



The Third Age in The Republic of North Macedonia and the Effect on the Workforce

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Abstract:

Introduction: *As in all European countries, and also in the Republic of North Macedonia, issues related to the third age of human life have become increasingly relevant in recent years. It should be emphasized that the entire European continent is affected by the process of demographic aging. This process causes a negative effect on both younger and older people, but mostly on people who are currently specifically in the third age of their life. For many of these individuals, daily care for themselves and their psycho-physical well-being is the most important priority. Above all, it is seen in increased health care and public health. But in addition, in the creation of nursing homes where people could be accommodated at this age in life, as well as specially targeted policies, such as: sports and recreation for the elderly through retirement societies, community service for them, or a series of other measures, through which they would feel happy and be active in the third age of their life. However, all this produces direct implications on the functioning of the labor market and labor relations and has a significant effect on the workforce.*

Subject Research: *The subject of research in this scientific paper is a general analysis of people who are in the third age in the Republic of North Macedonia. The very implementation of the above-mentioned analysis intersects with the publicly available data on policies and measures aimed at people who are in the third age of their life, at the national and local level in the Republic of North Macedonia.*

Method and Materials: *The appropriate and most common method in this scientific paper is the analysis of data, documents, and findings/observations expressed by appropriate experts and institutions. In this regard, the following documents are analysed: general condition of people in the third age of life in the country; documents for the creation of specially targeted measures for the elderly; measures and programs for employment of persons to provide care service for the elderly in the home, and in the community.*

Expected Results: *Through the concluding observations, in the final part of this scientific paper, a general understanding of the third age in the Republic of North Macedonia is obtained. Through the above-mentioned analyzes of policies and measures for healthy and active aging, the impact on the workforce in the Republic of North Macedonia can be seen. Based on this paper, in the future certain specific guidelines could be created to improve the way of life of people in the third age, by activating the workforce in the same measures and policies for protection and active and healthy aging.*

Keywords: *third age of life, workforce, labor market, Republic of North Macedonia, effects*

1. INTRODUCTION

On the entire European continent, the aging of the population is increasingly coming to the fore, mostly due to the influence of the general process of demographic aging of the population. At the same time, the global aging of the population is transforming the society in which we live in the long term, and the trend of extended life today is already a global phenomenon.¹ The population of the Republic of North Macedonia, as a country that is geographically located in Southeastern Europe, is not left out of those modern trends. Namely, the aging of the population in the Republic of North

¹World health organizations, Active aging a policy framework, Geneva. 2002.

Macedonia imposes a large number of challenges, especially for the elderly, both from an economic and social aspect, as well as from a health aspect. These people need care and care for them, from possessing living conditions, as well as for activation in society during their retirement days. On the other hand, due to the change in the structure of traditional families, the possibility of adequate family care for the persons of the third age is lost. The complexity of the aging population, as well as the influence of the home and the environment in which people of the third age live, on the participation of security and quality of their life, creates the need to create conditions for a quality individual (or joint-group) life, as and for life with the population that is close to them. In the Republic of North Macedonia, if we take into account the period up to a few decades ago, there were very rare researches on this topic, as well as very few practical examples in society for the inclusion of people from the third age. However, in the last decade, frequent scientific research on this topic is noticeable.²In addition to the academic community, both the state and the local community (municipalities in the Republic), create applicable action plans and measures and policies for a better quality, healthier and inclusive life for the people of the third age in society. In order to realize those action plans and measures, it is necessary to activate the labor market, by directing specific jobs to care for this category of persons. In the further part of this paper, a brief review is made of the effect on the workforce caused by national and local policies and measures for the protection and inclusion of people from the third age.

