

Youth work in South-East Europe



Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



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Youth work in South-East Europe

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Executive summary

South-East Europe has experienced social, political and economic turmoil over the last three decades. The changing context and slow administrative reforms have affected young people and youth work and have posed challenges to the implementation of youth policies. The European Union, the Council of Europe and other international organisations have been working to facilitate positive developments in the youth sector through the involvement of policy makers, practitioners and youth researchers.

The [partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth](#) has recognised the need to conduct qualitative research on the state of youth work in this area, five years after its latest seminar on youth work in South-East Europe. The main goal of this study is to identify pivotal components of youth work, the sector's accomplishments, and obstacles to youth work in 12 countries of South-East Europe. Following this, the study makes recommendations on how to advocate for better positions for youth workers and youth work in national and international contexts. The 12 countries included in this study are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo¹, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Türkiye. To gain a comprehensive insight into the challenges, potential and perspectives of youth work in South-East Europe, two methods of analysis were applied: desk research and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with selected national-level experts on youth and national-level youth workers. The desk research focused on literature published on youth work in South-East Europe since 2015, along with analysis of the youth policies on the national level, while the in-depth interviews had four main thematic areas: i. the context of youth work; ii. youth workers' skills and competences, and validation and professionalisation of their roles; iii. the potential for growth and innovation; and iv. examples of practice that resulted in improvements in youth work at the national or local level.

The analyses indicate that all the countries observed struggle with similar obstacles to planning and executing their activities, namely outdated legal frameworks for youth work – often linked with inefficient policy implementation – inadequate structures to support youth work, a paucity of structured educational opportunities for youth workers, a lack of recognition and validation for youth work, and scarce, irregular funding for youth work. At the same time, civil society organisations working in the youth sector and youth workers have both demonstrated resilience and adaptability

¹ All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.



to sudden social changes, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The innovation and inner strength displayed by the youth civic sector in South-East Europe are foundations for growth and development; this should be recognised and supported by genuine cross-sectoral co-operation. In support of this, this study concludes with recommendations directed at three main groups of stakeholders in the youth field in South-East Europe: policy makers, practitioners and researchers.

Introduction

The geographical area of South-East Europe, in addition to Greece and Türkiye, has a common memory of its socialist past, when the pillars of youth work were established. The first major pillar was established after the Second World War, when youth work was predominantly related to the scout movement and to Red Cross and Red Crescent activities. Kovačić and Čulum, in their 2018 paper on the development of youth work in the socialist period (p. 152), recognise that:

[i]n comparison with contemporary youth work, youth work actions of that time had four distinctive features not typical of youth work. Firstly, there was no co-creation of activities with young people [...] Secondly, unlike contemporary youth work practice where voluntary participation is highly praised and desirable, in the case of youth work actions, although not compulsory, (voluntary) participation was highly expected. Thirdly, many educational courses offered (today labelled as non-formal) were focused on gaining experience and competencies for certain vocations needed to elevate [...] industry.

The second pillar emerged with the appearance of the anti-war movements and actions directed at mitigating the aftermath of the socialist regimes at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s (Bužinkić et al. 2015; Pudar Draško 2018). Today, each country analysed in this study has a diverse set of civil society organisations working with and for young people on multiple areas relevant to their lives. Adjusting national policies to international standards, especially to those of the [European Commission](#) and the [Council of Europe](#), makes it possible to enhance the quality of youth work and young people's perspectives. The [Bonn Process](#), as a joint effort to put the [European Youth Work Agenda](#) into action across Europe by incorporating the principles of the [3rd European Youth Work Convention](#) into national legislation, is an opportunity not to be missed by those striving to improve the well-being of young people.

At first glance, all the countries analysed here (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Türkiye) struggle with similar issues in the youth field and have limited resources to perform youth work that responds in a timely manner to the needs and aspirations of young people. However, the 12 countries included in the analysis also show significant variation in their socio-political and economic situations, as well as in their institutional frameworks and policy systems that provide settings for youth work. Legal and strategic documents in South-East Europe envisage similar mechanisms for the implementation of youth work, covering youth councils, youth centres, youth clubs and civil society organisations focused on young people (Siurala 2015). In the past three decades, public institutions and civil society organisations in

South-East Europe have been relying on the assistance of international organisations to conceive their youth policies and to fund youth-related activities. The presence of international organisations has also introduced various analyses of the issues in the field, along with experiments in monitoring and evaluating youth policies, and there are several reports on the status and progress of youth work in South-East Europe (for example, Potočnik and Stanojević 2019). Nevertheless, it seems that youth work organisations facing patterns of inadequate support and striving for recognition would benefit from analyses that would take into consideration direct input from youth workers. Therefore, this study is less strongly focused on desk-based analysis of institutional and policy frameworks concerning youth work in South-East Europe – it looks more closely at interviews with youth workers and youth experts with insights into the youth work policy framework and implementation in the 12 countries observed.

This study builds on previous research by the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership in the South-East Europe region, namely contributions to [YouthWiki](#) from non-programme countries, expert seminars, and research papers. Research papers include the “Youth work in South-East Europe” (Kovačić and Pašić 2018) paper on the state of youth work, the analytical paper “Quality development of youth work in South-East Europe” (Potočnik and Stanojević 2019), “Principles and values of youth work” (Hadzibegović 2018), “Youth research in SEE” (Kovačić 2018) and a study “Youth work in eastern Europe: Realities, perspectives and inspiring initiatives” (Ignatovitch, Fras and Basarab 2020). Several regional seminars have been held since 2015, including “Beyond barriers: a youth policy seminar on social inclusion of young people in vulnerable situations in South East Europe”, held in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2015, and “Getting across: a peer-learning seminar on cross-sectoral youth policy in the Western Balkans”, held in Montenegro in 2016. The latest regional seminar on youth work in South-East Europe, titled “Peer-learning seminar on youth work and its relevance for youth policy in South-East Europe”, was organised in Ljubljana (Slovenia) in November 2018. This study also builds on long-standing research into youth work: the [History of youth work](#) series, contributions to the [European Youth Work conventions](#), [Youth Partnership Insights about the recognition of youth work and non-formal learning](#) and [mapping educational paths of youth workers](#), among others.

I. Methodology and aims of the study

The main aim of this study is to identify pivotal components of youth work, its accomplishments, and obstacles to its performance in 12 countries of South-East Europe. This in turn will allow recommendations to be made to give better positions to youth workers and youth work in the respective national and European contexts. A significant share of information used in this study is already available through [YouthWiki](#) and the [online sources of the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe](#), as well as through some previous analyses of youth work in South-East Europe shared at the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership [seminars](#).



The first stage of data collection and the analyses aimed to obtain insights into the formal frameworks of youth work and to identify thematic areas for the semi-structured interviews. During the desk review, national and international sources and studies were consulted, which also served to identify interviewees for the second stage of the research – primary data collection through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in each country, including with youth workers and youth work experts working in academia or in international organisations based in each country. Specifically, five interviews were conducted for Albania, three for Bosnia and Herzegovina, three for Bulgaria, three for Croatia, 10 for Greece, two for Kosovo*, three for Montenegro, three for North Macedonia, six for Romania, three for Serbia, three for Slovenia and five for Türkiye. The number of interviews conducted depended, firstly, on the availability or lack of updated data regarding the status of youth work in each context and, secondly, the occurrence of relevant developments in the field, some of which had not yet been academically recorded.

There are four main thematic areas addressed in the interviews: i. the context of youth work at the national level (including structures supporting youth work and challenges faced by those structures; legal framework at the national and local levels; source of funding and organisational capacities of youth organisations); ii. youth workers' skills and competences, and validation and professionalisation of their roles; iii. potential for growth and innovation (digitalisation, changes in youth work practice and intersectoral co-operation) and iv. examples of the practice that resulted in improvement of youth work at the national or local level. The interviews provided important insights for grasping the state of youth work, inconsistencies in youth work implementation, as well as relationships and co-operation among the stakeholders in youth work at the national level.



Formal elements of youth work architecture: case studies

Albania

Legal framework of youth work

According to the latest report of its national [Institute of Statistics](#), Albania is among the youngest countries in the region. Albania adopted a National Youth Law ([see References](#)) for the first time relatively recently, in 2019. The law is considered the most important legal document regarding youth work and youth policy in Albania, both at central and local levels.

The adoption of the law itself and its reference to the concept of “youth work” signified a new momentum for youth workers in Albania. Under Article 14, there is concrete reference to youth work, in Albanian *puna rinore*, literally meaning “youth work”. The law sets a framework for the recognition of youth work in Albania by defining some key terms, such as “youth organisations”, “youth policy”, and “young people”, who are defined as individuals aged between 15 and 29. The fact that this document regulates the involvement of local governments in youth work has also been hailed as a pivotal development. Albania also has a national youth agency, the only youth policy executive body in the country. Before the agency, there was a National Youth Service.

An interesting aspect of the Law on Youth has been the inclusion of the young Albanian diaspora in its intention to define activities, mechanisms and authorities working with and for youth. During the last few years, the Albanian state has put efforts into strengthening ties with its diaspora worldwide, focusing specifically on children and youth. In 2018, Albania presented its first ever National Diaspora Strategy 2018-2024 and Action Plan (Government of Albania 2018). The Albanian Government also published an updated document, titled [Albanian National Diaspora Strategy 2021-2025](#) (Government of Albania 2020a), which features a series of state-driven actions aimed at fostering ties with ethnic Albanians worldwide with the goal of “preserving language and national identity” (Government of Albania 2020a: 39).

The youth law upgraded the Albanian Youth Council to the status of a consultative body to the respective ministry. The Albanian Youth Council has 16 members, of which at least five must be selected respecting the gender quotas set out in point 2 of Decision 969 dated 2 December 2020 of the Council of Ministers (Lula 2021).

The law also sees local youth councils as consultative bodies for local youth policy making and youth policy decisions.

After a thorough procedure, involving a bottom-up approach and participatory consultations with young people and organisations, the Government of Albania announced the approval of the new Youth Strategy 2022-2029 (Official Gazette of Albania 1.11.2022). As a result of this process, as of 26th of October 2022, Albania has The National Youth Strategy 2022-2029 ([Strategjia Kombetare e Rinise 2022](#)), approved by Decision of the Council of Ministers no. 692, dated 26.10.2022, published in the Official Gazette no. 144, dated 01.11.2022.

The new strategy has succeeded the [National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020](#) (Government of the Republic of Albania 2015), [which was](#) the primary strategic document on youth and youth policy in the country. The new strategy consists of 3 political goals, 9 specific objectives and different measures.

It is worth mentioning that, over the last two years, Albania has implemented several reforms that have contributed to strengthening the legal framework for youth by adding new structures aimed at enhancing the existing youth-related institutions. For instance, the new youth strategy and the inclusive nature of the consultative process that led to its approval were hailed by most interviewees as being positive developments that open the way for more young people and organisations to get involved in decision-making mechanisms. Furthermore, the establishment of a new ministry specifically dedicated to youth and children is a strong indication, according to respondents, that youth is high on the political agenda of the country. Until 2021, the main body for youth and youth policy making was the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth. However, in September 2021, the youth portfolio was transferred to the newly established [Ministry of State for Children and Youth \(Center for Good Governance\)](#). Young people and civil society have placed high hopes in this new ministry for further improvement of the existing regulatory framework and enhancement of transparency regarding public financing of civil society organisations. The new ministry is also expected to strengthen the capacities of the national youth agency to implement grant schemes and to deliver good quality and gender-responsive projects that generate greater youth engagement in local/national affairs.

Moreover, high hopes have been placed on the development of a new national youth action plan and the introduction of the [Youth Guarantee in Albania](#) (Europa (26 August 2021)), which entered a pilot phase in 2023, as part of the government's wider plan to tackle the high levels of youth unemployment (*Albanian Daily News* 2022). In this context, Albania approved in 2023 the national plan for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, as an annex to its 2023-2030 national strategy (RYCO 2023). The Youth Guarantee scheme has been designed to run until 2026; it is too early to draw any conclusions based on its first pilot year in Albania, however, according to the "EU-enlargement related progress report" published by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office at the end of the year, "efforts should continue on strengthening the social protection system, alongside the labour market measures" (RYCO 2023). Unemployment and lack of professional perspective remains one of the main challenges that young Albanians face and the main reason behind the rising figures in youth

migration and brain drain that have been reported in the last years (Mara and Landesmann 2022; Zisi, Shosha, and Anamali 2022). Apparently the situation deteriorated throughout 2023: according to [official figures](#) provided by the National Statistics Institute, INSTAT, in the first trimester of 2023 unemployment in Albania increased by 0.7% compared to the last months of 2022, raising the official unemployment rate at 10.9% (Instat 2023). Moreover, young people seem to be the ones who have been affected the most: the INSTAT figures indicate that the highest rate of unemployment has been registered at the 15-29 age group.

Structures supporting youth work

The [National Erasmus+ Office](#) in Albania (formerly the National Tempus Office) is the focal point for Albanian stakeholders involved in the Erasmus+ Programme. The contact points for the Erasmus+: Youth in Action and European Solidarity Corps programmes are located in two cities – Tirana and Kukes, respectively – the latter being in a geographically isolated area, on the border with Kosovo*. Contact points work in co-ordination with [Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth in South-East Europe \(SALTO-Youth SEE\)](#) and are tasked with supporting organisations and people interested in organising projects in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme, the youth field and the European Solidarity Corps.

The [National Youth Congress](#) (NYC) is a youth umbrella organisation – a union of youth organisations, informal groups, youth forums of political parties – aimed at exchanging information, highlighting youth issues, lobbying, and advocating for solving these issues and the provision of capacity building for all entities involved in the network. The NYC was established in March 2013 in Tirana, in the presence of over 30 national-level organisations. This network was started at the initiative of two foreign foundations: the [FES Tirana](#) (Friedrich Ebert Foundation) and [Olof Palme International](#). The synergy between the NYC and the Municipality of Tirana played a key role in Tirana winning the title of the [European Youth Capital](#) for 2022. It is thanks to this title and the structures that emerged from it, such as working groups, lobbying groups, etc., that Tirana enjoyed a vibrant year of youth-led activities, featuring a rich calendar of local, regional and international events that boosted youth participation and the visibility of respective mechanisms. Albania's National Youth Council is part of the consultative group of the [Western Balkans Youth Lab](#) project of the Regional Cooperation Council, aimed at boosting youth policy and participation.

It is worth mentioning that youth work in Albania is also being supported through a cross-border framework provided by regional organisations promoting youth policy and youth participation via different modalities, such as the [Regional Youth Cooperation Office \(RYCO\)](#), the headquarters of which are in Tirana.

Educational opportunities for youth workers

Except for the general guidelines provided by the Law on Youth, in Albania there is no consensus over the specific skills, competences or educational background that a youth worker should have. In this context, many practitioners come from different academic or vocational backgrounds and have different understandings of youth

work. At state level, the National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020 foresees educational pathways for practitioners working with and for youth on a variety of topics (sports, leisure, health, prevention of delinquency, etc.) and methods (peer-to-peer education, seminars, training courses, etc.). Educational opportunities on the various subjects mentioned above related to young people are also included in national strategies. Moreover, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and networks have organised educational activities targeting youth workers and other practitioners working with youth, such as teachers, activists or youth leaders. Many expectations for new opportunities and pathways have been placed on the new youth strategy.

The National Erasmus+ Office, along with the contact points for the Erasmus+: Youth in Action and European Solidarity Corps programmes, offers information and advice and runs targeted information and training activities with the support of SALTO-Youth SEE. Erasmus+ is a programme that has been ardently embraced by both non-governmental organisations and higher education institutes, as indicated by [Eurydice](#).

Geographically speaking, most youth-related activities and, consequently, educational or vocational opportunities for practitioners, are concentrated in the capital, Tirana. Local youth councils and youth centres engage in systematic efforts to provide regular opportunities in peripheral or rural areas. It is worth mentioning that many of the youth councils, especially in geographically isolated areas of Albania, have been launched and are being supported by international organisations or embassies operating in the country. Efforts are also being made by smaller NGOs, youth associations and informal youth groups active in the periphery, many of which are unregistered. The findings of both primary and secondary research (Cenaj 2021; King R. & Gëdeshi I. 2020), however, indicate that the few opportunities available in peripheral areas are either ephemeral and sporadic, meaning that they cannot bear meaningful results for the community in the long-term, or are available only to young people who have a high level of social capital or are educated enough to have access to these.

Recognition and validation of youth work

The presence of concrete reference to youth work in the [Youth-law-No.-75-2019](#) has reinvigorated local hopes and efforts for full recognition and institutionalisation of youth work in Albania. During the consultation rounds with youth and civil society throughout 2021 and 2022, preceding the approval of the new youth strategy on 26 October 2022, there had been vigorous discussions over the future of youth work in the country and the issue of recognition and validation has been identified as a top priority.

Both the 2019 youth law and Tirana's year as a European Youth Capital have elevated the role of the National Youth Council and schemes supporting youth work within local governments. However, for the time being, youth work in Albania is neither officially recognised nor standardised, which has a direct impact on the quality of practitioners' work, but also on the availability and reliability of data on youth work-related actions and activities. Interviewees for this study shared that there is a tax code under which one can be registered as a youth worker, but due to lack of

regulation it remains a precarious form of employment, usually in fixed-term contracts, offering minimum benefits.

Being a youth worker in Albania is not to be compared with being a youth worker in Germany, France or Sweden, for instance, in countries where youth work is institutionalised and genuinely supported by the state. I am sure that there are challenges everywhere, but here youth workers are faced with limited resources, bureaucracy, corruption and so many other adversities... Yet, despite all difficulties, the quality of the work provided is high and there are people who work very passionately. I think that the recognition of youth work would help enormously in achieving better standards for our work and our young people. It would also be an acknowledgement of our work and a reason for others to see youth work more seriously, not as a pastime, but as something very important for the community.

(Youth worker, Tirana)

Youth work in Albania moves in parallel with formal education, often filling gaps in the schooling system. Tools such as [Europass](#) and Youthpass, which increase the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are valued in the wider path towards the recognition of youth work. Regarding Europass, it should be noted that there are no support offices in Albania, unlike in other countries of the region, where there are [National Europass Centres](#).

The most important thing that the Youthpass has achieved for the young people we work with is the following: imagine that you have a young person from a small town who has not managed to enter university or college due to different reasons and who might not even have attended another seminar or training course before. Then, you give them something that they can put in their resume. You also give them motivation; the feeling that they have achieved something, they have completed a program. I am not saying that the Youthpass can substitute a certificate provided by a higher education institution, [but] the future employer will definitely notice this in this young person's CV and it will be a plus in their application to get a job or access a course, or anything else they decide to aim for.

(Youth worker from a rural area of Albania)

Assuring quality in non-formal education and establishing a common educational framework for youth trainers are some of the prerequisites that respondents see as vital in Albania's path towards recognition of youth work. Better co-ordination among civil society organisations and genuine political will were also identified as indispensable.

Youth work funding

The national [Youth Law of Albania](#) (2019), the primary source of funding for youth-related activities is within the state budget, which is managed by the national youth agency. This budget is reserved for financing the construction or reconstruction of public facilities and youth infrastructure; financing youth projects or/and youth organisations; and co-financing participation in international programmes. According to

Lula (2021), an innovative funding element introduced by the national youth agency has been the financial support to local administrative units in Albania (municipalities) through a similar grant scheme. The call for proposals for local government units to apply with their project ideas in support of local youth policies and projects was launched in June 2021. Smaller grants are also foreseen within the [National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020](#) (Government of Albania 2015). Theme-specific grants for youth projects addressing particular social, educational or health-related priorities are foreseen within various campaigns launched by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports ([Ministria e Arsimit dhe Sportit](#)) or the [Ministry of Health and Social Protection](#).

Overall, Albanian youth workers can count on international funding provided by international organisations (the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe) or by foreign embassies that are active in the country. Albania is a candidate country for European Union membership, and the European Union is its largest donor and investor, providing financial assistance in a wide range of areas, with the goal of bringing the country and its people/institutions closer to European Union standards.

Ad hoc funding for youth projects targeting specific communities, minority groups or young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods have also been envisaged within the wider framework of national plans carried out with the support of international donors. Among these are the [National Action Plan on LGBTI² people in the Republic of Albania](#) or the [National Action Plan for the Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma and Egyptians in Albania](#) [public%20services%20in%20comparison%20to%20the%20majority%20population.](#)" ([Government of the Republic of Albania 2020b](#); 2021).

In general terms, youth workers in Albania suffer challenges in finding financial resources to support their work.

We are working very hard and we would like to see a real change in our community. The problem is that we depend on small grants every time and no one can guarantee that we will continue receiving funding. You can't make a real change without a long-term plan. And you can't make long-term plans without secure sources of funding. For now, we have funds to cover our activities for this year, but in the next year, our target group and the focus of our work might stop being a priority for our donors. It is a constant fight to prove yourself, to prove the meaning and the impact of your work, to convince donors that it is worth investing in this project, in these young people.

(Project manager, Tirana)

In contrast to this, many organisations are instead following the donors' priorities, which define the scope and subject of their work.

I worked as an intern in this NGO in my city because I wanted to gain experience. My job was to scan through the internet and find open calls. Then, based

2. LGBTI is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons. Different acronyms are used by different documents, organisations etc. to mean (roughly) the same groups of people.

on these, we would write a project and submit. We would apply regardless [of] the call. I remember how during the period of one single month, we applied to calls for organisations working with Roma, refugees, abused women, radicalised youth and I can't remember what else.

(Young volunteer from a smaller town in Albania)

This donor-driven youth work is often based on the external priorities, not much on the needs of young people and the youth sector. It also impacts on the ability of the youth sector to plan long-term and work on the structural and underlying issues, but it rather sustains itself in a project-based manner.

