

3. THE STATE OF YOUTH POLICY IN THE EASTERN EUROPE AND THE CAUCASUS

Before the country-by-country presentations, representatives of the National Council of Swedish Youth Organisations (LSU) and the European Youth Forum (YFJ) presented the work of their respective organisations. This turned out to be a successful way of moving from the European level to the level of individual countries in the region.

European Youth Forum (YFJ)

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) is the European umbrella organisation of national youth councils (NYCs) and international youth associations (INGYOs) in Europe. It has more than 90 member organisations. YFJ is represented in EECA through national branches of INGYOs and through national youth councils in all seven EECA countries.

The YFJ considers youth policy to be a cross-sectoral policy, as all government policies affecting young people are of relevance to them (from employment to health and discrimination). Youth policy should aim at providing a better, safer and equal environment for young people and providing them with the adequate means and policies for the present and the future. Therefore, YFJ, especially in the context of European institutions, focuses on two areas with regard to policies that target young people:

Youth Participation: Young people's participation as equal partners in the development of youth policy and in society in general is a central priority for YFJ. The organisation works on promoting such partnerships at all levels. YFJ is also advocating for lowering the voting age to 16 in Europe. The Youth Forum pursues its agenda through collaborating with its member organisations, through European and international institutions and through a broad network of civil society NGOs.

Volunteering: The European Youth Forum advocates for a better and safer environment for volunteers in general, and for volunteering which leads to commitment and engagement in youth organisations in particular. In this regard, the YFJ develops, together with its member organisations, a framework for the rights of volunteers. This document is being advocated towards European and international institutions and will be used in various institutional processes such as the European Union's Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the youth field. The YFJ, believing that volunteering needs more visibility and attention, is together with other NGOs advocating for 2011 to be declared the European Year of Volunteering.

With regard to the EECA region, YFJ is basing its work on its existing Youth Work Development strategy, of which monitoring of the youth policy development in each country of the region is a major element. YFJ has a strong interest in the youth policy reviews of the Council of Europe and it follows closely the European Neighbourhood Policy. The Youth Forum also focuses on capacity-building of its member organisations – national youth councils and the branches of international non-governmental youth organisations. As tools to monitor the realities in different countries, YFJ conducts study visits, meetings, uses its own "think tank" the Youth Work Development Working Group, etc. Based on this, YFJ makes analyses and works out recommendations on further actions to be carried out in order to improve the youth sector. It also organises training activities for member organisations on

different topics related to youth work and youth policy, and cooperates with different institutions and the SALTO EECA.

The European Youth Forum maintains a close focus on Belarus and the National Youth Council in Belarus, RADA, which is a YFJ member organisation. RADA has been going through difficult times since it lost its legal status, but YFJ is observing that the situation is slowly improving.

National youth councils from all Eastern European and Caucasus countries are members of YFJ.

The National Council of Swedish Youth Associations (LSU)

The National Council of Swedish Youth Associations (LSU) is the umbrella organisation of more than 80 national youth organisations in Sweden. In addition to having a national platform, LSU has a wide international involvement. One of LSU's initiatives is the Eastern European Youth Cooperation (EEYC), which involves all the EECA countries: Russia, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova.

Sweden currently has the chairmanship of the Council of Europe, and has just launched an initiative together with the Polish government to strengthen Eastern European cooperation within Europe. LSU has for several years been an important player in promoting closer Eastern European cooperation in the youth sector, and is trying to benefit from its government's initiative. The Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Carl Bildt, has been very open to involve LSU and young people in a dialogue on this issue (Bildt has a history as a former board member of LSU himself, so he has a good understanding of youth policy and the role that youth organisations can play.)

Through EEYC, LSU promotes networking and closer cooperation among youth organisations in the EECA countries as a way to empower young people. One of the issues that are in focus is the visa issue.

Armenia

National youth policy was first presented as a concept in Armenia in 1997-98. In 2004-05, a process took place to develop a National Youth Policy Strategy, which was adopted by the Government. Youth organisations were also somewhat consulted in this process. The adoption of the strategy was followed by a large scale research on youth issues in Armenia, as a result of which a "National Youth Report" was produced. As a further step, a National Youth Policy Review was conducted by the Council of Europe in 2006. The current government conducted a revision of the youth policy strategy in the first half of 2008, and the minister responsible for youth has promised that young people will be involved in the process to develop an action plan.

