

# Youth Partnership

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



## Youth Work in South-East Europe

**Draft**

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## Table of Contents

Executive summary .....	6
INTRODUCTION .....	7
I) METHODOLOGY AND AIMS OF THE STUDY.....	8
II) CASE STUDIES DESCRIBING FORMAL ELEMENTS OF THE YOUTH WORK ARCHITECTURE .....	9
<b>Albania</b> .....	9
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	9
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	11
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	11
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	13
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	15
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	16
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b> .....	17
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	17
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	18
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	20
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	20
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	21
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	21
<b>Bulgaria</b> .....	22
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	22
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	23
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	24
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	24
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	24
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	25
<b>Croatia</b> .....	25
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	25
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	26
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	28
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	28
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	29
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	31
<b>Greece</b> .....	31
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	31
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	33

<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	34
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	35
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	37
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	38
<b>Kosovo*</b> .....	39
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	39
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	40
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	41
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	42
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	42
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	43
<b>Montenegro</b> .....	44
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	44
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	44
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	46
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	46
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	47
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	47
<b>North Macedonia</b> .....	48
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	48
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	49
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	50
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	51
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	51
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	52
<b>Romania</b> .....	53
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	53
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	53
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	54
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	55
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	58
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	59
<b>Serbia</b> .....	60
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	60
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	61
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	63

<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	64
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	64
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	65
<b>Slovenia</b> .....	66
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	66
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	67
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	69
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	69
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	70
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	70
<b>Turkey</b> .....	71
<i>Legal framework of youth work</i> .....	71
<i>Structures supporting youth work</i> .....	72
<i>Educational opportunities for youth workers</i> .....	73
<i>Recognition and validation of youth work</i> .....	74
<i>Youth work financing</i> .....	75
<i>Examples of practice</i> .....	76
III) COMMON ELEMENTS AND DIFFERENCES ACROSS THE REGION BASED ON THE INTERVIEWS ...	76
<i>Youth work practice: Cross-sectoral cooperation</i> .....	77
<i>Financing</i> .....	79
<i>Politicisation and shrinking space for civic society</i> .....	80
<i>Digitalisation</i> .....	82
IV) CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVOCACY AND REVISION OF THE YOUTH WORK FRAMEWORK IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE .....	84
<i>Recommendations directed at policy-makers</i> .....	84
<i>Recommendations directed at youth workers</i> .....	85
<i>Recommendations directed at youth researchers</i> .....	86
REFERENCES .....	87
ANNEX: Guiding questions for personal, semi-structured interviews .....	97

## Executive summary

Southeast Europe has been an area of various social, political and economic turmoil for more than three decades. The changes (and lack thereof) affect youth work and youth and pose challenges to 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 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. 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 for advocating better positions of youth workers and youth work in national and international contexts. The 12 observed countries are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey. In order to gain a comprehensive insight into the challenges, potentials and perspectives of youth work in SEE, two methods of analysis were applied: desk research and in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected youth experts and youth workers at the national level. Desk research focused on literature published on youth work in SEE since 2015, with policy analysis, while in-depth interviews had four main thematic areas: 1) the context of youth work; 2) youth workers' skills and competences and validation and professionalization of the youth workers' profession; 3) potentials for growth and innovation and 4) examples of the practice that resulted in improvement of youth work on the national or local level. Results of the analyses indicate that all observed countries struggle with similar obstacles to planning and exercising their activities, namely with the outdated legal framework of youth work that is often joined with inefficient implementation of the prescribed policies, inadequate structures supporting youth work, a paucity of structured educational opportunities for youth workers, deficiencies in recognition and validation of youth work and scarce and irregular youth work financing. At the same time, youth civil society organisations and youth workers demonstrate resilience and adaptability to sudden social changes, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Innovations and inner strengths of the youth civic sector in SEE is a foundation for the growth and development of the youth sector and it should be recognised and supported by the genuine cross-sectoral cooperation. With this aim, the study concludes with the recommendations directed at three main groups of stakeholders in SEE youth field: policy-makers, practitioners and researchers.

## INTRODUCTION

Geographical area of the South-East Europe (SEE) has a common memory of the socialist past, when the pillars of youth work were established. The first major pillar was established during the post-World World II, when youth work was predominantly related to the scout movement and Red Cross activities. Kovačić and Čulum, in their 2018 paper on development of youth work in the socialist period (p. 152), recognise 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.” The second pillar emerged with appearance of the anti-war and actions directed at mitigating aftermath of the socialist regimes at the end of 1980s and early 1990s (Bužinkić et al., 2015; Pudar Draško 2018). Nowadays all countries analysed in the study have diverse scene of civic society organisations working with and for young people and covering multiple areas relevant to the lives of young people. Adjusting the national policies to the international standards, especially to those of [the European Commission](#) and [the Council of Europe](#), provides a possibility to enhance quality of youth work and young people’s perspectives. [Bonn process](#), as the joint effort to put the [European Youth Work Agenda](#) into work across Europe, by incorporating the principles of the [3<sup>rd</sup> European Youth Work Convention](#) into the national legislation, is one of the opportunities that should not be missed by those striving to improve youth well-being.

At a glance, all analysed countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey) struggle with similar issues in the youth field and have limited resources for performing youth work that would timely response to the needs and aspirations of the young people. However, twelve countries included in analyses also show significant variations concerning socio-political and economic situations in the countries, as well as institutional frameworks and policy systems that provide settings for youth work. Legal and strategic documents in the SEE envisage similar mechanisms for the implementation of the youth work, covering youth councils, youth centres, youth clubs and civil society organisations focused on young people (Siurala, 2015). In the past three decades, public institutions and civil society organisations in the SEE have been relying on the assistance of the international organisations in conceiving their youth policies as well as in funding youth-related activities. Presence of the international organisations also introduced various analyses of the issues in the field and experiments in monitoring and evaluation of the youth policies and there are several reports on the status and progress of the youth work in SEE (e.g. Potočnik & Stanojević, 2019). Still, it seems that the patterns of inadequate support to the youth work and striving for recognition would

benefit from the analyses that would take into consideration direct input from the youth workers. Therefore, this study is to a lesser extent directed at desk analysis of the institutional and policy frameworks of youth work in the SEE, whilst it focuses on the interviews with the youth workers and youth experts who have profound insights into the youth work policy framework and youth work implementation in 12 observed countries.

This study builds on the previous research of the EU-CoE youth partnership in the SEE region, namely the contributions to [the Youth Wiki](#) from non-programme countries, expert seminars and research papers. Research papers include [“Youth Work in South East Europe”](#) paper on the state of play of the development of youth work by Marko Kovačić and Lana Pašić, analytical paper [„Quality development of youth work in South-East Europe“](#) by Dunja Potočnik and Dragan Stanojević, [„Youth Work and SEE - Principles and Values“](#) by Ajsa Hadzibegović, [„Youth research in SEE“](#) by Marko Kovačić, and a study on [Youth Work in eastern Europe](#) by Alena Ignatovitch, Max Fras and Tanya Basarab. A number of regional seminars were held since 2015, including [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](#), held in Montenegro 2016. The last regional seminar on the SEE youth work, [the SEE Youth Work Seminar](#), was organised in Ljubljana in 2018. This study also builds on the long-standing research of youth work, including [History of youth work series](#), contributions to [the European Youth Work conventions](#), [Youth Partnership insights about recognition of youth work and non-formal learning](#), and [mapping educational paths of youth workers](#), among others.

## I) METHODOLOGY AND AIMS OF THE STUDY

The main aim of this study is to identify pivotal components of youth work and hindrances to its performance in 12 countries of the South-East Europe in order to propose recommendations for advocating better position of youth workers and youth work in the national and international contexts. A significant share of information used in this study is already available through [Youth Wiki](#), and the [online sources of the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe](#), as well as through some previous analyses of the youth work in South-East Europe shared at the [seminars of the EU-CoE Youth Partnership](#).

The first stage of data collection and the analyses aimed at obtaining insights into the formal frameworks of youth work, as well as at recognising thematic areas for the semi-structured interviews. During the desk review both national and international sources and studies were consulted, which also served for determining interviewees for the second stage of the research - primary data collection through semi-structured interviews. Semi structured interviews were conducted in each country, which included youth workers and youth work experts working in the academia or international organisations based in the countries.