Examples of practice

The National Youth Congress is currently co-operating with three German foundations in three dimensions related to youth. Together with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, as well as the Swiss Embassy, the NYC focuses on institutional dialogue and co-operation, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung project focuses on research, monitoring and evaluation, and the collaboration with the Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung is focused on political education and capacity building. The NYC has developed a strong bond with five other national youth structures in the Western Balkans region through the Cooperation and Development Institute and the Western Balkans Youth Cooperation Platform. Today, the NYC represents 112 youth entities located in 12 regions of Albania.

On 22 September 2021, the [Erasmus Student Network](#) welcomed Albania as its 41st country. The Erasmus Student Network is a non-profit international student organisation working in the field of education, active citizenship and European values. Albania's full membership is expected to open up new horizons in the field of youth, by providing more opportunities, such as access to youth programmes, educational and networking projects as well as advocacy campaigns.

Tirana gaining the title of the [European Youth Capital 2022!](#) awarded by the [European Youth Forum](#), was an important opportunity for youth advocacy and participation. The activities implemented within this initiative have been an excellent opportunity for the city's extroversion and networking, but also for local young people to contribute in different areas and be more actively involved in decision making and project implementation.

Legal framework of youth work

The legal framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina is, by far, the most complex one in South-East Europe, given the constitutional and institutional setting of the country established by the Dayton Peace Agreement,³ which divided the country into two entities: The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Republika Srpska (RS) and one special district the Brčko District (Bose 2005), which functions as a multi-ethnic, self-governing unit. Youth policy falls under the jurisdiction of the entity and cantonal level, with relevant ministries existing at these levels (Pašić 2019: 166). Because of the unique constitutional and institutional structure of the country and the decentralised jurisdiction concerning youth, Bosnia and Herzegovina has three laws governing the position of youth in the country: the [Youth Law of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) (Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2010), the [Law on Youth Organization of Republika Srpska](#) (Government of Republika Srpska 2004), and the Youth Law of the Brčko District ([Zakon o mladima Brčko Distrikte](#)) (Brčko District Assembly 2017). Although the three laws on youth use different definitions of “youth work”, they nonetheless establish it as one of the priorities of youth policy. They also define “youth” as people between 15 and 30 years of age.

The Youth Law of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010) includes a very narrow definition of youth work as “planned, purposeful and conscious youth support through youth voluntary participation” (Article 4, paragraph 11), even though further in the text (Article 8, paragraph 4) it elaborates what this “support” actually entails. Interestingly, the law includes a section on “youth obligations” which, among others, states that young people have “to actively work on improvement of their abilities, their education and development of the integrity of their personality” and “improve the environment in which they live” (Article 7, paragraphs 1 and 5, respectively). Furthermore, it also stipulates that the relevant authorities, when adopting measures related to youth work as well as youth activity plans will, among the rest, consider the “*spiritual* needs and characteristics of young people” (Article 9, emphasis added).

The Law on Youth Organization of Republika Srpska (2004, amended in 2008 and 2012) includes a more elaborate definition of youth work as

the part of youth activities organised with and for youth, which takes place within the free time of young people and is performed in order to improve conditions for personal and social development of young people and the general social benefits in accordance with their needs, opportunities, and with their voluntary participation (Article 2).

The Youth Law of the Brčko District (2017) describes youth work as a “form of socially useful work in the field of interest of youth in which they are involved and which contributes to the improvement of the position of young people” (Article 2). Similarly

3. The Dayton Peace Agreement, also known as the Dayton Accords, the Paris Protocol or the Dayton-Paris Agreement, is the peace agreement formally signed in Paris on 14 December 1995, putting an end to the three-and-a-half year-long Bosnian War, one of the armed conflicts in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina 1995).

to the Youth Law of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this law also includes a section on the of young people (Article 7).

The legislation foresees the setting-up of local youth councils and municipal youth offices. When it comes to implementing this option provided by law, however, the situation throughout the country is quite heterogeneous. On the one hand, there are cases of dynamic youth councils, such as the one in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina ([Vijeće mladih](#)), which have managed to overcome initial challenges and establish an active presence (Sejfić 2023; Boracic-Mrso 2020). On the other hand, operational and technical challenges have impeded some municipalities from establishing designated structures to support youth, while in other cases, existing mechanisms are weak, disfunctional or insufficient (Sejfić 2023; Mujčinović 2021))

Although the Youth Law of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina includes a section on youth work and defines the purposes of having a youth strategy at all levels (cantonal, municipal), the federation does not yet have a youth strategy. Back in 2015, a working group was set up to develop a strategy based on analysis conducted during the previous two years, yet these efforts did not lead to concrete outcomes. In June 2019, representatives in the House of Representatives of the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina supported an initiative by the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina to finally adopt the youth strategy (Aščerić 2019) but, for various reasons, the final document never made it to the parliament. A few months later, the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic would also take its toll. Evidence shows that many youth-related plans remained pending as the region entered a challenging period, which translated throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina into increased poverty and serious social inequalities (United Nations Childrens' Fund and United Nations Development Programme 2022). Today, as the region is recovering from the pandemic, these gaps are being pointed out by youth experts and youth activists, who are identifying the effects of both the absence of an integral youth strategy, but also the minimal or ineffective implementation of related youth policies (Sejfić 2023).

By contrast, Republika Srpska has a strategy on youth, which was developed through a participatory process. The strategy was drafted in 2015 and adopted in 2016. The government of Republika Srpska has also adopted a youth policy for 2023-2027, defining four strategic goals with a total of 15 priorities, 44 measures and three strategic projects (Mladibl 2023).

The Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina has developed a draft youth strategy for 2021-2025 in co-operation with the Brčko District Youth Council, which was formed in 2018, and the Brčko District Department of Professional and Administrative Affairs ([Radio Brčko](#) 2022). The document is currently under consideration by the Brčko District authorities.

The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republika Srpska and the Brčko District have adopted legislation on volunteering. In this regard, the Brčko District was the first to pass the [Law on Volunteering](#) (2010). This law establishes an obligation to the district government to promote volunteering as an activity of public interest which contributes towards active participation of citizens, youth in particular, in resolving "societal and other social issues" (Article 3). The [Law on Volunteering of the](#)

[Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) (Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2012), in addition to local volunteering, also defines international volunteering (Article 3), further stating that the “role and importance of volunteering is conveyed through formal and non-formal education” (Article 12). Similarly, the [Law on Volunteering of Republika Srpska](#) (2014) stipulates that the “role and importance of volunteering is transferred to children and youth by formal and informal education” (Article 28). It further establishes a responsibility of the Ministry of Family, Youth and Sport to fund and support the development of volunteering (Article 27), giving it a type of supervisory role regarding volunteering activities (Article 24).

These three laws allow young people above the age of 15 to become volunteers, establishing a further mechanism for the protection of their rights. Certainly, such developments are positive, especially if one considers that the establishment of a legal framework for volunteering activities had been long awaited in a country where volunteering activities have gained increased significance in recent years. However, criticism has been expressed on the scope and applicability of the laws. Currently, there are no national or regional authorities responsible for youth volunteering (YouthWiki n.d.a), while most volunteering activities are administered by civil society organisations. This leaves room for different practices and interpretations, while it also means that the rights of young people can be subject to the *modus operandi* of each organisation working at a civil society level. Criticism has also been expressed regarding who and under which conditions is perceived as a volunteer, meaning that the laws focus mainly on the role and rights of interns in organisations and not so much on other roles that might also fall under the wider role of being a volunteer.

Structures supporting youth work

Because of its constitutional and institutional structure, Bosnia and Herzegovina conducts youth work at the levels of the federation, the Republika Srpska and the Brčko District. At state level, the only existing body is the [Commission for Coordination of Youth Issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), which is responsible for co-ordinating all relevant groups for the promotion and protection of the role and positions of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The commission is established as part of the [Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) and consists of **nine members**: four members from the government institutions – one from each of the two entities, two from the Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and five representatives from the youth NGO sector. (Pašić 2019: 166). It should be noted that the ministry does not have executive authority when it comes to youth and can only provide unbinding recommendations to the entities.

At entity level, the competent governmental institutions in the field of youth are the [Federal Ministry of Culture and Sports](#) and the [Ministry of Family, Youth and Sports of Republika Srpska](#). A youth expert interviewed for this study mentioned that, in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is an overlap of competences between the Ministry of Culture and Sports at federal level and the Ministry of Education at cantonal level. Youth activists from both the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska who were interviewed raised concerns about the partisanship of these institutions, which affects the quality of their work. As a youth worker characteristically said, this situation often results in only formal implementation of

the adopted laws and strategies and low priority being given to youth and youth work. Based on the interviews conducted, youth workers in the region have similar experiences.

Even though the countries of former Yugoslavia have a rich history of youth work (Pašić 2019: 159), since the 1990s youth work in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been primarily conducted by youth civil society organisations with the support of international donors. In a similar way as in Kosovo* and North Macedonia, youth work in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a post-conflict country, has been part of the general process of reconciliation and peacebuilding. For example, the first offices of the then PRONI Institute for Social Education, now called [PRONI Center for Youth Development](#), were opened at the places of demarcation between the major communities which had been heavily affected by the conflict. In this direction, of particular importance are youth umbrella associations which promote and lobby for the improvement of standards of youth work, as well as the status of youth workers in the country. What is particularly noteworthy with regards to the [PRONI Centre for Youth Development](#) is its role in establishing commonly agreed on quality assurance mechanisms in youth work. The centre has managed to sign relevant agreements with ten municipalities and cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the local communities of which (Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Mostar, Bihac, Cazin, Prijedor, Boanski Petrovac, Bijeljina, Trebinje and BD BiH) have accepted to adopt PRONI's proposed quality assurance mechanisms as their quality assurance standards (YouthWiki 23.11.2023).

Another structure that is worth referring to is the [Institute for Youth Development KULT \(Institut za razvoj mladih KULT\)](#), which was founded in 2002 and has implemented numerous activities focusing on non-formal education and youth information. The institute also gained experience in drafting legal documents and regulations. It initiated the adoption of the youth laws by both the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Brčko District. In co-operation with other youth organisations and the Federal Commission for Youth Issues, the institute drafted the Law on Volunteering of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and submitted it to the parliament, where it was ultimately adopted.

In Republika Srpska, the Network of Youth Centres for Animation, Development and Training ([Mreza Omladinskih Centara Za Animaciju, Razvoj i Trening \(M.O.C.A.R.T.\)](#)) supports establishing new youth centres, raises the capacities of the existing ones, and promotes youth work in general. The Institute Perpetuum Mobile ([Perpetuum mobile - Institut](#)) – the executive body of the network – also organises the annual [conference on youth work](#), which aims to raise awareness of the importance of youth work and creates a platform for sharing experiences and practices between youth centres and youth organisations.

Overall, the activities of these organisations have expanded in scope, filling the vacuum created by the collapse of the institutions during the war. Youth organisations have become the most important providers of youth work in the country (Kovačić and Pašić 2018: 16). As such, youth work in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been constantly evolving, adjusting to the needs of the young people. However, conflict prevention has been and remains its overarching goal.

Educational opportunities for youth workers

Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of the first countries in South-East Europe to establish formal educational opportunities for youth workers. Namely, the PRONI Centre for Youth Development, in co-operation with [Jönköping University](#) in Sweden, organised university-level courses for youth work. These courses were accredited by Jönköping University and trained the first cohort of professional youth workers not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the wider region as well.

However, since this programme ended in 2007, there has been a gap in youth work education, filled by the youth civil society sector. Specifically, several youth organisations, both in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Republika Srpska, have created year-long modular courses on youth work. For instance, the Institute for Youth Development -mentioned above- is implementing [training courses and certification](#) for youth officers engaged in youth work within city, municipal and cantonal authorities. Each organisation providing such modular courses has its own ethical codex on youth work, but none of these has been established at a state or entity level.

Recognition and validation of youth work

Of the three youth laws above, only the Youth Law of Brčko District (2017) incorporates a definition of a “youth worker” (Article 2). At the level of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the established legal term for “youth worker” is an “expert-associate in working with youth” (in the original Bosnian: *stručni saradnik za rad sa mladima*) and it is an officially recognised profession enlisted in the Classification of Professions of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina ([Klasifikacija Zanimanja U FBiH](#) (Federal Agency for Statistics/ Federalni zavod za statistiku 2016)).

However, this is not the case at the level of Republika Srpska, where there is no equivalent. According to youth workers from this entity, this is linked to the low prioritisation of youth work on the policy agenda. Moreover, neither Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country nor its constituent entities have established mechanisms for validating previously acquired experience in the field of youth work.

Youth work funding

Similarly to the rest of the Western Balkans, the youth sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina struggles to secure funding. Below are some concrete examples from different regions in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

According to figures in the [YouthWiki](#) (n.d.a), from its 2022 budget for various projects, planned at 2 311 500 Bosnian convertible marks (BAM) (approximately €1.1 million), the government of Republika Srpska allocated €100 000 for youth policy. Youth organisations in Republika Srpska are funded through open calls for youth projects, as foreseen by the Republika Srpska Youth Policy, which is being administered by the Republika Srpska Ministry of Family, Youth and Sports. The ministry assesses project proposals in accordance with the “Regulation on conditions and criteria for funding programmes and projects for the improvement of the position of young people and the improvement and development of youth organising”. Project calls

are published in the press but also on the ministry's official website, to secure that the information is open and accessible by everyone interested.

The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Budget for 2022 (Federal Ministry of Finance 2022) foresaw a fund allocated to youth called the "transfer for youth", to be administered by the Ministry of Culture and Sport. The amount planned under this fund to support youth organisations in implementing youth projects, was €204 000.

Youth practitioners interviewed for this study agreed that the amount provided for youth in different regions is insufficient. So, organisations feel the need to compete with each other for funding, but also to search for funding opportunities from international donors. The main supporters of youth work in the country are the European Union through its Erasmus+ Programme, the Council of Europe, through the European Youth Foundation, as well as the RYCO and other international organisations (institutes, foundations, governments, etc.). As a result, the youth sector struggles to ensure sustainability while most of the youth civil society organisations are donor driven. The legislation does not require local authorities to secure funding for youth centres and youth work in general. However, some municipalities have separate budget lines for local youth centres and secure their funding, but examples of this practice remain rare. In most cases, funding for local youth councils and youth work in general is provided by projects conducted by councils themselves, youth civil society organisations or the large youth umbrella associations.



Examples of practice

The [Institute for Youth Development \(Institut za razvoj mladih KULT\)](#) is one of the most prominent organisations working on youth issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The institute implements the [UMiD – Learn, Think, Act! - Institut za razvoj mladih KULT](#) as an officially recognised form of non-formal education that provides young people with an opportunity to acquire different competences that will make them competitive on the labour market and become active citizens. The year-long programme consists of training sessions, practical exercises and volunteering. UMiD (which stands for “uči, misli, djeluje!”, that is, “learn, think, act!”) is intended for youth under 30 years of age. As a part of this initiative, participants are focused on one of the following areas: active engagement of youth in the community, development of leadership and supporting community development. The UMiD programme has been implemented for over 17 years and, so far, it has included over 400 participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many of them are now decision makers, entrepreneurs, civil society activists and staff members of international organisations.

The [PRONI Center for Youth Development](#) is a non-governmental youth organisation established in 1998. It focuses on promoting peace and active citizenship. The organisation is active at both national and local levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the youth centre of Brčko District. One of the centre’s flagship projects is the PRONI Academy of Youth Work (PAOR), which continues until today. The project aims at training and empowering youth workers in their early steps, while emphasis is given on cultivating skills and attitudes promoting peacebuilding and dialogue.

[Zdravo da ste](#) (“Hi neighbour”) is a youth centre in Banja Luka. It runs the Open Youth Club, where young people can meet every day with their peers and the centre employees. It aims to support the development and social integration of children and young people, especially youth with special needs and those from vulnerable groups. Young people can get involved in different types of activities, including tournaments, excursions, camps, seminars, training courses and other types of events.

Legal framework of youth work

The legal framework of youth work in Bulgaria was established by the [Youth Law](#) (Government of the Republic of Bulgaria 2012). It defines youth work as “an organised activity or initiative which aims to present, protect and develop the interests and needs of the young people” (Article 17). It also includes provisions for creating a national youth policy, as well as for youth organisations, youth workers, youth volunteering, and for setting up a national youth information system. However, according to Bulgarian youth practitioners interviewed for this study, the law is imprecise and inconsistent, leaving space for different interpretations and applications.

The definition in the law creates more problems and raises more questions rather than it helps structuring the framework of youth work.

(Youth worker, Bulgaria)

As a result, youth organisations in the country have often proposed different definitions of youth work. They rely on the recommendations adopted by the Council of Europe, especially when it comes to the standard of youth work and youth workers’ skills and competences. In November 2021, the Ministry of Youth and Sport established a National Working Group for Youth Work mandated – among others – to provide a more concise definition of youth work in the country and conceptualise quality standards on youth work at a national level. Evidence shows that this group has been making slow – but steady – progress. According to updated information shared on YouthWiki Bulgaria (n.d.b):

The tasks set by the national working group for 2023 are to put the definition of youth work in the Youth Act, to finalise the mapping of youth work at national level, to set up an inter-university working group for designing an inter-university master’s programme and to finalise the code of ethics for youth work, to create a mechanism for its implementation and to establish a system for monitoring and assessment of the impact of the code of ethics and its relevant implementation mechanisms.

Bulgaria has a [National Youth Strategy for 2021-2030](#) (Government of Bulgaria 2021a), which was eventually adopted after some political turbulence which had temporarily halted the process. Among the strategic objectives of the National Youth Strategy 2021-2030 is the development and recognition of youth work at a national level through the establishment of relevant mechanisms and the promotion of innovative approaches.

Even though the Youth Law includes a relatively small section on youth volunteering (Section VI, Articles 25-43), Bulgaria has not adopted a separate law on volunteering. Somewhat surprisingly, despite long-standing lobbying by youth civil society organisations (European Center for Not-for-profit Law 2006), the ongoing debate in the country is whether adopting a law on volunteering is necessary at all.

Some stakeholders, predominately workers’ unions, have expressed concern that if an inadequate law is adopted, it might in practice be used to replace the full-time workers with volunteers. The issue was discussed in few instances in the Parliament, but none of the proposed versions were approved. Therefore,

the process of drafting and adopting a law on volunteering needs to be inclusive and be a result of an extensive negotiation process that would include all stakeholders in the Bulgarian society.

(Youth worker, Bulgaria)

Structures supporting youth work

The [Ministry of Youth and Sports](#) of the Republic of Bulgaria is responsible for the implementation of youth policy in the country. At a regional level, this is done by the district governors (Youth Law, Article 13). The district governors prepare the municipal youth plans for the relevant district and submit them for approval to the Ministry of Youth and Sport (Article 14). These plans “set the objectives and priorities of the regional youth policy in accordance with the National Youth Strategy” (Article 13). However, the effectiveness of these plans was questioned by some of the local youth workers interviewed for this study. As one of the respondents explained, “despite the provisions stipulated in the Youth Law, the district governors are *de facto* powerless in shaping youth policy and, by that effect, in supporting youth work in general”.

Finally, the mayors conduct the youth policy at municipal level. They prepare the municipal youth plans, which are adopted by the municipal councils (Article 16). The Youth Law allows the creation of municipal consultative councils dealing with youth issues (Article 15), but this is not a binding requirement. Rather, it is left entirely to the discretion of the local municipalities. Moreover, the law itself does not include provisions on the structure of these councils and their *modi operandi*. Evidence shows that not all municipalities see youth policy as being worth supporting from a strategic perspective and, as a result, only a few municipal consultative councils exist.

One part of the structure where youth work is conducted in the municipalities are the Centres for Professional and Personal Development, popularly known as “youth houses” (in Bulgarian: младежки дом). These “youth houses” were established during the communist period and continued operating after the political system changed. They offer more traditional extracurricular activities aimed at primary and secondary school students (such as drawing lessons, languages courses, etc.). While the premises themselves are municipal, their work is supported by the [Ministry of Education and Science](#). Additionally, some municipalities have had the opportunity to establish youth centres that conduct youth work in a more contemporary sense of the word. There are currently eight youth centres of this type across Bulgaria. Their development was part of a larger project implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science which was funded by the [European Economic Area Programme and the Norway Grants 2014-2021](#).

At this point, it should be noted that both the desk research⁴ and the in-depth interviews with youth workers and youth experts in Bulgaria showed that the Ministry of Education and Science is doing more to support youth work than the Ministry of Youth and Sport, which focuses predominately on grant programmes.

4. Recommendations within the Quality Label programme, following the expert team’s visit to Bulgaria (June 2022), whereby the Ministry of Youth was encouraged “to establish a constructive dialogue with youth centres and the Ministry of Education in relation to the development of quality criteria in youth work, development of youth policy, renewal of youth strategy and other topics relevant to the agenda of both institutions”.

There was, however, a previous project implemented by the Ministry of Youth and Sport under which a nationwide network of so-called “youth centres for information and consultation” was established. However, these centres were unsustainable and were closed after the project funding ended. Finally, youth work in the country has been supported significantly by Bulgaria’s participation in the [Quality Label for Youth Centres](#), a flagship programme of the Council of Europe. Bulgaria exceptionally has two youth centres that participate in the programme, in Plovdiv and Stara Zagora, respectively. The Council of Europe has been supporting these youth centres with expert input in relation to the conceptual and practical development of youth policy and youth work, and specific advice on the development of the infrastructural, managerial, administrative and educational qualities of their work, while it is expected from the centres to act as multipliers and work closely with the respective ministries and municipalities to shape and promote policies for youth.

Educational opportunities for youth workers

As noted above, the Youth Law (2012) is imprecise regarding the skills necessary for youth workers. Namely, it only states that a youth worker is “an adult person who has passed special training for work with young people and/or who has acquired professional experience to work with young people and to implement youth activities” (Article 32). Neither the Youth Law nor other acts describe what the “special training” or the “acquired professional experience” actually entail.