2. THE THIRD AGE IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA: GENERAL VIEW AND CHARACTERISTICS

The population in the Republic of North Macedonia is aging dramatically. This data is noticeable as official data in the national institution that has the primary task of collecting data about the population - the State Statistics Office, back in 2014, when creating the then Strategy for Demographic Policies of the State.³Namely, according to the data from this institution, it is noted that in the next 50 years, the number of elderly people is expected to reach 25% of the total population in this country.⁴Because of that fact, the need to create a certain framework for what constitutes aging, that is, the third age of life, is imposed. Many authors around the world have written about old age and the impact on psychophysical characteristics on the human individual. Although it is said that "there are no old people, only those who feel that way", the fact is that in the third age there are psychophysical and social changes, such as reduced life dynamics, retirement, weakening of some cognitive functions and development of certain ailments and diseases. However, the fact that at certain years our sight and hearing weaken, or that we are no longer as mobile as in our youth, does not mean that aging is by definition a "bad condition".⁵Accepting the fact that some human functions weaken, as well as that certain life circumstances change, are the first step in "getting to grips"⁶with the third age. Another step is having physical activity according to the possibility of the age, having an active social role, as well as facing some certain new experiences, and why not enjoying the implementation of them. Aging is an inevitable process. Today, it is generally accepted that people in their third age should be as active as their health and age allow. To a large extent, our health and mental state depend on how active we are. Also, communication with other people and socializing are very important in old age, because the person would still feel needed and active in society. Trust and support are built until the end of life, so accordingly, at this age of life, they are very necessary for these people.

If the majority of the elderly practiced all the above-mentioned things, it is highly probable that they would live to a deeper old age, and would be in a solid psycho-physical condition. However, in order for these processes to be carried out continuously, both in the present and in the future, it will contribute to the need to increase the number and volume of centers for: care and protection of the elderly, health care and medical assistance, for accommodation (nursing homes), for maintaining

²Doncho Donev, Mome Spasovski, Fimka Tozia, Elena Qosevska andco. Social Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, University of St.Cyril and Methodius, Skopje. 2013

³Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. Strategy for demographic policies 2015-2024. Republic of Macedonia. 2014.

⁴State Statistics Office of the Republic of Macedonia. Statistical yearbook. Skopje. 2014.

⁵Nolen-Hoekuma. S. Emotional regulation and psychology for wellness in older adults. Annual Review of clinical psychology. 2012.

⁶Bornarova, Susana. Social policy and the elderly. Faculty of Philosophy. Skopje, 2009

mental health, and for maintaining physical health, as well as for social inclusion of the persons of the third age in society as equal citizens. At the same time, even though they exist, the need to open more new facilities for the psycho-physical well-being of these people, made possible by professional licensed therapists, is still huge. The same applies to associations of retired citizens, through which the elderly would be socially included in social life, even in their third age of life. Looking at the structure of the elderly in our country, it is significant to note that the majority of them are cared for at home. Taking into account the traditional mentality of the population, as well as the social policy itself, which is present as a state arrangement (according to Article 38 of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, the state is characterized as a welfare state that takes care of its citizens), it is quite typical for the elderly to live with their families, together or separately, but with their mutual support.

However, in addition to maintaining traditional values regarding the status of persons and family arrangement, a certain number of persons are accommodated and cared for in specialized institutions for them. Persons in the third age who are institutionalized in homes for the elderly have a high need for care and concern for them, as well as emotional, social and physical support. At the same time, a large part of them may need 24-hour assistance in all daily activities. Relative to their non-institutionalized peers, these individuals are often less active and have much more mental health problems in addition to physical health.

Both those who are cared for at home in their families or families, as well as those who are institutionally cared for, all of them often suffer from multiple diseases caused by old age. In fact, this is what distinguishes them from the people of the second and first age of life, who live in the same community with them.

