

## Chapter 12

# Theories and concepts of youth work in South-East Europe

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Youth work is complex, but the complexity lies precisely in the flexibility of youth work with its intention to respond, as much as possible, to the needs of young people, both at the individual level and in the context of the local communities in which [the] youth work programme is implemented.

(Forum MNE, 2008)

**Y**outh work is a recent concept in South-East Europe, although its practices precede its conceptualisation. During the socialist era, the idea of youth care was used predominantly to describe activities that promoted benefit for young people. That form of youth work was mainly executed through socialist youth organisations, whose task was to organise young people and their time outside of formal education (Krnjajić 2012). However, with the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, the needs of youth have been largely neglected in state policies and actions. Prolonged post-socialist transformation, with its high youth unemployment rates, rendered young people very vulnerable. This economic situation has contributed to a perspective where youth work is often seen as a support mechanism for the transition of young people from education to employment.

In a rare recent analysis of youth work in South-East Europe, Bužinkić et al. (2015) mention several youth work pillars identified in Croatia that can easily be applied to the region as a whole. Taken chronologically, these pillars include: peace building (1990s), non-formal education (late 1990s, early 2000s), networking and advocating for youth policies (mid and late 2000s), and finally, structuring youth work through youth organisation projects (Bužinkić et al. 2015: 38). The authors argue that peace building and anti-war campaigns, together with human rights advocacy, initially created the platform for youth work practices. Youth projects and activities during

the Second World War and the post-war period were supported by international organisations and featured themes of reconciliation, tolerance and active citizenship (Vojnić Tujnić 2008). These activities can be seen as the trigger for renewed forms of youth work, independent from the state and political parties.

By the end of the 1990s, the focus moved slowly to what may be called the second pillar, youth work as a non-formal education platform. A number of civil society organisations invested considerable efforts into, first, activities based on the non-formal education of teachers and then of young people themselves. Such work led to the strengthening of youth involvement in community work through capacity building of youth organisations and youth leadership programmes. The third pillar refers to youth work networking for advocacy of youth policy, to foster the development and sustainability of youth organisations.

State policies did not recognise youth as a specific and vulnerable group until the mid-2000s, prioritising other policies focused on the economy, justice, social protection and formal education. During the 2000s, all the countries of South-East Europe slowly began to define strategic and legal frameworks for youth policy, within which the notion of youth work became more or less accepted, but was still not clearly defined. This is the period when umbrella organisations and networks, mostly representing the predecessors of national youth councils, were created across the region.<sup>84</sup>

This development could be seen in the light of European processes, where the EU and the Council of Europe fostered the recognition of youth work's importance through the adoption of several guiding documents<sup>85</sup> and continuous support for youth activities through European programmes. Their work, along with that of other international donors, has been key to the development of youth work in the region in the past two decades.

However, the evidence on youth work practices and development in this region remains inadequate. In spite of relatively scarce data on youth work in South-East Europe, this chapter will try to offer a comprehensive overview of the concept of youth work in the region and point to good practices in specific countries.

## **What do we mean by youth work?**

When it comes to the recognition of youth work in the legislation and strategic documents of youth policy in South-East Europe, the situation varies from country to country.

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84. For example, the Croatian Youth Network was founded in 2002, the Youth Coalition of Serbia (later Youth Umbrella Organisation of Serbia) in 2003, and the Coalition of Youth Organizations SEGA in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" in 2004.

85. This process started with the publishing of the White Paper on Youth in 2001, which offered the base for developing national strategic frameworks of youth policy to support youth work. It is important to mention also the Council of the European Union Resolution on Youth Work (2010) and "Pathways 2.0 towards recognition of non-formal learning/education and of youth work in Europe" (2011) as two documents directly tackling the issue of youth work in Europe.