However, unlike most countries in South-East Europe, three leading Bulgarian higher education institutions do provide educational opportunities for youth workers. Namely, Sofia University Saint Clement of Ohrid, the oldest and biggest university in the country, offers a bachelor’s degree programme in non-formal education. At graduate level, the University of Veliko Tarnovo has established a master’s degree programme focusing on social and pedagogical work with youth. The National Sport Academy Vasil Levski offers [a master’s degree programme in youth activities and sport](#).

Additionally, youth workers in Bulgaria attend training organised by international organisations, especially the Council of Europe. Youth civil society organisations provide training in youth work mainly through Erasmus+ projects. As a youth worker from Bulgaria confirmed, there are also youth organisations that develop their own, tailored programmes in youth work, but they mainly consist of short-term training courses.

Recognition and validation of youth work

Bulgaria does not have a formally established system of youth work recognition and validation. Although the term “youth worker” exists in the national classification of professions, there is no definition as to the education, skills and experience required. Youth civil society organisations are actively lobbying for standards to be established in this area, and there has been an ongoing debate on this issue in the national youth sector for several years already (according to a youth worker in Bulgaria interviewed for this study). As a result, it is left at the discretion either of the municipality where a particular youth centre is located and/or the NGO running the youth centre, whether and to what extent they would recognise and validate youth workers’ experience and professional background.



Youth work funding

The main provider of public funding for youth work activities is the [Ministry of Youth and Sports](#) through the [National Youth Programme \(2021-2025\)](#) (Government of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021b), which is now aligned with the objectives of the [National Youth Strategy 2021-2030](#) (Government of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021a). In this context, the programme is oriented towards supporting activities promoting the potential of young people, boosting entrepreneurial skills and improving quality of life. In previous years, youth-oriented funding had been used primarily for sports-related activities. Although sports remain a high priority in the national agenda for youth and are strongly associated with youth work in the country, evidence shows that Bulgaria is taking stock of lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic and is showing willingness to invest more than before in the socio-economic capacity of youth.

According to the interview with local youth practitioners, national funding for youth work activities is insufficient and often unsustainable. As a result, organisations rely heavily on external funding, but also on having parallel income from entrepreneurial activities (such as leasing conference spaces, providing seminars with a small fee, etc.).

The [Erasmus+ Programme](#) and the [European Social Fund](#) are important sources of funding for Bulgarian youth work organisations. Additionally, the [European Economic Area Programme and the Norway Grants 2014-2021](#) in Bulgaria have provided support to the municipalities for opening eight youth centres across the country, as well as for other youth-related projects. It should be clarified, however, that applying for these types of large grants requires human resources with significant expertise, something that some youth organisations, especially smaller ones and those located in rural areas, do not have. The situation has become even more difficult since the Covid-19 pandemic because many youth organisations had to reduce their staff while, at the same time, they needed to procure the technical equipment necessary to implement online activities.

Examples of practice

The [International Youth Center in Stara Zagora](#) is the first Bulgarian youth centre to be certified with the quality label for youth work by the Council of Europe. The story of the building itself is very much interconnected with the socio-political status of contemporary Bulgaria. Having been a movie theatre during the communist times, the building was rebuilt and transformed into a space for the young people of the area. The centre started out as a shelter for children and young people at risk, but after the award of the quality label, it acquired a more international character and is now known as “the International Youth Centre of Stara Zagora”. Working with vulnerable youth is still at the core of the centre’s activities. To approach vulnerable youth groups, the centre engages in outreach activities and awareness-raising campaigns and maintains stable co-operation with schools and local authorities.

Ever since receiving the quality label, the centre has been focused on developing its staff’s competences in non-formal learning and human rights education with young people; expanding its youth work practice; practicing residential youth work inside its facilities, which have been reshaped to match this purpose; and adopting a more extrovert character by establishing international partnerships. All these factors have undoubtedly contributed to the overall development and consolidation of youth work, youth policy and youth participation in the Bulgarian context. It is worth mentioning that the local municipality has been very supportive of the youth centre.

Following the establishment of community priorities in the youth sector, the youth centre team initiated a municipal Youth Development Strategy for the period 2021-2027. Representatives of local youth organisations, scholars and experts from Stara Zagora Municipality took part in the development of the document. The Youth Development Strategy reflects the priorities of the national and European youth development policies enshrined in the European Youth Strategy, the Charter for Participation of Young People in the Life of Municipalities and Regions, the National Youth Strategy and the National Youth Programme of Bulgaria.

The [Plovdiv Youth Centre](#) was awarded the quality label of the Council of Europe in 2018. This development gave an important boost to the centre’s activity, visibility, connectivity and international co-operation. At the same time, the guidance provided by means of the quality label programme led to very positive results in terms of development and enhancement of the existing space, quality of services, outreach to young people, and capacity building and training of educational staff. The work of the centre is now significantly more varied than before the quality label was awarded.

During the pandemic and despite the associated challenges, the Plovdiv Youth Centre co-operated with three more youth centres to develop a manual on digital literacy and conduct an open consultation process together with the Municipality and the Ministry of Education to develop improved standards for youth centres. Moreover, the local team in the centre has designed an annual programme of activities in line with the ten-year Municipal Youth Strategy, ensuring the active involvement of young people in the design process.

Legal framework of youth work

In Croatia, youth work as a term still has not gained recognition and it is most often referred to as “working with young people” (*rad s mladima*). The concept of youth work is only fully understood and applied by a small number of youth experts and civil society professionals. The Central State Office for Demography and Youth is the main body responsible for youth policy in Croatia, although it also falls within domains of other ministries, such as the Ministry of Science and Education and the Ministry of Labour and Pension System, Family and Social Policy. The National Programme for Youth 2023-2025 (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2023) was adopted in June 2023, five years after the previous version of the programme, the National Programme for Youth 2014-2017 (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2014), had expired. Relevant to youth work is the Act on Volunteering (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2021) that prescribes basic principles of volunteering, mechanisms for engaging in volunteer activities and tools for the recognition of competences gained through volunteering. The other key document defining youth policy in Croatia is the Law on Youth Advisory Boards (Central State Office for Demography and Youth 2014), which conceptualises the basic aspects of local youth policy. Concerning the strategic orientation set up by public institutions, the guiding principles of the European Commission and of the Council of Europe are being followed at a very general level, but there are some important missing links (i.e. national priorities of the Bonn Process). The youth civil sector is openly addressing missing or inadequate elements in the national youth policy and its implementation:

Composition of the newly elected members of this committee [Advisory Board for Youth of the Government of the Republic of Croatia] does not reflect competences of the youth experts working with young people, and it is the first time in nearly three decades the youth researchers are not represented in this committee.

(Youth expert, Zagreb, Croatia)

Cross-sectoral co-operation in the youth field in Croatia is only partially accomplished, with some crucial processes diverted from genuine inclusion of youth NGOs in policy making. One such example is exclusion of the Croatian Youth Network (an umbrella organisation of youth NGOs in Croatia) from the committee for drafting the new National Programme for Youth. By omitting this umbrella association from the expert committee, the institutional memory of the youth sector is lost to a significant extent, which weakens the outcomes of the process. Therefore, potential gaps between youth policies at a normative level and their practical implementation were one of the key questions employed during the interviews conducted for this study. At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic has increased societal expectations of young people; everyone talks about young people having to provide support to older members of family and society. Yet, young people are not provided equal support and they are left out of decision making, which inevitably leads to disappointment and vanishing motivation to take part in meaningful change in the youth sector (Baketa et al. 2021).

Structures supporting youth work

The most important institution in Croatia for devising and implementing the youth work policy is the Central State Office for Demography and Youth [Središnji državni ured za demografiju i mlade]. According to the Regulation on Government Office for Co-operation with NGOs (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2012), the task of the Governmental Office for Co-operation with NGOs is to co-ordinate the work of ministries, central state offices, Croatian government offices and state administrative organisations, as well as administrative bodies at a local level in connection with monitoring and improving co-operation with the non-governmental, non-profit sector in the Republic of Croatia. The Advisory Board for Youth of the Government of the Republic of Croatia [Savjet za mlade Vlade RH] holds a role of monitoring and analysing public policies directed at young people, proposes the new acts and amends the existing legislation in the field of youth policy. Youth work is not listed as one of this body's jurisdictions.

The Ministry of Labour and Pension System, Family and Social Policy performs administrative and other tasks related to employment policy, labour relations and approval of the standard of qualifications. However, this ministry considers youth work as a part of social work and there is limited support for adopting the standards of youth worker qualification. According to one of the interviewees, the Ministry of Science and Education takes part "ex officio, but does not exhibit any initiative regarding the youth work". Support to youth work and youth workers is also provided by the research and educational sector, namely by the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb and the University of Rijeka, which provide expert and research support to youth civil society organisations and are jointly organising formal channels for youth workers' education – a programme of lifelong learning called "Youth in contemporary society".

Developments on the local level, as a domain of life that is directly relevant to the young people, is by and large influenced by the processes and frameworks devised at the national level. Local self-governments are open to partnership with the civic sector, but they are often restrained by financial limitations and a lack of national legal framework. Local youth councils [općinski i gradski savjeti mladih] are established as advisory bodies of local and regional self-government units. Their task is to promote and advocate for the rights, needs and interests of young people at their local and regional levels. The Law on Youth Advisory Boards, which defines the establishment and areas of work of the local youth councils, directly refers to youth work as an area of the local youth councils' activities, although it does not define youth work, actors in youth work or conditions for its performance. However, some interviewees from Croatia expressed their concerns regarding political influence in selection of local youth council members and therefore councils' functioning.

The Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes, the second most important institution highlighted by the interviewees as a structure supporting youth work, is responsible for implementing and promoting EU programmes and other international programmes in the field of science, education, training and youth. The agency has made significant steps towards recognition and a better position for youth work in Croatia, but its role and mandate are limited. The agency is not a policy maker and, as such, cannot bring forth normative policy acts. Its role mainly extends to managing

the grants and putting some topics on the agenda. One such example is the [Europe Goes Local project](#), where the agency launched a structured public debate on local youth work and youth work professionalisation.

Other youth organisations and networks of NGOs (namely the [Croatian Youth Network](#) and Mladforma [[Mladforma – neformalna inicijativa mladih](#)]) are also reliable stakeholders in the civic scene, but this type of partnership has its own limitations due to financial scarcity. In the last decade, schools, especially secondary or high schools, have opened up to partnerships with youth NGOs, mainly in organising extracurricular activities and implementing programmes of civic education.

Challenges faced by actors in the youth field in Croatia include difficulties to clarify the meaning of youth work to the actors outside the existing institutional structures and the NGO scene. Some youth workers are not completely aware of the ongoing processes in youth work in Croatia and they do not identify themselves as youth workers (e.g. people working with youth in sports, in churches, scouts, and teachers included in extracurricular activities). At the level of society in general, motivating young people for volunteering is still not recognised as a worthwhile goal that requires structured support, not to mention youth work.

State institutions nominally support youth work, but there is no quality support. They don't have a clear developmental perspective of the youth, especially not the long-term one. Two prominent examples relate to the rural youth and local youth councils as priorities. Although they are stated as priorities, there are no new policy or legal acts that would provide support to the rural youth or local youth councils. (Youth worker, Rijeka, Croatia)

Educational opportunities for youth workers

The Croatian Youth Network manages a programme of non-formal education, [Study on Youth for Youth](#), which offers an omnibus of workshops and seminars for youth workers. At a formal level, education for youth workers is available through the [Youth in Contemporary Society](#) programme of lifelong learning that is jointly managed by the University of Rijeka, the [University of Ljubljana](#) (Slovenia) and the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb. This programme is delivered in a hybrid manner, with onsite lectures and workshops held at the premises of the University of Rijeka. The Youth in Contemporary Society programme consists of three modules covering the most important issues in the youth field: i. youth research; ii. youth work; and iii. youth and community development. The first cohort of youth workers enrolled in the academic year 2017/18 and the second cohort enrolled during the Covid-19 pandemic – 2020/21. This programme is one of the milestones of the supporting evidence-based education of youth workers, which aims to set up and improve the architecture of youth work in Croatia and Slovenia.

Recognition and validation of youth work

The [Croatian Qualifications Framework](#) (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2013) defines non-formal and informal learning and envisions the development of a system of recognition and evaluation of non-formal and informal learning. Article 15 of the relevant Act states that "[...] procedure, recognition and validation

of previously acquired learning shall be stipulated by an ordinance on recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning". The [Agency for Science and Higher Education](#) has published guidelines and procedures for recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning [[Smjernice i postupci za priznavanje neformalnog i informalnog učenja](#)] (Balković and Dželalija 2015), which describe the procedure for recognition. However, the ordinance on recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning has not yet been adopted. Recognition of prior learning experiences is also one of the basic prerequisites for establishing a master's study programme on youth work in Croatia, which is one of the aims following the introduction of the programme of lifelong learning for youth workers. Youth work is still not considered a profession in Croatia; this is reflected in inadequate working conditions and widespread precarity among civil society organisations working with young people in the country.

Majority of the decision makers and majority of youth do not acknowledge youth work as a distinctive practice and they don't even recognise the basic elements of the youth workers' profession. There is no wide recognition of the importance of the National Programme for Youth and associated strategies and there are no action plans. Even if there are local youth action plans developed, they are not implemented as there is no reliable support and funding.

(Youth expert, Zagreb, Croatia)

The institutions are reluctant to establish a quality-control process for the professionalisation of youth work; currently, the Croatian framework for youth work only formalises the existing conditions. Actors from public institutions claim only nominal acceptance of the importance of professionalisation of youth work. Still, youth experts vocalise their hope for constructive changes:

I cannot help to ask myself is there a point to professionalise youth work as currently there is only one public call for funding the youth associations and associations for youth. Still, there have been some changes since the Central State Office for Demography and Youth has been established and impact of the Council of Europe and the European Commission has gained importance.

(Youth expert Croatia)

An additional step that could help with the recognition and professionalisation of youth work in Croatia would be the development of ethical standards of youth work, which is one of the aims of the [Art of Ethics in Youth Work project](#). The project is jointly implemented by Austria, Croatia, Finland and Serbia.

Youth work funding

Youth NGOs' activities are still mainly funded through project work, which causes fatigue and dissatisfaction of youth workers. Funds available from national and local governments are very modest and do not prioritise young people and youth-related activities. At the national level, grants are available through the schemes provided by the Central State Office for Demography and Youth, the Ministry of Science and Education and the [National Foundation for Civil Society Development](#). Among them,

only the Central State Office offers grants aimed directly at youth, while the other two funders support the entire spectrum of civil society interest groups.

Croatia has an abundance of funds available for youth work from the European and international levels, primarily through the [Erasmus+ programmes](#) and the [European Social Fund](#), but obtaining grants is time consuming and depletes the already modest human resources of youth associations. Consequentially, fluctuation in the youth sector is rather high and the sector is deeply affected by turnover of human resources. Many youth workers are volunteers, and those who are employed must simultaneously perform various roles due to a paucity of financial resources (the roles of youth workers, administrators, accountants, project managers, etc.). The youth sector is eclectic and it is hard for newcomers to grasp all the elements and processes in the sector. Funding for youth worker education is very scarce and there is no regular support in this regard at the national or local level.

The public calls' primary aim is not to develop mechanisms of support to the youth workers and to help in development of the youth workers' skills. They are mostly aiming at covering a share of the youth workers' salary and costs of the utilities.

(Youth worker, Zagreb, Croatia)

The majority of youth work in Croatia relies on the vision and enthusiasm of the youth workers and youth leaders, the NGO scene is very vivid and there are European Union funds available.

The needs of the youth civic sector are rarely recognised and respected, e.g. the 2021 public call for funding the non-governmental organisations offered in total €1.3 million for a wide range of topics: the violence and drug prevention campaigns, reconstruction after earthquakes and rural development. Topics of tackling discrimination (especially discrimination against LGBTIQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer, Asexual)) people and members of the minorities) have remained out of focus.

(Youth expert, Zagreb, Croatia)

Youth associations at the local level, especially in smaller municipalities in rural areas, are faced with hardships in obtaining financial means to implement their activities. Many municipalities do not have grants dedicated to young people. Usually, only smaller amounts are available, and because of the Covid-19 pandemic, many calls have been significantly downsized.

For the last couple of years policy makers have put rural youth and local youth work in the focus but only at a declarative level. Youth organisations from smaller municipalities, who in reality present majority of youth NGOs in Croatia, are still those who have major struggles in providing financial means for their activities. Their projects are often reduced to organising extracurricular activities in smaller municipalities whose school facilities do not allow for a wide range of opportunities for youth leisure time.

(Youth worker, Osijek, Croatia)

Examples of practice

Croatian interviewees pointed to five examples of youth work that resulted in beneficial changes at the local level.

Association ZUM, in partnership with Volunteer Centre Istria [Volonterski centar Istra], organises the Young Volunteers' Clubby giving support to young volunteers for creating and implementing their activities for the local community, especially for other young people.

Youth Association P-4 [Varaždin Underground Club] is one of the oldest youth associations in North-West Croatia, which deals with the development of programmes and festivals focused on youth, international co-operation and independent culture. Its added value lies in enabling young people interested in culture outside of the mainstream to engage actively and to find a safe space for self-expression, leisure time and personal development.

The city of Pregrada [Grad Pregrada] has designed the first participatory budget for young people in the local community. The aim of the project is to encourage the active participation of young people in decision-making processes in the local community and to strengthen the dialogue between young people and decision makers. The project implements educational activities, budget analysis from the perspective of young people, implementation of participatory budgeting, and information.

Association Carpe Diem [Organizacija Carpe Diem] in Karlovac has established the Youth Centre Grabrik [Centar za mlade Grabrik], the first Croatian youth centre based on the principle of co-management. The work of the youth centre is based on co-operation with other associations, providers of relevant services, public institutions, experts in various areas, and the involvement of volunteers.

The Municipality of Medulin [Općina Medulin] initiated and completed adoption of the Local Youth Programme [Lokalni program djelovanja za mlade Općine Medulin] that was co-created by local administration, young people and local youth organisations. The process has successfully given voice to youth issues and aspirations, and the most active young people gained wide recognition from the local and regional community. Their successful participation in creation of the Local Youth Programme resulted in their victory at the latest local political elections.

Legal framework of youth work

Youth participation and youth policy in Greece are defined within the Strategic Plan for Vocational Education Training, Lifelong Learning and Youth 2022-2024 (Στρατηγικό Σχέδιο Επαγγελματικής Εκπαίδευσης, Κατάρτισης, Διά Βίου Μάθησης και Νεολαίας 2022-2024), issued by the Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs⁵ in January 2022. The strategic plan conceptualises issues of national youth policy, such as designated areas of activity and governmental initiatives, focusing exclusively on interests and challenges corresponding to young people aged 15 to 29.

This document has built upon the Youth '17-'27: strategic framework for the empowerment of youth (Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs 2018), which is a road map identifying youth-related national standards and priorities as well as mechanisms through which these could be achieved or perserved. The body responsible for management and implementation of actions foreseen within the Youth '17-'27 Strategy is the General Secretariat for Youth and Lifelong Learning.

In Greece, there is no ministry dedicated exclusively to youth. The main governmental institution managing youth-related issues is the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports (Υπουργείο Παιδείας, Θρησκευμάτων κι Αθλητισμού).⁶ The ministry manages policies related to young people's professional and personal development via the Secretariat General for professional education, vocational training, lifelong learning and youth (Γενική Γραμματεία). Youth work, strongly correlated with non-formal learning, is perceived in this context as a tool used in alternative educational pathways beyond the formal educational system. It is supported by laws on vocational training and general adult education (Hellenic Gazette 17.9.2013) 2013) which define mechanisms and activities that fall under the category of adult education and training, also within the scope of activities of the Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.

Sporadic activities targeting youth – yet not necessarily via youth work – have been launched and managed by other ministries such the Ministry of Culture or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Historically speaking, youth work in Greece has been strongly correlated with volunteering. A large part of its legacy in the Greek sociocultural and political context belongs to the wider realm of voluntary activity, in the form of scouting, charitable activity, humanitarian aid, participation in political organisations, etc. (Giannaki 2014). After public pressure to regulate volunteering in Greece, especially in the field of civil society, where voluntary work is usually unregistered and unpaid, in 2021 the Greek government passed the Law on Volunteering (Government of the Republic of Greece 2021), labelled as "Protection of volunteering, strengthening the action

5. As of 27 June 2023, Greece has a newly formed Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports.

6. After the national elections in June 2023, youth issues moved from the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs to the new Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family. The ministry's portfolio consists of three pillars: demographic and housing policies, solidarity/welfare and poverty-fighting policies, and gender equality and human rights.

of civil society, tax incentives to enhance the public benefit action of civil society organisations and other provisions". The law establishes a unified framework for the operation of civil society organisations and obliges civil society organisations to register their volunteers in an official platform (called "Ergani"), to provide them (under certain circumstances) with social security or medical insurance and to cover accommodation, food or travel expenses that are related to the voluntary activity.

The Law on Youth Councils (Government of the Republic of Greece 2006a) foresees the establishment of [local youth councils](#) and municipal youth councils. The role of local youth councils is to raise awareness of the needs of young people at a local level, engage in various initiatives promoting the autonomy of young people and advocate for the active participation of youth in the local community. To meet these objectives, local youth councils count on creating networks with their counterparts at national and European levels.

Structures supporting youth work

The main institution managing issues connected with youth and non-formal learning is the Youth and Lifelong Learning Foundation (INEDIVIM), which is the national agency in Greece for the implementation of the Erasmus+ Youth Programme.

INEDIVIM originates from the National Youth Foundation, founded in 1947, and came about from the merging of the Institute for Continuing Adult Education and the Institute for Youth. INEDIVIM's mission is to implement lifelong learning programmes/projects; launch youth programmes/projects, emphasising youth innovation, mobility, transitions and career growth; and manage all issues regarding student care services, catering and accommodation facilities (educational welfare). INEDIVIM also supports activities within the Erasmus+ programme, often in co-operation with the [State Scholarships Foundation](#).

