

# Youth Partnership

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



## QUALITY DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH WORK IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

### Analytical paper

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth work, as it is known today, emerged in South-East Europe (SEE) region<sup>1</sup> in the early 1990s, when a number of the countries underwent turbulent transitions from socialist regimes. Supported by the international community, youth work in this region has grown into a powerful force that provides young people in the region with opportunities to enhance their potential and well-being and share their experiences with their peers in their own country and abroad. This paper will analyse the crucial aspects of the development of youth work in the SEE region, identifying its drawbacks and areas that need further improvement, as well as its strengths and potential to benefit both young people and the wider community. This will be done by reflecting on the major policy initiatives in the region and by embracing the messages delivered by the participants of the seminar organised by the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the Field of Youth, “SEE youth work” (November 2018, Slovenia).

Successful youth policies try to maintain a sensitive balance between the needs of young people and official policy agendas. Such policies can only be realised with a clear sharing of responsibilities and designated human, infrastructural and financial resources. This paper gives an overview of positive developments in the quality of youth work in the region, and gives recommendations for further improvement of youth work in the SEE region.

The paper analyses the strengths of youth work in SEE, concluding that that is currently underdeveloped or unrecognised by the official youth policy. In this respect, as emphasised by the participants of the SEE seminar, “passion makes a difference”: quality youth work requires committed practitioners, policy makers and researchers. Moreover, it needs some “wind beneath the wings”, which can be primarily assured by quality provision of four basic prerequisites for quality youth work: 1) good quality evidence-based policy frameworks; 2) stable and reliable financial resources and infrastructure; and 3) qualified experts and youth workers and 4) supportive cross-sectoral communication and co-operation.

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<sup>11</sup> Of the many interpretations of the scope of this broad area of Europe, we adopted one comprising of the following list: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia.

\*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.

## 1. THE CONTEXT OF YOUTH WORK IN SEE

Young people in SEE are, to some extent, a disadvantaged group in the respective countries and face obstacles in the fulfilment of their life trajectories. [A set of representative national youth studies](#) conducted in SEE between 2011 and 2015<sup>2</sup> reveals an alarming picture of young people and a hiatus between their aspirations and opportunities. Many of the young people in this region find the formal educational system unsatisfactory and not motivating. This, in addition to an economic recession or stagnation and an unstable political situation does not provide many prospects for a brighter future. Due to high unemployment rates and a high prevalence of precarious jobs, many young people opt for migration to the more developed European countries, which leaves the SEE countries with low rates of human resources and rather a bleak economic picture. This opens up a space for the development of new policy instruments and the engagement of the already existing and emerging actors in the youth field. Actors in the youth work field have highlighted the most important areas that have to be tackled in order to enable young people to realise their potential and well-being. This paper aims at: 1) depicting the context of youth work development in the region; 2) presenting some of the most recent developments in youth work in SEE; and 3) analysing challenges and giving proposals for the advancement of quality youth work in this region.

Youth work can be defined following a description noted in [the European Union Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field \(2010-2018\)](#): “youth work is a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature both by, with and for young people. Increasingly, such activities also include sport and services for young people. Youth work belongs to the area of ‘out-of-school’ education, as well as specific leisure time activities managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders and is based on non-formal learning processes and on voluntary participation”. Youth work in the region has a significant role and relevance in providing support to young people. Its significance comes both from filling the gaps left by ineffective policy and from bringing content to, and increasing the quality of, everyday lives of young people. Youth work has started to draw attention in the SEE region only in the last two decades, after the dissolution of the socialist regimes. Prior to that, it was mainly a form of after-school activity of young people, often centred on scout and sport organisations. Bearing in mind that people in the region share a common history and culture, as well as conflicts and misunderstandings that consequently structure their experience in a similar way, the answers to everyday challenges they face can be similar.

The SEE region has a tradition of youth work, which originates from post-World World II when youth work was predominantly related to the scout movement and Red Cross activities. Consequently, it may not conform with the contemporary understanding of youth work that, to a great extent, relies on the efforts of civil society organisations (mostly youth-

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<sup>2</sup> A new set of studies in 11 SEE countries was conducted in 2018 and the data are expected to be published in March 2019.

led organisations and organisations for youth). Kovačić and Ćulum, in their 2018 paper on development of youth work in the socialist period (p. 152), note that “in comparison with contemporary youth work, youth work actions of that time had three 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.”

A good overview of youth work in a part of this region (countries belonging to the former Yugoslavia) was given by Bužinkić et al. (2015: 38) who list youth work pillars recognised in Croatia that can easily be identified in the former state. Chronologically, these pillars encompass the following “eras”: peace building in the 1990s, non-formal education in the late 1990s and early 2000s, active networking and advocating for youth policies in the mid- and late 2000s, and structuring youth work through projects of youth organisations in the most recent period. As the authors of this paper conclude, peace building and anti-war campaigns, accompanied by human rights advocacy, initially created a platform for youth work practices, most of which are still contributing to development of the youth field. Furthermore, Draško (2017: 132) notes that “the 2000s were marked by the establishment of ... umbrella organisations and networks, mostly representing the predecessors of national youth councils. ... This development could be seen in the light of European processes, where the European Union and the Council of Europe fostered the recognition of youth work’s importance .... 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.”

Nowadays, there are a number of national and international initiatives that are addressing youth work in the SEE and strive to provide assistance to the actors in the field. The partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the Field of Youth and the [SALTO South-East Europe](#) Erasmus+ Resource Centre have taken several specific support initiatives for youth work in the SEE, including a variety of training programmes, research activities and seminars. We will briefly identify some of these actions, starting with [the 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](#) organised in Montenegro in 2016. The efforts made by the SALTO South-East Europe Resource Centre, within the framework of the Erasmus+ programme of the EU include [the Erasmus+ Youth in Action Forum for the Western Balkans](#) (2015, Montenegro), the [Europe-Western Balkans Youth Meeting: "Connecting Youth Work and Youth Policy"](#), the paper [An Action Plan for youth work and youth policy](#) (2016, Slovenia) and [the Second Europe-Western Balkans Youth Meeting](#) (2018, Montenegro).

[Recommendation CM/Rec\(2017\)4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member States on youth work](#) has the potential of reinforcing the quality of youth work in the region as it recognises that provision of quality youth work is vital to develop the potential of young people as it develops critical thinking, increases the sense of belonging, and strengthens young people's capacity to resist negative influences and behaviour. From 2017 onwards, in order to strengthen knowledge-based youth policy, the [EU-CoE youth partnership](#) began a [research project](#) on the educational paths of youth workers, which aims to contribute to quality development in youth work by collecting data and analysing the formal and non-formal education paths and career itineraries of youth workers.