Specifically, in alphabetical order per country, 5 interviews were conducted for Albania, 3 for Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3 for Bulgaria, 3 for Croatia, 10 for Greece, 2 for Kosovo\*, 3 for Montenegro, 3 for North Macedonia, 6 for Romania, 3 for Serbia, 3 for Slovenia and 5 for Turkey. The number of interviews conducted depended firstly, on the availability or not of updated data regarding the current status of youth work in each context and secondly, the occurrence of relevant developments in the field, some of which had not been yet academically recorded.

There are four main thematic areas addressed in the interviews: 1) the context of youth work on the national level (including structures supporting youth work and challenges faced by those structures; legal framework on the national and local level; source of financing and organisational capacities of the youth organisations); 2) youth workers' skills and competences and validation and professionalization of the youth workers' profession; 3) potentials for growth and innovation (digitalisation, changes in youth work practice and intersectoral cooperation) and 4) examples of the practice that resulted in improvement of youth work on the national or local level. The interviews provided important insights for grasping the state of youth work, inconsistencies in youth work implementation, as well as relationships and cooperation among the stakeholders in youth work on the national level.

## II) CASE STUDIES DESCRIBING FORMAL ELEMENTS OF THE YOUTH WORK ARCHITECTURE

### Albania

#### *Legal framework of youth work*

Despite its vibrant young demographics, that according to the latest report of its [National Statistic Agency](#), classify it among the youngest countries in the region, Albania adopted a [National Youth Law](#) for the first time in 2019, after a turbulent drafting process. The Law consists of 20 Articles. It is considered the most important legal document regarding youth work in Albania, as well as youth policy both at central and local level. The law on youth provides a concrete outline of institutions and mechanisms protecting the rights of young people and describes the necessary conditions for their activism and participation in civic life.

The adoption of the law itself and even more, its mentioning for the first time of the concept of 'youth work' signifies a new, quite promising momentum for youth workers in Albania. Under article 14, there is a concrete reference to youth work, which is translated into Albanian as 'puna rinore', literally meaning youth work. The law clearly sets a framework for the recognition of youth work in Albania by defining some key terms, such as 'structural dialogue', 'non-formal education for young people', 'safe youth space', 'youth infrastructure', 'youth organisations', 'youth policy', 'subject of youth policies' and of course, 'young people', who

are defined as individuals at age between 15 to 29. The fact that it regulates the involvement of local governments in youth work has also been hailed as a pivotal development.

Through Law 75/2019, Albania also has a [National Youth Agency](#), the only youth policy executive body in the country, established through Decision No. 681 dated 2.9.2020. Prior to the Agency, the National Youth Service was in place.

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

The Youth law makes a special reference to the [National Youth Council](#), which has been upgraded to the status of a consultative body to the respective ministry. The National Youth Council has 16 members, of which at least five must be selected respecting the gender quotas set out in point 2 of Decision 969 dated 02.12.2020 of the Council of Ministers ([Youth Wiki Albania 2021](#)). The law sees also local youth councils as consultative bodies for local youth policy making and youth policy decisions.

The primary strategic document on youth and youth policy in Albania remains the [National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020](#), which had succeeded the expired National Youth Strategy 2007-2013. The National Youth Action Plan, which was part of the Government Program for Youth, the National Strategy for Development and Integration, the European Union Youth Strategy, and the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the SEE Regional Strategy (2014-2020) had been an example of direct inclusion of Albanian youth and civil society in the consultation process leading to its creation. The Plan had been developed within a bottom-up, cross-sectoral procedure, assisted by the Swedish Government via the Olaf Palme Centre, foreseeing the direct contribution of over 12000 young people, students, and representatives of think-tanks.

During the last months, the new government of Albania has proceeded into a number of reforms in the field of youth. Until recently, the main body for youth and youth policy making was the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth. Since September 2021, however, young people and youth policy have been the focus of the newly established [State Ministry of Children and Youth](#). Moreover, there are provisions for the development of a new national youth action plan and the introduction of the [Youth Guarantee](#), planned in 2023, as part of the government's wider plan to tackle the high levels of youth unemployment.

### *Structures supporting youth work*

The [National Erasmus+ Office](#) (NEO) in Albania (former National Tempus Office) is the focal point for Albanian stakeholders involved in the Erasmus+ Programme, which is particularly popular in Albania. The [Contact Points for the Programmes Erasmus+: Youth in Action and European Solidarity Corps](#) are located in two different cities: Tirana and Kukes, respectively, the latter being on a geographically isolated area, on the border with Kosovo\*. Contact Points work in coordination with [SALTO SEE](#) and have the mission to support organisations and people interested in organising projects in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme, youth field and European Solidarity Corps.

The [National Youth Congress](#) is a youth umbrella organisation – a union of youth organisations, informal groups, youth forums of political parties – aiming at exchanging information, highlighting youth issues, lobbying and advocating for solving these issues and the provision of capacity building for all entities involved in the network. NYC was established in March 2013 in Tirana, in the presence of over 30 organisations at the national level. This network was started with the initiative of two foreign foundations: Friedrich Ebert Foundation and Olof Palme International. The synergy between the NYC and the Municipality of Tirana played a key role in Tirana winning the title of the [European Youth Capital](#) for 2022.

It might be worth mentioning that youth work in Albania is being supported also within a cross-border framework provided by regional organisations promoting youth policy and youth participation via different capacities. In its [2020-2022 Strategy and Work Programme](#), the [Regional Cooperation Council](#) advocates for the ‘full inclusion of youth in decision-making and their contribution to achieving the goals set forward in the regional strategies’.

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

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

At a state level, the National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020 foresees within its activities educational pathways for practitioners working with and for youth on a variety of topics (sports, leisure, health, prevention of delinquency etc.) and methods (peer-to-peer education, seminars, training courses etc.). Educational opportunities on different subjects related to young people are included also in different national strategies. Moreover, local NGOs and networks on different occasions organise educational activities targeting youth workers and other practitioners working with youth, such as teachers, activists or youth leaders.

The NEO (Erasmus+) office, as well as the Contact Points for the Programmes Erasmus+: Youth in Action and European Solidarity Corps, offer information and advice and run targeted information and training activities with the support of SALTO SEE. Erasmus+ is a program that

has been ardently embraced by both NGOs and higher education institutes, as indicated by [Eurydice](#).

Furthermore, the Erasmus Mundus partnerships have had a systemic impact on international cooperation of Albanian universities, providing, thus, mobility, education and capacity-building opportunities for academic staff, students and all practitioners working with youth. The [University of Tirana](#), for instance, has a wide range of partnerships with universities from 23 Programme Countries. According to figures provided by the European Commission (2019) on [EU-Western Balkan cooperation through Erasmus+](#) for the period 2014-2020, altogether, these partnerships have exchanged 354 individuals, 51% of which learners and 49% staff. According to the same report, overall, 80% are Albanians moving to Programme Countries and 20% other Europeans coming to Tirana. Most exchanges cover economics and ICT-related subjects.

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

Generally, the absence of sufficient opportunities for young people in the Albanian periphery is a factor that has been widely identified by independent international research (Cenaj, 2021; Pacukaj, 2021; Meçe 2019) as a common phenomenon, pushing young people towards migration to countries offering better educational and employment-related perspectives. At this point, it might be worth clarifying that in the case of a developing, transitional country like Albania, the distinction between urban and rural life differs significantly from the dominant standard in many European countries, where this distinction is measured in terms of concentration of population. In the Albanian context, the gap between urban and rural life is measured by a significant difference with regards to privileges and opportunities provided (Meçe 2019: 68), involving, among others, access -or not- to basic standards defining one's quality of life, such as infrastructure, energy, transport, education, employment and security.