For example, the National Youth Strategy (2006)<sup>86</sup> of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has not defined youth work as a concept; it is mentioned only in the list of actions fostering non-formal learning as complementary to formal education. This action is aimed at introducing a permanent university course for youth work. In Montenegro, Croatia and Albania, too, youth work is not specified in documents on youth policy. A relatively recent Council of Europe international youth policy review of Albania suggested a lack of understanding of the idea of youth work, since, in the youth strategy that prevailed at the time, “youth work” and even “non-formal education” were scarcely mentioned (Williamson 2010). A quite similar situation can be found in Kosovo,<sup>87</sup> where youth work has not been officially recognised, despite the adoption of the Law on Youth and the Kosovo Strategy for Youth,<sup>88</sup> and apparently positive developments in “recognising youth workers as potential partners in dealing with young people across a number of contexts” (Şenyuva 2012: 39).

Youth policy competences in Bosnia and Herzegovina are divided between the two federal entities, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. The Law on Youth Organising of the Republika Srpska<sup>89</sup> defines youth work as different forms of socially beneficial work in which young people are involved and which contributes to the improvement of their position. In the Bosnia and Herzegovina federation, youth work is not defined as such, but a wider definition of “work with young people” (*rad sa mladima*) has been in use. The Law on Youth of the Bosnia and Herzegovina federation defines work with young people as planned, meaningful and intentional support to young people through their voluntary participation. This concept includes non-formal education, different activities for young people and with young people, youth counselling, programmes designed for specific groups of young people, international youth work and other types of creatively organised leisure time for young people.

Finally, the Slovenian and Serbian frameworks could be used as role models. Slovenian legislation recognised the concept of youth work through an Act on the Public Interest in Youth Sector (2010),<sup>90</sup> which has defined youth work as:

an organised and target-oriented form of youth action ... for the youth, within which the youth, based on their own efforts, contribute to their own inclusion in society, strengthen their competences and contribute to the development of the community. The implementation of various forms of youth work is based on the volunteer participation of the youth regardless of their interest, cultural, principle or political orientation.

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86. Available at [www.sega.org.mk/web/doc/National%20Youth%20Strategy-Macedonia.pdf](http://www.sega.org.mk/web/doc/National%20Youth%20Strategy-Macedonia.pdf), accessed 11 March 2017.

87. All reference 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.

88. Available at [www.youthpolicy.org/national/Kosovo\\_2009\\_Youth\\_Law.pdf](http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Kosovo_2009_Youth_Law.pdf) and [www.mkrs-ks.org/repository/docs/KOSOVO\\_STRATEGY\\_FOR\\_YOUTH.pdf](http://www.mkrs-ks.org/repository/docs/KOSOVO_STRATEGY_FOR_YOUTH.pdf), accessed 11 March 2017.

89. Available at: [www.pm.rs.ba/publikacije/dokumenti/18-zakon-omladinskom-organizovanjurs/file](http://www.pm.rs.ba/publikacije/dokumenti/18-zakon-omladinskom-organizovanjurs/file), accessed 11 March 2017.

90. Available at [www.ursm.gov.si/fileadmin/ursm.gov.si/pageuploads/pdf/ZJIMS/ZJIMS\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.ursm.gov.si/fileadmin/ursm.gov.si/pageuploads/pdf/ZJIMS/ZJIMS_ENG.pdf), accessed 11 March 2017.

In general, the Serbian national youth policy framework offers the most comprehensive and inclusive approach when it comes to youth work recognition and practices. Youth work is defined through the Law on Youth (2011):<sup>91</sup>

Youth work shall mean such 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.

Together with the national youth strategy and its action plan,<sup>92</sup> this law provides a good framework for better recognition and support for youth work practices. With the new National Youth Strategy 2015-2025, adopted in early 2015, youth work has gained even more importance and focus, since one of the specific goals of the strategy is "Improved quality and availability of youth work and ensured recognition of youth work". This document envisages a definition of youth work occupation through the new National Qualifications Framework.

It is obvious that there is no singular or harmonised definition of youth work from a regional perspective. Non-formal education, voluntary participation and the development of young people (personal and/or social aspects) are major aspects of youth work concepts, if we are to follow the legislative frameworks. However, these frameworks do not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that youth work is more developed or better implemented in the countries where legislation and strategic documents clearly recognise youth work. It only sets preconditions that can, but do not necessarily have to influence significantly the scope and real effects of youth work.