At regional level, from 2014 [the Berlin process](#) aimed to foster stability and security in Europe through stronger links with and support to the Western Balkans region. [In the youth field](#), it led to the creation of the [Regional Youth Cooperation Office \(RYCO\)](#) for enhancing youth mobility in the Western Balkans, focusing on the six territories of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Important regional events also included the [Paris-Balkans 2016 summit](#) that resulted in the [Connecting Youth Western Balkans Youth Conference – Conclusions by the Working Groups](#), the [Trieste Western Balkan Summit](#) (2017) that focused on connecting infrastructures, people and economies and resulted in [a declaration](#), and lastly, the [EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia](#) (2018), which resulted in [the Sofia declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit](#), emphasising that special focus in the region should be placed on youth, including intra-regional mobility schemes and a recommendation on doubling Erasmus+ funding for the next generation of EU programmes.

One of the most recent initiatives that contributed to the development of quality youth work was [the SEE Youth Work Seminar](#), which was organised in Ljubljana in November 2018 by [the EU – CoE youth partnership](#), in co-operation with [the Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth](#), [SALTO SEE Resource Centre](#) and [RYCO](#). The main aim of the seminar was deepening the discussion on the state of youth work in the region, looking at what is needed to improve its quality and to promote a wide range of European support instruments, mechanisms and tools. Building on developments in the region, this activity aimed to strengthen youth work in the region, by analysing its state of play and identifying the support needed from youth work policy, and reflecting on the crucial role that youth work can play in supporting youth policy at different levels. The seminar addressed these aims by involving approximately 50 representatives of youth work practice, policy and research, and the seminar's results are the basis of this analytical paper. Specifically, the seminar's objectives were defined in the following way:

1. to strengthen the knowledge about youth work in SEE;
2. to explore current challenges and needs that youth work as a field has in SEE and how youth policy can respond to them, at different levels, through frameworks, capacity building, and support tools;

3. to enhance synergies between different relevant actors in the region for the development of the youth work sector;
4. to analyse the crucial role that youth work can play in supporting youth policy at different levels.

The challenges identified by the participants of this seminar go along with the ones recognised by N. Connolly (2018: 61): “the challenges faced by youth work are both enduring and shifting, requiring youth workers to adapt to changing circumstances while remaining true to the core principles of youth work. ...Youth work faces the challenges of funding, recognition and credibility, as well as a changing sociopolitical and economic landscape”. We can continue with a challenge that is very relevant in the SEE: “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 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” (Draško, 2017: 137). The idea of youth work as a powerful force in society will be examined, leading to a review of possible ways of improving the quality of youth work in the SEE region.

Following this brief overview of the history of youth work in SEE, the following chapters will attempt to depict legal and policy frameworks and institutional and organisational settings that provide the basis for quality youth work in the SEE region.

## **2. LEGAL, POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS OF YOUTH WORK IN THE SEE**

Based on the insights into [the national policy frameworks in the SEE](#), youth work in this region is, to a significant extent, neither well understood nor strategically well-conceived, and lacks a planned approach. Youth work in some of the countries analysed (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia and Montenegro) is still referred to as “working with young people”.. All of the countries do have some kind of legal and policy framework, Serbia and Slovenia being the most advanced countries in this respect. Table 1 provides an overview of the legal and policy frameworks in the observed territories. The analysis of the relevant legal and policy documents brings us to the conclusion that the national frameworks to some extent cover the basic prerequisites for quality youth work. Serbia and Slovenia can be seen as examples of good practice, as they have succeeded in establishing coherent systems of recognition and validation of youth work and youth work activities and competences. On the other hand, despite numerous legal and policy acts that have been developed since the early 2000s, Croatia currently lacks active legal documents in the field of youth work, as does Kosovo.\*

These frameworks provide actors and structures in the youth field with possibilities to learn from and develop their policy frameworks and actions. Still, as will be demonstrated later in

this paper, the mere existence of legal and policy frameworks does not guarantee a completely effective implementation of the planned actions. While institutional frameworks and modes of co-operation designate responsibilities in implementation, evaluation and monitoring of youth policies (affecting the outcomes of youth work and well-being of young people), policy does not always become action.

Table 1: Overview of the legal and policy frameworks in the field of youth

COUNTRY	LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK
Albania	National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Draft Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina Youth Strategy (2015) Youth Law of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010) Youth Policy of the Republika Srpska 2016-2020 Laws on Volunteering and Youth Organisation of the Republika Srpska (2008)
Bulgaria	Youth Law (2012) National Youth Strategy (2010-2020)
Croatia	Youth Advisory Boards Act (2014) Act on Civil Society Organisations (2014) government's Decision on the Youth Council (2014) Act on Volunteering (2010) Act on Student Councils and other Student Associations (2007)
North Macedonia	National Youth Strategy 2016-2025 Law on Associations and Foundations (2010) Law on Volunteering (2007)
Greece	National Youth Strategy 2017-2027 National youth programmes influenced by EU Youth Strategy, 2010-2018 Law on Local Youth Councils, 2006 The Honorary Day for Greek Youth was established by a unanimous decision of the House of Representatives in March 1998 to commemorate the Greek Youth Struggle against the dictatorship of 21st April 1967. It is celebrated each year on 17th November
Kosovo*	Youth Strategy 2013-2017 Youth Action Plan 2013-2015 Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth (2009) National Youth Strategy 2018-2023 and the Youth Action Plan 2018-2021 (currently being drawn up)
Montenegro	Law on Youth (2016) Youth Strategy (2017-2021)
Romania	Youth Law (2006) National Youth Strategy 2014-2020 Law on setting up a National Youth Day (2004) Law on state support for youngsters in rural areas (2002) Law on Volunteering (2001)
Slovenia	Act on Public Interest in the Youth Sector (2010)
Serbia	National Youth Strategy 2015-2025 Law on Youth (2010)

Draško (2017: 134) explains that, in the SEE, “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.” The realities of youth work and the prerequisites for its planning and implementation differ among the countries in the SEE region, meaning that not all actors performing youth work can rely on policy frameworks, (infra)structures, resources, or even intra- and inter-sectoral communication and co-operation. Many of the actors in the field are in a constant process of (re)inventing ways of carrying out effective youth work. Their efforts may be supported by learning opportunities and examples of good practice: it is for this reason that the organisers of [the SEE Youth Work Seminar](#) invited Rok Primožič, Head of the Office for Youth of Slovenia, to present the reality of youth work support frameworks in Slovenia.