Geography inevitably influences the priorities of organisations and practitioners working with and for young people. Overall, in Albania, youth work is mainly oriented towards employability and citizen participation. The subject of more specialized activities, however, depend largely on the geographical area where they are conducted. For instance, the arrival of Afghan refugees in Albanian territory following Afghanistan's takeover by the Taliban has created new

youth work-related needs and emergencies in towns like Shengjin, in the country's north close to the border with Montenegro. A respondent working directly with young refugees has shared her experience:

*“Now I spend most of my days in Shengjin and not in Tirana, like before. Afghan refugees have arrived bearing the trauma of war and conflict. I have worked with vulnerable groups before, but this is something completely new for me. Albania is a transit country for Afghans, who are meant to travel to the United States. Yet, bureaucratic procedures take long and these people are stuck somewhere in between: they can't go back to their homeland, they are not supposed to stay in Albania and they do not have a clear picture of when they will manage to leave for the States. You can imagine how challenging it is for them and for us too. No one knows the right answers.”* (youthworker, Albania)

A few years ago, a series of research-based seminars organised by the Youth Partnership in 2016 under the title ["Journeys to a New Life": an expert seminar on the role of youth work in integration of young refugees in Europe](#) had triggered a discussion over the necessity to equip youth workers working with refugees in emergency situations with tools and competences that would enable them to respond efficiently to the new needs and challenges that had emerged. The seminar had been an opportunity to reflect upon case studies from Greece, Turkey and other countries of the SEE region -and not only- that had opened their borders to refugees following the war in Syria and the consequent Greece-Turkey refugee agreement in 2015. One of the takeaways was the need to come up with a manual of 'emergency youth work' for practitioners working in such contexts. This proposal had led to another series of series of [Workshops on the role of youth work in the process of inclusion and participation of young refugees](#), that took place in 2017, in Strasbourg, France and Thessaloniki, Greece respectively. One of the [outputs](#) of these workshops was the creation of a manual for youth workers and educational practitioners. The situation that has been moulded currently in Albania is a reminder of the need to keep investing in the exchange of ideas and practices, especially among countries of the region that have experienced similar situations in the past and therefore, might be a valuable source of knowledge.

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

The presence of concrete reference to youth work within the recently adopted [Youth Law 75/2019](#) has reinvigorated local hopes and efforts of a full recognition and institutionalization of youth work in Albania. In the past months, there have been vigorous public discussions over the future of youth work in the country, taking stock of lessons learnt in the previous years and making the best out of the new perspective ahead.

Except for the fact that the law provides a definition of youth work, it also entails articles regulating the role of mechanisms supporting youth work within local governments and elevates the role of the National Youth Council and the local youth councils. These

developments have been characterized by local practitioners and experts as very important and promising.

At the time being, youth work in Albania is neither officially recognized nor standardized, which has a direct impact on practitioners' quality of work, but also on the availability and reliability of data on youth work-related actions and activities. Interviewees for this study have shared that there is a tax code under which one can be registered as a youth worker, yet youth work is neither regulated nor standardized. This means precarious forms of working, usually in fixed-term contracts, offering minimum benefits.

*“Being a youth worker in Albania is not to be compared with being a youth worker in Germany, France or Sweden, for instance, in countries where youth work is institutionalized and genuinely supported by the state. I am sure that there are challenges everywhere, but here youth workers are faced with limited resources, bureaucracy, corruption and so many other adversities... You must have a hard stomach to survive. Plus, I do not know many people who can support themselves only through youth work. Yet, despite all difficulties, the quality of the work provided is high and there are people who work very passionately. I think that the recognition of youth work would help enormously in achieving better standards for our work and our young people. It would also be an acknowledgment of our work and a reason for others to see youth work more seriously, not as a pastime, but as something very important for the community.”* (youth worker, Albania)

Youth work in Albania moves in parallel with formal education, often filling in gaps of the schooling system. Tools such as [Europass](#) and [Youthpass](#), which increase the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are valued as important in the wider path towards the recognition of youth work. As respondents shared, the validation of knowledge and skills acquired via non-formal education is one more argument in favour of the value of youth work and its methodologies. Regarding Europass, it should be noted that there are no support offices in Albania, as in other countries of the region.

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

## *Youth work financing*

As foreseen by article 16 of the [Youth Law 75/2019](#), the primary source of funding for youth-related activities is within the state budget, which is managed by the National Agency for Youth. This budget is reserved for financing the construction or reconstruction of public facilities and youth infrastructure; financing of projects of youth or/and for youth organisations and co-financing for participation in international programmes. According to [Youth Wiki \(2021\)](#), an innovative funding element introduced by the National Youth Agency has been the financial support to local administrative units in Albania (municipalities et al.) through a similar grant scheme. The call for proposals for local government units to apply with their project ideas in support of local youth policies and projects was launched in June 2021. Smaller grants are foreseen also within [the National Youth Action Plan \(NYAP\) 2015-2020](#) (Plani Kombëtar i Veprimit Për Rininë 2015-2020). Theme-specific grants for youth projects addressing particular social, educational or health-related priorities are foreseen within various campaigns launched by the [Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports](#), or the [Ministry of Health and Social Protection](#).

Overall, Albanian youth workers can count on international funding provided by international organisations (UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, OSCE) or foreign embassies that are active in the country. Ad hoc funding for youth projects targeting specific communities, minority groups or young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods have been envisaged also within the wider framework of national plans carried out with the support of international donors. Among these is the [National Action Plan on LGBTI people in the Republic of Albania](#) or the [National Action Plan for the Integration of Roma and Egyptian people](#).

At a regional level, there are grants provided within cross-border initiatives supporting youth work among the six economies of the Western Balkans. Tirana is the city hosting the [Regional Youth Cooperation Office \(RYCO\)](#), a mechanism that arose as a fruit of the Berlin Process. RYCO launches projects fostering cooperation among young people from all over the Western Balkans and announces at specific periods per year grants for projects fulfilling certain criteria.

Financing opportunities for regional youth projects are also provided by the [Regional Cooperation Council \(RCC\)](#), an intergovernmental body based in Sarajevo, yet promoting regional cooperation across Southeast Europe and among the six economies of the Western Balkans. Albania's National Youth Council is part of the consultative group of the ["Western Balkans Youth Lab"](#) project of the RCC, aimed at boosting youth policy and participation.

In general terms, youth work in Albania suffers from the same pledges characterizing many countries of the region. The shrinking space for civil society, meaning here less opportunities for growth, visibility and participation in the decision-making process; unregulated sources of funding; competition among organisations conducting youth work over their financial survival and the dependence on short-term, driven projects are only some of the scourges affecting youth work and its practitioners. An expert interviewed talks about the ceaseless struggle to find financial resources to support their work:

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

In contrast to the respondent who is constantly seeking funds to support the activities of their organisation, which are very specific and target a particular community, a young volunteer interviewed shares a completely different perspective. In their organisation, it is the donors’ priorities that define the scope and subject of their work:

*“I worked as an intern in this NGO in my city because I wanted to gain experience. My job was to scan through the internet and find open calls. Then, based on these, we would write a project and submit. We would apply regardless the call. I remember how during the period of one single month, we applied to calls for organisations working with Roma, refugees, abused women, radicalized youth and I can’t remember what else.”* (young volunteer, Albania)

### *Examples of practice*

The [National Youth Congress](#) is currently cooperating with three German Foundations, in three dimensions related to youth. Together with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, as well as Swiss Embassy, NYC focuses on Institutional Dialogue and Cooperation, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung project focuses on research, monitoring and evaluation, and the collaboration with the Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung is focused on political education and capacity building. NYC has developed a strong bond with 5 other National youth structures in Western Balkan region through Cooperation and Development Institute and Western Balkan Youth Cooperation Platform. Nowadays, NYC represents 112 youth entities located in 12 regions of Albania.

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

Tirana gaining the title of the [European Youth Capital for 2022](#) awarded by the European Youth Forum is expected to be an important opportunity for youth advocacy and participation. The



activities planned within this initiative are an excellent opportunity for the city's extroversion and networking, but also for local young people to contribute in different areas and be more actively involved in decision making and project implementation.

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

### *Legal framework of youth work*

The legal framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina is, by far, the most complex one in Southeast Europe. This is due to the constitutional and institutional setting of the country established with the Dayton Accords, which divided the country into two entities (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska) and the District of Brčko.