Strategic and legal frameworks in all countries envisage several mechanisms for the implementation of youth policy. Those are mainly youth councils, youth centres, youth clubs, youth organisations and civil society organisations (CSOs) focused on young people. In Serbia, there is also the specific institution of youth offices (regional and local), whose role is the implementation of the youth policy and organisation of community youth work at the regional and local level. Youth offices are to be financed from the budget of local self-government, which is seen as a good way to ensure their sustainability, especially in a context where the absence of sustainability is the general weakness of the youth sector.

## **Where is youth work in practice?**

Reliable evidence on youth work patterns and practices across the countries of South-East Europe is lacking. Research on young people in general is neither routine nor done in comparative fashion, and research on youth work is even less frequent and limited to the ventures of CSO representatives from the youth field. Therefore, it is difficult to compare practices in the countries and point to trends in youth work in this region, with the exception of advocacy processes for the recognition of youth work.

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91. Available at [www.mos.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/download-manager-files/The%20Law%20on%20Youth.pdf](http://www.mos.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/download-manager-files/The%20Law%20on%20Youth.pdf), accessed 11 March 2017.

92. Available at [www.youthforum.org/assets/2014/10/Serbia-EN-National-Youth-Strategy.pdf](http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2014/10/Serbia-EN-National-Youth-Strategy.pdf) and [www.youthpolicy.org/national/Serbia\\_2009\\_Action\\_Plan\\_Youth\\_Strategy.pdf](http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Serbia_2009_Action_Plan_Youth_Strategy.pdf), accessed 11 March 2017.

Recognition and promotion of the youth work concept in South-East Europe has been largely supported by international organisations and institutions. When the Swedish organisation Forum Syd launched a regional initiative to set up an association for youth workers/practitioners in co-operation with partner organisations from Serbia, Montenegro, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2007, Serbia was the only country where this process was successful. The National Association of Youth Workers (Nacionalna asocijacija praktičara/ki omladinskog rada – NAPOR) was founded in March 2009 with the aim of fostering recognition and quality assurance of the youth work at national level. Today, NAPOR has 80 full and 10 associated member organisations. In other countries in the region, several CSOs have also endeavoured to achieve recognition and professionalisation of youth work at the national level, but without a specific association of youth workers.

The lack of standards gives rise to different understandings of the main purpose and aim of youth work, and leaves space for quality variations in practice (NAPOR 2010). Despite the strong presence of youth work in the field, a central goal of youth work – the active participation of young people in society – has had limited results.

In the next few paragraphs, I will present the national process of professionalisation and recognition of youth work in Serbia, as the most advanced in the region.<sup>93</sup> This process started after the founding of NAPOR, with the intention of defining a quality assurance framework, including the identification of qualification levels, quality standards for youth work practitioners and for organisations, as well as internal and external “verification” or assessment mechanisms.

The first step in this process was specifying within the national context what youth work is. The founding assembly of NAPOR adopted the Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Youth Work Programmes (2009), within which it was stated that:

The purpose of youth work is to support young people in the process of reaching independence, where youth workers help them in personal and social development in order to become active members of society and participants in decision-making processes. The idea of youth work is to create a safe environment and opportunities for active participation of young people on a voluntary basis in the process of acquiring skills, knowledge and attitudes. Therefore, youth work is:

- a. complementary to formal education;
- b. carried out by youth workers;
- c. conducted through activities using methods of non-formal education and information.

(NAPOR 2011: 8)

Besides these guidelines, NAPOR has achieved several other important steps in the process of recognition and promotion of youth work and youth workers as a profession by developing:

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93. It has to be taken into account that some steps in defining occupational standards for youth workers were also finalised in Montenegro, as presented in “Omladinski rad u Crnoj Gori” [Youth work in Montenegro], published by Forum Syd in 2007.