Figure 1: Framework of youth work in Slovenia

[The Act on Public Interest in the Youth Sector](#) may be considered as the most comprehensive and binding official document that addresses the needs and/or rights of young people in Slovenia and stipulates how youth issues should be addressed. The act is also the legal basis for the adoption of a national youth programme and the establishment of the Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth. The co-ordination of youth policy is delegated to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (Office for Youth), but the implementation of various measures is the responsibility of competent ministries. Regional and local level policy and implementation of the youth work guidelines is being updated on the basis of the nationally developed policies and bodies established at central level. To a great extent they mirror regional and local level policies and bodies. In promoting the recognition of non-formal education in youth work, there are a series of examples of good practice, such as [Nefiks](#), [My experiences – a tool for validation and recognition of working experience](#) – and [Learning Badges](#).

The boxed text briefly presents a framework for youth work in Slovenia, providing the hyperlinks to the main legislative acts and recognition mechanisms. Insights into the system of youth work in Slovenia enabled the participants to grasp the main elements of a successful youth work system, whose basis lies in supportive national, regional and local structures, effective policies, reliable financial resources and institutional frameworks and recognition of youth work(ers).

In conclusion, significant progress has been made in SEE at national level concerning establishing frameworks for youth work, although there is still space for further improvement. First of all, there is a need to develop cross-sectoral and intra-sectoral co-operation and civic dialogue between various stakeholders, giving a voice to young people and to the research community. The latter is particularly important for creating reliable, applicable and evidence-based policy. The next required step relies on providing basic prerequisites for quality youth work, such as policy and legal documents and regular structural funding. The third essential prerequisite is closely linked to the previous one as it targets establishing effective infrastructures available to the youth sector, primarily by



making available physical infrastructure and facilities that can be used for youth work. The last crucial component is ensuring the official recognition of youth work and youth workers, which would ease the career pathways of youth workers and increase public recognition and co-operation among various stakeholders.

The participants of [the SEE Youth Work Seminar](#) were also asked to identify what support actors in youth work need in order to improve the quality of youth work, and whom they would ask for help. The results are summarised describing the main missing elements for successful national, regional and local youth work and giving details of the stakeholders who could be asked for assistance, with the abbreviations of the countries concerned (Figure 2).

The discussion on the strategies and legislation in national teams resulted in five components missing in the policy framework of most countries:

1. legal framework;
2. definition of youth work/er;
3. standards of youth work (code of ethics and quality standards);
4. national qualification framework;
5. youth worker competence framework.

The sixth element – the systematisation of youth work job placements – is yet to be developed in the entire SEE region.

The functioning of frameworks and structures was recognised as inadequate. Their nature varies from the very basic forms, like a public body in charge of the youth field (e.g. the ministry of youth, or a youth agency), to youth councils and student councils, which are either non-existent or do not have a clear mandate and are ineffective. This is compounded by the inadequate and irregular participation of young people in decision-making bodies. Formal recognition of youth work and its promotion and public recognition arise only from perseverance in advocacy and an active approach by civil society. Their development takes a very long time and sometimes requires a change of mentality not only of the politicians, policy makers and mass-media, but also of the general population over a long period of time. These components require giving a voice to young people and making their opinion and contribution to the policy making visible on a larger scale.

Resources, especially financial resources, were identified as one of the most unstable elements of youth work in the SEE region, meaning that youth work is most often performed voluntarily or on a project basis and not in a stable and continuous way. This depletes energy and the personal/organisational resources of civil society and does not enable actors in the youth field to perform sustainable and quality youth work. Therefore, we conclude that national institutions and funders should ensure structural, unrestricted, predictable and stable financing for regular youth activities.

Youth sector co-ordination, which is mirrored by a paucity of political will and non-existent or unreliable processes of cross-sectoral communication and co-operation, is the area of youth work that requires most effort from young people and youth-led organisations. It was noted that there is a significant lack of political will to design and implement much needed reforms, especially in relation in the youth sector. Every time a new governing party and officials are elected, the legal system is (re)invented from the beginning, neglecting previous accomplishments. Such processes adversely affect the youth field and neither allow for the development of quality youth work nor motivate the most qualified experts to stay in the field. It is therefore recommended that international organisations help youth organisations and youth work actors in their efforts to reach out to public bodies at national, regional and local levels.

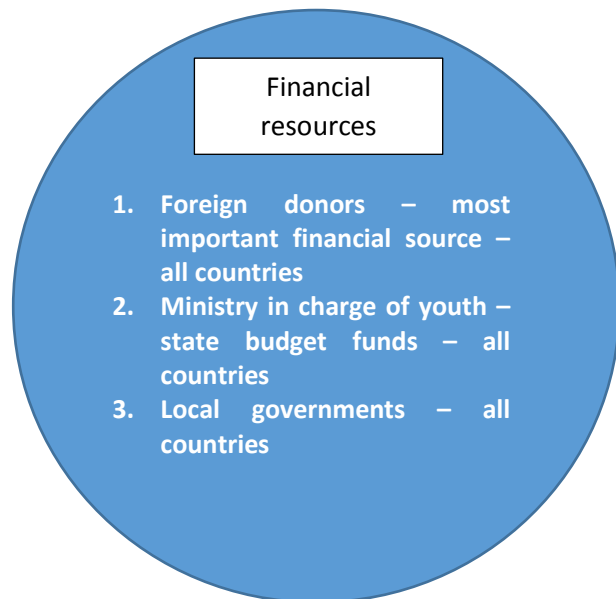
Those active in the youth sector are often faced with infrastructure problems at all levels: local, regional and national; youth organisations and bodies that are supposed to represent young people are not established or operational at all levels. Experience shows that although the work performed in all countries has already established an operational framework, resources are unevenly distributed and are often inadequate. While in large cities there is generally a solid youth work infrastructure, this is almost completely absent in villages and smaller towns. Largely, local support is very weak (Pašić, 2018; Cooperation and Development Institute/ShtetiWeb).

The sector's biggest challenge is the lack of recognition of youth work, which leads to a high turnover in youth workers. Since their qualifications in most countries are still not recognised, they are usually unable to find a job within the sector, causing them to leave the sector after a while. In this way, significant resources are lost because organisations and institutions keep losing those who have formal qualifications, as well as those who have acquired them through work and experience (O'Donovan et al., 2018).

