

From the countries of the Western Balkans, Croatia, and Montenegro fall under the category Very high human development. Their HDI is below the average for the specified group of countries to which they belong. Serbia, Albania, Bosnia, and Herzegovina have HDI above the average for that group of countries to which they belong, while North Macedonia has HDI which is the same as the average for this group of countries (Dasic et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The following methods were applied in the research process: method of analysis and synthesis, method of comparison, statistical method, method of description and historical method. Using the methods of analysis and synthesis, the data will be processed and arranged into one harmonious whole. In addition to these two basic methods, a comparison method will be used to compare the data. The method of description is also used, which is intertwined throughout the paper. Also, one of the methods used is the statistical method, where data are sorted and displayed for easier comparison and understanding. Historical research is very important for the research of this paper, because with this method we can examine historical events and compare them with today's. In finding a survey of satisfaction with the employed quality of life in the education system in Serbia and North Macedonia, we took a sample of 40 respondents, professors at the elementary school in Belgrade and Skopje. Target research is that through indices of purchasing power, security, health care, climate, cost of living, property and income prices, travel time to work and pollution index, we get results on the quality of life in these places. We hired employees with the intention that their salary is on average with other occupations in both Serbia and North Macedonia. When it comes to Serbia and the countries of the former Yugoslavia, a Serbian teacher receives the lowest salary, even lower than teachers in BiH, Montenegro and Macedonia. Teachers in Serbia earn around 7,000€ gross annually, while a teacher in BiH earns around 9,700€, and their colleagues in Montenegro around 10,500€. The salary of a teacher in Macedonia is a little over 9,000€ while for example, a teacher in Greece earns about 25,000€ a year (<http://www.fbg.org.rs/>). Today, the initial salary of a teacher for the 7th level of expertise in Serbia is

59,095 RSD (502,59€) while in Kosovo and Metohija, with the addition of 98,188 RSD (835,07€) dinars for the same worker.³

Questions and discussion

1. Your gender?

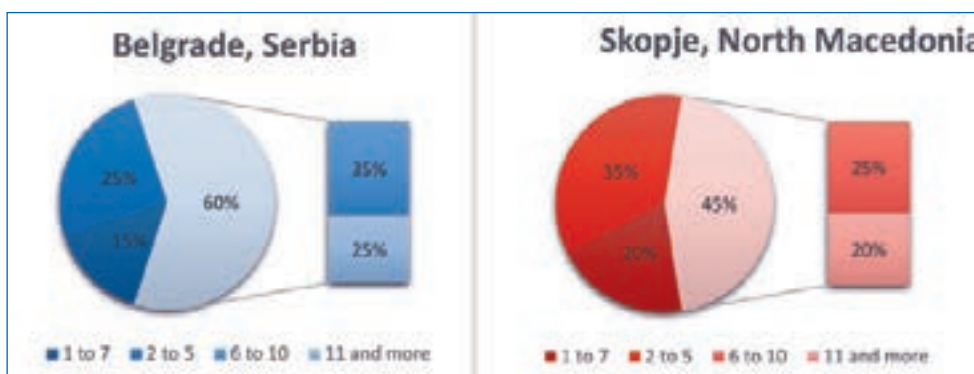
- a) Male 7 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 11 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- b) Female 13 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 9 (Belgrade, Serbia)



Of the 40 respondents, 20 were from Belgrade (Serbia) and 20 from Skopje (Northern Macedonia). In Belgrade, 11 males and 9 females were examined. While in Skopje there are 7 male respondents and 13 female respondents. With this question, our goal is to establish what is the satisfaction with the quality of life of respondents of different genders.

2. How many years of service do you have?

- a) 1 – 3 years 4 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 3 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- b) 2-5 – 7 years 7 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 5 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- c) 6-10 – 7 years 5 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 7 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- d) 11 and more 3 years 4 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 5 (Belgrade, Serbia)