The Government adopted in 2006 a paper which formally recognises the concept of non-formal education and which devises a strategy for the development of non-formal education in Armenia. This is the first time this concept is legally defined in the country. The document was developed in cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Culture and Youth Affairs and the National Pool of Trainers, which provided experts pool from NGO sector.

The first Council of Europe training course that took place in Armenia focused on government – NGO cooperation and was very successful. One of the follow-ups of this event was the establishment of two co-management structures in Armenia. First, the Council of Youth Affairs under the Prime Minister, with an equal composition of representatives of government bodies and youth. Second, a co-managed structure was established under the ministry responsible for youth issues, responsible for decision making on the allocation of grants from the state budget to NGOs.

A number of youth organisations exist in Armenia, and many of them are members of the National Youth Council. Besides youth NGOs in almost all universities, there are student self-government organisations (such as student councils and student scientific societies) which unite young people. Some youth branches of political parties also exist, as well as several national donor-agencies, the largest of them being the "Pan-Armenian Youth International Center" Foundation and All-Armenian Youth Foundation.

Russia

A new governmental structure has recently been established in Russia, in which there is a separate Deputy Minister of Education responsible for youth issues and a separate department for youth policy. The Deputy Minister for Youth is a former board member of the National Youth Council of Russia, who has a good understanding of youth policy. The National Youth Council of Russia has been lobbying for the development of a co-managed Advisory Board which will give recommendations to the Ministry on youth issues, but the results of this effort are still uncertain.

Youth policy development in Russia is currently undergoing some challenges. One is financial, as it is difficult to ensure sufficient funding for youth-related programmes and activities. With regards to budget for youth activities and for implementing youth policy, the regional administrations have much larger budgets than at the federal level. Second, there are strategic challenges. A National Youth Policy strategy was proposed in 2006, but it has not been implemented due to a lack of funding. The third challenge regards research on youth. There is a lack of reliable and comprehensive data on youth on a national level, and no clear understanding of what their real needs are and how they can be addressed by a coordinated national youth policy. One measure to improve the situation in the research field is to promote closer cooperation, and an initiative has therefore been taken to establish a national network of youth researchers.

A youth law is currently being drafted in Russia. A draft law will be subject to public hearings, and the National Youth Council and other stakeholders will be able to submit their proposed amendments and revisions to the draft law.

The National Youth Council of Russia (NYCR) has existed for 16 years and is a well established partner with the government. There are a number of large youth NGOs in the country. A new and positive development in the youth sector is that the youth branches of political parties, which are relatively independent from their mother parties, have expressed an interest in becoming members of NYCR.

Moldova

The Government of the Republic of Moldova declared 2008 as the Year of Youth. Young people make up approximately 1/3 of the population.

A National Youth Action Plan was developed in Moldova in 2003-04. Since then, however, the Youth Ministry was discontinued and youth issues are now handled by the Ministry of Education and Youth. At the Parliament, there is a separate commission responsible for youth, and at the regional level there are several institutions dealing with young people.

With the change of government in Moldova, the National Youth Council of Moldova (CNTM) has had to re-establish its relations with the state authorities. However, this has also opened up new possibilities for the youth council, which has been in a position where they could show their vast competencies on youth policy and international cooperation in the youth field. However, a general lack of political stability in the country, with frequent change of political leaders and governments, makes it difficult for the non-governmental sector and CNTM to establish lasting working relations with the government. Adding to this is that it is difficult for NGOs to register as legal organisations. This has been a traditional barrier for establishing closer cooperation with consecutive governments.

Of all non-governmental organisations in Moldova, 60 % have activities for young people and students. However, there are only few which are actually working *with* young people or who are administered by young people themselves. Some local youth councils have been emerged, but most of the work is conducted by adults. There are currently ongoing efforts to develop a national students organisation.

Azerbaijan

After Azerbaijan gained independence, many challenges emerged. A military conflict with Armenia has still not been resolved, which means that approximately one fifth of Azeri territory is occupied and that around one million refugees are internally displaced. This situation has a great direct effect on young people, since it means that youth unemployment and other problems for young people are much greater than they would otherwise have been.