#### 4. FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Figure 2. Financial resources

The next set of challenges refers to funding. The biggest challenge is the sustainability of funding for youth organisations and programmes. In all countries, project-based funding is dominant, which in the long run leads to the depletion of resources and places youth workers in a precarious position, causing a high degree of staff turnover. Support coming from state funds is usually not sufficient (Cooperation and Development Institute/ShtetiWeb, 2016). At local level, funding depends on the economic strength of the municipality or city and on political will. Existing sources of funds in the region can shift direction or interest quickly, which compounds uncertainty and insecurity. Without systemic, programmatic and continuous financial support to the sector, a further depletion of resources will happen.



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Financial dependence on international donors does not provide long-term sustainability to youth organisations. National and local funding mechanisms are also essential for the development and recognition of youth work (Cooperation and Development Institute/ShtetiWeb, 2016).

In all territories of the SEE region, the national government allocates certain funds for the activities of youth organisations.<sup>3</sup> The most common form of financing and the largest funds from the state budget go to project-based activities. In most cases, tenders are announced once a year, and youth organisations normally apply with project proposals. Funds allocated vary from one country to another, and although the youth sector in all countries needs a higher level of budgetary allocation, in some cases, such as in Montenegro, local and national funding is not sufficient to ensure even the implementation of the activities foreseen by the National Youth Action Plan.

<sup>3</sup> In 2018 in Romania, the annual budget for youth was approximately €6 million; in Kosovo in 2017 it was approximately €2 million; in 2016 in Serbia it was approximately 1.9 million; in Slovenia about €1.2 million; and in Albania it was about €300 000. Details about budget allocations in all countries can be found [here](#) for EU Member countries, and [here](#) for non- member countries.

Figure 3. Financial challenges in SEE

Although the youth sector can apply for funding made available by various ministries (e.g. for education, sport, employment and culture), cross-sectoral co-operation and co-ordination needs more attention (Pašić, 2018; Kovačić, Pašć, 2018). It is important to link funding for activities in the youth field to actual projects. In this way, youth workers may be identified independently from social workers, teachers, and social mediators.

In some countries, trust between institutions and the youth sector needs to be strengthened. Looking specifically at the 6 countries of the Western Balkans, procedures in selecting projects funded by the public sector are not sufficiently respected, the transparency of the selection procedure of projects and organisations to be supported is very low, and the way funds are allocated and their spending is not monitored. The inclusion of different representatives from the youth sector in these processes, the transparency of all aspects of the selection procedure, the possibility to support the selection with arguments, the work of funded organisations open to the public, and the presentation of results in public would build a bridge towards long-term trust.

On the other hand, in some countries, the procedures for selecting projects, their management and implementation are too bureaucratic. For example, in Bulgaria, procedures for budget transfers are burdensome and often slow. In many cases, permission for the reallocation of direct costs is needed. There are no clear deadlines for project applications, which leads at times to a too short preparation period. The final reports are often out of date and payments to the organisations are delayed.

**Regional and local authorities.** In all countries, a part of the sector's activities is financed with funds from the local level. In most cases, local authorities decide themselves whether and how to fund youth organisations. This often leads to funding and sustainability depending on the political will of the respective local authority, rather than on the intrinsic merits of the proposals or the efficacy of the applicant. Although funding at the local level can be very effective, because it can identify those acute problems that young people face in a given context, this part of the funding chain is the least developed and at the highest risk when an economic crisis or political changes occur. A relatively well-organised system of local financing is present in Slovenia, while in all other territories it is underdeveloped and



provided on an ad hoc basis. Local organisations are often best supported in large cities, richer regions and in places where there is already a solid youth infrastructure. Maintaining such a situation leads to even more significant regional differences, especially between urban and rural areas. The developed parts of a country manage to acquire not only local, but also national and international funds, while undeveloped regions remain undeveloped. Since the beginning of the economic crisis, some countries have faced a shrinking space for the youth sector on the local level. Many youth services at the local level have lost their funding, while local authorities have cut the budget for the work of the youth sector. It appears, however, that the situation has recently started to revert to normal thanks to renewed efforts and political will.

**Foreign funds.** Foreign donors are the most important supporters of youth organisations and activities in the SEE region (Pašić, 2018; Petković, 2018; Cooperation and Development Institute/ShtetiWeb, 2016). Most of the funding comes from international institutions and organisations (EU, IPA, USAID, Visegrad Fund, RYCO, SIDA, United Nations, Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe, etc.) and foreign embassies (Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the United States, etc.). All foreign programmes are project based and time limited (O'Donovan et al., 2018).

The main challenge of this financing model is the low sustainability of the organisations themselves, because they depend on funds that are unstable in the long term. There are insufficient funds for sustainable programmes because the limited finances force them to do short-term activities; it is therefore difficult for the organisations to do any long-term planning. There are insufficient funds for increasing and maintaining organisational capacity, both with regard to infrastructure and to human capital. In the first case, it means that organisations are often unable to cover basic costs (rent, bills and fixed costs) and maintain or improve the equipment they use. In the second case, the situation is even more complex, because it introduces insecurity into a sector that should, instead, be fighting it. Youth workers are engaged in jobs through temporary contracts that are time limited and in most countries of the region still do not guarantee basic social rights (the right to paid sick leave, paid holidays, etc.). In most SEE countries, the labour laws still do not cover all forms of labour as equal, which means that temporary contracts do not give workers the right to paid leave for illness or holidays. Such arrangements are usually made within the organisation and depend on its work culture. Work contracts cover only a small part of the duties performed, while a significant part of the organisations' activities are carried out without compensation, which leads to a significant waste of resources, exhaustion of human capacity, and, in the long term, a high turnover of youth workers. This, in turn, leads to youth workers leaving the sector and to an even more dramatic loss of resources.

It appears evident, in conclusion, that available funds are not sufficient for the development of high-quality youth work. Long-term funding schemes for youth work would be beneficial

for achieving stability in employment and the sustainability of long-term projects. Only long-term projects with sufficient funding could make sustainable changes in the field of youth and support the development of youth work.

## **5. FRAMEWORKS FOR THE EDUCATION OF YOUTH WORKERS**

### ***Recognition of the profession of youth worker (is there a profession?)***

As in most European countries, youth work as a profession is emerging in SEE. Some efforts have been made to recognise this profession, but so far, most countries do not see it as a distinct profession. It is necessary to work on the validation and recognition of youth work through formal and non-formal education. Countries will have to go through the process of recognising youth work in the system of national qualification frameworks (NQF), which some countries have already done, such as Slovenia, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria. So far, most youth workers have acquired their education in various fields, such as social sciences and humanities and are working on different youth-related tasks.