The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs is the national authority tasked with delivering the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes, and the two agencies are responsible for the implementation of the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps (for INEDIVIM) and Erasmus+ for education (for the State Scholarships Foundation). Both agencies act as national agencies of the European Commission

The [Hellenic National Youth Council](#) is the official body representing Greek youth in Greece and abroad. It was established in 1998 and consists of 59 youth organisations (six political youth organisations and many non-governmental youth organisations). Youth policy and youth work are also supported at a local and national level by the Community Enterprises, operating in different municipalities as foreseen by the 3463/2006 Law on Municipalities and Communities ([NOMOS 3463/2006](#)).

In Greece, there are various public and private entities supporting youth. However, organisations that plan to organise a residential non-formal youth activity, such as a youth exchange or an international training course, have limited choices. In rural areas, large youth activities are usually organised in the premises of municipal schools, cultural centres or camps. A significant development, which is expected to open the door to more investments of its kind, is the plan to establish in the city of Florina the first youth centre in Greece based on the standards of the [Quality Label](#)

for Youth Centres that have been established by the Council of Europe. This is an approved project, which has been initiated and is being implemented by Association of Active Youths of Florina.

Educational opportunities for youth workers

Given that youth work in Greece is yet to be regulated and standardised, educational opportunities directly targeting youth workers are scarce. There is, however, a plethora of educational opportunities for practitioners working with and for youth, who are registered as teachers, trainers for adults, social workers, community workers, adult trainers, researchers, etc. These opportunities are provided by entities such as INEDIVIM, but also the Europe Direct offices, local NGOs, international institutions operating in Greece, cultural foundations, universities, networks, cultural associations and other entities operating in the field of education. None of these initiatives, however, are recognised as officially accredited educational schemes for youth workers.

Currently, there are no official courses that could lead to an accredited diploma in youth work. Instead, there is a rich variety of vocational courses in subjects related to youth work, such as project design, intercultural education, youth policy, human rights education, etc. Many of these courses, which aim at facilitating the job-finding process, fall within the operations of the Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection, an independent commission established by the Hellenic Parliament, whose mission is to establish and implement selection criteria for people interested in working in the public sector. Most courses are subsidised either by the Greek state or by European Union funds. There are also paid or partly subsidised vocational courses provided by private consulting companies and private educational institutions.

INEDIVIM is among the most prominent institutions providing educational opportunities to practitioners working with and for youth. Moreover, it has engaged in action to create and sustain a national pool of trainers, consisting of experts in the field of non-formal learning and youth policy, organising a variety of training courses for its members. To be eligible to join the pool, one needs to have a formal educational background, a reason for which INEDIVIM was criticised by some of the local youth workers interviewed for this study.

Youth work in Greece does not exist as an academic branch, either. Universities based in Greece offer undergraduate or post-graduate courses that might include references to non-formal education and youth policy, yet youth work does not exist as an academic field per se. For instance, in Thessaloniki's University of Macedonia there is a master's course in European Policies on Youth, Entrepreneurship, Education and Culture, consisting of three or five academic semesters (depending on whether students enrol on a part-time or full-time basis). There is a tuition fee (€3 600), which means that the programme is available to students who can afford it, and it is offered only in the Greek language.

At the Aristotle University, there are undergraduate modules in non-formal education and informal learning under the School of Education and Pedagogics, but also under the English faculty. The departments of Sociology and Psychology also feature subjects corresponding to the wider field of knowledge that a youth worker should ideally have. Attendance is free of charge.

An interview with an employee at one of the two public universities of Thessaloniki is indicative of the fact that “youth work” as a term is relatively unknown in the realm of academia in Greece.

I have never heard of such a course. Honestly speaking, I do not really know what youth work is, although I deal with young people every day. We have similar courses in other departments, but not exactly this. Before your contacting me, I had not heard of this term, either. I understand, however, what you mean and I think there would be a value on educating young students on this.

(Administrative staff at university, Thessaloniki)

To bridge the gap in academia, important educational opportunities are provided by different institutes and foundations within the wider spectrum of civil society. The Bodossakis Foundation has launched an essential initiative, the [Social Dynamo](#), which is a training academy for civil society, including youth workers, implemented in co-operation with the municipalities of Athens and Thessaloniki. The Social Dynamo is also supported by more than 200 mentors, trainers, coaches, consultants and collaborators, such as the Centre for Volunteer Managers of Greece and the Hellenic Coaching Association.

Moreover, opportunities are provided by incubators supporting the growth and development of civil society organisations. Among these, there is the [Higher Incubator Giving Growth and Sustainability initiative](#) for training and support of civil society organisations, their staff and youth workers; but also [InfinityGreece](#).

Recognition and validation of youth work

The value of non-formal learning in Greece was highlighted at the outbreak of the refugee crisis in 2016 (Drosopulos 2018a). Moreover, local practitioners involved in youth work in different capacities started organising themselves and advocating for better terms regarding youth work. In 2016, a group of 50 youth workers created a [Hellenic Youth Workers Association](#) and agreed on the term, Σύμβουλος Νέων, or “youth consultant”, as the most appropriate Greek translation of the term “youth worker”. The association also contributed to important steps that were taken in the years that followed, such as the establishment of the National Working Group on Structured Dialogue, participation in the Europe Goes Local project and drafting of a new law on volunteering (Drosopulos 2018b: 63). Today, the [Hellenic Youth Workers Association](#) continues its efforts on the recognition and validation of youth work, while it is also the national contact for the Bonn Process, a joint effort to implement the European Agenda for work with/for the youth.

An official, but not legally binding, framework for recognition and validation of youth work in Greece had been provided in the ‘17-’27 Strategy for Youth, which, in its Article 1, paragraph 1.3, commits to

supporting the profession and work of youth workers through targeted initiatives such as creating an integrated institutional framework for the profession of youth worker in Greece (e.g. recognition and certification), ensuring appropriate education and training for youth workers, etc.

The current strategic plan has built upon the previous strategy. Yet, possibly responding to current needs and challenges, it is oriented more towards setting mechanisms and preconditions that will facilitate young people's autonomy, by building bridges between education and the labour market.

Over the years, Greek youth workers have been facing various adversities, such as limited opportunities for employment, lack of adequate infrastructure to practice youth work, absence of a concrete legal and professional framework, and lack of social recognition and acknowledgement. The Covid-19 pandemic brought about new challenges, impacting the priorities of the youth sector, putting the topic of recognition on hold. What is expected of Greece now is to proceed with the reforms and actions required to implement the pledges taken within the national youth strategy.

I believe that there will be crucial developments in youth work in Greece. 2020 marked the beginning of the new programming period for the EU; both the EU and the Council of Europe have put such issues (youth work and youth working) very high on the agenda. Any delays that have been observed in the last years have led to these issues being accumulated, therefore, solutions must be gradually found. I reckon that there we do not have time for any further delay.

(Government official/expert in youth policy, Thessaloniki)

In the framework of the European Year of Youth, on 15 April 2022 the General Secretariat of Vocational Education, Training, Lifelong Learning and Youth organised an online event titled "Youth work: the road to recognition". This launch event kickstarted the official efforts on mapping the road to professional recognition of youth workers in Greece.

Youth work funding

In Greece, there is no regulated funding reserved exclusively for youth work-related activities. There are, however, different funding opportunities for young people, as direct or indirect beneficiaries. The Greek government supports individuals on their path to autonomy (young entrepreneurs, young people not in education, employment or training, etc.) along with entities (community enterprises, research centres, non-profit organisations, youth-led start-ups, etc.), with funds reserved for projects with a positive impact on society. This is often made possible with European funds, managed by local ministries. The [Partnership Agreement for the Development Framework 2021-2027](#), managed by the Ministry of Development and Investments, is the main strategic framework for growth in Greece, with significant resources originating from the European structural and investment funds of the European Commission. The partnership agreement was launched as a tool to help tackle the structural weaknesses in Greece that contributed to the economic crisis and the consequent socio-economic repercussions. The partnership agreement is aligned with the targets of [Europe 2020 – A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth](#),

Funds for youth-led or youth-targeting projects are provided via INEDIVIM, which is financially and operationally independent, although supervised by the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. Funding for activities targeting youth is

provided also by Greek cultural foundations, such as the Onassis Foundation or the [Stavros Niarchos Foundation](#). These opportunities are made available via competitions, following public calls.

Funding is also sporadically provided by foreign cultural foundations and embassies operating in Greece. Among these organisations are the British Council, the Goethe Institute, the Fulbright Foundation, the Instituto Cervantes, the House of Cyprus, the Institut Français and many others, also within the Greek network of European Union National Institutes for Culture ([EUNIC](#)) which has two clusters, in Athens and Thessaloniki, respectively. There is also the Hellenic-German Youth Foundation “Youth Dialogue”, a bilateral foundation which clearly prioritises youth work youth workers’ exchanges and training, and transfers of good practices between the two beneficiary countries and other partners.

Overall, civil society organisations in Greece rely significantly on grants and donations to support their work. Funding, however, can be unpredictable and unstable, creating a challenging environment for youth workers (Innovation Hive 2023). The findings of research conducted for this study have shown that there are very different perspectives when it comes to evaluating and making good use of opportunities available based on an organisation’s geography and capacity. Although there is apparently a good number of funding sources available, at both national and international levels, the ones who are truly eligible to benefit from these are NGOs that have the experience, the expertise and the resources to draft and submit the sophisticated and lengthy applications needed. Having built “a name for oneself” and having “the right connections” are among the parameters identified by interviewees.

For me, returning to Greece was a conscious choice. I understood that there is a great need for good project writers and this is what I do now, almost exclusively. No, I no longer spend my time on Erasmus applications like I used to... Everyone applies for Erasmus+ and there is not much to expect from there. There are many other funding opportunities out there, for much larger sums, but you need to have not only a brilliant idea, but also the know-how to put it down on paper so that you can convince donors to invest in your project. This is not something that a simple youth worker can do. This is a serious skill.

(Former youth worker and municipal youth council member, Themi)

In this context, it is mainly powerful, well-established and well-connected NGOs with highly qualified staff that can have access to such sources of funding, but also other opportunities that could provide access to other types of support, such as invitations to networking activities, conferences, charities, etc.

From time to time, we have some brilliant youth workers and even young researchers at the organisation where I work; young people with real vision and ideas to make a change, but they get paid pittance, that is why they usually quit. They come here to learn how a big non-profit works, they come full of dreams, flattered that they got accepted, but then they realise that they also need to eat and pay the rent. Do you know who get the highest salaries? Not the most qualified ones, but the ones who get the projects. The ones who have the connections at the embassies and can guarantee grants for the organisation.

And these people may have started as youth workers or youth visionaries, but they are now businessmen. It is not about social change; it is about figures.

(Staff at a large civil society organisation, managing the youth agenda, Athens)

There is a different narrative coming from smaller NGOs, let alone informal youth groups and cultural associations working with young people at a local level, sometimes in small villages or disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The latter rely heavily either on small municipal funds or on the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission, a strategy which is usually inefficient, leading to projects that are short-term and limited in impact.

We compete for Erasmus grants, or for any small opportunity that will allow us to survive for 3 months, then the next 6 months. How can you bring solutions and think of progress when you are so preoccupied with surviving?

(Manager of a small cultural association working with youth from an ethnic minority, Thessaloniki)

I started an NGO in a small village nearby the town where I live and work. This is the village where I am originally from and until recently there was practically nothing available for young people. The NGO is slowly growing but it is taking lots of efforts and patience. We work mainly with youth exchanges and European Solidarity Corps projects, but I cannot say that one can make a living, let alone a profit out of these grants. Thankfully, I have my day job to support me and the same goes for all the staff and volunteers.

(Youthworker/NGO manager in a rural area, Greece)



Examples of practice

The creation of the Balkan Heart in Thessaloniki, the second large city in Greece, by the [United Societies of Balkans](#) NGO has offered an alternative space for youth, in a city where there is a vibrant young population, yet almost no spaces for youth to gather and engage in activities together.

As part of the Why Youth Work is Good project funded by the European Union through the Erasmus+ KA2 strategic partnership programme, the Croatian organisation Udruga IKS, together with Greek partners, has conducted and presented research on the status of youth work in Greece, featuring interviews with Greek youth workers and relevant stakeholders.

A symposium on the “Roads to recognition of youth work” was organised between 5 and 9 December 2022 in the city of Ioannina, bringing together youth workers from Greece and other European countries to reflect on the outcome of the discussions at national level, exchange practices and experiences and contribute to the formal and political recognition of Youth Work in Greece, by fostering the quality of youth work services within the youth work community of practice. The activity was organised by the Youth and Lifelong Learning Foundation.

The Eurobalkan Youth Forum, an informal group based in Thessaloniki with branches all over the Western Balkans, has started a consultation process with local universities, NGOs and experts, to promote the establishment of a pivotal academic course on youth work.

ActionAid Hellas ([ActionAid](#)) has opened a centre for young people where, by reservation and free of charge, young people can use the space for educational and recreational activities. The ActionAid offices in the heart of the city provide a space unique in its kind, in a city where youth centres are scarce and those available either function on specific days and occasions, or require a fee.

Legal framework of youth work

The [Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth](#) (Kosovo* Law on Youth 2009) establishes the legal framework of youth work in Kosovo*. It defines: i. the basic responsibilities for strengthening the youth sector in Kosovo* and for supporting the participation of youth in decision making; ii. The responsibilities of the institutions of central and local government to young people and youth organisations in relevant areas regulated by the law; iii. voluntary work and informal education of young people; iv. instruction for the licensing of youth centres. The law defines young people as persons between 15 and 24 years of age, establishing a lower threshold than most of countries in South-East Europe, which usually consider youth up to 29 years of age.

Kosovo* has the highest percentage of young people in Europe: 31% of Kosovo's* population is 0-18 years old (United Nations Children's Fund n.d.). For implementing the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth, four administrative instructions have been issued: i. one for youth participating in the decision-making process; ii. one on licensing youth centres; iii. one for voluntary work; and iv. one for non-formal education of youth ([Stankovski 2021](#)). To this date, the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth has not undergone any revisions since its ratification in 2009. The law states that: "the Government by sub-legal act will determine the key ministries, responsible for enforcing the provisions of paragraph 1 of Article 6 of this law" (Article 6, paragraph 2). However, the Kosovo* authorities have not yet issued a sub-legal act concerning this issue.

The establishment and licensing of youth centres was regulated in 2010 through the specific [administrative instruction for licensing of youth centres \(11/2010 per regjistrimin e Qendrave_Rinore\)](#) (Authorities of Kosovo* 2010), derived from the Law on Youth Empowerment and Participation. Youth centres operate within municipalities and offer spaces for youth programmes and activities based on their statute to provide quality youth services. According to Article 3, each municipality must have at least one licensed youth centre in their locality.

Currently, the main document regarding the implementation of youth policy is the [Strategy for Youth and Action Plan 2019-2023 of Kosovo*](#) drafted by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport of Kosovo* (2019) in consultation with other relevant governmental bodies, representatives of local and national youth organisations, as well as international organisations present in Kosovo*. It is a strategic document which involves the vital interests and youth needs for the period 2019-23 and centres on youth participation and active citizenship, skills provision and the creation of a healthy and safe environment for young people.

Kosovo* is in the process of establishing a new strategy on youth. This is being done via a participatory process, involving experts from local civil society working directly with government officials and international organisations operating in the region, but also local youth workers.

Structures supporting youth work

Despite the responsibilities of certain ministries regarding the enforcement of the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth not being clear, the main central authority in charge for youth policies is the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The ministry was, in fact, among the first ones to be created by the [United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo*](#) (UNMIK) as part of the executive branch of the provisional institutions of self-government in Kosovo*. According to [Regulation No. 2001/19 on the executive branch of the provisional institutions of self-government in Kosovo](#) (Authorities of Kosovo* 2001) and [Regulation No. 2005/15 amending UNMIK Regulation No. 2001/19 on the executive branch of the provisional institutions of self-government in Kosovo](#) (Authorities of Kosovo* 2005), this ministry is responsible for developing policies and strategies for the youth sector, including the identification of vulnerable youth groups, developing programmes to address their needs and to promote clubs, groups and youth associations. In addition, the ministry is responsible for developing and implementing the relevant legislation for the establishment and functioning of organisations, clubs, groups and youth associations.

The youth action councils were established by the [administrative instruction on licensing of youth centres](#) (Authorities of Kosovo* 2010) issued by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The Central Youth Action Council serves as a youth representative body composed of members from youth non-profit organisations at central and local levels. One of the main duties of the Central Youth Action Council is to participate in the drafting, implementation and evaluation of youth policies. The same responsibility at the local level lies with the Local Youth Action Council. However, according to local youth experts interviewed for this study, some of these councils are not yet fully operational, while some others have fallen short of promoting youth participation in decision-making processes mainly because they have been politically instrumentalised. Moreover, the findings of interviews with youth workers in Kosovo* suggest that political parties try to exert influence over the youth councils.

In August 2021, a “[State Commission on Youth](#)” (Komisioni Shtetëror për Rini) was established as a key mechanism of the local authorities go for co-operation, support and decision making towards Kosovo* youth. This commission aims to harmonise the strategic documents, such as the programme of the government, the work plans of the ministries, and the national youth strategy. The commission will also contribute to drafting the new national youth strategy and propose measures and activities that should be undertaken by the sector ministries. It will also periodically monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Strategy. The establishment of such a body is a recommendation of the Council of Europe to ensure a horizontal approach to youth policy.

Kosovo* does not have a youth agency as a separate institution responsible for youth policy, while the current Department of Youth is established under the [Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport](#). In this legal and institutional framework, there is a lack of mechanisms to implement the legislation on youth. As a result, not many young people have been involved in civil society activities, as political parties are the main mobilising factor. This is, as some respondents explained, a consequence of young people expecting to use party connections to find a job, rather than engaging in activities of meaningful political participation. This, along with the youth civil society sector still surviving predominately thanks to external funding, significantly reduces the sustainability of the youth sector.

Educational opportunities for youth workers

The [Strategy for Youth and Action Plan 2019-2023](#) (Authorities of Kosovo* 2019) includes a provision on capacity development of youth organisation personnel. To preserve and promote the safe environment of Kosovo* youth, the strategy stipulates that the Department of Youth will increase the capacity of youth organisations' staff in various centres of the country through "structured trainings on prevention and protection from violence, various threats from the internet, terrorism and other threats that undermine the safe environment for Kosovar youth" (Authorities of Kosovo* 2019: 36). These training packages, according to the strategy, are dedicated to youth workers in Kosovo* youth organisations and, as such, they have been designed to be organised annually. Some of the youth workers interviewed for this study had either been participants in such training courses supported by the Department of Youth or part of the organising teams. They agree that initiatives aimed at capacity building for youth practitioners are very much needed, especially in rural and peripheral areas, where opportunities are scarce. Nevertheless, respondents questioned the selection process itself through which some organisations have been granted funds to organise such training courses, as well as the quality of the courses delivered, referring to the richness and relevance of the content and the degree of expertise of the trainers and facilitators involved.

There are some organisations that are doing a remarkable work in the field, against all odds and challenges, but these are very few. There are also some other organisations, which receive grants because they have the right connections – these NGOs usually provide superficial work, they have no real expertise, they just apply to grants available, whatever the topic might be and if they get the grant, they employ people they know as organisers or trainers. In the end, they write a nice report saying that they did everything right, but this is not the case.

(Youth worker, from an Albanian-speaking rural part of Kosovo)*

There are no formal educational opportunities for youth workers in Kosovo. Nor is there an established accreditation procedure for youth workers or ethical guidelines/standards regarding their conduct. Considering this, prospective youth workers join the existing youth organisations as volunteers to gain practical skills and work with young people. Youth work practitioners come from different academic backgrounds, such as social sciences, political sciences, law, social or cultural anthropology, etc. Most universities, however, are active in international programmes, offering training opportunities for practitioners working with young people. For instance, the [University of Prishtina](#) is the leader and partner of many capacity building projects within the Erasmus+ programme, while the university's regional summer courses have also gained reputation.

At a non-formal level, training courses are provided predominately by the Council of Europe or by regional structures such as SALTO-Youth SEE and the RYCO. Here, it should be noted that young people from Kosovo* are the only ones in the region who cannot exit their country due to visa limitations and issues of recognition. As a result, many young people in Kosovo* are deprived of mobility opportunities that their peers in the region have the right to enjoy. This is a problem the social

extensions of which have been identified by research (Drosopulos 2019; 2020). The recent decision of the [Council of the European Union to give a green light to visa-free travel](#) (European Council 2022) will allow Kosovo* passport holders to travel to the European Union without a visa for a period of stay of 90 days in any 180-day period from 1 January 2024.

Recognition and validation of youth work

Although the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth does refer to the term “youth work” and “youth worker”, the latter is not an officially recognised profession. Recognition of youth work has been one of the main demands of the Kosovo* youth sector for more than a decade now. The positions held at the Tirana Symposium on Recognition of Youth Work and Non-formal Learning in South-East Europe, back in 2012, are still valid today. As there is no established system of validation, the recognition of youth workers’ experience is left to the discretion of their prospective employers.

Youth work funding

Analysis of [the Law on the Budget Appropriations for the Budget of the Republic of Kosovo for Year 2021](#) (Authorities of Kosovo* 2021) and of previous budgets indicates that there have been no substantial changes to the funds allocated to either the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport or to the Youth Programme in the period 2020-2023. This analysis also shows that there are significant amounts of funding dedicated to youth that have gone unspent and that have been transferred across fiscal years. This tendency can undermine the activities meant to be implemented according to the action plan.