Looking at the third age in a general framework, it can be reduced to the conclusion that in the Republic of North Macedonia, the most widespread perception of it is that the old man should be retired and be left out of all activities. The arrival of the so-called the third age is a period in which almost everyone notices visible signs and certain deficiencies that threaten health, such as: increased blood sugar, increased pressure, dysfunction of the circulatory system, or problems with the spine and joints. This raises the question of whether all those negativity must appear, whether it is a necessary part of the aging process and whether we can age without losing the quality of our living. Many world and European scientists have shown⁷through their research⁸that it is certainly possible. The academic and institutional, expert community from the society of the Republic of North Macedonia is of the same opinion.⁹Namely, in addition to the creation of specifically targeted strategies, measures, policies and action plans to improve the general condition of the elderly in the third age, certain measures are also implemented at the local and national level to increase the vitality of these persons. The explanation of them follows in the continuation of the paper, where the effect they cause on the workforce is also perceived.

3. EXAMPLES OF ACTIVE AND HEALTHY AGING OF PEOPLE WHO ARE NEARLY IN THE THIRD AGE IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

The formula for healthy aging is usually defined by a low probability of disease and disability, and a high mental and physical capacity for independent and active living in later years. The probability of healthy aging increases dramatically by preventing from childhood and creating healthy lifestyle habits, such as diet, physical activity, mental engagements, avoiding stress, socializing with dear people, having a measure in work and continuous rest. It can be said that there are different types of age: chronological age – age determined by date of birth, then biological age – age in relation to the degree of aging (someone ages faster, some slower), psychological age – independent of age, and social age which is determined by working life, family, economic situation, etc. With the exception of chronological age, all others can be influenced. There are many ways to enhance life in the third age and bring new dynamism and joy into it. Retirees who engage in hobbies are healthier and more

⁷Isaacowitz. D.M An attentional perspective on successful socioemotional aging: Theory and preliminary evidence . Research for Human Development. WHO. 2005.

⁸Laidlaw. K. Cognitive Behavior Therapy for Older People: An introduction . SAGE Publications. London. 2015.

⁹Blagica Rizoska Vanicand Biljana Koprova. Active living. University American College. Skopje. 2018.

satisfied and show fewer symptoms of depression compared to those who do not engage in regular leisure activities. Many European researches show this. In accordance with the fact that the Republic of North Macedonia geographically belongs to Europe, but also considering that this country is a candidate for membership in the European Union, there are numerous examples both at the local and national level of maintaining the vitality and cheerfulness of the elderly.

If the mental and physical well-being of the elderly is considered, primary and secondary healthcare plays a major role in that. Since Macedonia is a country that has ratified all conventions and protocols for public health of the population, including the elderly population, it has an obligation to offer quality services for health care and care for people from the third age of life. This includes all necessary health examinations, care in hospital conditions, as well as palliative and geriatric services aimed at the elderly population. In terms of health care, people in the third age have a mandatory 6-month health check-up, and if they have certain chronic health problems, they have the possibility of partial exemption from the participation for the medicines they need to maintain their good health. In terms of palliative and geriatric care, in recent years the processes of establishing such centers have become more frequent, with the release of specialized professionals who take care of the elderly who need services from those centers. It is expected that the need and the number of such centers will increase in the future, mostly due to the above-mentioned process of demographic aging of the population, as well as due to the increasingly present emigration of the young population outside the country.

Furthermore, from the national level, the most explicit and exposed example is the continuous organization of certain manifestations and activities of the national association of pensioners in Macedonia. Namely, every year they organize the holding of Republic sports tournaments. They are organized by the associations of pensioners of Macedonia, by all associations of pensioners, from all cities, regions and settlements. By organizing these sports retirement days, it is shown that even in the third age one can be in good physical condition, regardless of which and what kind of sport it is. Of course, it is an indication that our older citizens, who in their working life have made a huge contribution to society, can still be active in all spheres, including sports, and lead a fulfilling life.¹⁰ At the same time, it is important to note that the pension organization in the country has a long and continuous history. Namely, in 2023, 75 years of the pension organization in the country were marked. In addition, every year on September 20, the pensioners' day is celebrated, with numerous cultural, folklore and musical events at the local and national level.