### ***Training and education for youth workers***

Although there are various ways of becoming a youth worker in the region – through formal or informal education, or through simply working with young people – there is no clear path (Krnjaić, 2012; Mitulescu, 2014; Giannaki, 2014; Kovačić, Ćulum, 2018). Youth workers become youth workers mostly because of ad hoc choices rather than a planned educational and career project (O'Donovan et al., 2018; Kovačić, Pašć, 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to work on the establishment of clear educational frameworks and paths that youth workers can choose in the early stages of their education and careers. This would allow them a greater degree of autonomy, dedication and identification with the profession (O'Donovan et al., 2018; Kovačić, Pašć, 2018).

### ***The role of universities***

Universities are “ideally placed to develop, initiate, and co-ordinate the initial educational needs of youth workers” (Watts, Singh, 1998:1). However, developing other, less formal ways of acquiring knowledge and skills is important, because “formal recognition of learning in youth work activities could lead to the overformalising of youth work, in other words the application of formal standards from other fields” (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, 2013: 29). In many European countries, developing university-level curricula is still in its infancy, so the SEE region is not lagging much behind. The UK and Ireland are at the forefront, but in most countries “many universities offer combined degrees enabling people to work in this sector, such as applied psychology and criminology, community psychology, social work, working with children, etc.” (Panagides et. al., 2019: 12). In SEE countries, there

are degree level courses that include youth work, such as courses on social work, but they are not specifically designed for that purpose.

When it comes to courses directly related to youth work, at the level of undergraduate and postgraduate studies for youth work, the situation in the SEE region is as follows:

- in Bulgaria there is one B.A. and two M.A. programmes related to youth work (at the Veliko Tarnovo University and National Sports Academy);
- in Greece there is one M.A. programme on youth work (University of Macedonia);
- in Romania, there is one Postgraduate Certificate on youth work (West University of Timisoara).

At present there are no university programmes dedicated to youth work in any of the countries and territories of the former Yugoslavia (O'Donovan et al., 2018). The authors state that in the last decade there has been some regression in three of the countries of the former Yugoslavia with regard to the sustainability of youth work education at university level. In Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro some efforts have already been made towards introducing programmes at university level. Unfortunately, after the initial support of the PRONI Institute for Social Education and Jonkoping University in Sweden, the programmes failed to obtain infrastructural and financial support at national level. In Serbia, there was one formal M.A. programme from 2008 to 2009, although PRONI was already providing a training course from 2001 to 2007. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the courses organised by PRONI were available for a longer time – from 1998 to 2008, while in Montenegro PRONI was present from 2002 to 2007 (Petković, 2014; O'Donovan et al., 2018). During these activities, a significant number of young people went through training and acquired qualifications for youth work. It is estimated that approximately 400 young people in Serbia and 600 in Montenegro have obtained a youth work diploma in first decade of the millenium. Estimates also show that very few people that are trained for youth work are working in the youth sector: in Montenegro, less than 10% of qualified people are involved in youth work, which indicates a waste of resources invested in youth work. These examples indicate that it is very important to involve national actors in order to ensure the sustainability of such programmes and to save resources.

At the level of vocational education, further education and training, courses are held in two countries: Croatia and Serbia. These are two good practice examples. In Croatia, since 2018, there has been a programme of lifelong learning developed by the University of Rijeka and the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, named Youth in Contemporary Society, with a plan to establish a master's degree in the subject. In Serbia since 2018, one-year programmes have been held within the Centre for Youth Work (CZOR) in partnership with Jonkoping University Sweden, while five-day courses are held in Romania under the Schultz Consulting programme (O'Donovan et al., 2018).

### ***The role of non-formal learning for youth workers or for those about to become youth workers***

Non-formal learning is a very important aspect of acquiring skills and knowledge for current and future youth workers in the region. Most training courses for youth work are held outside the formal education framework. Although a significant number of young people acquire the necessary theoretical knowledge through formal education, they only have the chance to encounter youth work in a practical way through training courses, seminars, and exchanges. In all countries of the SEE region, NGOs provide various training courses for future youth workers, so NGOs have proved themselves to be key actors in providing the knowledge and key qualifications important for youth work. Although ministries and national youth organisations are involved in financing these activities, most of the finances continue to come from foreign donors (EU institutions and international organisations). In some countries (Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia) these courses are organised directly by state institutions (O'Donovan et al., 2018).

The practice of introducing both non-formal and informal education, their funding and validation are processes that are generally conducted under the auspices of the EU and international institutions. However, in all countries, it is necessary to involve national actors more quickly and more intensively in this process.

In none of the countries in the region has knowledge acquired through non-formal education for youth work been validated at the national level by state institutions. The youth organisation conducting the training courses is the body that issues the youth work certificate or diploma.

### ***Frameworks of competences***

O'Donovan et al. (2018) research shows that three countries in the region, Romania, Slovenia and Serbia, have developed competency-based frameworks in various formats and for different purposes, from recognition of youth work to skills for better employment. In Bulgaria, a framework was developed by the National Youth Forum, but it is still not validated by institutions. In these countries, the necessary competencies are defined through the specific content of training programmes. These competencies include different knowledge and skills, and encompass various aspects of work with young people – leadership, organisational and management skills, etc. One of the first examples in the region was the National Association of Youth Workers (NAPOR) in Serbia, which started a process of creating a tool in 2013, which can enable the recognition of competencies of youth workers. They created the Passport of Competences, which was then implemented in co-operation with the Ministry of Youth and Sport. The end goal of this document is the "recognition of transferable skills (competences) that young people gain through youth work programmes by employers, in order to foster youth employability; more efficient planning of professional and personal improvement of young people; and recognition of the impact of youth work on the development of young people." (Perović, Stojanović, 2018:11). In



Slovenia, youth workers' competencies are defined through seven areas that include general and specific knowledge and skills. Out of these countries in the region, Serbia also has developed (through NAPOR) a quality assurance framework for youth work.

### ***Recognition/validation of competences acquired through practice***

The European Union Council recommendation (2012/C 398/01) of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning states that EU Member States should initiate a process of validating non-formal and informal learning. Although this process has a wider scope, it is very important for the educational and career paths of youth workers. A significant number of youth workers gain competences through work and through non-formal education, so the validation of their competences should be possible through different validation approaches. Some of the countries have already started this process. In Slovenia, there are several acts that define the ways in which previous experience within the youth sector (Act on the Public Interest in Youth Sector, Vocational and Technical Education Act, Volunteering Act, etc.) could be validated. Besides training courses for two vocational levels – Youth Leader and Youth Worker, NAPOR in Serbia has introduced a mechanism for validation of previously attained competences in youth work (Perović, Stojanović, 2018). In Montenegro the Law on National Vocational Qualifications provides the tools for recognition and confirmation of previously acquired knowledge and skills ([Petkovic, 2014](#)). The Erasmus+/Youth in action programme provides a significant contribution in this respect. With the process of youth work recognition, all forms of education, including formal, non-formal and informal education, will have to be formally recognised through an acknowledgement of the acquired competencies.