Article 9 of [Regulation No. 01/2015 on Subsidies in the Field of Culture, Cultural Heritage, Youth and Sports](#) (Authorities of Kosovo* 2015) states that the Department of Youth of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport shall provide support to stakeholders involved in this field. That includes subsidising youth organisations, youth centres, school councils, businesses and individuals contributing to the programme objectives in the field of youth. In addition, Article 5 of [Regulation No. 01/2018 on Defining Criteria, Procedures and Forms Concerning the Certificate of Sponsorship in the Field of Culture, Youth and Sport](#) (Authorities of Kosovo* 2018) states that sponsorship beneficiaries in the field of youth may be individuals, informal groups or youth organisations, and youth centres registered as NGOs, as well as natural persons and informal groups applying through NGOs dealing with youth activities.

Kosovo* is a partner country of the Erasmus+ programme, in the Western Balkans section, which means that Kosovo* can take part in certain actions of the programme. An [Erasmus+ office in Kosovo*](#) has been established with the aim of assisting the European Commission, the Executive agency and the local authorities for the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme. In the period 2015-19, 4 177 staff and students of Kosovo* obtained Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility scholarships. Significant funds for youth co-operation projects have been also granted by the [Regional Youth Cooperation Office \(RYCO\)](#) which, so far, has had four () open calls for proposals for participants from Western Balkans, including Kosovo*.

On recommendation by the Parliamentary Committee for Education, Science, Technology, Culture, Youth and Sports, a specific budget code for youth at the local level was created in the budget of Kosovo*. This was done to prevent the municipalities from using the funds meant for youth for other purposes. Prior to this reform, the budget lines allowed the municipalities to redirect funds at their discretion.

Overall, despite the progress made when it comes to financing, the youth sector in Kosovo* remains dependent on international funding and is still largely donor driven.

Examples of practice

[The Youth Initiative for Human Rights – Kosovo* \(YIHR KS\)](#) is a part of the regional Youth Initiative for Human Rights network. The office in Prishtina was established in 2004. For more than 15 years, YIHR KS has worked successfully in the protection and promotion of human rights and democratic values not only in Kosovo* but also in the region. In particular, YIHR KS is focused on the process of dealing with the past, protecting human rights and the rule of law, and empowering youth at the local and regional levels.

[ACT – Arts, critical thinking & active citizenship](#) is the name of the phase 1 Kosovo* project, part of the Changing the Story programme, launched by the University of Leeds (United Kingdom) together with the Universities of Prishtina and Bournemouth (United Kingdom). The ACT project combined research and applied components, producing alternative practices to be proposed to formal and informal educational institutions, as well as academic research and publishing in Kosovo*. The project, which ran during the period 2018-21, was conducted in co-operation with local partners that work with art and youth in several Kosovo* municipalities, including: Anibar (Peja), 7 Arte (Mitrovica), and Varg e vi (Gjilan). Additionally, representatives of local and international organisations contributed, including Kosovo 2.0, Youth Initiative for Human Rights and [Opera Circus](#) (from the United Kingdom), as well as independent researchers.

Montenegro

Legal framework of youth work

The Government of Montenegro has adopted a [Law on Youth](#) (2019), which defines youth work as

an activity that is realised in co-operation with young people and for young people with the aim of their independence and transition to adulthood, learning, personal and social development, in accordance with their needs and abilities, and based on non-formal education methods.

A key document for the implementation of youth work in Montenegro – [the National Youth Strategy](#) (Government of the Republic of Montenegro 2016) and accompanying action plans for implementation of the strategy – expired in December 2021. During the interviews for this study, participants confirmed that [the Regional Cooperation Council](#) will conduct an evaluation that will serve as a basis for the new strategy development, but at the time of publishing of this study there has been no update on the process. There is also [the National Programme for Realisation of the Priorities in the Field of Youth Policy](#) (Government of the Republic of Montenegro 2020), which prescribes priorities in the youth field, instruments for monitoring and evaluation of the progress in the youth field and sources of their funding. Concerning the strengths and shortcomings of the legal framework of youth work in Montenegro, the shortcomings can be recognised in a hiatus between administrative settings and practices, especially at the local level. Youth workers at the local level have no or very low budget for their activities.

The strengths of the youth policy framework in Montenegro relates to clearly defined framework for youth policy and recognition of the actors in the field. The shortcomings arise from low financial resources at the local level and irregular public consultations.

(Youth expert, Podgorica, Montenegro)

Structures supporting youth work

[The Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports](#) is responsible for youth work in Montenegro. Such a setting has only been recently introduced and followed years of independence of the Directorate for Youth and Sports. The youth expert from Montenegro interviewed for this study expressed their dissent with youth sector being part of the current very heterogeneous structure.

Since merging of the two directorates there has been a noticeable deterioration of the commitment to the youth sector. One of the arguments indicating this deterioration is omission of the Directorate for Youth from the report on the half-term of the new ministry.

(Youth expert, Podgorica, Montenegro)

At a local level, each municipality has a local action plan. If action plans are not adopted, municipalities are subject to fines. However, these fines are not constitutional and they are not aligned with the national law. Some municipalities have a

small budget allocated for implementation of the local action plan, but support for implementing the local action plan is usually missing. Notably, the interviews for this study were conducted in the context of a political change, when youth services were closed because the administrators' contracts expired.

Before merging of the directorates there was a functioning liaison among youth services, youth clubs and municipalities. There were 11 municipalities and the Ministry was funding youth service administrators. Currently, all youth clubs in 11 municipalities are revoked, they ceased to work due to expiration of the administrators' contracts (five contracts expired in January and six in May).

(Youth expert, Podgorica, Montenegro)

The potential for resolving this crisis for Montenegrin youth work lies in assistance from the international institutions and organisations that are present in this part of South-East Europe (the European Union, the Council of Europe, the [United Nations Office in Montenegro](#), [SALTO-Youth SEE](#), the [OSCE Mission to Montenegro and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office](#)) and international donors who are still providing funds in the scope of Western Balkan development. The OSCE Mission to Montenegro has been supporting youth work, especially by funding the development and implementation of local action plans, and the United Nations Office in Montenegro has provided financial support during development of the youth strategy.

The [PRONI Centre for Social Education](#) holds a significant place in foundations of the youth work in Montenegro. PRONI Association facilitated establishment of [Forum MNE, an umbrella association of youth NGOs in Montenegro](#), as one of the leading regional youth civil society organisations. Judging based on statements by Montenegrin youth workers, currently a framework of youth worker socialisation and non-formal education is resulting in youth workers being less equipped with the skills and knowledge required for quality youth work.

I don't think formalisation of the youth work is the major challenge in the youth field, it is quality of youth work. Ten years ago, a process of transfer of knowledge from the Swedish system, primarily through PRONI Centre, has established solid basis for development of youth work in this region. However, nowadays youth workers do not go through such diverse system of non-formal training and I cannot help but to ask myself what are the values, attitudes and skills of the younger generation of youth workers in Montenegro. Also, youth workers are not well acknowledged with the law acts and processes in decision making and policy making, and intersectoral co-operation is not regular and reliable.

(Youth worker, Kotor, Montenegro)

The interviewees expressed their agreement that the youth civic sector in Montenegro is very activvivid, but often does not receive recognition. Many initiatives do not want to stick to the traditional form of an NGO, so such initiatives and grass-roots movements cannot get financial support; such rigidity deteriorates the civic sector. Young people fluctuate from one initiative to another, and they easily get bored and/or would like to simultaneously join several initiatives. However, the state does not legally acknowledge such initiatives, which may be demotivating for young people. The existing youth work framework does not differentiate among various profiles in

the youth sector – activists, youth workers, curious young people, etc., and young people cannot rely on the same type of support when approaching different institutions responsible for youth.

A certain generational and worldview gap is also noticeable in the relations between youth workers and public officials. The youth workers from Montenegro interviewed for this study identified a lack of public officials' commitment to the youth policy as one of the challenges that is yet to be tackled. Assistance from public institutions was praised concerning physical space and infrastructure being provided to organise activities, but the youth workers were sceptical about the existence of a coherent vision for development of the youth sector.

Administrative capacities and knowledge about youth work are very low at governmental level. There are frequent changes in the staff and institutional memory is being lost repeatedly. It also reflects a lack of commitment of the new officials as they are not eager to engage in the area they will leave soon.

(Youth expert, Podgorica, Montenegro)

Educational opportunities for youth workers

In Montenegro, youth workers can access structured, non-formal education only through [the Forum MNE programme for youth activists](#). This programme was licensed by the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 2017. The programme lasts for one year and offers modules covering theoretical approaches and practical work that enable participants to obtain a “youth activist” certificate. The first certified youth activists completed this programme in 2020. In 2020, thirty youth activists successfully completed the training and obtained the youth activist occupation certificate, according to the officially adopted standard of qualification. Forum MNE and the Ministry of Youth and Sports have published [a Manual for Youth Activists](#) (2019). This manual describes the principles and values of youth work, the ethical and professional principles of youth work, and the core principles of youth policy.

Recognition and validation of youth work

Although actors in the youth field are getting informal recognition from other stakeholders in the field, recognition of youth work is the most evident shortcoming of the youth policy in Montenegro; there is no law that directly regulates the status of youth work. The current law mentions only youth services, which is insufficient and inadequate because to do so reduces youth work to youth services that are managed by the local government. Professionalisation of youth work is very much needed, as it would guarantee a long-term vision for youth work and stronger commitment from actors in the youth field.

Youth work funding

According to the law, there are only two sources of funding available to the youth NGOs at the level of public organisations: the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports, and local government, although some other ministries also occasionally provide funding for youth-related activities. However, the [Centre for Development of](#)

[Non-Governmental Organisations \(CRNVO\)](#) has conducted analysis on the grantees and found that a large percentage of the associations receiving grants do not have a good track record in the youth field, which may indicate that the evaluation of grant applicants is sometimes partial and not merit-based. Moreover, the financed projects only focus on young people with fewer opportunities to a limited extent, their main target group being active and educated youth. Youth experts from Montenegro suggested that CRNVO is influenced by politics and, therefore, does not adequately promote the interests of young people and youth workers in Montenegro.

Montenegrin civil society organisations in the field of youth benefit from internationally available funds, especially from the funds directed at the six Western Balkans Countries (WBC6), as well as from the [Erasmus+ programme](#) and the [Regional Youth Cooperation Office](#). International funds represent significant support for vertical and horizontal development of the youth sector, especially regarding youth mobility, intercultural exchange, youth participation and non-formal education. Still, internationally available funds and funds at national and local levels are not sufficient for sustainable high-quality youth work. Currently, youth NGOs focus on sustaining basic project work; investments in knowledge and skills are sporadic. Similarly to the rest of the region, there is a lack of stable employment in youth NGOs in Montenegro, which results in very scarce human resources. Youth experts are leaving the sector for better-paid and more stable positions, which results in hardships for the new generation of volunteers who do not have enough support to cope with all challenges. European Union grants are the most reliable source of funding, but most youth NGO do not have the capacity to attract those funds.

It is crucial to emphasise there are only a couple of NGOs dealing exclusively with young people in Montenegro (otherwise they wouldn't survive). It shows that young people are not a priority group in Montenegro.

(Youth worker, Kotor, Montenegro)

Examples of practice

Two examples of practice were identified during the interviews. The first, [Youth Club Budva](#), is easily accessible to young people and is suitable for activities such as seminars, workshops, exhibitions, film screenings, concerts, plays and lectures. There is a small budget from the local government allocated to this youth club and the other financial resources are provided through public calls. The club has a solid base of activists and volunteers, and it is run by a co-ordinator who is permanently employed.

The [Education and Training Centre Montenegro](#) is running a [project called Community Action Now](#), which aims to educate youth workers to work in the community. There are three stages of individual involvement in the project: accepting, sharing and challenging. Each person can choose which topic(s) to engage with: 1. I love Montenegro; 2. become active; 3. say no to hate speech; 4. our language, our treasure; and/or 5. human rights.

North Macedonia

Legal framework of youth work

Despite noticeable progress, the legal framework of youth work in the Republic of North Macedonia is still lacking a special law on youth work. Instead, Article 3 of the [Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy](#) (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia 2020) provides a definition of youth work: an “organised and systemic process of education and support of the authentic development of the youth in order to achieve their full personal, social and societal potential, and their active involvement in the life of the community”. The same article defines youth workers as “skilled people who have the competencies to work with young people by implementing activities that support their personal and social development through non-formal and informal learning”.

The adoption of this law was an important step for the development of youth policy in the country because, among others, it established the necessary legal framework for opening local youth councils, municipal youth offices with corresponding “officers for youth”, and local youth centres. Article 22, paragraph 2 stipulates that youth workers shall be responsible for the work conducted in the youth centres. However, inconsistency can be seen in the fact that the National Registry of Professions does not include a “youth worker” category, but only a “worker with young people”. Also, the law describes neither the required qualifications for the “officers for youth” nor the responsibilities of the municipal youth offices. This “minimalist approach” of not defining all aspects of youth work, according to a youth expert from the country, was adopted because it was expected that a separate law on youth work would regulate these issues. However, the process of drafting this law, although it has been initiated, has remained intermittent. In the meantime, the [Rulebook for Quality Standards of Youth Work](#) (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia 2021) provides more detailed, albeit not entirely comprehensive, guidelines for youth centres. The centres that meet these standards receive the quality label, as the rulebook itself is modelled on the [Quality Label for Youth Centres](#) developed by the Council of Europe.

According to a youth activist who was included in the legislation drafting process, even the formulation “worker with young people” was a product of a compromise between representatives of youth civil society and representatives of the state administration: “neither understood the difference nor the reason why that particular terminology (namely “youth worker”) should have been adopted in the first place”. While there is an ongoing initiative to adopt a law on youth work and some progress and preliminary drafts have been prepared, the process has been halted.

North Macedonia has a [National Youth Strategy 2016-2025](#) (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia 2016), which includes nine thematic areas, local youth work being one of them. This thematic area has three objectives. First, recognition of youth work as a key tool for assisting the positive personal and social development of young people. Second, formal recognition and regulation of the use and availability of youth work as an integral part of the education system of the country. Third, ensuring the quality and availability of youth work in the territory of each municipality. The [Law on Volunteering](#) (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia 2008)

was also adopted which, among the rest, includes separate provisions on protection of minor volunteers, i.e. those between 15 and 18 years of age (Article 5), and also allows volunteering in civil society organisations (Article 6).

Structures supporting youth work

The main institution supporting youth work in the country is the [Agency of Youth and Sport](#) of the Republic of North Macedonia. According to the aforementioned Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (2020), the agency manages a registry of youth organisations and organisations working with youth (Article 13); drafts the national youth strategy and Action Plan through a “consultative, inclusive and transparent process” in consultation with the national representative body on youth and delivers them to the Government (Article 19); reviews the reports of the “officers for youth” of the state administration, the municipalities and the City of Skopje (Article 23); and establishes a research centre for youth-related issues (Article 24). However, according to a youth expert from North Macedonia, despite its overall interest to support the youth sector, the agency is understaffed and has limited capacity on youth issues. In addition, its “sport” component is considerably dominant over the “youth” component because sport creates much higher media and political exposure.

The [National Agency for European Education Programmes and Mobility](#) is a national institution charged with delivering the decentralised actions of the Erasmus+ Programme in North Macedonia. Co-operation with the agency is of extreme importance to youth organisations working on Erasmus+ projects. Nevertheless, a [corruption scandal](#) involving its former director has undermined its credibility among the public. The scandal relates to allegations that North Macedonia’s agency in charge of allocating European Union mobility and education awarded part of European funds for digital literacy to a company that runs a hair salon (Marusic 2020).

The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (2020) creates an obligation upon every municipality and the City of Skopje to create a “youth office” as a “primary contact point for youth on local level” (Article 21). Also, the institutions of the state administration, the municipalities, and the City of Skopje are responsible for appointing a “youth officer” (Article 23). As the law is already in force, the first youth offices have been established and first youth officers have already been appointed. However, it can be argued that these provisions are only formally implemented. It has been pointed out by a youth expert from the country that the new “youth offices” are effectively non-functional. Also, the “youth officers” have not been specially recruited through a merit-based process. Instead, according to the same source, in most cases, a person who has already been working in the municipality has just been given the “youth officer” portfolio without even knowing what this assignment entails in practice.

The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy allows the creation of a National Advisory Body on Youth Policies (Article 14). Although this body was not fully operable at the time of writing this study, it was in the process of being established. Another important innovation is the creation of the National Youth Assembly (Article 10) and the obligation that every municipality in the country and the City of Skopje must create a youth council which will have an “advisory and representative role” (Article 16). As previous youth councils created in North Macedonia have been informal, this

legal requirement is a significant step forward for ensuring more meaningful youth participation. To fully use the opportunities created by the law, the OSCE Mission to Skopje has created a [Manual for Local Youth Councils](#) (2021) and delivered training sessions both for representatives of the youth councils and for staff of the municipalities. However, it is too early to assess the efficacy of these provisions in practice. It is worth mentioning here that North Macedonia has a fully functional [National Youth Council](#), which is a leading youth umbrella organisation in the country.

Finally, the law stipulates the creation of youth centres, stating that the youth work conducted in the centres is the “responsibility of youth workers” (Article 22). Moreover, every municipality is required to establish a youth centre on its territory within five years of the law entering into force in January 2020 (Article 26). A few municipalities have already started co-operation with local youth organisations to create youth centres. These efforts have been supported by international donors in the country. However, as a youth expert from North Macedonia interviewed for this study argued, there is concern over how this requirement will be implemented by the poorer, rural municipalities.

Educational opportunities for youth workers

At the level of higher education, the [Union for Youth Work](#) in partnership with the Faculty of Philosophy and the Institute for Social Work and Policy from Skopje has been implementing a Key Action 2 (KA2) project that aims to establish a master’s degree programme in youth work. The curriculum has been prepared based on similar programmes at the University in Tallinn.

Additionally, both the Union for Youth Work and the [Coalition of Youth Organisations](#) have created a four-month training module on youth work as part of an adult-education programme. The module consists of 208 hours of teaching, of which 144 hours are theoretical instruction and 64 hours are practical. The module is certified by the [Ministry of Education and Science](#) and the [Centre for Adult Education](#). The students receive a certificate for “workers with youth”. Considering that the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy requires that “youth workers” are “qualified individuals with necessary competences to work with young people” (Article 3), creating this type of educational opportunity is important. Other youth organisations have provided non-formal trainings on youth work, but the certificates they award are not formally recognised. However, as a youth expert from North Macedonia interviewed for this study stated, “the creation of educational programmes for youth workers will remain futile if there are no attractive employment opportunities for them”.

Most of the youth workers interviewed for this study, the majority of whom are active in peripheral cities, other than the capital, Skopje, have participated in training courses organised by the European Commission, the Council of Europe, but also other bodies providing education for youth workers and youth trainers. As most interviewees have shared, such educational opportunities have been extremely useful, not only for the quality of training provided, but also for the opportunities to network, find project partners, but also create opportunities for self-employment abroad, without having to leave the country.

My involvement in the youth centre is such that gives me flexibility to travel. In the previous years, I grabbed every opportunity available abroad to attend “trainings of trainers and youth workers”; I wanted to educate myself as much as possible and enrich my understanding of youth work by experiencing it in different contexts. Now I am often invited by foreign organisations as a trainer or expert; this is not only a fulfilling process, but also a very important financial help. I would struggle if I had to survive only with my local salary. Now, I can continue living in my own city and working to make it better, but I have one foot here and one in central Europe.

(Youth worker, from a small city in North Macedonia)

Recognition and validation of youth work

North Macedonia does not have a national system of recognition and validation of youth work. Currently, this is left to the discretion of potential employers. Considering the changes introduced by the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy, this issue needs to be urgently addressed. Because the law requires qualified and competent youth workers, failing to recognise previous experience can create a vacuum period that can undermine the law’s applicability.

When I travel abroad to attend international youth workers’ meetings and conferences, I am impressed by the status of youth work in other European countries. Recognition is first and foremost an acknowledgement of youth workers’ efforts, but it also means more opportunities, better professional standards, more respect for your work. I think we have a long way ahead of us. Many good youth workers I know have left the country for good; they have moved to European countries where they can work under better conditions and brighter perspectives. I understand them. I have thought of it too, but I have personally chosen to stay and try to build something here.

(Youth worker from a rural part of North Macedonia)

Youth work funding

The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (2020) stipulates that, for the “implementation of the law”, the state will provide minimum 0.3% of the annual budget, while the municipalities and the City of Skopje will allocate minimum 0.1% “for the youth” (Article 25). However, due to the imprecision of the law, several issues arise. First, the very general notions “for the implementation of the law” and “for the youth” can be interpreted very broadly and allow funding of issues which are not directly youth related. Second, even the dedicated funds for youth can be easily re-allocated for other purposes, something which is already a common practice in the country. And third, there is no strict enforcement mechanism that would ensure that the state and municipalities fulfil this requirement. According to the Rulebook on Quality Standards on Youth Work (2021), the municipality must provide 50-70% of the funds necessary for the youth centres. Considering that the youth centres will be managed by civil society organisations, which will be selected via an open call, the remaining 30-50% of the running costs will *de facto* be provided by these organisations.

Generally, as is the case in the other countries in the region, the youth sector in North Macedonia, in the absence of sufficient domestic funding, is dependent on foreign grants, a situation which ultimately undermines the sector's sustainability. Also, considering that most of the international grant opportunities require significant technical knowledge, almost all these funds are allocated to larger organisations that have the expertise in project applications while, at the same time, the smaller local NGOs are being squeezed out.

Examples of practice

The MultiКулти Youth Centre was established by the [Centre for Intercultural Dialogue](#) in 2010 in Kumanovo, North Macedonia, as a neutral platform where young people from different ethnic backgrounds can take part in activities together. These types of activities are particularly important for a post-conflict, ethnically segregated municipality such as Kumanovo. Each year, more than 1 000 young people participate in different educational programmes organised by local youth workers. MultiКулти is currently co-operating with the Municipality of Kumanovo in becoming one of the first licensed youth centres in the country according to the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (2020).