More than 2/3 of the population of Azerbaijan is under 30 years old, making the country the "youngest" of all member states of the Council of Europe. The government has a constructive approach towards working with youth. However, financial funds available for youth policy are scarce.

In terms of youth policy development, the situation has improved with the recent development of 4 regional youth centres. Furthermore, as of 2008, the National Statistics Office will collect annual statistics on youth. This is an achievement of the Ministry and will enhance what we know about young people. A National Youth Programme (2005-2009) exists, and a new programme is now under development. Youth NGOs do take part in a consultation process, and the Youth Minister has shown receptive towards involving civil society in policy development.

The National Youth Council in Azerbaijan, NAYORA, has developed a tradition of having its leaders in high political positions. The current chairman of NAYORA is a Member of Parliament, which was also the case as with the three previous chairmen. The Deputy Minister responsible for youth is also previous chairman.

Recently, it has become much easier for non-governmental youth organisations to register and gain legal status. There are still some challenges for political youth organisations, although youth branches of political parties are free to register.

Georgia

According to Georgia's state statistics agency, young people in the age group 15-34 makes up 31 % of the country's population.

The responsibility for youth issues is located in the Ministry for Culture, Monument Protection and Sport, with a Deputy Minister as responsible for youth issues. The Ministry is responsible for developing state youth policy. It also provides some support for activities to be implemented by the non-governmental youth sector, although the annual budget is rather limited (in 2008 it amounts to USD 20500). There is a law on state support for children and youth organisations in Georgia, but no specific legislation on youth policy.

The main objective of the National Council of Youth Organisations in Georgia (NCYOG) is to promote and support the development of youth policy issues towards state authorities of the Georgian Government and international institutions. According to NCYOG, a national youth policy should be developed focusing around the following themes: Education, youth participation, youth organisations, culture and traditions, sports and leisure, religious, sexual and ethnical minorities, creation of a legal framework (youth law), promoting youth research, and around the social issues of employment, healthcare, gender equality, young families and housing.

Ukraine

Issues relating to youth policy and young people rests with the Ministry of Family, Youth and Sport. The current youth law is from 1993. The current efforts of the government in the field of youth policy focus on improving opportunities for young people's meaningful leisure time, and the development and adoption of a programme for orphaned children. There is also a youth policy project under development with the support of the UNDP Country Office in Ukraine, called the National Doctrine of Youth.

Ukraine is experiencing political instability, with governments typically lasting for less than a year. The political implication of this is that consecutive governments have been hesitant and even resistant towards advocating for substantial changes which they will not be able to follow up on.

Youth policy in Ukraine has traditionally been rather problem-oriented, and focuses primarily on the needs of especially talented young people and those with special needs. There is no specific focus on providing young people in general with resources and opportunities to ensure a quality upbringing, or a strategy of support to the non-governmental youth sector. Other important issues that remain to be tackled concern the health and well-being of street-children and orphans.

Since 1998, several rivaling youth platforms in Ukraine have existed side by side. One of them – the Ukrainian Youth Forum (UYF) – has become a member of the European Youth Forum (YFJ).

Belarus

The administration of youth affairs is located within the Ministry of Education. The existing legislation on youth was adopted in 1997, but a new law is currently being developed and will be adopted in 2008. In the new legislation, all references to NGOs have been deleted, meaning there will be no legal basis for the government to give financial assistance to non-governmental organisations.

The only non-governmental youth organisation that seems to be supported by the government is the Belarussian Patriotic Youth Union, which is developed across the country.

There is a National Youth Council in Belarus called RADA, which is a member organisation of the European Youth Forum. This platform has encountered problems with the Belarussian government, however, and has been stripped of its legal status. Without legal status it is very difficult to operate and RADA is going through difficult times. The government has supported the establishment of a rival national youth council, but this council has not received the support from the youth NGO sector.

Within the system of secondary education, there is a strong focus on "patriotic education". In most Eastern European countries this has to do with promoting active citizenship, but in the situation of Belarus there is an increasing focus on military discipline and training. The concept of non-formal education is not very recognised in the country.