Due to the unique constitutional and institutional structure of the country, and the decentralised jurisdiction on the matters of youth, Bosnia and Herzegovina has three laws governing the position of youth in the country: the [Law on Youth of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), the [Law on Youth Organisation of the Republika Srpska](#), and the [Youth Law of the Brčko District](#). The Law on Youth of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2010) includes a very narrow definition of youth work as “planned, purposeful and conscious youth support through youth voluntary participation” (Article 4, para. 11), even though further in the text (Article 8, para. 4) it elaborates what this “support” actually entails. Somewhat unusual, the Law includes a section on “youth obligations” which, among the other things, states that young people have “to actively work on improvement of their abilities, their education and development of the integrity of their personality” and „improve the environment in which they live“ (Article 7, paras. 1 and 5, respectively). Furthermore, the it also stipulates that, the relevant authorities, when adopting measures related to youth work as well as youth activity plans will, among the rest, consider the “spiritual needs and characteristics of young people” (Article 9). In this context, if by “spiritual” the lawmakers considered religious needs than, from a strictly legal perspective, it can be argued that this provision clashes with the constitutionally enshrined principle of secularism. The Law on Youth Organisation of the Republika Srpska (2004, amended in 2008 and 2012) includes a more elaborate definition of youth work as “the part of youth activities organised with and for youth, which takes place within the free time of young people and is performed in order to improve conditions for personal and social development of young people and the general social benefits in accordance with their needs, opportunities, and with their voluntary participation” (Article 2). The Youth Law of the Brčko District (2017), describes youth work as a “form of socially useful work in the field of interest of youth in which they are involved and which contributes to the improvement of the position of young people” (Article 2). Similarly as the Law on Youth of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this law also includes a section on obligations of young people (Article 7).

Albeit the the three laws on youth provide different definition of “youth work”, they establish it as one of the priorities of the entity’s youth policy nonetheless. They also define “youth” as persons between 15 to 30 years of age. Moreover, the legislation allows for the establishment of local youth councils and municipal youth offices. Most of the youth councils, among the other things, include raising awareness and popularisation of youth work as one of their main tasks. Still, as stated by a youth worker from Bosnia and Herzegovina interviewed for the purpose of this research, not all municipalities have established youth councils, while many municipal youth offices, both in the Federation of and in Republika Srpska, are not fully operational. However, although the Law on Youth of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina includes a section on youth work, the Federation does not yet have a youth strategy. Also, as confirmed by youth workers and experts from the country, many of the adopted policies have not been effectively implemented. On the other hand, Republika Srpska does have a Strategy on Youth but, unlike the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has not yet established minimum requirements on youth centres.

Both the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, and the Brčko District have adopted legislation on volunteering. In this regard, the Brčko district was the first to pass the [Law on Volunteering](#) in 2010. This law establishes an obligation to the District Government to promote volunteerism as “a public interest activity” with contributes towards active participation of the citizens, youth in particular, in resolving “societal and other social issues” (Article 3). The [Law on Volunteering of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) (2012), in addition to in addition to domestic, also defines international volunteering (Article 3), further stating that the “role and importance of volunteering is conveyed through formal and non-formal education” (Article 12). Similarly, [the Law on Volunteering of Republika Srpska](#) (2014) stipulates that the “role and importance of volunteering is transferred to children and youth by formal and informal education” (Article 28). It further establishes a responsibility of the Ministry of Family, Youth and Sport to fund the support and the development of volunteering (Article 27), giving it a type of supervisory role regarding volunteering activities (Article 24). All these three laws allow young people above the age of 15 to become volunteers, establishing further mechanism for the protection of their rights.

### *Structures supporting youth work*

Because of its constitutional and institutional structure, youth work in Bosnia and Herzegovina is conducted at the level of Federation, Republika Srpska and the self-governing Brčko District. At the state level, the only existing body is the [Commission for Coordination of Youth Issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), which is responsible for the coordination of all groups of significance for the promotion and protection of the role and positions of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is established as part of the [Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), and includes representatives from two entities, Brcko and the main youth umbrella organisations. However, the Ministry does not have executive authority when it comes to youth and can only provide unbinding recommendations to the entities.

At entity level, the competent governmental institutions in the field of youth are the [Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), and the [Ministry of Family, Youth and Sports of Republika Srpska](#). When it comes to the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as stated by a youth expert from the country, there is an overlap of competences between the Ministry of Culture and Sports on federal level and the Ministry of Education on cantonal level). However, similarly as with the other countries in the Region, youth activists from both Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska have raised concerns about the extreme level of partisanship of these institutions which impact the quality of their work, the practice of only formal implementation of the adopted laws and strategies and the fact that, from all the competencies of these institutions have, youth and youth work has been given lowest priority (youth worker, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Even though the countries of former Yugoslavia have a rich history of youth work (Pasic 2019: 159), youth work in Bosnia and Herzegovina is primarily conducted by the youth civil society organisations with the support of international donors. Similarly, as in Kosovo and North Macedonia, the youth work in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as post-conflict country, has been supported by the civil society and international donors as part of the general process of reconciliation and peacebuilding. For example, the first offices of the then PRONI Institute for Social Education, now called PRONI Centre for Youth Development, have been opened at the places of demarcation between the major communities which have been heavily affected by the conflict (PRONI 2020: 11). In this direction, particularly important are youth umbrella associations which promote and lobby for the improvement of standards of youth work, as well as the status of youth workers in the country. For example, the [Institute for Youth Development – KULT](#) was founded in 2002 and has implemented numerous activities focusing on youth non-formal and information education. The Institute also gained experience in drafting legal documents and regulations. It initiated the adoption of the youth laws of both the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the District of Brčko. In cooperation with other youth organisations and the Federal Commission for Youth Issues, the Institute drafted the Law on Volunteering of the Federation and submitted it to the Parliament where it was ultimately adopted. In Republika Srpska, the [Network of Youth Centres for Animation, Development and Training \(MOCART\)](#) supports establishing new youth centres, raises the capacities of the existing ones, and promotes youth work in general. The Institute Perpetuum Mobile, the executive body of the network also organises the annual [Conference on Youth Work \(KORA\)](#) which aims to raise the awareness on its importance and creates a platform for sharing experiences and practices between youth centres and youth organisations.

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

Another common phenomenon present not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but in all of the Western Balkans is that the youth wings of political parties have become the main institutions of youth mobilisation. However, as stated by a local youth worker, the large number of young members they have is not due to the high interest of youth in politics, but because of lucrative reasons such as, for example, obtaining employment or generally benefiting from the clientelistic system that the political parties have created. As the youth wings also organise extensive activities for their members, this effectively shrinks the space of the youth civil society organisations.

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of the first countries in Southeast Europe to establish formal educational opportunities for youth workers. Namely, the PRONI Centre for Youth Development, in cooperation with the Jonkoping University from Sweden, organised university-level courses for youth work. These courses were accredited by the Jonkoping University and trained the first cohort of professional youth workers not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the wider region as well (PRONI 2020: 11).

However, since this programme ended in 2007, there has been a gap in youth work education. More recently, this gap has been filled by the youth civil society sector. Namely, several youth organisations, both in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, have created year-long modular courses on youth work. Each organisation providing these modular courses have its own ethnical codex on youth work, but none has been established on a state or entity level. But, the issued certificates are not formally accepted in Republika Srpska because, unlike the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, youth worker (or an equivalent) is not recognised as a profession. Overall, as there are no formal educational opportunities for youth workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Council of Europe or the regional organisations such as SALTO and RYCO provide different types of trainings on a non-formal level.

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

From the three aforementioned youth laws, only the Youth Law of the Brčko District (2017) incorporates a definition of a “youth worker” (Article 2). At the level of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the established legal term for “youth worker” is “expert-associate in working with youth” (in original: “stručni saradnik za rad sa mladima”), and it is an officially recognised profession enlisted in the [Classification of Professions of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#). This is not the case at the level of Republika Srpska where such an equivalent does not exist. According to youth workers from this entity, this is linked with the low prioritisation of youth work on the policy agenda. Moreover, neither Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country nor its constituent entities, have established mechanisms of validation of previously acquired experience in the field of youth work.