The project [MladiHUB](#) is implemented by the National Youth Council of Macedonia, financed by the British Embassy in Skopje and supported by the President of the Republic of North Macedonia. It aims to provide inclusive, youth-friendly physical spaces available to all young people and offer a variety of activities organised by different stakeholders, all related to youth. For a short period of time, [MladiHUB](#) gained recognition as the go-to space for youth work. Currently, in addition to the office in Skopje, three new regional offices across North Macedonia are being opened as part of this project.

Over the past years, the [Union for Youth Work](#) has been leading processes aimed at improving the quality of youth work in the country, as well as its recognition and standardisation as a profession and public service. It operates on the premise that for serious and sustainable progress to be made, it is essential that there be commitment and engagement from all relevant stakeholders. The organisation participated in the drafting process of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (2020) and in developing the first master's degree programme in youth work which will be offered by the Institute for Social Work and Policy in Skopje. It currently focuses on advising different municipalities in the process of establishing youth centres according to the new legislation.

Legal framework of youth work

The first official reference to the term “youth worker” was defined in the National Youth Law of Romania (Government of the Republic of Romania 2006; 2010), which is a document that created a legal framework for youth policy in Romania. In the summer of 2012, a draft [National Youth Strategy 2015-2020](#) was launched for public debate. After a turbulent process, the document was eventually approved by the Romanian Government in July 2018 (Government of the Republic of Romania 2018). This strategy was approved by the first chamber of the Romanian Parliament (the Senate) in November 2018. The 2018 strategy introduced new features, which were of paramount importance for the status of youth work in the country. Among these was a provision to upgrade community youth centres, setting them up for young people to benefit from integrated and personalised youth services. The strategy also paved the way for the establishment of consultative councils at the level of the municipalities, the county councils and the Ministry of Youth and Sports to effectively implement the youth policy.

Romania is in the process of establishing its new youth strategy. The Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities ([Ministerul Familiei](#)) has announced that it has made the draft National Youth Strategy 2023-2027 available to decision makers (Ancheta 3.8.2023). The document is still undergoing examination by respective ministries.

Romania also has an updated [Action Plan 2020-2022](#) ([Government of the Republic of Romania 2021b](#)), currently in place, led by the Ministry of Youth and Sport and supported by local institutions. The plan aims to implement mechanisms that lead to the development of synergies among authorities, young people and structures working with and for young people.

Structures supporting youth work

At a national level, as per January 2022, the [Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities](#) is the main authority responsible for youth. Nevertheless, only four of the main priorities of the youth policy are under the immediate control of the ministry. These are: (1) Non-formal learning; (2) Youth volunteering; (3) Youth public and political participation; (4) Youth leisure.

The [Youth Capital of Romania](#), an initiative started in 2009, is another structure that is considered important for youth work and youth participation. This is an ambitious national programme for young people that focuses on the development of youth ecosystems in Romanian areas in general and on the development of urban youth ecosystems in particular. Under the programme, local authorities work with non-governmental organisations of and for youth and with the private sector, putting young people at the heart of the urban development process.

Interviewees recalled the positive shift in mentality towards youth work and youth workers that had come following the award of the title to the city of Baia Mare, with a mandate running from 2 May 2018 to 1 May 2019.

In its application for the title, the city hall of Baia Mare had committed to hire ten youth workers. After winning the title, the authorities kept this promise. This had an important impact on the communities where those youth workers carried out their activity, serving us an example that other cities could follow.

(Youth worker, Baia Mare, Romania)

Educational opportunities for youth workers

Youth work is neither a separate academic branch nor an academic field in the Romanian higher education system. Romanian universities do not offer university studies on youth work per se, yet they provide courses, both at graduate and post-graduate levels, in fields that are related to youth work, such as pedagogics, youth educational resources, social sciences, etc.

Many educational and training opportunities for youth workers are provided by NGOs, youth centres and cultural associations in Romania, which have a wide repertoire of activities to exhibit. The most recognised among these educational opportunities is the compulsory training foreseen within the occupational standard (Government of the Republic of Romania 2012) as part of the official accreditation system for youth workers.

Most opportunities are in the big urban centres, some of which have a long tradition in youth work, like Bucharest, Iasi and Cluj Napoca. Some Romanian youth workers address this phenomenon by providing peer training and working in their home-towns or villages, where they can share and put into practice what they have learned.

Recognition and validation of youth work

Romania is one of the few countries in South-East Europe that have developed a viable, widely accepted system that standardises youth work and accredits professional youth workers. In October 2012, a scheme called “occupational standards for the youth worker occupation” (the occupational standard) was approved. The [occupational standard \(Government of the Republic of Romania 2012\)](#) is a scheme defining a youth worker’s competences at a national level and providing training based on these. This scheme was an output of a strategic project titled “[Constructing ‘the youth worker’: institution for a better insertion of young people in the society](#)”, part of the sectoral operational programme called “development of human resources”.

In this context, to become a youth worker, one must go through a five-day course delivered by a private entity – Schultz Consulting. These competencies are based on the [eight key competencies for lifelong learning \(European Parliament 2006\)](#). The occupational standard identifies the following role for youth workers:

The youth worker mobilises young people with the purpose of developing life skills and proactive behaviours, stimulating associative life and co-operation among young people, facilitating their participation in the community.

The specialised training received in the context of the occupational standard is the most important educational accreditation that Romania-based youth workers can receive. To apply for this training, one does not need to have an academic background in higher educational institutions. The training course within the occupational

standard is conducted at specific times per year and for an affordable fee. This training course consists of different thematic units: i. key competency units (involving communication in the official language and in foreign languages, as well basic competencies in mathematics, sciences, and technology); ii. general competency units (related to activity planning); and iii. a specific competency unit (focused on the creation of a personal and professional development plan and basic skills in non-formal learning processes). After completing this course, participants receive a youth worker certificate recognised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education and the National Authority for Qualifications. The certificate recognises the skills and competencies required to practice the profession of youth worker (COR⁷ code 341205). Registered professionals can pursue a job in a variety of places, such as non-governmental organisations, youth centres, community centres, state institutions, cultural centres and/or the County Offices for Sport and Youth.

Despite a legal mechanism, fiscal recognition and an official accreditation scheme being in place, the perspectives of conducting youth work professionally are far from ideal. Romanian interviewees attribute this to four main reasons: i. lack of social recognition; ii. insufficient support from the state; iii. absence of a labour market that can absorb trained practitioners; iv. limited number of youth centres and, more generally, spaces where youth work can be conducted. One of the respondents explained the frustration of trying to introduce herself to people outside the field.

There is still no clear public image of what “youth work” is. Many people here have never experienced anything other than formal education. The vast majority of people think that education can happen only at school, in a classroom. They have never experienced intercultural connection, either. This is why our practices and methods might come across as unfamiliar.

(Youth worker, Cluj Napoca, Romania)

Overall, the youth workers interviewed for this study agreed that the state should do more to support youth work and its practitioners, especially by investing more in youth work in less advantaged areas, especially rural communities, where there are fewer opportunities.

Youth workers are badly needed in Romania, particularly in the countryside, where 47% of the country’s population lives. Unfortunately, most towns and small cities don’t hire youth workers and don’t carry out youth-related activities on a regular basis.

(Young person, living outside of Iasi, Romania)

Youth work funding

The budget corresponding to youth policy falls under the work of the [Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities](#). Part of this budget is reserved for administrative costs and salaries of the staff of the Ministry as well as the County offices for Family and Youth.

7. The abbreviation COR stands for *Clasificarea Ocupațiilor din România*, which translates as “classification of occupations in Romania”.

Overall, The [Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities](#) (which succeeded the Ministry of Youth and Sport) runs on an annual basis four framework programs supporting the following: i) Youth Centres, ii) youth projects, iii) student projects and iv) youth research.

The ministerial budget also covers cultural events organised by students organisations, funded by the 15 so-called Students' Culture Houses that are located in university towns all over the country.

The Romanian youth law obliges local communities (local and county councils) to allocate budget for local youth policies and activities, based on consultation with youth civil society. Romania is among the countries that are heavily reliant on European funding programmes, with the National Agency for Erasmus+ being the main funder of training courses and relevant initiatives targeting youth. Youth workers interviewed agreed that the state should promptly invest more in the youth sector.

I would like to see the state investing in youth work more, so that we can intervene in a person's life at the proper time, when it is still possible to make a positive change. In order for organisations and practitioners to do so, however, they should not be primarily concerned with issues of survival and sustainability. They should have the space and conditions to dedicate themselves to their mission, which is to intervene at the right time and change young people's lives to the better.

(Youth worker, Bucharest, Romania)

Examples of practice

The [Group of the European Youth for Change](#) is a Romanian youth organisation, founded in 2010 and active at the European level. The group initiated and coordinates the [PRISMA European Network](#), a Europe-wide coalition aiming to raise the quality of youth projects through digital youth work, as foreseen by the Bonn Process and the common effort to put the European Youth Work Agenda into action.

The project "[standards and sustainable policies in youth work](#)" was implemented in 2019 by the Young Men's Christian Associations Federation of Romania and the Centre for Durable Community Development. The project could be considered a milestone, as it aimed to create a public policy of standards in youth work that would increase the quality of youth work in Romania, bringing a structure, but also a role of counselling and guidance for the organisations who want to start such activities. It also aims to provide a reference system for NGOs active in youth work which, in time, will lead to coagulation and co-ordination that will increase the positive impact on young people. The project was co-funded by the European Social Fund through the operational programme Administrative Capacity 2014-2020.

Legal framework of youth work

The orientation of the youth policy framework recently changed in Serbia when the youth domain transitioned from [the Ministry of Youth and Sport](#) to the Ministry of Youth and Tourism. Although the merger was announced in late December 2022, it will certainly take time for all administrative issues to be resolved, as the dedicated web pages still refer to the Ministry of Youth and Sport and the Ministry of Tourism, Commerce and Telecommunications [[Ministarstvo trgovine, turizma i telekomunikacije](#)]. Youth work in Serbia is defined through [the Law on Youth](#) (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2011: 91):

youth work shall mean activities organised by and for young people, based on non-formal education, carried out in young people's free time and undertaken with the aim of improving the conditions for personal and social development of young people, in accordance with their needs and abilities, in which young people voluntarily participate.

The foundations of youth work policy in Serbia are defined by three core documents: [the National Youth Strategy, adopted for the period 2015-25 \(2015a\)](#), [the Action Plan for the Implementation of the National Youth Strategy 2018-2020 \(2015b\)](#) and [the Law on Youth](#) (2011). The oldest of those documents – the Law on Youth – tackles youth work, as do the subsequent two documents. However, according to the interviewees in this study, there are certain shortcomings concerning the legal and administrative framework of youth work in Serbia.

The Law on Youth refers to many components that are only declarative as they should be implemented in synergy with other ministries, which does not happen. The Law on Youth doesn't have a power to independently define activities that are responsibility of other ministries; it can only give proposals that are not binding. Moreover, currently there are no reliable instruments for implementation of the Law at the local level as institutions at the local level are not required to implement the Law on Youth.

(Youth worker, Novi Sad, Serbia)

The current revision of the Law on Youth presents an opportunity to closely define youth worker and to bypass the inconsistencies between the legal framework and requirements for efficient implementation of the youth work guidelines and priorities.

In youth policy in Serbia there is space to better define the actions and priorities. Although there are currently some tensions between the youth NGOs and the Government, it seems that the youth sector is standing on a solid basis. Youth civic sector is marked by good networking and thanks for their internal management they are able to convince the Ministry to undertake some steps. However, the situation is very different when it comes to implementation of the policies and decisions in the youth field; there is evident lack of commitment on the governmental side.

(Youth expert, Belgrade, Serbia)

Serbia can be presented as an example of evidence-based youth policy, at least when it comes to the youth policy at the national level. However, there is a certain lack of detailed aims and their operationalisation, especially regarding local-level youth policy and dedicated budgets for policy implementation.

There are also significant issues at the local level; local actions plans are often just copy-pasted from the national one and thus not adapted to the needs and aspirations of the young people at the local level. Even if there are serious efforts in this regard, it is very unlikely they will be implemented as there are no dedicated budgets.

(Youth worker, Novi Sad, Serbia)

Furthermore, the inclusivity of the planning and timing of the drafting process of the new strategy is questionable, as the process was begun in the middle of summer 2021, when many actors in the youth field were not available for public consultations.

Structures supporting youth work

The overall responsibility for co-ordination, development and improvement of youth policy in Serbia used to fall under the [Ministry of Youth and Sports](#), established in 2007. In October 2022, the youth domain was transferred to the [Ministry of Youth and Tourism](#). The youth policy documents and officially recognised youth topics still can be found only on the website of the previous ministry. The ministry in charge of youth is working with other ministries and government bodies in charge of areas relevant to young people (in the areas of health, employment, etc.). The ministry is also a managing body for reviewing and proposing new acts in the youth field, including review of the active national youth strategy. Prior to each annual review of the strategy, the ministry co-ordinates a field survey for analysing the needs of young people and the impact of the strategy in the previous period. However, although the national youth strategy is evaluated annually, this is not the case with the state of youth work.

Besides the ministry, the main body accredited for the professionalisation of youth work is the [National Association of Youth Work Practitioners \(NAPOR\)](#). The [National Youth Council of Serbia](#) is a leading actor in advocacy, but it is also a service that provides youth workers with capacity-building activities and opportunities for networking. NAPOR is engaged in the formalisation of the Bonn Process in Serbia. One of their actions includes a proposal to introduce a vacancy for the expert co-ordinating implementation of the Bonn Process in Serbia. This proposal resulted in the establishment of the expert team for implementation of the Bonn Process as a leading structure supporting this process in Serbia. The <https://birnsrbija.rs/kancelarija-za-saradnju-sa-civilnim-drustvom-vlade-republike-srbije> was established by the Government of the Republic of Serbia to provide an institutional mechanism for supporting the development of civil society organisations and dialogue between civil society and governmental institutions. This office also takes part in monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the strategic documents concerning civil society, but they oversee all of civil society in Serbia with no specific focus on young people or youth workers. Other important supporting structures include the [Ministry of European Integration](#), the [RYCO Office in Serbia](#), and Ecological Centre Radulovacki [Ekološki

centar Radulovački], which is accredited by the Council of Europe. International organisations play a significant role in supporting youth work in Serbia, including the [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit in Serbia](#), the [Embassy of Sweden in Belgrade](#), the [Royal Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade](#) and the [United Nations Office in Serbia](#). All interviewees from Serbia emphasised the importance of logistical and financial support from international organisations, stating that the national government institutions lack the human and financial resources needed for proper implementation of the youth policy.

The state can change course of the processes only if it accepts a concrete and strong role in logistics and funding. In other words, only if the state becomes a co-ordinator/manager of the processes. So far, it hasn't been a problem to put on the agenda almost anything proposed by the youth experts and representatives of the civic sector, the ministry most often approves such proposals, stating that "it can be added to agenda if it is aligned with the rules of the European Commission". However, the issue is that the proposed programmes require funding and competences that the state lacks. So, I could say this is the core issue: we have a state that demonstrates nominal will, but lacks essential interest, which results in unsustainability.

(Youth expert, Belgrade, Serbia)

At a local level, local youth councils and local youth offices perform consultative actions and implement youth policy. There are local youth councils, or advisory bodies, supporting youth work in 80 municipalities in Serbia and, since 2009, the Local Youth Actions have been adopted in 144 municipalities. Some 137 local youth offices are registered – their main role is to support youth initiatives and provide services to young people. Following the need to establish an umbrella association of local youth offices, the [National Association of Youth Offices](#) was founded in 2014, and now brings together 110 cities and municipalities. However, not all youth offices have the same structure and capacity for undertaking actions, as the allocation of funds is highly dependent upon local governments. Moreover, some municipalities have introduced a specific, contracted position of youth programme co-ordinator, while other programme co-ordinators still carry out their roles on a volunteer basis.

The autonomous province of Vojvodina established the [Provincial Secretariat for Sports and Youth](#) in 2002, which is in charge of monitoring and supporting the work of youth associations and youth offices, preparation of programmes to improve the position of young people, and supporting projects relevant to young people. The Youth Council of Vojvodina [[Savet za mlade AP Vojvodine](#)] was established in 2012 at the initiative of the Provincial Secretariat for Sports and Youth, with the aim of encouraging and co-ordinating activities related to the development and implementation of youth policy and to propose measures for its improvement. The provincial secretariat has developed the [action plan on youth policy for the autonomous province of Vojvodina 2015-2020](#) (Provincial Secretariat for Sport and Youth 2015).

Of the former Yugoslav countries, Serbia has the most diverse structures supporting the development and implementation of youth policy and serves as an example regarding youth work structures. Nevertheless, as one of the interviewed experts said that there are additional efforts required in some areas, because:

[...] there is no governmental body directly responsible for youth workers, there is no direct support to the youth workers.

(Youth worker, Belgrade, Serbia)

Concerning individual membership in youth associations, youth workers in Serbia gather in civil society organisation networks and networks of youth workers. However, one of the interviewees for this study pointed out that these networks cover less than 50% of all youth workers in Serbia, and many youth workers still struggle with their professional identity and finding suitable support for their activities. The latter is especially the case for youth workers with 20 or more years of professional experience as they find the current system of accreditation degrading, since it demands completion of the same trajectory for all youth workers irrespective of their previous experience in the field.

Educational opportunities for youth workers

Over the past 12 years, the [National Association of Youth Work Practitioners \(NAPOR\)](#) has reached several significant milestones in providing non-formal educational programmes for youth workers and assisting other youth organisations in organising such courses. There are two programmes available to the experts in the youth field: “youth leader” and “youth worker”. NAPOR has also contributed to the development of standards of youth work-programme accreditation based on eight areas of skills and values relevant for youth work-related activities. The [Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Youth Work in Serbia](#) have also been adopted (NAPOR 2009a), along with the [Ethical Code in Youth Work](#) (NAPOR 2009b) and the standards of qualifications for youth leaders, youth workers and specialists for youth work and youth policies. Notably, standards of qualifications for the three levels of youth worker occupation developed by NAPOR are yet to be included in the National Qualification Framework.

The milestones reached in Serbia are sustained by youth civil society organisations, primarily NAPOR, and some youth workers recognise that there is space for more resourceful youth worker education that is supported on a wider scale.

Youth workers’ experience and practice are not often recognized, often at the expense of those with at least ten years’ experience. Youth workers lack diversified programs that acknowledge differences in work experience.

(Youth worker, Belgrade, Serbia)

This quote contrasts with the remark that not all youth workers seek certification, especially those with several decades of experience in the field. Concerning the future prospects of youth worker education in Serbia, NAPOR is currently undertaking a comparative analysis of several European countries to grasp possible modes of organising youth work studies in Serbia. The second step is a proposal for a university curriculum, which will be followed by setting up qualification standard for a master’s degree programme. Nevertheless, the youth experts and youth workers interviewed for this study expressed their concerns regarding the viability and success of such a study, as there are only a few university professors who understand the concept of youth work and who have been co-operating with civil society organisations in past decades.

Recognition and validation of youth work

In last two years, civil society organisations – primarily NAPOR – and governmental institutions have accomplished some key elements of recognition and validation of youth work: [Sector Councils](#) have been established and “youth worker” has been included in the [National Qualification Framework’s](#) (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2008) [list of occupations](#). However, at the national level, mechanisms for full recognition of the youth worker occupation are yet to be developed and youth worker is still not recognised as a profession.

In 2016, NAPOR created an online tool for recognition of the competences of young people gained through youth work programmes (the [Passport of Competences](#)) and implemented it in co-operation with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and other relevant actors from the public, private and civil sectors. This passport enables embracing and recognising the transferable competences and provides youth workers with a mechanism for planning professional and personal development.

Youth work funding

Lack of funding is emphasised as the main challenge the structures supporting youth work in Serbia are facing, which affects not only immediate actions and projects, but also causes long-term reducing of the sector.

The crucial issue in youth work, both at a local and a national level, relates to a lack of funding. There is a very realistic danger we will face decrease in the number of youth workers at the local level due to youth NGOs functioning merely on project funding. The majority of youth workers are either volunteers or working on the fixed-term contracts and part-time contracts. The outflow is significant as other sectors provide employees with more stable working and financial conditions.

(Youth worker, Novi Sad, Serbia)

Two sources of funding for youth work in Serbia are the most prominent: public calls from the Ministry of Youth and Sports; and international organisations. In comparison to the international funds, the resources allocated through public calls or decisions made at a local level represent a small share of available funds. The interviewees for this study agreed that there should be better transparency in the allocation of funds from the national and local level and increased financial resources towards fostering the quality of youth work and the sustainability and implementation of long-term aims. Concerning international funds, the most prominent programmes are the [Erasmus+ programme](#), the [TEMPUS programme](#), the [European Social Fund in Serbia](#), the [RYCO Office in Serbia](#), the [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit in Serbia](#), the [Embassy of Sweden in Belgrade](#), the [Royal Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade](#) and the [United Nations Office in Serbia](#). Interviews with the youth experts and youth workers indicate that, thanks to the long-term presence and stability of the international organisations in the region, co-operation between international organisations and youth organisations is very fruitful and indispensable for the development of youth work in Serbia.



Examples of practice

Examples of practice that contributed to transformation of the youth work in Serbia encompass a wide range of activities that engage youth workers and young people in creative approaches to resolving issues at the individual or social level.

[Seven Digital Thematic Youth Clubs](#), managed by [NAPOR](#), grew out of a concept of the theatre of the oppressed and are striving to engage young people through artistic forms. Art has been used to facilitate young people to open up to each other and to transform the communication processes.

Another practice from the field of engaged culture, [Singing Shelter](#), is co-ordinated by an association called [Art Aparat](#) and which assembles artists, educators and researchers. They use music for education, social integration and strengthening the capacities of different groups, with a focus on vulnerable children and young vulnerable groups (i.e. members of minorities, and young refugees and asylum seekers).

The [Belgrade Centre for Human Rights](#) runs the project [Sofa: Solidarity First Aid](#) that pairs young people (18-30 years old) and the elderly (65+ years old), encouraging intergenerational solidarity and exchange and creating cohesion both offline and online.