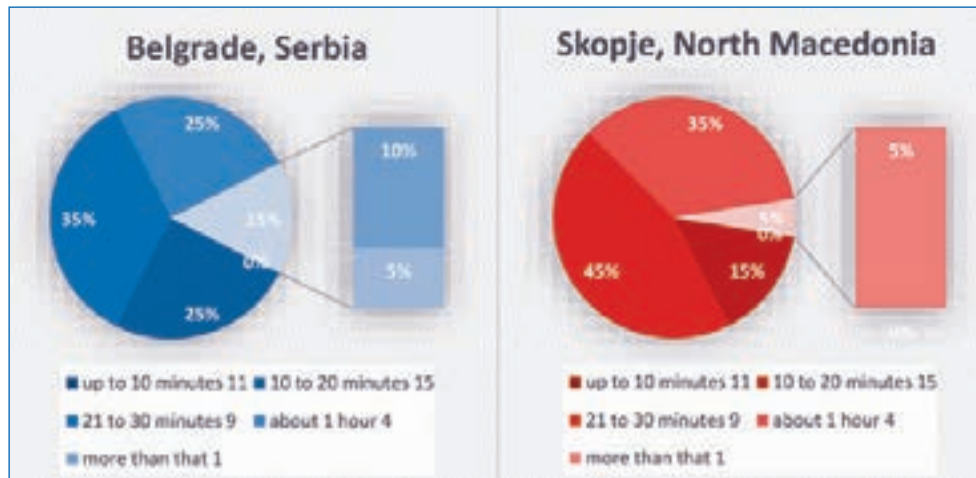


When it comes to the work experience of the respondents out of 20 respondents from Belgrade, 7 of them had work experience in the interval from 6 to 10, 5 respondents each had work experience from 2 to 5 years, in more than 11 years, while with the least work experience 1 to 3 years there were 3 respondents. From Skopje, most respondents had a work experience of 2 to 5 years (7 respondents), followed by 6 to 10 years of work experience (5 respondents) and 4 respondents with a work experience of 1 to 3 or 11 or more years.

³ According to the middle exchange rate of the euro on March 20, 2021. in the amount of 117.58 RSD for 1€

3. How long does it take you to get to work?

- a) up to 10 minutes 3 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 5 (Belgrade, Serbia)
 b) 10 to 20 minutes 9 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 7 (Belgrade, Serbia)
 c) 21 to 30 minutes 7 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 5 (Belgrade, Serbia)
 d) about 1 hour 1 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 2 (Belgrade, Serbia)
 e) more than that 0 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 1 (Belgrade, Serbia)



Another indicator of quality of life is the travel time to work, so in accordance with that, our respondents came to the conclusion that respondents from Serbia need more time to come to work. 3 respondents from Skopje stated that they need less than 10 minutes to get to work, 9 respondents need approximately 11 to 20 minutes, while 7 respondents come to work on average from 21 to 30 minutes. In Belgrade, out of 20 respondents, 5 arrive at work in an interval of 10 minutes, 9 respondents arrive at work in an average of 11 to 20 minutes, 5 respondents in an interval of 21 to 30 minutes, about an hour of travel is needed for the two of them, while one respondent travels for more than an hour.

4. Do you manage to pay your dues with your monthly income?

- a) Yes 9 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 11 (Belgrade, Serbia)
 b) No 3 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 1 (Belgrade, Serbia)
 c) Yes, I also manage to save money 5 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 3 (Belgrade, Serbia)
 d) No, I use other sources of funding 3 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 5 (Belgrade, Serbia)



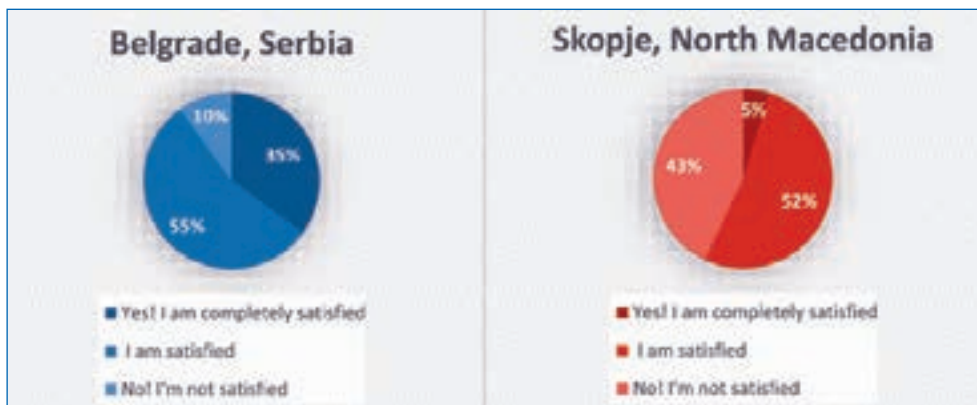
The next indicator we examined was purchasing power index and cost of living. In Skopje, 9 respondents answered in the affirmative, that they manage to pay their expenses with a monthly salary, 5 respondents manage to save money, 3 respondents fail to cover their expenses, ie they need additional funds, probably respondents who do not have full fund of classes or family people. In Belgrade, 11 respondents answered that they manage to settle their expenses with monthly income, 3 respondents manage to save money, while 1 respondent fails to settle monthly salary obligations, 5 respondents stated that they need additional funds.