4. NATIONAL AND LOCAL MEASURES AND PROGRAMS FOR THE EMPLOYMENT OF PERSONS TO PROVIDE HOME AND COMMUNITY CARE SERVICES FOR THE ELDERLY

Due to the fact that people of the third age usually, for the most part, live in their families, according to that, most of the policies, measures and programs for the care and services of the elderly have been created. However, due to the trend of increased aging of the population, and the above-mentioned predictions for an increase in that trend in the future, starting from 2020, the state is creating specific measures and policies for institutional care and welfare services for the elderly. All of that causes a direct effect on jobs, that is, on the labor market. This process changes the need for certain necessary skills, knowledge and qualifications of the workforce in the country, both in the medium and long term.

The newest and most comprehensive measure/program implemented by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia is for "employing persons to provide care and nursing services for adults in the home and in the community". This measure represents a set of policies aimed at improving the general condition of the elderly, and employment policies for the unemployed persons registered in the National Employment Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia. This measure is currently described in the National document: Operational plan for active programs and measures for employment and services on the labor market, starting from 2021.¹¹ However, the implementation of the measure is impossible without the specialized persons from the Centers for Social Affairs, from

¹⁰Web portal of the Municipality of Veles. The 25th Republic sports games were held. <https://veles.gov.mk/vo-veles-se-odrzaa-25-republicki-sportski-penziorski-igri/>

¹¹Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. Operational plan for active programs and measures for employment and services on the labor market for 2021. Skopje. 2020

the Centers for the Protection of the Elderly, as well as from the Commission for Licensing of Palliative and Geriatric Care Providers. At the same time, the purpose of this measure is to support unemployed persons to acquire professional qualifications and skills for providing care and nursing services in the home and in the community and support for their employment in the field of economy for the care of the elderly in the home and in the community. From the very start of implementation until now, more than 5,000 previously unemployed people have been trained and certified, and a significant number of homes for geriatric care have been opened. It is important to note that many of the people who are now licensed providers of services for the elderly, work in the care of the elderly in home settings, as helpers in carrying out the household chores of the elderly, or as carers of them.

Another national institution that implements measures, policies and activities to protect and improve the lives of people in the so-called the third age is the Red Cross of Macedonia, which institution is in continuous coordination with the policies of the Government of Macedonia. More specifically, the Red Cross celebrates the "Care for the Elderly Week" every year in the month of November.¹² Every year, the Red Cross of Macedonia, in conjunction with the observance of the week for the care of the elderly, holds informative workshops throughout the country, with members from clubs of pensioners throughout the country, as well as with other interested persons. Specifically, during that week, the members of the retirement clubs, as well as every interested citizen of the country, learn about the social and health care rights of the elderly, with the aim of improving their quality of life and healthy aging. In doing so, the concepts of old age and aging, and the life stages of old age, are considered and discussed. At the same informative meetings, people from the third age, members of pension societies, and every citizen, have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the current strategic documents, such as: "National strategy for the elderly"¹³, as well as the "Action plan for healthy aging".¹⁴ Also, any adult who has certain problems or needs can ask for professional help or advice from the Red Cross team that works with people of the third age. In addition to these activities, the Red Cross of Macedonia pays particular attention to the services offered by the Red Cross of Macedonia, such as the services for "Help and care in the home for the elderly" and "Care for people suffering from Alzheimer's disease".¹⁵

In addition, with the emergence of the corona crisis of 2020, and the closure of the economy, pensioners and in general all persons who are in the third age, are characterized as a vulnerable group of persons. Pensioners are covered by the packages of anti-crisis measures offered by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia. At the same time, starting from 2022, the Government through the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy concluded a Collective Agreement for the growth and increase of pensions according to the growth of the consumption basket in the country. Namely on that occasion, the vice-prime minister of the country has stated that: "We have a law with which we adjust pensions twice a year, with a certain methodology that is appropriate and gives results. In addition, with the adoption of the new minimum pension law, we complete the entire reform process and leave the problem of pensioners aside."