The programme [CoolTour Tube](#) co-ordinated by the [Belgrade Centre for Human Rights](#) with the support of the United Nations Refugee Agency offers an opportunity to young people to learn more about human rights, interculturality, prejudice and acceptance of diversity. Such programmes are created in response to the need to focus on non-mainstream youth, such as young refugees and asylum seekers.

Legal framework of youth work

[The Act on Public Interest in the Youth Sector](#) (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2010) defines youth work as

an organised and goal-oriented form of action targeting young people, in which young people, based on their own efforts, contribute to their own integration into society, strengthen their competencies and contribute to community development. The implementation of various forms of youth work is based on the voluntary participation of young people, regardless of their interests, cultural, ideological or political orientations.

[The Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2013–2022](#) (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2013) was adopted for the period 2013–22, adding to the recognition of and support for youth work in Slovenia. Youth work is acknowledged as one of the areas that needs fostering and active support, and this document prescribes mechanisms for the monitoring and evaluation of the national and local youth policy implementation. The resolution also addresses the prerequisites for promoting and advocating for youth work and achieving high-quality youth work at the national and local levels. The [Youth Council Act](#) (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2000; 2010) regulates the status, areas of work and funding of [the National Youth Council of Slovenia](#) and the local youth councils. Youth policy is part of policies with shared responsibilities among different governmental bodies on the national and local level, depending on the topic of interest.

The youth workers and youth experts from Slovenia interviewed for this study emphasised that youth policy implementation is, to a certain degree, standardised at a national level. However, they pointed out major discrepancies when it comes to policy implementation at a local level; everything depends on the willingness of the local policy makers and politicians to engage in supporting activities in the youth field. A further objection to the implementation of the youth work policies concerns the insufficient inclusivity of the strategies and actions plans, as they do not focus on marginalised people. This inadequacy at a general level is reflected in public calls, which often aim to cover young people as a rather homogenous entity, neglecting the specific needs of marginalised or hard-to-reach young people.

Structures supporting youth work

The principal national public authority for youth work in Slovenia is [the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport](#) and its autonomous body, the [Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth](#), which is responsible for youth. The [Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth](#) is a consultative body that proposes measures and monitors the consideration of youth interests in various public policies at the national level.

An [Expert Committee for Youth Work Quality](#) was established in 2019 by the government, but no concrete steps have been made so far to introduce the quality-control mechanism. One of the interviewees in Slovenia suggested, “activities and processes

in the field of youth work seem to happen through parallel processes and structures, which results in questionable quality”.

The National Youth Council of Slovenia, as an umbrella for youth associations, engages in representing the interests of young people and advocating for better a position for young people and youth workers in the making and implementation of youth policy. There are also several other strong networks of youth associations supporting youth work and youth workers, like the [MaMa Network](#), the [PiNA Network](#), the [Network of Youth Centres](#), the [Young Dragons](#), [Institute Bob](#), [Slovenska filantropija](#) and the Association for Promotion of Volunteering.

The [Local Youth Office in Ljubljana](#) has established youth work as one of its priorities. The interviewees observed that, although the general youth work framework is well established, youth work in Slovenia is heavily centralised and rather often “the closer the municipality is to Ljubljana, the more efficient implementation is and the more funds there are” (youth worker, Ljubljana, Slovenia).

Slovenia has been a member of the European Union since 2004, and international policy guidelines and programmes influence and shape youth work policy in Slovenia. The crucial actor in advocating for the development of youth work in Slovenia and the promotion of access to international programmes is the [Institute for Development of Youth Mobility \(MOVIT\)](#). The institute provides support for the development and funding of youth work and sets up agendas for the development of civil society and the framework of youth work. Inputs from the interviewees indicate that MOVIT’s contribution to the development of youth work is highly convincing, and some of the interviewed youth work experts ranked co-operation with MOVIT significantly higher than outcomes of co-operation with some of the other governmental bodies or institutions.

Youth workers and youth experts in Slovenia interviewed for this study identified five challenges to the structures supporting youth work in Slovenia.

1. A high degree of centralisation, which especially affects the system of youth work funding.

There is no reliable system of funding and the stakeholders still haven’t agreed on common priorities and indicators for monitoring and evaluating of youth work. There are strong structures in Ljubljana and majority of finances is being allocated to organisations based in Ljubljana, but there is no common framework.

(Youth expert, Ljubljana, Slovenia)

2. A lack of continuous national research on young people, which hinders youth-friendly actions and policies and is often coupled to a high degree of bureaucratisation of youth work.

Being young 10-15 years ago meant something very different from nowadays. The major challenge is how to attract young people to get engaged in the community and how to provide resourceful persons who can gain trust of the young people. Youth workers have to be sensitised to the issues and needs of young people and institutional support has to enable processes that are not excessively bureaucratised.

(Youth worker, Ljubljana, Slovenia)

3. Youth policies focusing on “mainstream” young people, which contributes to further marginalisation of vulnerable youth.

Marginalised youth and youth experiencing discrimination (minorities, LGBTIQ+ youth, young homeless people, youth facing addiction) are left on the margins of the youth policy as there is a widely accepted understanding that youth policy should deal with mainstream youth. Last year we noticed enhanced activities towards young immigrants, but it has not happened thanks to the state institutions but by help of the youth NGOs.

(Youth worker, Ljubljana Slovenia)

4. Inadequate indicators evaluating impact of youth work.

The indicators are mainly quantified and if the public call defines at least 500 young people as a target, an NGO who works with marginalised young people cannot get the grant. Can you imagine a project with 500 homeless young people at the national level?

(Youth worker, Maribor, Slovenia)

5. Visibility of youth work and youth workers.

Visibility is also a problem in youth work in Slovenia, youth workers lack PR skills and there are only a couple of youth organisations who know how to communicate their activities towards other stakeholders in the field, the youth and the general public.

(Youth worker, Maribor, Slovenia)

Educational opportunities for youth workers

Official documents defining youth worker education in Slovenia recognise the need for integrating education on youth work in a system of formal education. The Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2013–2022 addresses current non-formal channels of youth worker education and call for integration of the extracurricular courses on youth work into secondary education. At the university level, the [University of Ljubljana](#) is co-ordinating a [programme of lifelong learning](#) for youth workers, together with [the University of Rijeka \(Croatia\)](#), and [the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb \(Croatia\)](#). The first generation of youth workers took part in the programme in the academic year 2017/18 and the second generation obtained their certificates during the Covid-19 pandemic – 2020/21. The onsite lectures and workshops are held at the premises of the University of Rijeka and the programme is performed in a hybrid manner, with most courses organised via online tools due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This programme is part of the project [Supporting Evidence-based Education of Youth Workers](#) that aims to develop youth work provision in Croatia and Slovenia. The programme is implemented via three modules covering the most important issues in the youth field: i. youth research; ii. youth work; and iii. youth and community development.

Recognition and validation of youth work

Youth work is still not recognised as a profession in Slovenia and youth workers are still encountering inadequate working conditions, inadequate and unstable remuneration and difficulties in accessing social security. The interviewees agreed that the majority of youth workers work on temporary contracts and are earning salaries that are below the national average.

Youth workers most often have temporary contracts, only a small number of the youth NGOs can offer open-ended contracts. Youth workers are in a precarious position, working conditions depend on the project that provides funding. Salaries in the youth sector often do not exceed the national minimum wage. Working conditions to a large extent depend on the size of the organisation and on their capacity to attract stable funding.

(Youth worker, Ljubljana, Slovenia)

An online system of the [National Qualification Framework Slovenia](#) marked launching of recognition of the youth worker occupation in Slovenia.

There have been two generations of youth workers educated, but there are several serious deficiencies of the current system of the youth workers' education. It seems to me that experienced and committed youth workers do not have a strong need to obtain such certificate and I cannot help to wonder what is a point of such system of youth workers' education. In reality, youth workers formal education is not as recognised as it was expected from the policy makers and those who provided support in establishing framework for education. We have the structure set, but that's it.

(Youth worker, Maribor, Slovenia)

The [Youth Worker Occupation Standard](#) prescribes a mode of obtaining the qualification of youth worker. The process includes an oral and written exam at [the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education](#) and is open to everyone who can provide evidence of their professional trajectory. However, the youth civic sector displays dissatisfaction with such a process, as the exam committee is composed of people who do not have backgrounds in youth policy or youth work.

Recognition of informally acquired knowledge during secondary education is enabled through [the Vocational and Technical Education Act \(Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2006\)](#), and the certification of non-formally acquired knowledge is the responsibility of [the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities](#).

Civil society in Slovenia has a long tradition of recognition of the non-formally acquired knowledge and skills and [the Institute Nefiks](#) is the most prominent actor in this regard. Nefiks provides the opportunity to obtain a booklet (including an online version) that serves as a tool for organising and planning skills obtained through informal and non-formal education.

Youth work funding

The Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2013–2022 (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2010) analyses the infrastructure available for youth work activities and prescribes the steps for better financial and infrastructural support for youth work, which are being implemented in a limited manner as many youth organisations still struggle with the issues regarding spatial resources and infrastructure. The interviewees from Slovenia agreed that human resources are a primary challenge when it comes to funding youth work in Slovenia; the majority of youth work is still funded via project activities. There are four main streams of youth work funding in Slovenia: 1. public calls by the Office of the Republic Slovenia for Youth; 2. public calls issued by other ministries (i.e. [the Ministry of Culture](#)); 3. public calls by local governments and their respective offices for youth; and 4. international programmes and organisations, like the calls issued by MOVIT, the [Erasmus+ programme](#) and the [European Social Fund](#).

Examples of practice

The [centre for LGBTIQ+ Youth Legebitra](#) is an LGBTIQ+ civil society organisation working in the fields of human rights, education, and mental, physical and sexual health, and it advocates for social and systemic change based on respect for sexual orientation, gender identity and/or sexual expression. This centre conducts its activities both online and offline. This is quite important in the context of the “single spaces” concept, which is related to minimising the negative effects of discrimination and negative judgement from the community.

The network MaMa has conceived a [logbook](#) – an instrument introduced with assistance from [the Europe Goes Local project](#), primarily from the Swedish organisation that has developed methodology for monitoring local youth work and evaluation of the youth work processes and impact.

The youth association [No Excuse](#) provides opportunities for young people and youth workers to take part in interdisciplinary programmes in seven areas of interest. These programmes are organised in several modules, depending on the skills, previous knowledge and age of the participants (ages 12–29).

[Institute Bob](#) is a community gathering young people and youth workers in a youth centre, and which encourages reflection on overlooked topics, especially marginalisation and discrimination. Its projects include street youth work, community youth work, various types of gatherings and events, workshops, and individual youth work.

The [youth network Young Dragons promijeniti](#) provides physical infrastructure to youth workers and young people in the suburbs of Ljubljana, where young people have limited opportunities for engaging with their peers and expressing their aspirations and creativity.

[Ljud's Laboratory](#) is using a tool of the open theatre workshops, intended for young people in public space. Open workshops of interactive and physical theatre have been organised since 2009 in collaboration with external mentors from Slovenia and abroad.

Legal framework of youth work

According to the 2020 report of the [National Statistics Office of Türkiye](#), Türkiye is home to 13 million young people. The Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye ([Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasası](#) (Parliament of the Republic of Türkiye 1982), Article 58 (protection of youth), refers to legal commitments and duties of the state for protecting youth. The constitution provides a stronghold for youth-related actions and provisions. Legal provisions to protect and promote youth participation and youth policy are envisaged within the scope and activities of the Turkish Ministry of Youth and Sports, as outlined in the [Decree Law on the Organisation and Duties of the Ministry of Youth and Sports](#) (Government of the Republic of Türkiye 2011), a text in the form of a statute mentioning departments and their respective responsibilities. Youth work in Türkiye is legally recognised and institutionalised. The Turkish term *gençlik çalışanı* literally translates to “youth worker”, while the respective practice is referred to as *gençlik çalışması*, meaning “youth work”. Youth workers are referred to with their legal name in official documents, such as the state gazette.

In 2013, the ministry produced the National Youth and Sports Policy Document ([Government of the Republic of Türkiye 2013](#)), which provides a general outline of the vision and scope of youth policy and youth work in Türkiye. According to this document, youth work is based upon two main pillars: “youth participation” and “youth empowerment”. The aim of the first pillar is to promote civic engagement, by launching or supporting initiatives that motivate young people to have a more active role in society and become more involved in decision-making and policy-making mechanisms and processes. The second pillar, based on the principles of social inclusion and equal access to opportunities, envisions the empowerment of young people by providing the right infrastructure, as well as educational and vocational opportunities that promote the overall well-being of youth at a personal and social level. Both pillars foresee regular and close co-operation between public authorities and NGOs. The content and language of the document itself is very much aligned with European discourse, featuring keywords of European youth policy such as education and lifelong learning; employment, entrepreneurship and vocational training; disadvantaged young people and social inclusion; democratic participation and civic consciousness; voluntary work and mobility (Lüküslü and Osmanoğlu 2017; 2018).

A framework law aimed at strengthening and enhancing civil society had been introduced within the [action plan of the 64th government](#) in December 2015. This law had served as a tool to regulate “the legal statutes of civil society institutions, their institutional structures, activities, their relations with public institutions and financial resources” (Third Sector Foundation of Turkey/ TÜSEV 2016). Today, the legal and structural provisions underpinning the activity of youth associations and other entities that belong to the realm of civil society are defined within the [Law on Associations](#) (2004) and the [Law on Foundations](#) (2008).

The Turkish state does not have an independent law on volunteering or youth volunteering, yet references are made to various laws, such as the [Municipal Law](#) (2005), the [Environmental Law](#) (1983a), [Civil Defence Law](#) (1958), the [Law on Social Services](#) (1983b), the [Law on Probation Services](#) (2005), the [National Education Basic Law](#) (1973) or the [Law on Primary Education and Training](#) (1961).

Structures supporting youth work

The most robust institution supporting the youth sector in Türkiye is the national Ministry of Youth and Sports, which was re-established as an independent ministry in 2011, uniting under its umbrella different governmental agencies that had been working towards a youth-related agenda in various capacities. There are also many other public bodies providing services related to young people. Among these are: the Turkish Employment Agency, the [Southeastern Anatolia Project](#), the [Center for EU Education and Youth Programmes](#), etc. The Turkish [Turkish National Agency](#), affiliated with the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is the body operating Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps opportunities. Youth work in Türkiye is not limited exclusively to the central government. Youth work activities are conducted also at a local government level (municipalities) and civil society level, even though at times there might be different priorities or conflicting interests among these, subjecting youth work to the dynamics of local political influence and competition (Lüküslü and Osmanoğlu 2018).

In Türkiye, all cities have a youth centre. The majority of these are supported by the Ministry of Youth and Sport. According to figures provided in the [3rd European Youth Work Convention \(Youth Partnership 2020\)](#), in December 2020 there were 354 ministry-led youth centres in Türkiye. Youth centres have also been created by local administrations (municipalities), albeit in a less standardised way (Lüküslü and Osmanoğlu 2018:1).

Türkiye does not have a National Youth Council, although this is something for which local civil society organisations have been advocating for years.

Student networks and unions in Türkiye are particularly active and usually have offices within the premises of universities, leading large events such as international summer schools, advocacy campaigns and other activities promoting youth participation and active citizenship. Youth work in Türkiye is widely used as a tool to consolidate the education and training of university students and to offer access to new opportunities. Public and private universities are among the institutions that have supported the recognition and consolidation of youth work as a notion and practice. Among these is Istanbul Bilgi University which, via its [Youth Studies Unit](#), has played an important role in the dissemination of youth work-related material among Turkish practitioners by taking over the translation into Turkish of manuals related to youth participation, youth policy and youth work.

Educational opportunities for youth workers

At a national level, educational and training opportunities for youth workers and youth trainers are provided on a regular basis by the Turkish National Agency and the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Moreover, local NGOs, youth networks and universities organise educational activities directly or indirectly related to youth work. There is no specialised vocational training or academic pathway to accredit youth workers, and university studies on youth work per se do not exist either. Nevertheless, there are academic courses at a graduate and post-graduate level that are strongly related to youth work.

Although there is no accredited course or training for youth work, there is a connection between youth work and the formal education system (Lüküslü and Osmanoğlu 2018). Many senior youth workers, members of the Turkish National Agency, and others, are affiliated with Turkish universities as lecturers, project co-ordinators or research assistants. Moreover, the most significant part of research on youth work in Türkiye has been conducted by teams of people who have dual roles as scholars/researchers and youth workers.

Despite visa-related restrictions for trips outside the country, Turkish youth workers have access to courses and other educational activities provided at European, regional and international levels, such as the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission and programmes launched within the Anna Lindh Foundation.

Recognition and validation of youth work

Youth work in Türkiye is legally recognised and institutionalised. However, being a youth worker is not a recognised profession. Youth workers in Türkiye operate and are referred to in legal documents by their official name but, fiscally speaking, they register themselves under different labels, such as social worker, educational advisor, teacher, trainer, etc. Youth work is also not standardised – there is no consensus in Türkiye over the definition, role and duties of a youth worker. In practice, this means that opinions vary regarding matters affecting practitioners, such as the nature and scope of youth work as an activity, the educational background that youth workers should have, desired or indispensable skills and competences, as well as the values that they should stand for.

To provide some examples of the polyphony that exists even among civil society organisations, in the following definition published on the [“Daily Student Life” section of a Youth Association website \(Öğrenci Gündemi 2022\)](#), one can find the following definition of a youth worker (translated from Turkish by author):

Youth workers are professionals who work with or for young people and who help them develop life competences, to establish healthy relationships and to take the right decisions for themselves. Youth workers generally work at youth centres, youth associations, youth units of public and private bodies, and they take up the duty of facilitating projects and activities.

The specific definition aligns with the state ideology, which views youth work at large as a means to keep young people away from “bad habits” (Lüküslü and Osmanoğlu 2018). This definition would probably be contradicted by many youth workers who would argue first about what constitutes a “good decision” in a person’s life, and second about whether it is really a youth worker’s role or “duty” (to quote the text) to help people take the “right” decisions. A recent article expressing the view of Gençlik Örgütleri Forumu (Forum of Youth Organisations) explains the burden imposed on youth workers by expecting them to mould “good young people”, as this is perceived within the cultural, religious and ideological standards promoted by the dominant political voices (Gazete Duvar 2020). Other organisations, such as the [Network of Local Youth Associations](#), count upon a translated version of the [definition provided by the Youth Partnership](#):

Youth work is a multifaceted practice. This makes it difficult to identify the defining features of youth work.



Youth work financing

At the state level, the Ministry of Youth and Sports is the main provider of funding for youth projects. Unregulated, ad hoc funds are also allocated by other ministries for projects involving youth work, targeting culture, the environment, education, etc. Moreover, Turkish universities allocate large amounts of money to grants for youth projects, in which they partner up either with state institutions or with Türkiye-based external donors.

My first experience with youth work was when I was a student at the Teknik University. I joined a youth organisation, which had offices inside the university. The fact that the organisation was inside the building made it easy for us to get access to information. I got interested after seeing their posters in the university walls, so one day I entered and asked for information. I am glad that my university offered me this opportunity. It was one of the many opportunities offered.

(Youth worker, from a city near Istanbul, Türkiye)

Türkiye has a solid presence in the Erasmus+ project. Moreover, in October 2021, the European Commission and Türkiye signed three agreements granting Türkiye association status to European Union programmes for the period 2021-27: [Horizon Europe](#), the European Union research and innovation programme; [Erasmus+](#), the European Union programme for education, training, youth and sport; and the [European Solidarity Corps](#), which means that Turkish actors in the youth sector can participate under the same conditions as participants from European Union member states. Turkish youth workers can also count on financial support from the numerous international organisations operating in the country. In recent years, large sums of money have been allocated to NGOs working with refugees, which is expected to continue for as long as there will be large migratory flows inside Turkish territory.

Examples of practice

The city of Izmir announced its candidacy to be the European Capital of Youth in 2026. The announcement was made on 22 December 2022 by the mayor of Izmir, Tunç Soyer, at a press conference organised in the presence of members of the Forum of Youth Organisations.

According to an announcement made to the local press on 22 December 2022, a gunpowder magazine dating to the Ottoman Empire, situated in the region of Beyoglu in Istanbul, will be transformed into host a youth centre and library.

The [Youth Work Academy Camps 2020](#) was a project by the Toy youth association that lasted for 18 weeks and involved young people aspiring to become youth workers. The greatest part of the project was conducted online due to the lockdown in Türkiye enforced by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Community Volunteers Foundation (Toplum Gönüllüleri Vakfı) has grown over the years into one of the most influential organisations supporting grass-roots youth work and volunteering. Right now, the foundation's branches are supporting dozens of young people who undertake social responsibility projects in 135 youth groups/clubs/communities across Türkiye's 81 provinces.

Regional similarities and differences

South-East Europe has been marked by a strong tradition of youth work, dating to the period following the Second World War. Some of the states in the region, namely the states of former Yugoslavia, have undergone a period of transition which has given an impetus for the development of civil society organisations. Over the last decade, youth workers in some countries of South-East Europe have also sought to address other, more nuanced, threats to security, such as radicalisation and violent extremism. There have been effective actions in this regard, which have fostered the setting-up of networks, especially among civil society organisations. Such activities have also been enhanced by support from the European Union and the European Commission, the Council of Europe, SALTO-Youth SEE, the RYCO and other international networks and donors. The Bonn Process could also present a platform for the consolidation of youth work in the entire region.

At a regional level, opportunities for networking and inclusion in meaningful youth activities are significantly reduced for young people from rural and remote areas. Youth workers in the region are striving to keep up with international processes and to be included in training that could facilitate delivery of high-quality youth work. Youth workers in South-East Europe have managed to organise and conduct activities despite the scarcity of infrastructure and financial resources. They have demonstrated adaptability to ever-changing political structures and economic crises, which are often accompanied by high turnover in the government staff in charge of youth and youth work. Despite negative developments stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic, youth workers have accomplished better visibility for youth work and for the efforts of youth workers who contribute to positive social changes and to mitigating the effects of the pandemic.