- ▶ standards of qualifications in youth work on three levels:
  - assistant for youth work programmes;
  - co-ordinator for youth work programmes;
  - specialist for youth work programmes;
- ▶ a mechanism for the validation of previously acquired competences from previously mentioned occupations;
- ▶ standards for youth work programmes;
- ▶ curricula for non-formal education for the youth work profession;
- ▶ a code of ethics for youth workers, adopted and signed by all NAPOR members;
- ▶ the Council for Ethics and the Ethical Code of Youth Work.

Besides a strong, advocacy-oriented association of youth practitioners, other steps have also been taken to establish the occupation of youth work in Serbia. The Centre for Youth Work (Centar za Omladinski Rad – CZOR), a founding member of NAPOR, is the only CSO in South-East Europe that provides formal university education for community youth workers. Its success is mirrored in the establishment of the two curricula within formal education, supported through the EU's Tempus programme. The Bachelor's and Master's Youth Work in Community programmes are implemented in co-operation with Jönköping University (Sweden) and two universities in Serbia (Alfa University and the University of Novi Sad).

Beyond Serbia, there is an accredited programme titled Leadership and Community Youth Work at the South East European University in Tetovo, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". A similar initiative was begun in Montenegro with a feasibility analysis for a Master's on youth work in the community, but the programme did not come to fruition.

## **Perspectives on the sustainability of youth work**

Bužinkić et al. (2015: 43) claim that youth work in Croatia, and I would argue throughout the whole region of South-East Europe as well, has become project and funding-oriented in the past few years:

The "getting old" phenomenon of the youth sector is in place – individuals, initiatives, and organisations who have been most active in building the youth sector in Croatia from the early 1990s are disappearing from the youth scene. Those who have built the youth sector are no longer represented. In the meantime, new generations of youth (projects) consumers, instead of youth leaders, have filled the void.

Şenyuva (2012) is pointing to a similar trend in stating that the availability of foreign funds as the primary source of financing has had some unintended negative outcomes, like a lack of networking and co-operation in the youth field due to high competition for (very) limited funds, and one-off activities, with organisations failing to survive beyond funding periods (2012: 9).

Therefore, the results of the survey among youth workers in Serbia conducted by NAPOR in 2010 cannot come as a surprise. They show that the highest percentage of funding (52.83%) comes from the EU and other international institutions and

donors, followed by government institutions (ministries, cities, municipalities), at 44.45%. Despite the positive development in the share of national funds available for programmes of youth work, there remains a concern for the longer-term sustainability of these programmes.

This is especially important if we note that both international and national funding is strictly project based in the field of youth work, with projects generally limited to durations of 3 to 12 months, and exceptionally 18 to 24 months. In recent years, many donors have withdrawn from the South-East Europe region, with severe consequences for youth work.<sup>94</sup> In practice, the EU's Erasmus+ is the only major grant programme with a specific scheme for youth projects. In addition, economic weakness in the observed countries has led to further cutting down of already small budgets allocated for youth, endangering the progress already achieved and stalling the continuation of youth work development in South-East Europe.

## Conclusion

Young people in South-East Europe are continuously faced with the difficulties of living in societies in prolonged economic transition, with increasingly unstable political systems. This leads to extended transitions to adulthood and high dependence on the family. In such circumstances, youth work is strongly challenged to provide paths to facilitate the transition from education to employment. Non-formal education programmes are mostly oriented towards gaining skills for better employability. Apart from general impressions and overviews, evidence on the existing processes and initiatives that could provide data for evaluation and monitoring is missing in all of the countries discussed.

We cannot claim that there is a unique concept of youth work in South-East Europe, in spite of the initiatives coming primarily from civil society. Youth work is undervalued throughout the region, with a few bright exceptions, and suffers from a lack of sustainable funding, but the sector still has great potential to develop into a coherent and powerful force in society. Its base will definitely remain within civil society, but hopefully this will not undermine the importance of the state support necessary to keep up with the needs of young people, whose benefit is at the core of the concept of youth work.

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94. There are some indications that the continuation of the refugee crisis in 2015 is bringing back the focus on the Balkans, but these actions are very specific and cannot by any means engage the whole youth work field, although there are many youth organisations involved in refugee relief actions.



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