## *Youth work financing*

Quite similar to the rest of the Western Balkans, the youth sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina struggles to secure funding. The funds allocated from the budgets of the entities, cantons and municipalities are insufficient, thus the main supporters of youth work in the country are European Union through Erasmus+ Programme, the Council of Europe, the European Youth Foundation and international donors. As a result, the youth sector struggles to ensure sustainability while most of the youth civil society organisations are donor-driven. Existing legislation does not impose the local authorities to secure funding for youth centres and youth work in general. However, some municipalities have separate budget lines for the local youth centres and secure their financing, but such examples of this practice remain rare. In most of the cases, the funding of the local youth councils and youth work in general is provided by projects conducted by the councils themselves, youth civil society organisations or the large youth umbrella associations.

## *Examples of practice*

- The [Institute for Youth Development - KULT](#) is one of the most prominent organisations working on youth issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Institute implements the UMiD – Learn, Think and Act! training course as an officially recognised form of non-formal education that provides young people with an opportunity to acquire different competences that will make them competitive on the labour market and become active citizens. The yearlong programme consists of trainings, practical exercises and volunteering. UMiD is intended for youth under 30 years of age. As a part of this initiative, participants are focussed on one of the following areas: active engagement of youth in the community, development of leadership and supporting community development. The UMiD programme has been implemented for over 16 years and, so far, it has included over 400 participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many of them are now decision-makers, entrepreneurs, civil society activists and staff members of international organisations.
- [PRONI Centre for Youth Development](#) is a non-governmental youth organisation established in 1998. It focuses on promoting peace and active citizenship. The organisation is active at both national and European level through networking with other youth NGOs and membership in different international youth networks. It has established 42 youth clubs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the largest network of this type in the country. The PRONI Centre is also the initiator and co-founder of one of the largest Youth Centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the Youth Centre of the Brčko District.
- [Zdravo da ste](#), is a youth centre in Banja Luka, runs the Open Youth Club where young people can meet every day with their peers and the centre employees. It aims to support the development and social integration of children and young people, especially youth with special needs and from vulnerable groups. Young people can get

involved in different types of activities including tournaments, excursions, camps, seminars, training courses other types of events.

## Bulgaria

### *Legal framework of youth work*

The legal framework of youth work in Bulgaria has been established with the [Youth Law](#) (2012). It defines youth work as “an organised activity or initiative which aims to present, protect and develop the interests and needs of the young people” (Article 17). It also includes provisions on creating national youth policy, as well as on youth organisations, youth workers, youth volunteering, and on setting a national youth information system. However, as it was stated by a Bulgarian youth worker, the law is imprecise and inconsistent and, as such, it “creates more problems and raises more questions rather than it helps structuring the framework of youth work”. As a result, according to the same source, youth organisations in the country have often proposed different definitions on youth work. They rely on the recommendations adopted by the Council of Europe, especially when it comes to the standard of youth work and youth workers’ skills and competences. At the moment of writing this study, the Ministry of Youth and Sport is leading a discussion on establishing quality standards on youth work on national level. However, no concrete outcome has been produced yet.

The country had a [National Youth Strategy \(2010-2020\)](#) which defines nine strategic objectives. The process of adopting a new Strategy for the period of 2021-2030 was halted due to the political crisis in the country. Up to this date, a new document has not been yet approved.

Even though the Law on Youth includes a relatively small section on Youth Volunteering (Section VI, Articles 25-43), Bulgaria had not adopted a separate law on volunteering. Somewhat surprisingly, despite the constant lobbying by the youth civil society organisations, the ongoing debate in the country is whether adopting a law on volunteering is necessary at all. This is because some stakeholders, as stated by a youth worker from the country, predominately workers unions, have expressed concern that if an inadequate law is adopted, its implementation might be abused in practice for replacing the fulltime workers with volunteers. The issue was discussed in few instances in the Parliament, but none of the proposed versions were approved. Therefore, as this youth worker added, the process of drafting and adopting a law on volunteering needs to be inclusive and be a result of an extensive negotiation process that would include all stakeholders in the Bulgarian society.

### *Structures supporting youth work*

The [Ministry of Youth and Sport](#) of the Republic of Bulgaria is responsible for the implementation of youth policy in the country. On a regional level, this is done by the district governors (Youth Law, Article 13). The district governors prepare the municipal youth plans for the relevant district and submit them for approval to the Ministry of Youth and Sport (Article 14). These plans “set the objectives and priorities of the regional youth policy in accordance with the National Youth Strategy” (Youth Law, Article 13). However, despite the provisions stipulated in the Youth law, the district governors are *de facto* powerless in shaping youth policy and, by that effect, in supporting youth work in general as a youth worker from Bulgaria stated. Finally, the majors conduct the youth policy on municipal level. They prepare the municipal youth plans, which are adopted by the municipal councils (Article 16). The Youth Law allows the creation of municipal consultative councils dealing with youth issues (Article 15), but this is not a binding requirement. Rather, it is left entirely to the discretion of the local municipalities. Moreover, the Law itself does not include provisions on the structure of these councils and their *modus operandi*. Generally, according to a youth worker from the country, the municipalities do not see youth policy as worth supporting from a strategic perspective and, as a result, only few municipal consultative council exists.

One part of the structure where youth work is conducted in the municipalities are the Centres for Professional and Personal Development or popularly known as “youth houses” (in Bulgarian: *младежки дом*). These “youth houses” were established during the communist period and continued operating after the political system changed. They are offering more traditional extracurricular activities aimed for primary and secondary school students (such as, for example, drawing lessons, languages courses, etc). While the premises itself are municipal, their work is supported by the [Ministry of Education and Science](#). Additionally, some municipalities had the opportunity to establish youth centres that conduct youth work in a more contemporary sense of the word. There are currently eight youth centres of this type across Bulgaria. Their development was part of a larger project implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science which was funded by the [European Economic Area Programme and the Norway Grants 2014-2021](#). Generally, in the words of a Bulgarian youth worker, the position of youth workers in Bulgaria is that the Ministry of Education and Science is doing more to support youth work than the Ministry of Youth and Sport, which focusses predominately on grant programme. There was, however, a previous project implemented by the Ministry of Youth and Sport under which nationwide network of so-called Youth Centres for Information and Consultation was established. But, these centres were unsustainable and were closed after the project funding ended.

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

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

However, unlike most countries in Southeast Europe, two leading Bulgarian higher education institutions do provide educational opportunities for youth workers. Namely, Sofia University „Saint Clement of Ohrid“, the oldest and biggest university in the country, offers a bachelor degree in non-formal education. On a graduate level, the University of Veliko Tarnovo has established master programme focussing on social and pedagogical work with youth. The National Sport Academy “Vasil Levski” offers a master degree programme in youth activities and sport.

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

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

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

### *Youth work financing*

General observation of the situation with youth work financing in Bulgaria according to the local youth workers, as it is also the case with the other countries in the Region, is that the youth sector is unsustainable and relies predominately on external providers. On national level, as it was already elaborated, funding is provided by the Ministry of Education and Sciences and the Ministry of Youth and Sport. The latter has established a grants programme for youth organisations. However, it was as a Bulgarian youth worker pointed out, that



majority of the funds from this ministry are allocated towards sports activities and that youth civil society organisations receive disproportionately less money.

However, unlike the countries from the Western Balkans, Bulgaria is an EU member state and Bulgarian youth organisations can apply for funds provided by the European Commission. In that direction, the [Erasmus+ Programme](#) and the [European Social Fund](#) are important sources of funding. Additionally, the [European Economic Area Programme and the Norway Grants 2014-2021](#) in Bulgaria have provided support to the municipalities for opening eight youth centres across the country, as well as for other youth-related projects. But, applying for these types of large grants requires human resources with significant expertise, something that the youth organisations, especially smaller ones and those located in rural areas do not have. The situation has become even more difficult as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic because many youth organisations had to reduce their staff while, at the same time, they needed to procure technical equipment necessary for the implementation of online activities.