### ***The role of European tools, such as the Youthpass***

In most countries of the region, young people have the opportunity to obtain certificates for informal programmes such as Europass and Youthpass, issued with support and within the framework of EU institutions. Europass has its support offices in all countries in the region except Albania, Kosovo,\* and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Youthpass was created as a tool for increasing the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Its importance in the SEE region is significant in validating the knowledge and skills acquired this way, as there are very few institutions and organisations at the national level that have these validation tools. The regional SALTO resource centre in Slovenia serves as the base for such activities in the region. The programmes young people and youth workers have the opportunity to attend usually consist of seminars, workshops, group learning, conferences and exchanges. The skills they can acquire vary and include communication skills, intercultural learning, project management, coaching skills, leadership, social inclusion, human rights, prevention of risky behaviour, help with employment, work with refugees, and many others. This resource centre monitors the development of organisations and participants from entry-level courses through exchanges and network seminars, all the way to advanced thematic training courses

with specific target groups in an international setting. The SALTO SEE Resource Centre also organises training for volunteers.

When we speak of the youth sector in the SEE region, we can say that in the previous three decades serious foundations have been laid through resources, experiences and knowledge (Krnjaić, 2012; Mitulescu, 2014; Giannaki, 2014; Kovačić, Ćulum, 2018). Youth workers possess values, knowledge, skills and experience and are familiar with the youth work methodology. In many SEE countries, youth workers are faced with a lack of formalised educational knowledge and experience. As part of validating and recognising youth work, it would be beneficial to create educational curricula at secondary and tertiary levels. There is also a need to work on acknowledging qualifications of youth workers through their non-formal and informal education and experience gained through working with the beneficiaries. On the other hand, in many countries, experts testify that there is an expert drain from the youth sector. Many qualified youth workers have gained experience in working with young people and have then gone on to work in other sectors. It would also be good to establish platforms for sharing good practice at national, regional and international levels.

The challenge of the lack of clear educational and career paths complicates the position of youth workers in two ways. Firstly, it is not clear enough what qualifications young people should have to work in the youth sector. Secondly, it is not clear on how to separate youth work from social work, pedagogical work, and so on. It is necessary to solve both issues because the current state of affairs leads to the insecurity of youth work, insufficient motivation, and the draining of human resources over time.

## **6. NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION**

### **National co-operation**

In most SEE countries, effective networks of youth organisations (Figure 8) are established and work with skilled, committed, well-trained youth workers. In some countries there are also associations or networks of youth workers. In Greece (Association of Youth Workers in Greece), North Macedonia (Network MaMa) and Serbia (NAPOR) there are associations of youth workers. In Slovenia, the Network MaMa gathers and represents youth organisations that run youth centres or are active in the field of youth work ([O'Donovan, 2018](#)). A good example is NAPOR in Serbia. This umbrella organisation consists of 68 member organisations, and deals with three areas of work: 1. the professionalisation of youth work; 2. the recognition of youth work competences; and 3. the quality assurance of vocation and programmes ([Perovic, Stojanovic, 2018](#)).

Figure 4: Countries with umbrella youth organisations



The report on the situation of the youth sector in Albania, Serbia and Montenegro indicates that one of the significant challenges in these countries is the competition between national organisations for domestic and foreign funds (donations and projects), which turns them into competitors rather than partners. Although international projects connect actors from the region, they still compete at the national level, so the recommendation of this study is to revise "the donor logic" based on "market principles and the transparency of disbursement in order to fight the atomisation of the national scene" (Cooperation and Development Institute/ShtetiWeb, p. 8). The youth sector in all six Balkan countries is facing similar problems. The focus of organisations on (financial) challenges they face often leads to co-operation and solidarity within the country taking second place. Bearing in mind that sometimes in these countries organisations emerge that have priority in obtaining national projects, it further deepens the suspicion, division and atomisation of the youth sector that already has modest financial, organisational and human resources.

### ***Co-operation in the region***

The regional co-operation between youth organisations has been a part of the process of peace-building, reconciliation in the region, and building democratic institutions. While there are many examples of bilateral and multilateral co-operation in the youth sector in the region, more can be done to strengthen it. Certain organisations do co-operate regionally, for example with international programmes, but this co-operation depends solely on foreign programmes and donors. Considering that the region shares similar challenges and a history of both co-operation and conflict, there is room for establishing co-operation not just through the mediation of foreign institutions and organisations, but also through initiatives of public (state, regional and local) institutions and organisations operating at national level. Organisations and youth workers could learn more from each other in the region. One of the

ways of recognising the challenges faced by young people and youth workers at national level is sharing experiences and knowledge of what others have already done or are doing at the same time in other organisations in neighbouring countries. Regional co-operation could strengthen the position of the youth sector in agreements and negotiations with state institutions – they could have a joint stand in front of stakeholders when it comes to youth policy, recognition of youth work, etc. (e.g. through the [Berlin process](#)). In order for regional co-operation to be sustainable and have a significant effect, in addition to youth organisations, regional state institutions, such as ministries, agencies, cities, etc., should also be included in the designing and implementation of regional co-operation programmes.

Similar challenges occur at the regional level and could be resolved in similar ways. For example, all six Western Balkans territories have a similar economic structure with a similar potential and challenges. Labour market challenges with low employment rates, high employment risks (employment without a contract or without the possibility of exercising the rights guaranteed by the respective labour law), *clientelism* and the importance of personal informal relationships characterise almost the entire region, so the solutions for these challenges could be found in the exchange of experience between the countries in the region.

#### ***Lack of co-operation in larger networks***

Networking at the national, regional and European levels has been identified during the seminar as something that needs a lot more work to be strengthened. It should be intensified with institutions and with youth organisations. An intensified communication with large European and global youth networks would yield multiple benefits for this sector in the region: transfer and exchange of knowledge, acquiring competences, more options for learning mobility, etc.