5. Are you satisfied with your health care?

Yes! I am completely satisfied 1 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 7 (Belgrade, Serbia)

I am satisfied 11 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 11 (Belgrade, Serbia)

No! I'm not satisfied 9 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 2 (Belgrade, Serbia)



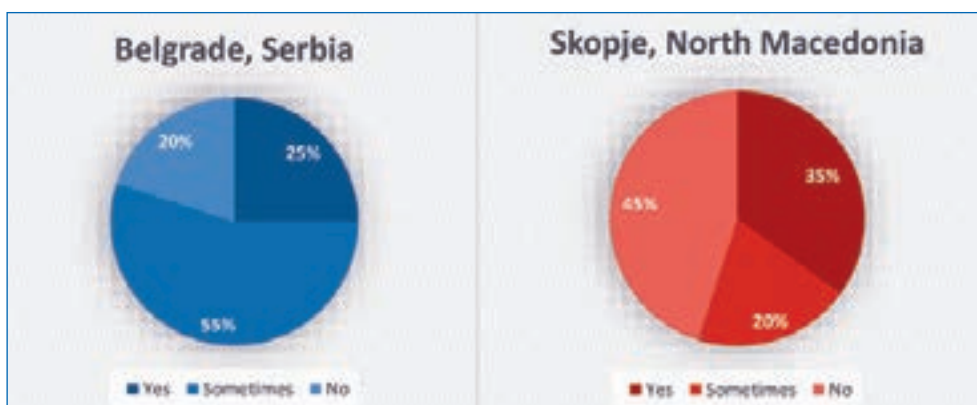
When it comes to the next indicator, which is satisfaction with health care, out of 20 respondents from Skopje, 11 of them are satisfied with health care, 1 respondent is completely satisfied, while 9 are not satisfied with health care. Respondents from Belgrade, 11 of them are also satisfied with health care, 7 of them are completely satisfied, while 2 respondents are not satisfied with health care. According to the conducted research, we can conclude that the respondents from Belgrade are more satisfied with the health care in relation to the respondents from Skopje.

6. Do you feel safe in your country?

a) Yes 7 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 5 (Belgrade, Serbia)

b) Sometimes 4 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 11 (Belgrade, Serbia)

c) No 9 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 4 (Belgrade, Serbia)



When it comes to security, an indicator that is also crucial for quality of life, 7 respondents from Skopje feel safe in their country and surroundings, 4 of them sometimes feel safe, while 9 respondents do not feel safe in their environment. When it comes to respondents from Belgrade, 5 respondents feel safe in their environment, 11 respondents occasionally feel safe, while 4 of them said they do not feel safe in their environment.

7. Are you satisfied with the quality of the environment and the climate?

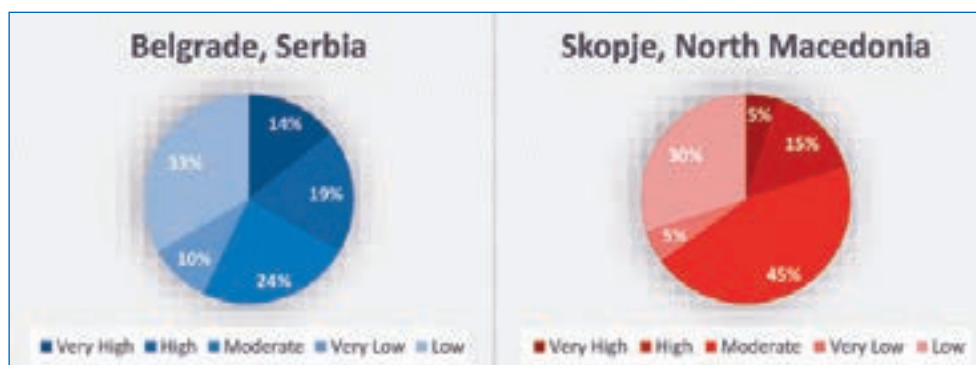
- a) Yes, I am satisfied 9 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 3 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- b) No, I'm not satisfied 5 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 11 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- c) I am partially satisfied 6 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 6 (Belgrade, Serbia)



With the globalization of business, indicators such as climate and environment have crystallized, so we accordingly asked our respondents whether they are satisfied with the quality of the environment and the climate in their environment. Respondents from Skopje, 9 of them answered that they are satisfied with the quality of the environment and climate in Skopje, 5 respondents are not satisfied with the quality of the environment and climate, while 6 respondents are partially satisfied. In Belgrade, respondents are less satisfied with the quality of the environment and climate than respondents from Skopje. 11 respondents from Belgrade are not satisfied with the quality of the environment and climate, 3 respondents are satisfied, while 6 respondents are partially satisfied.