### *Examples of practice*

[The International Youth Centre - Stara Zagora](#) is the first Bulgarian youth centre which has been certified with the quality label for youth work by the Council of Europe. It focusses on developing non-formal education and inclusive activities for young people 15-30 years old. Although the centre operates within the Municipality of Stara Zagora, it has an influence on national level because of its expertise in youth work and youth policy. It creates opportunities for vulnerable youth groups to take part in international youth exchanges and supports their personal development through its outreach programmes. The Centre also works with informal groups. For example, in order to encourage young people's active participation, the organisation is currently in the process of selecting 50 youth initiatives, which will receive funds up to 500 BGN group in order to support their implementation. This is the first call for projects on a regional level aimed at informal youth groups.

## **Croatia**

### *Legal framework of youth work*

In Croatia, youth work as a term still has not gained recognition and it is most often being referred to as “working with young people”. The concept of youth work is fully understood and applied only by a small number of youth experts and civil society professionals. [The Central State Office for Demography and Youth](#) is the main body responsible for youth policy in Croatia, although it also falls within domains of other ministries, like [Ministry of Science and Education](#) and [Ministry of Labour and Pension System](#). Currently there is no valid national youth policy strategy as [the National Programme for Youth](#) expired in 2018. The review of the youth strategy is currently in process. Relevant to the youth work is [the Act on Volunteering](#)

(2021) that prescribes basic principles of volunteering, mechanisms for engaging in volunteer activities and tools for recognition of the competences gained through volunteering. The other key document defining youth policy in Croatia is the [Law on Youth Advisory Boards](#) (2014), which conceptualizes the basic aspects of local youth policy. Concerning the strategic orientation set up by public institutions, the orientation of the European Commission and of the Council of Europe are being followed on a very general level, but there are some important missing links (i.e. national priorities of the Bonn process). The youth civil sector is openly addressing missing or inadequate elements in the national youth policy and its implementation,;

*“Another action by the Government that caused disappointment in the youth NGO and youth researchers is related to the selection of the members of [Advisory Board for Youth of the Government of the Republic of Croatia](#) – an advisory committee to the Croatian government in the matters of youth policy. Composition of the newly elected members of this committee does not reflect competences of the youth experts working with young people, and it is the first time in nearly three decades the youth researchers are not represented in this committee.”* (youth expert, Croatia)

Cross-sectoral cooperation in the youth field in Croatia is only partially accomplished, with some crucial processes diverted from genuine inclusion of the youth NGOs into policy-making. One of such examples is exclusion of the Croatian Youth Network (an umbrella organisation of the youth NGOs in Croatia) from the committee for drafting the new National Programme for Youth. By omitting this umbrella association from the expert committee, the institutional memory of the youth sector is lost to a significant extent, which weakens the outcomes of the process. Therefore, potential gaps between the youth policies on a normative level and their practical implementation were one of the key questions employed during the interviews. A sarcastic response by one interviewed expert in Croatia: “since there is nothing on the paper, there is no gap” depicts a limbo Croatian youth NGOs are placed in. At the same time, Covid-19 pandemics has elevated expectations from young people; everyone talks about young people who have to provide support to the older members of family and society. At the same time, young people are not provided equal support and they are left out of decision-making, which inevitably leads to disappointment and vanishing of motivation to take part in meaningful change in the youth sector (Baketa et al., 2021).

### *Structures supporting youth work*

The most important institution in devising and implementing the youth work related policy is [the Central State Office for Demography and Youth](#). According to the [Regulation on Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs](#), the task of the Governmental [Office for Cooperation with NGOs](#) is to coordinate the work of ministries, central state offices, Croatian Government offices and state administrative organisations, as well as administrative bodies at local level in connection with monitoring and improving the cooperation with the non-

governmental, non-profit sector in the Republic of Croatia. Already mentioned [Advisory Board for Youth of the Government of the Republic of Croatia](#) holds a role of monitoring and analysing public policies directed at young people, proposes the new acts and amends the existing legislation in the field of youth policy. Youth work is not listed as one of this body's jurisdictions.

[The Ministry of Labour and Pension System, Family and Social Policy](#) performs administrative and other tasks related to employment policy, labour relations and approval of the standard of qualifications. However, this ministry considers youth work as a part of social work and there is a limited support to adoption the standards of youth worker qualification. According to one of the interviewees, [the Ministry of Science and Education](#) takes part “*ex officio*, but does not exhibit any initiative regarding the youth work”. Support to the youth work and youth workers is also provided by the research and educational sector, namely by [the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb](#) and [the University of Rijeka](#), who provide expert and research support to the youth civil society organisations and are jointly organising [formal channel of the youth workers’ education](#).

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

[The Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes](#), the second most important institution apostrophized by the interviewees as a structure supporting youth work, holds responsibility for implementation and promotion of EU programmes and other international programmes in the field of science, education, training and youth. Agency has made significant steps forward in recognition and better positioning of the youth work in Croatia, but its role and mandate are limited. The Agency is not a policy-maker and as such, cannot bring normative policy acts. Its role mainly extends to managing the grants and putting some topics on the agenda. One of such examples is the [Europe Goes Local project](#), where the Agency opened a structured public debate on local youth work and youth work professionalization.

Other youth organisations and networks of NGOs (i.e. [Croatian Youth Network](#), [Mladforma-non-formal initiative of youth](#)) are also reliable stakeholders in the civic scene, but this type of partnership has its own limitations due to financial scarcity. In the last decade, schools, especially secondary or high schools, are open to partnerships with the youth NGOs, mainly in organising extra-curricular activities and implementing programmes of civic education.

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

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

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

The Croatian Youth Network manages a programme of non-formal education [Study on Youth for Youth](#) that offers omnibus of workshops and seminars for youth workers. On a formal level, education for youth workers is available through a [programme of life-long learning “Youth in Contemporary Society”](#) that is jointly managed by the University of Rijeka, [University of Ljubljana](#) and the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb. This programme is performed in a hybrid manner, with on-site lectures and workshops held at the premises of the University of Rijeka. The programme *Youth in contemporary society* consists of three modules covering the most important issues in the youth field: (I) youth research, (II) youth work, and (III) youth and community development. The first generation of youth workers enrolled in the academic year 2017/2018 and the second generation enrolled during Covid-19 pandemics – 2020/2021. This programme is one of the milestones of the project [Supporting Evidence-based Education of Youth Workers](#), which aims at setting up and improving the architecture of youth work in Croatia and Slovenia.

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

[The Croatian Qualifications Framework Act](#) (adopted in 2013 and revised in 2018) defines non-formal and informal learning and envisions the development of a system of recognition and evaluation of non-formal and informal learning. Article 15 of the Act states that procedure, recognition and validation of previously acquired learning shall be stipulated by an Ordinance on recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning. [The Agency for Science and Higher Education](#) has published [Guidelines and procedures for recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning](#) in 2015, which describe the procedure for recognition. However, the Ordinance on recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning still has not been adopted. Recognition of the prior learning experiences is also one of the

basic prerequisites for establishing a Master study on youth work in Croatia, which is one of the aims following introduction of the programme of life-long learning for youth workers. Youth work is still not considered a profession in Croatia, which reflects inadequate working conditions and widespread precarity in the civil society organisations working with young people.

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

The institutions are reluctant to establish a quality process of professionalization of youth work since there is no real understanding and wide acceptance of the youth work benefits. Croatian framework for youth work currently only formalizes the existing conditions, and actors from the public institutions claim only nominal acceptance of the importance of professionalization of youth work. Despite this grim situation, maybe there are new horizons opening, and youth experts vocalize their hope for constructive changes:

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

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

### *Youth work financing*

Activities of the youth NGOs are still primarily financed through project work, which causes fatigue and dissatisfaction of the youth workers. Funds available from the national and local government are very modest and do not prioritize young people and youth-related activities. On the national level, grants are available through the schemes provided by the Central State Office for Demography and Youth, the Ministry of Science and Education and by [the National Foundation for Civil Society Development](#). Among them, only the Central State Office has grants aimed directly at youth, whilst the other two funders support the entire spectrum of civil society interest groups.