## **7. ADVOCATING FOR QUALITY YOUTH WORK DEVELOPMENT AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE**

Challenges related to youth work are described by H. Williamson<sup>4</sup> who wrote that “youth work is invariably positioned on the cusp of competing pressures and expectations – between the individual and society, between association and transition, and much more” (p. 171). Quality youth work usually results from a clear sharing of responsibilities and designated human, infrastructural and financial resources for its execution. Regarding the responsibilities shared among stakeholders in youth work, we can agree with Draško (2017, p. 137) who wrote “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.” The need to find a

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<sup>4</sup> Williamson, H. (2018), “Finding common ground – Mapping and scanning the horizons for youth work in Europe”, in Schildt, Connolly, Labadie, Vanhee and Williamson (eds.) [Thinking seriously about youth work, Youth Knowledge No. 20](#) Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the Field of Youth.

delicate balance between various interests and accessible resources is reflected on by Williamson,<sup>5</sup> who ponders on the position of youth work: “youth work has to find its place between responding independently to the individual and collective needs of young people and becoming subordinated to the (usually much more powerful) agendas within education and training, employment, health and criminal justice policy” (p. 177).

Before we continue with proposals for advocating for quality youth work development in SEE, we should consider what the strengths of youth work in this region are, which can be further enhanced and used as assets in future development. The most prominent strengths of youth work can be identified as:

1. a strong tradition of youth work, emerging from a tradition of peace-building, reconciliation and the fight for democracy. All the states in the region have encountered a period of civil unrest or civil wars, which has given a positive impetus for the development of civil society organisations;
2. effective, established networks, especially among civil society organisations, additionally enhanced by the support from the Council of Europe and RYCO;
3. skilled, committed, well-trained youth workers who manage to conduct activities despite the scarcity of infrastructure and financial resources;
4. adaptability to ever-changing political structures and economic crises, which often implies changes in people occupying the positions of public servants, and therefore, changes in modes of co-operation and ruptures in actions in the youth field;
5. positive financial support from the EU and good awareness, in the sector, of EU policy and programmes (e.g. Erasmus+ and RYCO instruments);
6. willingness of youth work providers to co-operate with stakeholders from the private and public sectors and active investment in building strategic partnerships;
7. current positive developments that increase the visibility of youth work and efforts of youth workers and other experts in the field, like [examining the educational paths of youth workers and gathering knowledge on youth work](#).

In order to enhance the quality of youth work and achieve goals that are fine-tuned with the needs and aspirations of young people, there are a number of prerequisites that have to be fulfilled. Agdur in his paper “Assuring the quality of youth work” (2018) states that development of quality youth requires fulfilment of the following basic prerequisites: 1) concrete targets/objectives must be set up for youth work activities; 2) objectives of youth work activities must comply with the definition and the core principles of youth work – they

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<sup>5</sup> Williamson, H. (2018), “Finding common ground – Mapping and scanning the horizons for youth work in Europe”, in Schildt, Connolly, Labadie, Vanhee and Williamson (eds.), [Thinking seriously about youth work, Youth Knowledge No. 20](#), Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the Field of Youth.

have to be relevant and attainable; 3) an adequate and well-functioning system for evaluation must be in place; and 4) the competences of youth workers must be further developed. The conclusions of the expert group [\*Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union, 2014\*](#) (p. 179) resonate with the proposals by Jonas Agdur. They argue that quality youth work has to:

1. establish quality youth worker's relationship with young people;
2. employ active outreach to young people in need of help and support;
3. be flexible, accessible and adapt to the needs of young people;
4. provide learning opportunities, goal setting and recognition of achievements;
5. be safe, supportive environments enabling young people to experience life, to make mistakes and to participate with their peers in leisure time activities in an enjoyable and fun setting;
6. allow young people to drive their own learning and development and to have autonomy;
7. nurture sustainability and partnerships with other actors (e.g. formal education, social work);
8. ensure commitment from young people, youth workers and the community.

One of the core documents contributing to the guidelines for quality youth work development, [\*Quality Youth Work\*](#),<sup>6</sup> following the sets of criteria set up by the previously cited document, states that the outcomes of youth work can be divided into two different categories, quantitative outputs and qualitative effects (pp. 18-19). Quantitative outputs are the directly quantifiable benefits that have occurred as a result of youth work, while qualitative effects are what actually happens to young people and how they develop as a result of their taking part in youth work. It further elaborates that "the purpose of a quality system is to support and improve work, and that the knowledge gathered is first of all to be used as a basis for constructive analysis and reflection. Analysis and reflection based on relevant and structured knowledge constitutes the necessary ground for all kinds of development and without it no real progress can be made. Provoking debate and critical reflection are core functions of a good quality system" (p. 22). The expert group who authored this publication also stresses that "working with a systematic quality approach asks for resources in terms of time, knowledge and money – this is not a cost; it is a necessary investment. ... The development of quality relates to and is a responsibility for all stakeholders – since no chain is stronger than its weakest link capacity building around quality issues is essential. Working with continuous quality improvement asks for continuous engagement from all stakeholders involved – conducting an external evaluation is something else. ... Youth work relies on relations with young people – so does the development of quality approaches" (pp. 36-37).

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission (2015)

Based on the strengths of youth work in SEE and provided that there is help from other stakeholders in the youth field, we can expect youth work to become a more powerful tool for the improvement of the condition of young people in the region. Talking about help required from various levels, bodies and organisations, the participants of [the SEE Youth Work Seminar](#) were unanimous in identifying three types of actor whose help is essential in assuring better conditions for quality youth work:

1. civil society could primarily help by providing opportunities for peer-learning and joint advocacy on the requirements needed for quality youth work;
2. national, local and regional governments should, together with civil society, work on ensuring the basic prerequisites for quality youth work, starting from policy frameworks and providing stable financing;
3. international organisations and programmes (Erasmus+ National Agencies, European Commission, European Youth Foundation, SALTO Erasmus+ Resource Centres, EU-CoE youth partnership) could help by providing advice and examples of evidence-based policy and by advocating the importance of providing stable prerequisites for quality youth work that correspond to the desired changes in the status of young people and to their aspirations.

Concerning the missing elements in the quality youth work equation, the participants of the SEE youth work seminar agreed that the entire youth field in the region needs “some wind in its wings”. This wind could be ensured by better political will of the national governments to start, or improve, the process, by enhancing a political culture and by better implementing and monitoring the already existing schemes. They also concurred that there is not enough exchange between different organisations and countries in the field, also that policies do not match local realities. Instead, some of the national governments and agencies have the practice of adopting international-level policies without adapting them to the needs of the national, regional and local levels. International organisations could help in improving quality youth work in the SEE by:

1. facilitating closer discussion among youth organisations facing similar issues, in a trans-border approach;
2. through social and political recognition, helping local authorities and youth organisations in establishing a national system of validation of non-formal and informal learning. The current systems, Youthpass and Europass, should be promoted in the whole region;
3. helping in the development of standards and tools for the formal recognition of non-formal education.