Insights gathered during the desk research and interviews conducted for this study indicate that there are eight main challenges facing youth work in South-East Europe:

1. cross-sectoral co-operation and a high degree of centralisation;
2. funding;
3. politicisation and shrinking space for civic society;
4. digitalisation;

5. a lack of continuous national research on young people that hinders establishing youth-friendly actions and policies and which is often coupled with a high degree of bureaucratisation of youth work;
6. youth policies focusing on “mainstream” young people, which contributes to further marginalisation of vulnerable youth;
7. inadequate indicators evaluating the impact of youth work;
8. a lack of visibility of youth work and youth workers.

The next four sections summarise the findings on the four aspects that proved crucial in analysis of common or diversifying traits of the 12 countries examined for this study: centralisation and cross-sectoral co-operation, funding, politicisation and shrinking space for civic society, and digitalisation.

Youth work practice: centralisation and cross-sectoral co-operation

Desk review and interviews revealed some weak points in co-operation among the stakeholders in youth work in South-East Europe. Support structures to youth work and youth workers were addressed from different angles, including the suitability of the existing state structures responsible for youth work. The evidence from the publications and interviews suggests that young people and youth work are merged in inappropriate institutional frameworks that divert attention from youth work. For example, in Greece the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs oversaw youth until mid-2023, in Croatia youth is merged with demography, under the State Office for Demography and Youth, while in Serbia youth was recently merged with tourism under the same ministry. In other countries, the structures supporting youth work are under the auspices of institutions in charge of education and/or sport. Even in these cases, youth work is usually given less priority and funding. For example, in North Macedonia, the main institution supporting youth work, the Agency of Youth and Sport, disproportionately invests in the sport component because of the political visibility it creates for the government. A similar situation exists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Kosovo*. Albania is the only country in this study that has a ministry dedicated exclusively to children and youth, established in 2021.

There is significant room for improvement when it comes to joint efforts to devise youth policies. Youth policy is addressed as an area that is completely separate from public policy in general, with very little coherence with other ministries and policy areas. So, experts for some areas, such as education, employment, health and so on, are not being consulted in drafting youth policy, and vice versa.

Although cross-sectoral co-operation has been a buzzword in the youth sector for more than two decades, genuine and inclusive cross-sectoral co-operation is still an exception rather than the rule in practice in South-East Europe. A triangle of policy makers, youth workers/practitioners and researchers, which is directly engaging young people and is fostered by political will for devising and implementing relevant and sensible youth work policies and actions, is still not a reality in majority of the countries in South-East Europe concerned in this study. Regarding intersectoral

co-operation, the interviewees expressed concerns about the capacity and competences of the state in this regard. Most officials at the institutions in the youth sector do not have a background in civil-sector youth work.

There is a general impression that young people are not sufficiently included in decision-making processes and do not have a complete overview of intersectoral and cross-sectoral co-operation. Government officials rarely include young people with relevant experience in decision making or policy making. Moreover, youth strategies do not include vulnerable groups of young people; they are mostly focused on “mainstream” young people, denying opportunities for social inclusion to already marginalised youth, as stated by one of the interviewed youth workers from Slovenia.

Therefore, the youth sector in the region often finds itself in a vicious circle comprising the absence of strategic documents, a lack of support for the sector, partial implementation of youth policies, limited allocation of financial resources and widespread mistrust. All these aspects are more strongly pronounced at the local and regional levels, as the institutions and services in charge of youth are highly centralised. There is an evident lack of trust and a hesitancy to engage in productive dialogue that would include partners from various sectors. Young people do not demonstrate confidence in politics and governments, and young people (and youth workers) do not believe themselves to be a priority.

Funding

The paucity of sustainable funding presents one of the major challenges to youth work in South-East Europe. Financial resources for youth work activities from national sources are very scarce in the region, making the youth sector in the region generally unsustainable and donor driven. Funding from national sources depends on political will and the prioritisation of youth-related topics. The allocation of funding is sometimes used as a “subtle” way of keeping the civic scene “under control” and exerting pressure on youth organisations. In some cases, interviews highlighted the impression that dominant political parties have an influence on youth work funding, particularly when it comes to the allocation of grants. Moreover, the prevalence of precarious employment in the youth and civil society sector within the region, often in the form of temporary contracts, may create opportunities for exerting pressure and political influence while restricting the free expression of differing perspectives and approaches.

Project-based funding dominates youth work in South-East Europe, as support coming from the state is not sufficient for activities targeting young people. There are only one-year grants available, and the interviewees have been trying to advocate for establishing funding for programmes that would last for at least two to three years. According to the interviewed youth workers and youth experts, the transparency of evaluation procedures and allocation of grants is very questionable. The scarcity of funding has always elevated the vulnerability of the youth sector in South-East Europe, with project proposals having to claim “150% of milestones and deliverables” while available funds do not allow to implement even 50% of foreseen activities. The criteria to be met by applicants should also be changed, as they are currently based mainly on the “large numbers”, which means that associations working with

discriminated and marginalised youth cannot get grants via public calls. These inadequacies also bring into question the quality of youth work and a depletion of energy, motivation and commitment among youth workers.

Youth associations at the local level, especially in smaller municipalities in rural areas, face hardship in providing the financial means to implement their activities. In other words, funding at the local level largely depends on the economic strength of the municipality. Many municipalities do not have grants dedicated to young people. Usually, only smaller amounts are available and, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, many calls have been significantly downsized.

The difficulties of funding youth work in South-East Europe are closely connected to the status of youth work and youth workers in the region. Youth work is still not recognised and acknowledged as an area of work that contributes to wider society; it is often pushed to the margins of “extracurricular” activities. In line with this, youth workers are not widely recognised as a profession, although there are some exceptions, like in Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia. Even in those three countries, youth workers are in the same precarious position as their colleagues from other countries in South-East Europe; they often work on a voluntary basis or for minimum wage, and without social security or a pension. Unfavourable working conditions lead to a loss of human resources, as a big share of the most skillful youth workers leave the sector for better-paid and more stable labour market prospects.

International funds, on the other hand, support youth work both on the national and at the local level, although the actions covered by international grants cannot always be applicable for local youth work. The current international funding schemes are usually complex and require expertise in the grant application process, making it difficult for smaller, grass-roots youth organisations to apply. At a regional level, there are grants provided within cross-border initiatives supporting youth work among the six economies of the Western Balkans. The [Regional Youth Cooperation Office](#), a mechanism that arose as an output of the Berlin Process, is based in Tirana (Albania). The RYCO launches projects fostering co-operation among young people from all over the Western Balkans and announces, at specific times each year, grants for projects fulfilling certain criteria. Funding opportunities for regional youth projects are also provided by the [Regional Cooperation Council](#), an intergovernmental body based in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), promoting regional co-operation across South-East Europe and among the six economies of the Western Balkans.

Politicisation and shrinking space for civic society

South-East Europe is still struggling with consolidating political processes and employing democratic practices, which is also reflected in youth work in the region. Political developments, therefore, have an impact on youth work in the region in various ways. One of the Croatian interviewees argued that: “political developments do not influence youth work in Croatia as young people are not a priority”. This is supported by the statement made by the interviewed youth worker/expert from Montenegro: “local youth services have been closed and their contracts haven’t been renewed, it shows to what extent young people are a priority in Montenegro.” On the other hand, while the policy agenda does not focus on youth, young people are

often omitted from the overall policy framework. Young people enter into focus only when it is suitable to the leading political actors, namely during political elections and for tokenistic actions.

Employing the young members of the political parties at the public institutions is closely related to the official politics influencing youth work. Such practices raise suspicion of the young people towards youth work, as well as mistrust of youth workers towards state institutions and agencies. Because of excessive politicisation in the countries of the Western Balkans, youth wings of political parties have become the main source of youth mobilisation. In fact, in these countries, the youth wings of only the few leading political parties have more members than all the youth civil society organisations combined. The reason for this “negative politicisation” is that, in most of these countries, party membership is often required to obtain a job in the public sector or to use clientelism that has been to a large extent created by political parties. As the youth wings also organise extensive activities for their members, this effectively shrinks the space of the youth civil society organisations. Moreover, youth wings do not play important roles in the decision-making processes of their respective parties, and they put political goals over genuine youth priorities.

Although political parties do organise different types of activities for their members, this cannot be called “youth work”. On the contrary, this phenomenon effectively contributes to shrinking the youth civil society in South-East Europe, especially in the Western Balkans. Youth work experts expressed concerns regarding the extent to which political settings affect the selection of members of national or local youth councils. Youth workers are often discouraged from expressing their views about current issues affecting youth or working with specific groups of young people due to fear of marginalisation and public persecution, corruption and nepotism.

Youth workers from Türkiye reported sudden changes of governmental relations towards youth NGOs (“blacklisting” associations) as a result of them having expressed publicly certain ideas or advocated for certain social rights. Youth workers around the region interviewed for this study testified about instances of failing democracy and fear of engaging in public debate and activism.

I feel that I can no longer call myself a youth worker in this country. If you work with specific groups or communities, you might be accused of being against the government. If you speak of certain ideas, you might be called a traitor and end up being prosecuted. [...] No, I prefer to have my peace of mind than end up jailed up for no reason.

*(ex-youth worker, now administrative assistant
at an educational institute, Türkiye)*

There are also controversial examples of local political elites occupying spaces meant for youth, as in the case of a small town in Romania, where a heated public debate emerged following the [public decision to hand over the premises of a youth centre to the local council \(Meseşan 2021\)](#). Local counsellors justified their decision to displace the NGO by claiming that the latter had “abusively invested in public spaces”. This dispute escalated into a heated political debate over the value of youth and the public space allocated to young people, especially in peripheral areas.

An interesting parameter linking youth work with political and civic life is the role of youth centres. Youth centres in Türkiye, for instance, are sometimes used as places where young people develop their political identity based on certain principles and values. On the contrary, in countries like Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Romania, the large absence of youth centres and spaces for youth, especially in rural areas, is seen as a great loss and a factor in people's disengagement from civil life and political dialogue.

The politicisation of youth work, the absence of political commitment to youth issues and shrinking spaces for young people in the region are often coupled with the over-bureaucratisation and prolonged procedures, and an overall lack of capacity at the state level.

Digitalisation

Rapid digitalisation and long periods of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic have increased the use of digital tools in youth work in the region. However, the transition to digital tools has been hard for many youth workers, and also for communities lacking access to digital tools and resources. Additionally, youth workers have found it difficult to substitute human interaction with digital youth work, and they sometimes feel they lack the digital competences or resources to do so. Direct communication via social networks is also often used, especially via messaging apps, in combination with paid promotions on social network and associations' web portals. In some countries, including Croatia, Romania and Serbia, youth workers have managed to keep up with activities due to shorter periods of lockdown, while the stricter lockdowns made it more difficult for youth workers in Greece, North Macedonia and Slovenia to do their work. Some youth associations had limited access to equipment prior to the pandemic, and some of them managed to purchase equipment through international funding. Many young people, especially those from rural areas, still struggle with very slow internet connections.

The ones who can benefit from digital youth work activities are those who have access to a private computer and stable internet connection. Sadly, this is not the reality for many young people who live in less privileged areas of Türkiye and who grew even more isolated during the pandemic.

(Youth worker, Türkiye)

The interviewees agreed that the quality of online compared to direct youth work is not equal, and that it is very difficult to establish trust and immediate co-operation between young people and youth workers through online activities.

Digital technology changes ways of access to services and participants, and a moment of establishing a social cohesion has been changed. Mingling of the event participants is impossible now and networking doesn't have the same quality and depth. But we have to adapt as hybrid youth work is our at least mid-term, maybe even a long-term reality.

(Youth worker, Croatia)

The lives of young people, especially of those who are still in formal education systems, are impregnated by digital technologies and educational contents, and young

people directly express their desire to engage in direct personal communication. During the interviews, there was frequent reporting on young people's saturation from the use of digital technologies, which leads to resistance towards digital means. At the same time, the youth workers expressed their concerns that the prevalence of digital youth work over direct youth work had probably influenced the ratings of their associations, and if youth associations would like to sustain their activities, they feel obliged to commit to hybrid events for as long as they can.

Of the youth workers interviewed for this study in different countries in South-East Europe, the majority responded that they feel they could make good use of extra training on digital skills before they could say that they feel confident in operating efficiently in the digital realm. The interviewees agreed that digital youth work cannot replace real-life experience, mainly for the following reasons.

- ▶ Their target community does not have access to the necessary digital equipment, space and infrastructure to participate fully in digital activities.
- ▶ Digital youth work is a new trend in South-East Europe. Therefore, conditions are not ripe yet.
- ▶ Youth workers often lack the necessary skills and competences, but also the space, capacity and equipment to perform efficiently online.
- ▶ Digital activities cannot replace the first-hand experience of trust that comes with one-to-one, interpersonal communication.

These findings are also supported by the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership's research on the impact of Covid-19 on young people and the youth sector in South-East Europe (Boskovic, Lula and Senyuva 2022) and the limitations of digital youth work (Pawluczuk and Şerban 2022). It should be also emphasised here that organisations that implement conflict resolution and intercultural learning projects for youth in post-conflict areas have been particularly strongly affected, as it is extremely difficult to conduct these types of activities online.

Most respondents said that they discovered new tools during the pandemic which they had not previously been aware of, and that they experimented with new platforms. It was almost unanimously shared that if there is one thing that should be kept as a lesson for the future, it is flexibility over communication. As almost all respondents shared, connecting digitally when physical presence is not possible, and flexibility in working hours and styles are worth keeping and developing further.

In the 12 countries observed, the youth sector has demonstrated its resilience as it has embraced new forms of interacting with young people. In addition to seminars, training courses and panels, youth organisations organised art exhibitions, language tandems, storytelling evenings or even theatrical plays online. Some organisations, like NAPOR in Serbia, recognised the need to develop expertise in communicating with young people; such expertise would require a full-time position in the association due to the high demand imposed by pandemics. NAPOR has just completed an analysis of channels and messages sent using digital tools to young people. On this basis, NAPOR will develop its communication strategy, which will add to previous efforts, such as organising [a regional conference on online methods](#) in November 2020.



The pandemic has transformed modes of communication and, although the digitalisation of youth work has been on the agenda for the last couple of years, the extent and severity of changes have not been scrutinised thoroughly. The sustainability of online youth work is yet to be analysed and planned, and it is difficult to comprehend the complexity of the requirements of various actors in the field regarding the implementation of digital means in youth work. The pandemic revealed that not all youth organisations have sustainable opportunities to engage in digital or hybrid youth work. Therefore, the interviewees expressed their anxiety over continuation of their activities and funding in the post-Covid-19 period.

Conclusions and recommendations for advocacy and revision of the youth work framework in South-East Europe

The interviews and desk research presented here indicate that, to implement sensible and constructive measures tailored to the needs of young people both at the national and local levels, stakeholders should engage in open, broad consultations, including using expert groups consisting of young people, youth workers and other practitioners, policy makers and researchers. All stakeholders should embrace processes and guidelines promoted by the Council of Europe and the European Union. So that this study can be used widely to advocate for positive changes in youth work in South-East Europe, the recommendations below are divided in three sections, one for each group of stakeholders: policy makers, youth workers and youth researchers.

Recommendations for policy makers

Policy makers and politicians at the national and local levels should respect impartiality and provide support to all youth organisations on an equal basis, regardless of the target group or area of youth work the organisations are dedicated to. Governments should pay special attention to enhancing a political culture that is based on mutual respect and compliance with the law. Their actions should result in tailored-made and responsive youth policies that react in a timely way to the needs and changes of the youth sector. Funds should be allocated through transparent and merit-based procedures. Overall, societies in South-East Europe should undergo a process of significant depoliticisation, especially of the public sector, and this should inevitably affect the youth sector as well.

Interviewees from the countries analysed here agreed that there are pronounced differences in access to opportunities for quality youth work across different regions at the national level. These differences are especially evident in the insufficient opportunities for exercising youth work in rural areas, which is also reflected in a lack of youth access to support from the civic sector. Equally importantly, youth workers from less affluent countries in South-East Europe feel deprived of possibilities that are

provided to their colleagues in economically more prosperous countries. Institutions in charge of youth work should advocate for recognition of the importance of youth work and provide support to building the structural, financial and human capacities of youth associations.

Formal education opportunities should be introduced in national universities and coupled with a well-structured system of youth work recognition and validation. There should be a serious commitment to joint drafting of pivotal youth documents and joint application of such documents and accompanying action plans. When it comes to international actors, certain international organisations and programmes (Erasmus+ National Agencies, the European Commission, the European Youth Foundation, SALTO Erasmus+ Resource Centres, the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership, the RYCO) could help by providing advice and advocating for the importance of providing stable prerequisites for quality youth work that correspond to the analyses presented in this study.

Recommendations for youth workers

Although there are examples of bilateral and multilateral co-operation agreements, a high degree of competition over financial and structural sources among youth associations is still noticeable. Considering that youth organisations in South-East Europe share similar challenges and obstacles to exercising their activities, it would be beneficial to engage in further co-operation, mutual learning processes, and establishing national and international networks. Special attention should be brought to nurturing sustainability and partnerships with other stakeholders in the youth field, especially with actors in formal education, social work and the health sector. Youth work efforts and the needs of youth workers often remain unnoticed because outreach activities are random and skills in the area of communication and dissemination are insufficient. More commitment is required in adopting the communication and networking skills that would help youth workers to more efficiently liaise with various stakeholders in the youth field and with young people in order to advocate for better conditions for youth work.

Recommendations for youth researchers

Youth researchers must acknowledge that youth policy and insights into youth work practice are indispensable components of almost all areas of youth research. Therefore, youth researchers should be more committed to developing in-depth knowledge on youth policies, youth work practices and support structures available to youth workers. To do so, researchers should co-operate with international youth studies, both with policy makers and other youth researchers and they should encourage funders to recognise the importance of internationally comparable data on youth work. In addition, the value of large, anonymised, longitudinal data sets – supplemented by insights obtained using qualitative methodology – should not be neglected.

In conclusion, the lack of cross-sectoral co-operation in the youth field in South-East Europe currently hinders quality youth work, in turn negatively affecting the

motivation of the most qualified experts to stay in the field. However, sharing examples of practice, in combination with the presence of international organisations in the region, could enable changes in the pace, quality and direction of the development of youth work. To achieve high-quality youth work, all actors must show willingness to contribute and provide support to the process. This should include youth organisations, public and international organisations and institutions and young people at the national, regional and local levels.



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Appendix

Guiding questions for personal, semi-structured interviews

1. The context of youth work

1. What are the most important structures supporting youth work in your country?
2. What issues/challenges are these structures facing?
3. Is there a legal framework for youth work in your country?
4. Please provide examples of the strengths and shortcomings of this legal framework; what is missing and what should be improved/aligned with European standards?
5. Is there a gap between the youth policies at a normative level and their practical implementation? In other words, do young people and practitioners working with youth have access to opportunities prescribed by public acts?
6. Are there any issues in terms of organisational capacities youth organisations in your country are facing? Please, explain.
7. What are the main sources of financial support for youth work in your country?
8. To what extent is youth work in your country influenced by political developments? How is this manifested?

2. Youth workers' skills and competences: capacity building, validation and professionalisation

9. Are there educational opportunities for youth workers in your country at an academic/vocational level?
10. Is there a nationally established system of validation of the previously acquired knowledge/competences in the youth field? If yes, please describe it briefly and give a reference for further info.
11. Is there a nationally established system of recognition of the youth workers' profession (accreditation procedure)? If yes, please describe it briefly and give a reference for further information.
12. Is youth work considered a profession in your country? Do youth workers enjoy benefits that other professionals do (prevailance of open-ended over fixed-term contracts, social security, medical insurance, payments, etc.)?

13. Are there professional requirements for youth work developed at the national level? If yes, please describe them briefly and give a reference for further information.
14. Are there ethical standards for youth work developed at the national level? If yes, please describe them briefly and give a reference for further information.
15. How do you think youth workers in your country could be better prepared and supported in order to deliver quality youth work?

3. Looking towards the future: potential for growth and innovation

16. What are the most frequent channels for reaching young people utilised by your organisation? *(If the expert is a part of an organisation)*
17. Are digital technologies used in youth work in your country? How exactly and via which channels? If they are used, what are the pros and cons of their use? How do they facilitate youth work?
18. What are the changes in relation to digital technologies and youth work that occurred during the pandemic?
19. Provided the possibility, what would you change in the way youth work is being addressed by policy makers in your country?
20. Is there anything else you would like to add in order to clearly describe youth work and its status in your country?"

Youth work practice examples

Please state if there is a good practice example of improving youth work in your country, or in a local community.

Please, briefly elaborate on the good practice example:

What are the main lessons learned from the good practice example:

Additional questions:

- i. What are the main driving/functioning elements of the good practice?
- ii. What needs to be changed in order for youth work practice to be more functional?
- iii. What are the challenges that cannot be addressed solely by your organisations?
- iv. Please, provide a link to the further sources of information on the good practice example.

Social, political and economic turmoil in South-East Europe over the last three decades have affected young people, youth work and youth policy implementation in the region. This research, aimed at young people, youth workers, researchers and policy makers, offers a comprehensive insight into the perspectives, challenges and potential of youth work in 12 countries of South-East Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo,* Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Türkiye.

The study analyses legal frameworks and youth policies at the national level, structures supporting youth work, educational opportunities for youth workers, recognition and validation of youth work and funding. It makes recommendations on how to advocate for better positions for youth workers and youth work in national and international contexts.

The findings indicate that while the youth sector in all the observed countries faces similar obstacles, youth workers and civil society organisations continue to demonstrate high levels of resilience, innovation and adaptability to sudden social changes, which have been essential for the youth sector's growth and development in the region.

* All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

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