Croatia has an abundance of the funds available for youth work from the European and international level, primarily through the [Erasmus+ programmes](#) and [the European Social](#)

[Fund](#), but obtaining the grant is time consuming and depletes already modest human resources of the youth associations. Consequentially, fluctuation in the youth sector is rather high and the sector is deeply affected by loss of human resources. Many youth workers are volunteers, and those who are employed have to simultaneously perform various roles due to a paucity of financial resources (the roles of youth workers, administrators, accountants, project managers, etc.). Youth sector is very eclectic and it is hard for newcomers to grasp all the elements and processes in the sector. Investments in education of youth workers in order to get them acknowledged with the framework, meaning of youth work and youth work practices that could be beneficial for their work are very scarce.

*“The public calls’ primary aim is not to develop mechanisms of support to the youth workers and to help in development of the youth workers’ skills. They are mostly aiming at covering a share of the youth workers’ salary and costs of the utilities. The state institutions do not have a clear vision of the youth work development and a position of the youth work in the society.”* (youth worker, Croatia)

Majority of youth work in Croatia relies on the vision and enthusiasm of the youth workers and youth leaders, and the good side of this unfortunate situation is that the NGO scene is very vivid and there are EU funds available.

*“The needs of the youth civic sector are rarely recognised and respected, e.g. the 2021 public call for financing the non-governmental organisations offered in total 1.3 million euros for a wide range of topics: the prevention campaigns, reconstruction after earthquakes and rural development. Topics of tackling discrimination (especially discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people and members of the minorities) have remained out of focus; there is no steps forward towards the real needs of the community.”* (youth expert, Croatia)

Youth associations on the local level, especially in smaller municipalities in rural areas are faced with hardships in providing financial means for implementation of their activities. Many municipalities do not have grants dedicated to the young people. Usually only smaller amounts are on disposal and due to the pandemics many calls were significantly downsized.

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

## *Examples of practice*

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

[Association ZUM](#) in partnership with [Volunteer Centre Istria](#) organises [Young Volunteers' Club](#) by giving support to young volunteers for creating and implementing their activities for the local community, especially for other young people.

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

[The city of Pregrada](#) has managed to conceive a process of the first participatory budget for young people in the local community. The aim of the project is to encourage the active participation of young people in decision-making processes in the local community and to strengthen the dialogue between young people and decision-makers. The project implemented educational activities, budget analysis from the perspective of young people, implementation of participatory budgeting and information.

[Association Carpe Diem](#) in Karlovac has established [Youth Centre Grabrik](#), the first Croatian youth centre based on the principle of co-management. The work of the Youth Center is based on cooperation with other associations, relevant services, public institutions, experts in various areas, and the involvement of volunteers.

[Municipality of Medulin](#) initiated and completed adoption of the [Local Youth Programme](#) that was co-created by local administration, young people and local youth organisations. The process has successfully voiced out youth issues and aspirations and the most active young people gained wide recognition from the local and regional community. Their successful participation in creation of the LYP resulted in their victory during the last local political elections.

## **Greece**

### *Legal framework of youth work*

Youth participation and youth policy in Greece are defined by the [Hellenic National Strategy for Youth](#), titled [Youth '17-'27: Strategic framework for the empowerment of youth](#). «Youth '17-'27» is a roadmap, identifying youth-related national standards and priorities as well as mechanisms through which these can be achieved or preserved. The document reflects the Government's commitments for Youth by providing a decision-making framework. It also

encapsulated the governments' willingness to set the foundations for a legal, institutional and educational framework for youth work and its practitioners.

In Greece, there is no ministry dedicated exclusively to youth. The main governmental institution managing youth-related issues is the [Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs](#). The Ministry manages policies related to young people's professional and personal development via [Secretariat General for professional education, vocational training, life-long learning and Youth](#), facilitating transition to autonomy. Youth work, strongly correlated with non-formal learning, is perceived in this context as a tool used in alternative educational pathways beyond the formal educational system. Subsequently, it is supported by [laws on vocational training and general adult education](#), which define mechanisms and activities that fall under the category of [Adult Education and Training](#), also within the scope of activities of [Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs](#).

Sporadic activities targeting youth – yet not necessarily via youth work – have been launched and managed by other ministries such the [Ministry of Culture and Sports](#) or the [Ministry of External Affairs \(MFA\)](#).

Historically speaking, youth work in Greece has been strongly correlated with volunteering. A large part of its legacy in the Greek sociocultural and political context belongs to the wider realm of voluntary activity, in the form of scouting, charitable activity, humanitarian aid, participation in political organisations etc. Until recently, a legal framework for voluntary activity was vague, if not inexistent. This fact, in combination with the lack of a legal framework for youth work, has led over the years to the exploitation of workers who have offered long hours of unpaid work, usually in the hope of finding a more stable job either within the organisations or via the organisations' wider network.

After public pressure to regulate volunteering in Greece, especially in the field of civil society, where voluntary work is usually unregistered and unpaid, the Greek government announced in its gazette the [4873/2021 Law on Volunteering](#), labelled as "Protection of volunteering, strengthening the action of Civil Society, tax incentives to enhance the public benefit action of Civil society organisations and other provisions". The law establishes a unified framework for the operation of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and regulates other issues within the competence of the Ministry of Interior. What is particularly important is that the Law obligates CSOs to register their volunteers in the official platform (called Ergani), to provide them (under certain circumstances) with social security or medical insurance and to cover accommodation, food or traveling expenses that are related with the voluntary activity.

[The Law on Youth Councils](#) foresees the establishment of [Local Youth Councils](#) and Municipal Youth Councils. The role of Local Youth Councils is to raise awareness over the needs of young people at a local level, engage into various initiatives promoting the autonomy of young people and advocate for the active participation of youth in the local community. In order to meet these objectives, they count on creating networks with other Local Youth Councils at national and European level.



### *Structures supporting youth work*

The main institution managing issues connected with youth and non-formal learning is the [Youth and LifeLong Learning Foundation](#) (or [INEDIVIM/INEΔIBIM](#) in Greek), supervised by the [Hellenic Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs](#). The “Youth and Lifelong Learning Foundation” originates from the National Youth Foundation, a body which was founded in 1947. Its current name and state came about from the merging of the Institute for Continuing Adult Education and the Institute for Youth. The mission of INEDIVIM is to implement lifelong learning programmes/projects; launch youth programmes/projects, emphasising youth innovation, mobility, transitions and career growth and manage all issues regarding student care services, catering and accommodation facilities (educational welfare). INEDIVIM supports also activities within the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, often in cooperation with the [State Scholarships Foundation \(IKY\)](#), which is the National Agency in Greece for the implementation of the Erasmus+ Programme for Education and Training.

[The Hellenic National Youth Council](#) is the official body representing Greek youth in Greece and abroad. It was established in 1998 and since then, it has been engaging into efforts to raise awareness around issues concerning Greek youth and advocate for youth participation in the decision-making process. Today it consists of fifty-nine youth organisations (six political youth organisations and a large number of non-governmental youth organisations).

Youth policy and youth work is also supported at a local and national level by the so-called Community Enterprises, operating in different municipalities as foreseen by [Law N.3463/2006 on Municipalities and Communities](#). The mission of these entities is, among others, to plan, organise and implement actions, programs and events for and alongside youth; to facilitate the dialogue among Europe 's youth and promote the creation of structures and initiatives supporting children and young people.

The absence of Youth centres in Greece is notably felt. There are various municipal entities supporting youth, such as libraries, cultural centres, spiritual centres (a venue supported usually by the Church), sports clubs, amphitheatres and other educational, athletic, political or cultural associations, yet there are no venues that could be characterized as ‘youth-friendly’. Organisations that plan to organise a non-formal youth activity, such as a youth exchange or international training course, have limited choices: in larger cities, like Athens or Thessaloniki, they can lease a private space (the term used in Greek is translated as ‘multi-space’, meaning a venue where one can work, study or organise an activity together with other people) or book a conference room at a hotel paying a salty fee. Cheaper prices are provided by youth hostels. Alternatively, they can use a university room, a sports centre or a theatre managed by the Municipality. In rural areas, large youth activities are usually organised in the premises of municipal schools, cultural centres or camps.

The lack of adequate spaces to work with young people is a parameter affecting the quality and impact of youth work in Greece. Despite the reported existence of municipal plans to

establish youth centres based on the quality criteria of the Council of Europe, such plans have been discouraged by bureaucracy and priority shifts.