The assets needed for quality youth work and help from other stakeholders in the field are two components of current and future quality youth work in the SEE. The third component relates to concrete plans for future action. Two slots of [the SEE Youth Work Seminar](#) were

organised around the plans for the future and plans for co-operation. This session resulted in several concrete proposals for co-operation:

1. Projects on strengthening the capacities of the national volunteer services to advocate for volunteering policy at regional and national levels in order to create an enabling environment for the development of volunteering as the effective tool that contributes to reconciliation and mobility of young people in the Western Balkans region, financed by the RYCO grant ROUTE WB6 2019-2021.
2. [SALTO SEE Resource Centre and representatives from Slovenia had a](#) proposal on mapping and promoting local and regional activities on youth work. The aims of this project would also include creating a list of good practice examples in youth work in the SEE region and establishing support services for youth work infrastructure development in the SEE.
3. Developing in-depth knowledge on the youth work community of practice in SEE, proposed by a member of [the Pool of European Youth Researchers](#).
4. A project in support of youth work aimed at policy makers and politicians, proposed by the participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and North Macedonia.
5. Participants from Croatia, Germany and Spain presented an idea of applying to the KA2 Erasmus+ activity with a project on youth work in shrinking cities.
6. Participants of several SEE countries, together with the representatives of [the Pool of European Youth Researchers](#), SALTO SEE, [NAPOR](#) and [RYCO](#) discussed applying for an Erasmus+ grant with projects on: 1) youth work information and the impact of such information on communities; and 2) youth workers' identity/self-recognition and youth work community practices in the SEE.
7. Several participants planned to conceive projects on the following topics:
  - advocating for youth work and youth workers organising, at regional level, a youth work day, a youth work convention and a network of youth work practitioners;
  - implementation of youth work in schools by combining formal and non-formal learning and building an environment of inclusion and security;
  - advocating for gender equality.
8. A project of mapping youth work infrastructure in the region, proposed by the Romanian [FITT organisation](#).
9. A project of analysis on the impact of youth policies in SEE, proposed by the Romanian [FITT organisation](#).
10. Conceiving a campaign for recognition of youth work, proposed by a representative of [NAPOR](#).
11. Strengthening co-operation with local authorities by finding a common ground and understanding as well as educating local/regional government units, proposed by a representative of [the Croatian Youth Network](#).

The highlights of discussion were related to the need to enforce a process of reconciliation in the region, to try to adopt principles of co-management, to constantly work on the capacity



building of all actors in the field and to enable a better political and social environment for policy and advocacy initiatives.

## 8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Contemporary actors in the youth field, although working in different national and regional contexts, encounter similar challenges, as identified by Kovačić and Pašić (2018) in “Youth Work in South-East Europe”, a paper on the state of play of the development of youth work.<sup>7</sup> The challenges are as follows: 1) the lack of comprehensive, evidence-based studies on the state of play of youth work in the region. Further investments in youth research in the SEE are needed; 2) meetings, conferences and seminars on the topic of youth organised in the region have focused on policy rather than on youth work; 3) the recognition and understanding of youth work as a profession in the region continues to be an important area of concern; and 4) there is a need for a cross-sectoral approach to youth policy and youth participation in the region. Tackling these issues should be a priority, as the youth sector remains sidelined to the traditional “youth issues” and there is a gap between young people, the youth sector and governments.

The above-mentioned components will be supplemented by conclusions based on knowledge, experience and motivation of the participants of [the SEE Youth Work Seminar](#), which can support the development of quality youth work in the region. Some of these conclusions are listed below.

First of all, as highlighted in the seminar, passion makes a difference and youth work does not happen in a “vacuum”. These two postulates are especially important in youth work in the SEE region, where youth workers have to face serious uncertainties and a scarcity of resources when trying to perform quality youth work.

The experts gathered in the seminar also agreed that a common European agenda in the youth field should strongly support youth work and youth workers, not only by supporting regular youth work activities, but also by dedicating one entire year, for example, 2020, to youth work, and naming it the “European Year of Youth Work”.

The basic prerequisites for quality youth work encompass

- policy frameworks;
- stable and reliable financial resources and infrastructure;
- qualified experts and youth workers; and
- supportive cross-sectoral communication and co-operation.

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<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017993/11301132/Youth-Work-in-SEE-State-of-Play-Development.pdf/861889e1-1c0f-5923-5d0d-0782baf27a8b>

In order to achieve high quality youth work and the harmonisation of youth work procedures across the countries in the region, a set of standards and code of ethics could be developed.

Furthermore, quality youth work requires continuous evaluation and re-invention. Youth workers should have the opportunity to participate in high-quality accredited learning programmes, both in formal and non-formal contexts.

A stronger commitment to cross-sectoral co-operation among ministries and state agencies can be very beneficial to youth work development, along with more convincing and balanced infrastructural development at all levels: state, regional, and local.

One of the sector's biggest challenges is how to obtain greater recognition of youth work, which would contribute to the self-sustainability of youth organisations. Besides official recognition, it is also necessary to acknowledge the profession and the role of youth workers. The efforts of youth workers should not be distorted by politicians and policy makers; furthermore, they should not be presented as an institutional endeavour (at national or European level) but as a result of a bottom-up effort undertaken by the different actors in the youth sector.

It has been recognised that youth workers sometimes struggle with being aware of the worth of their work. Therefore, youth workers must be supported to build a stronger confidence before aiming for public and formal recognition of their work. Public and formal recognition of the youth work profession has to follow well-structured pathways; recognition should also be easily obtainable through experience on the ground and training.

### **Co-operation in the region**

In most SEE countries, effective networks of youth organisations are established and work with skilled, committed, well-trained youth workers. A significant challenge for co-operation within the countries is the competition between national organisations for both domestic and foreign funds (donations and project funding), which turns them into competitors rather than partners. Regional co-operation between youth organisations has been a part of the process of peace-building and reconciliation in the region, and building democratic institutions. While there are a number of bilateral and multilateral co-operation examples in the youth sector in the region, more can be done to strengthen co-operation. Considering that the countries in the region share similar challenges and a history of both co-operation and conflict, there is room for establishing co-operation not just through the mediation of foreign institutions and organisations, but through the initiatives of public (state, regional and local) institutions and organisations operating at national level. It is necessary to improve regional co-operation, to learn from each other, but also to have a joint stand in front of stakeholders when it comes to youth policy, recognition of youth work, and so on (e.g. through [Berlin process](#)).



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