8. What is your quality of life?

- Very High 1 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 3 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- High 3 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 4 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- Moderate 9 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 5 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- Low 6 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 6 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- Very Low 1 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 2 (Belgrade, Serbia)



When it comes to the quality of life indicator, we applied the scale we stated at the beginning of the paper, from the variables *Very High*, *High*, *Moderate*, *Very Low* and *Low*. One of the twenty respondents from Skopje answered that it is very high, while on the other hand in Belgrade, three respondents answered that the quality of life is very high. Three respondents from Skopje answered that their quality of life is at a high level, four respondents from Belgrade gave the same answer. Nine respondents from Skopje answered that their quality of life is average or moderate, while in Belgrade five respondents answered the same. One respondent from Skopje and two from Belgrade answered that their quality of life was very low, while six respondents from Skopje and Belgrade answered that their quality of life was low.

9. If you had an offer to work for a higher salary and have a better quality of life, would you go abroad?

- Yes, of course 2 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 7 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- No, I would not leave my country 7 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 9 (Belgrade, Serbia)
- Maybe, I'm not sure 11 (Skopje, North Macedonia) 4 (Belgrade, Serbia)



With this question, our goal was also to inform ourselves in a certain way about the satisfaction of the respondents with the standard of living, so with the intention to offer them the possibility of a higher salary, a better quality of life, we offered several possibilities for an answer. Two respondents from Skopje and seven from Belgrade would be willing to leave their country and work abroad, thus having a better quality of life, seven respondents from Skopje and nine respondents from Belgrade would not leave their country and work for such an offer, while eleven respondents from Skopje and four from Belgrade would consider the offer. Based on this last answer we can conclude that the respondents were realistic when answering the previous questions.

Table 2. Comparative overview of the Cost of Living Index in the countries

City	Travel time to work	Indices of purchasing power, cost of living, property and income prices	Health care	Security	Climate, pollution index	Total
Skopje, North Macedonia	5,41	2,8	2,4	2,2	3	15,81
Number, respondents	40	40	40	40	40	40
Belgrade, Serbia	7,79	2,8	3,2	3,2	1,8	18,79

Source: Autor

From the attached we can conclude that the cost of living is higher in Belgrade (Serbia), while in Skopje (Northern Macedonia) are lower.

CONCLUSION

Based on the conducted research in primary schools in Belgrade and Skopje, based on the indicators from the Numbeo database, we came to the conclusion that the respondents from Serbia are more satisfied with health care compared to the respondents from Northern Macedonia. On the other hand, when it comes to the indicator Time to travel to work, respondents from Northern Macedonia need less time to come to work than respondents from Serbia. When it comes to the Security indicator, respondents from Serbia feel safer in their country compared to respondents from Northern Macedonia. When it comes to the indicator Climate and environment, based on the results of the research, we can conclude that the respondents from Northern Macedonia is more satisfied with the climate and the environment in relation to the respondents from Serbia. The problem in Serbia, especially in Belgrade, is air pollution, especially in winter days, but also a large number of landfills and the still underdeveloped environmental awareness of people. When it comes to the cost of living indicator, we can conclude that the closest indicators on this issue are the more money saved by respondents from Northern Macedonia. When it comes to the quality of life based on the scaling of variable values, we came to the result that people from Serbia are more satisfied with the quality of life compared to the respondents from Northern Macedonia. When asked whether, if there is a chance to work for a higher salary and have a better quality of life, the respondents would work abroad, we conclude that the respondents from Serbia are more willing to leave their country compared to the respondents from Northern Macedonia.

The standard of living refers to the quantity and quality of material goods and services available to a certain population for economic and demographic development and change can be said to be a complex process in which environmental, socio-economic, geographical, and other factors play an important role. Population movements can be natural, mechanical, spatial and social. Industrialization and development of other economic activities in Serbia and Northern Macedonia have led to major changes in the economic structure of the active population; population concentrations in urban and mixed settlements and to the spatial mobility of the population. Due to the demographic and socio-economic connection, there were new characteristics of the population of Serbia and Northern Macedonia, which are characteristic of the period after the demographic transition: low or moderate birth rate; low mortality rate and changed age structure and developed social and economic structure of the population. Serbia and Northern Macedonia are facing a steady aging population due to low fertility rates and increased life expectancy. The rate of economic activity is lower than in many other European countries. The population of Serbia and Northern Macedonia is declining due to negative natural growth and emigration. The consequences of the COVID-19 crisis can lead to the prevalence of national interests in the system of international economic relations and delay the solution of global security priorities, to actualize the danger of social unrest and contribute to the collapse of internal stability in some countries caused by locking the country.

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