Also, starting from 2013, in accordance with the processes for active and healthy aging of the population, and especially the population that is in the third age, i.e. pensioners, free bus transportation was started on certain days of the week (Tuesday and Friday). Apart from this, the then government also introduced free inter-city transport every last weekend of the month, as well as free entry to certain musical and cultural events. Fortunately, except for the now canceled free entry for cultural and musical events, the other benefits can still be felt by people of the third age of life.

All these policies, measures and activities cause a direct impact on the budget of the Republic, on the total GDP, on the pension system, and on the jobs and, accordingly, on the necessary skills and qualifications that it is desirable for the workforce to have, in the future, on shorter, but also in the longer term.

¹²Red Cross of the Republic of Macedonia. Elderly care week. <https://ckrm.org.mk/nedela-na-grizha-na-starite-lica-4/>

¹³Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. National strategy for the elderly 2010-2020 . Skopje. 2009

¹⁴Action plan for healthy food and healthy aging. Ministry of Health. <https://extranet.who.int/nutrition/gina/sites/default/filesstore/MKD%202016%20Food%20and%20Nutrition%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

¹⁵Institute of Public Health . And a report on the health of the population in the Republic of North Macedonia. Skopje. 2019

Bearing in mind that in about half a century, the number of the elderly population in the country is expected to increase by a quarter more than now, the process of adapting the labor market to producing personnel for care, nursing and services aimed at the elderly is inevitable, that is towards the elderly. Through the possibilities of care and nursing in the home and the community adapted to the elderly, it is necessary to open specialized centers that produce skills and qualifications for this. These needs are already felt by highly developed European countries, such as Germany, Switzerland or Denmark, and are currently creating such training centers.¹⁶ Furthermore, all sports, cultural, musical events, as well as activities for the social inclusion of people from the third age in society, create a need for having appropriate personnel who would know their job and would be successful in implementing it. In that process of continuous transformation of the labor market, the effect on the labor force, in the long and medium term, was perceived.

5. CONCLUSION AND CONSIDERATIONS

The aging process of the population in the Republic of North Macedonia is an irreversible process. The effect of this process is increased by another complementary process, which is the mass emigration of the young able-bodied population, in search of a better life, outside the country. This breaks the traditional norms of caring for the elderly within the family, after which many elderly remain alone. However, the tradition still exists, which together with the low incomes of the people of the third age - mostly pensioners, do not practice institutional care and their protection. A large part of them decide on the methods of care and protection through public health, and a large percentage of them actively participate in retirement societies, attending cultural, musical, sports or social events. However, there is still a low level of social inclusion of the elderly in Macedonian society, mostly due to the still existing stigmas and stereotypes about them that persist in society.

On the other hand, the protective factors that enable the improvement of the quality of life of people in the third age, such as: consumption of healthy nutritious food, good physical activity, strong support from family and friends, participation in social activities, as well as having positive attitudes and adaptability. In order for this to be possible, there is a return to having a secure social platform for the realization of all these positive life habits and practices by the elderly, and that is also the opening of new jobs, as part of the support system and services.

For now, the Republic of North Macedonia is creating significant measures, policies and programs for social inclusion, safe and healthy aging, and care and nursing in the home and in the community of the elderly. However, there is a serious gap between coverage in rural and urban areas of the country. In addition to that, all indicators show concrete information about a future increase in the number of elderly people, and a drastic decrease in the number of young people due to the trend of emigration from the country and a series of other demographic factors. Therefore, the state must devote itself much more seriously in the future to the creation of policies, strategies and measures for the protection, care, nursing and social inclusion of the persons of the third age in society. All that, of course, contributes to the creation of new jobs in this branch. With that process, perhaps the state will contribute to the return of young and able-bodied personnel back to the state, but also to the employment of unemployed persons, all those who would create the system for the protection of persons in the third age, possessing appropriate skills and knowledge for to carry it out.

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