

Youth Partnership

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



YOUTH WORK IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

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Sarajevo, 15.11.2022

Potocnik, D., Drosopulos, M., Stankovski, B. (2022). *Youthwork in SEE*

WHY THIS STUDY? WHY NOW?

Southeast Europe has been a region of diverse social, political and economic turmoil for more than three decades.

This has been having an impact primarily on young people and certainly, on youth work and the implementation of youth policies.

Efforts by the Council of Europe and other international organisations to facilitate positive developments in the youth sector through the involvement of policy makers, practitioners and youth researchers are noteworthy, but often do not result in the desired changes.

Therefore, the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe recognised the need to conduct **qualitative research on the state of youth work in this area**, four years after the last seminar on youth work in SEE.

PRIMARY GOAL

The main goal of the study is **to identify pivotal components of youth work and hindrances to its performance** in 12 countries of South-East Europe in order to propose **recommendations to advocate for** a better position of youth workers and youth work in national and international contexts.

The 12 countries observed are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo *, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Türkiye.

METHODOLOGY

- Desk research (focused mainly on recent literature);
- Primary research in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected youth experts and youth workers at the national level and (at cases) physical observation.

- 1) the context of youth work;
- 2) youth workers' skills and competences and validation and professionalization of the youth workers' profession;
- 3) potential for growth and innovation and
- 4) examples of practices that resulted in improvement of youth work at a national or local level.

KEY FINDINGS

→ **Wide polyphony in regional youth work with regards to recognition, validation and accreditation.**

There are countries like Romania, for instance, where YW is recognized and accredited via mechanisms such as the 'Occupational Standard'. In other countries, such as in Greece, YW is recognized in paper and exists as a name, but no concrete steps have been made to validate and accredit it.

→ **Youth work for democracy, state building and reconciliation**

The tradition of youth work is intertwined with the history of SEE. There are different practices and trends of youth work across SEE economies, yet the joint element among these is their connection to peace-building, reconciliation and the fight for democracy, in which civil society has played a pivotal role.

Through the years, there have been effective, established networks among CSOs which have been strengthened with the support of the Council of Europe, Salto SEE, RYCO and other international networks and donors.

KEY FINDINGS

Youth work in SEE remains to a large extent donor-driven and dependent on fixed-term projects.

This has an impact on the impact, quality, dissemination and follow-up dynamics of any given project, let alone ideological implications.

In some countries, the Erasmus plus program remains the strongest source of funding due to lack of other funds allocated for youth.

Youth workers in SEE do not enjoy benefits and opportunities that their peers in western Europe countries do.

Youth workers in the region are striving to keep track of international processes and get included in trainings that could facilitate the delivering of quality youth work.

However, despite scarcity of infrastructure and financial resources, SEE youth workers **manage** to organise and conduct activities. They demonstrate **adaptability** to changing political structures, as well as economic crises, which are often accompanied by a high turnover in officials occupying positions at governmental bodies in charge of youth and youth work.

INCONSISTENCY AND FRAGMENTED COOPERATION

Support structures to youth work and youth workers have been addressed from different angles in this study.

One of these angles considers the **suitability of the state-established structures responsible for youth work on the national level.**

We have collected evidence proving that **young people and youth work is being merged into inappropriate institutional frameworks** that in fact, divert attention from youth work.

In **Greece**, there is no Ministry responsible for Youth.

‘Youth’ falls under the agenda of the Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious affairs.

In **Croatia**, youth-related topics are merged with demography under the State Office for Demography and Youth.

Albania is the only country among the observed ones that has a ministry dedicated exclusively to children and youth, established in 2021.

CROSS-SECTORAL COOPERATION HAS BEEN A BUZZWORD IN THE YOUTH SECTOR FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES, YET CONCRETE RESULTS ARE SCARCE.

A genuine and inclusive cross-sectoral cooperation that is respectful towards all participants, is still more an exception than a practice in SEE.

We have been talking for years about the need to establish working triangles of policy-makers, youth workers/practitioners and researchers, that would be :

- i) directly engaging young people and
- ii) ii) fostered by political will to design and implement relevant and sensible youth work policies and actions.

This, however, is not a reality in most SEE countries.

ARE THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN CHARGE?

Regarding intersectoral cooperation, the interviewees were very clear when expressing **concerns over the skills and competences** and consequently, the **efficiency** of public officials dealing with youth-related policies and institutions.

Respondents claim that the majority of officials working at institutions active in the youth sector **do not have a background** neither in youth work nor in the civic sector.

At the same time, **they do not utilise opportunities to include people** with relevant experience in their decision-making and policy-making mechanisms

This phenomenon is very much linked with **nepotism and corruption**, major scourges in SEE that are deeply embedded in regional societies.

YOUNG PEOPLE DO NOT TRUST INSTITUTIONS

→ Young people do not trust politicians and governments.

This phenomenon has grown more intense during the pandemic, the effects of which have affected mainly youth (OECD, 2022).

→ There is often public mistrust towards youth NGOs and people presenting themselves as youth workers.

→ Both young people and youth workers **do not believe that youth is a priority for their governments.**

ON YOUTH CENTRES

An interesting parameter linking youth work with political and civic life is the role of youth centres.

-Türkiye, for instance, is the country with the largest number of youth centres, many of which are high-quality with regards to facilities and range of services provided. Most YC, however, are also used as hubs of political ideology and orientation, shaping communities according to their donors' credos.

-On the contrary, in countries like Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Romania, the low presence of youth centres and generally, spaces for youth, specifically in rural areas, is seen as a great loss, and a factor disengaging people from civil life and political dialogue. In Greece, there are currently no youth centres, although there are vigorous plans aimed to change that.

-Regional governments do not seem to capture neither the value nor the function of a youth centre. They are not aware of the requirements involved in opening a highly functioning youth centre (based on QL standards).

-With the exception of Bulgaria, where there are already 2 centres holding the Quality Label of the CoE, in most SEE countries, there is no organisational, structural or financial support to open high-quality youth centres.

Youth workers visiting youth centres in Central and Western Europe feel left out and deprived.

RECOMMENDATIONS

-In order to implement sensible and constructive measures tailored according to the needs of young people both at a national and local level, stakeholders should engage in open & wide consultations via expert groups consisting of young people, youth workers and other practitioners, policy-makers and researchers.

-All stakeholders should embrace processes and guidelines promoted and provided via international structures, for example, via committing to the Bonn process.



**We encourage you to read our findings and
join the discussion!**

THANK YOU

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