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

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

At the moment, there are no official courses that could lead to an accredited diploma in youth work. Instead, there is a rich variety of vocational courses in subjects related to youth work, such as project design, intercultural education, youth policy, human rights education, etc. These courses are usually provided by the state, state universities or state-affiliated institutions, while candidates are selected via a competition, following open, public calls. Full attendance is usually mandatory. Many of these courses, which aim at facilitating the job-finding process, fall within the operations of the Supreme Council for Civil Personnel Selection (ASEP/ΑΣΕΠ in Greek), an independent commission established by the Hellenic Parliament, whose mission is to establish and implement selection criteria for people interested in working at the public sector. Most courses are subsidized either by the Greek state or by EU funds. There are also paid or partly subsidized vocational courses provided by private consulting companies and private educational institutions.

In Greece, there is no consensus over the skills, competences and values that a youth worker should have. In terms of employment, youth workers can pursue jobs, usually under different yet relative professional labels, in various entities: civil society organisations, but also, educational institutions, community centres, youth clubs etc. Consequently, the state applies different evaluation mechanisms to assess the qualifications of people interested in working with youth, depending on the nature of the entity where they will be employed. While ASEP is aimed at assessing employees in public institutions, there are other schemes certifying, usually with a fee, the competences of employees in private organisations.

INEDIVIM is among the most prominent institutions providing educational opportunities to practitioners working with and for youth. Moreover, it has engaged into action to create and sustain a National Pool of Trainers, consisting of experts in the field of non-formal learning and youth policy. In the spring of 2015, INEDIVIM organised a training course for the members of its new pool, where internationally accredited trainers from Greece and Germany, working with the European Commission, SALTO and other organisations, introduced aspiring trainers

to the essentials of human rights education, youth participation, group building and project design. Ever since, the members of the Trainers Pool of the INEDIVIM have changed, yet the institution continues providing training for trainers and other practitioners working with youth. In 2020, given the needs for remote training that arose due to the pandemic, the INEDIVIM launched during the quarantine a long-term training for trainers and youth workers on digital training and has been providing ever since relevant courses and seminars.

Youth work in Greece does not exist as an academic branch, either. Universities based in Greece offer undergraduate or postgraduate courses that might include references to non-formal education, yet youth work does not exist as an academic field per se. An interview with an employee at the alumni office of one of the biggest universities of Northern Greece is indicative of the fact that youth work as a term is quite unknown in the realm of academia.

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

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

The recognition and validation of youth work is a national priority for the Greek government. Currently, youth work is yet to be legally recognized and standardized. It could be said, however, that it has started gaining social validation and acknowledgment. This is clearly reflected in the '17-'27 Hellenic Strategy for Youth. At this point, it might be worth mentioning some pivotal events that have led to this positive development.

Firstly, the value of non-formal learning was highlighted at the outbreak of the refugee crisis in 2016, when the emerging need to educate and integrate refugee students and their families called upon methods and approach different than the ones used for years in the formal schooling system (Drosopoulos 2016). It was during that turbulent time that teachers providing formal education started working more closely with social workers, street workers and other practitioners using alternative, more communicative methods, that proved out to be more efficient in reaching out to young people and children of a different cultural and religious background, affected by trauma and loss.

*The Greek state finally understood that a conventional teacher cannot handle a child that has never held a pencil or a book before due to the war. There are children who are so traumatized by conflict and separation that refuse even to speak. Entering a new environment where everyone and everything looks different adds to their trauma. In situations like this, a teacher needs the support of a youth worker, someone who has been trained in non-verbal communication, in conflict transformation and of course, in intercultural dialogue.* (youth worker, Greece)

Secondly, local practitioners involved in youth work via different capacities started organizing themselves and advocating for better terms regarding youth work. Many of these people would be professionally active in European networks and institutions in countries where youth work is recognized and therefore had concrete practices and proposals to share. In 2016, a group of 50 people, self-declared as youth workers, created a [Hellenic Youth Workers Association](#) and agreed on the term, Σύμβουλος Νέων, or *youth consultant*, as the most appropriate Greek translation of the term 'youth worker'. In all their official documents, such as statute and minutes of meetings, members referred to themselves as 'youth consultants', yet preserved the original English term 'youth work' when referring to the nature and practice of their work. The specific entity was then included in some follow-up activities, such as the discussion on the National Youth Strategy (2017-27), the establishment of the National Working-group on Structured Dialogue, participation in [Europe Goes Local](#) (Erasmus+ project focused on the youth work at the municipal level) and drafting of a new law on volunteering (Drosopulos, 2018b: 63). Nevertheless, in the following years, that had come with the establishment of the Youth Strategy 2017-2027, many plans of the Hellenic Youth Workers Association remained on paper. Ever since the outbreak of the pandemic, the entity has been relatively inactive. The term 'σύμβουλος νέων' is not officially used in Greece and local youth workers have not experienced any significant changes in their reality. This initiative, however, has been important in the sense of being the first organized, collective initiative of its kind.

These events, in combination with Greece's eagerness to tune in with the positive climate towards youth work in Europe, triggered on a national level a vivid conversation over the role, rights and duties of youth workers in Greece. For the first time, the government was involved in open discussion of the practicalities of youth work – a field which hitherto had only existed unofficially. This public discussion included consideration of terminology (such as, how the terms 'youth work' and 'youth worker' should be translated into Greek) and of the new processes needed for professional accreditation, in consultation with the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP) (Drosopulos 2018b:63).

An official, yet not legally binding framework, has been provided with the existence of the Hellenic National Strategy for Youth, which, under article 1.1.3, commits to 'supporting the profession and work of youth workers through targeted initiatives such as creating an integrated institutional framework for the profession of youth worker in Greece (e.g. recognition and certification), ensuring appropriate education and training for youth workers, etc.' The Strategy refers to youth work as a tool in the context of promoting youth autonomy via non-formal and informal learning. According to the document, youth work is considered indispensable 'in raising awareness among young people about their rights and obligations as active citizens' and also, 'endowing young people with skills, knowledge and attitudes consistent with the ethos of an inclusive and open (tolerant) society'.

The existence of a roadmap towards the gradual recognition and institutionalization of youth work is certainly a very positive development, which has been welcomed by local

practitioners. Nevertheless, the reality of youth work in Greece is different than the one aimed for in the '17-'27' Strategy. Over the years, Greek youth workers have been facing various adversities, such as limited opportunities for employment, lack of adequate infrastructure to practice youth work, absence of a concrete legal and professional framework, lack of social recognition and acknowledgement. The Covid-19 pandemic brought on new challenges, impacting the priorities of the Youth sector, putting the topic of recognition on hold. What is expected of Greece now is to proceed into the reforms and actions required to implement the pledges taken within the National youth strategy.

*I believe that there will be crucial developments in youth work in Greece. 2020 marked the beginning of the new programming period for the EU; both the EU and the Council of Europe have put such issues (youth work and youth working) very high on the agenda. Any delays that have been observed in the last years have led to these issues being accumulated, therefore, solutions must be gradually found. I reckon that there we do not have time for any further delay. (Government official/expert in youth policy, 27.3.2020, interview for Udruga IKS).*

### *Youth work financing*

In Greece, there is no regulated funding reserved exclusively for youth work-related activities. There are, however, different funding opportunities for young people, as direct or indirect beneficiaries. The Greek government supports individuals on their path to autonomy (young entrepreneurs, young NEETs, etc.) and entities (community enterprises, research centres, non-profit organisations, youth-led start-ups etc.) with funds reserved for the implementation of projects with a positive impact on society: such type of projects can be, for instance, enterprises employing people who are traditionally excluded from the labour market; innovative start-ups or educational schemes targeting vulnerable, marginalized or underrepresented social groups. This is often made possible with European funds, managed by local Ministries. The [PA \(Partnership Agreement for the Development Framework\) 2014-2020](#) (ESPA/ΕΣΠΑ in Greek), managed by the [Ministry of Development and Investments](#), is the main strategic framework for growth in Greece with the contribution of significant resources originating from the [European structural and investment funds of the European Commission](#). The PA was launched as a tool to help tackle the structural weaknesses in Greece that contributed to the economic crisis and the consequent socio-economic repercussions. PA is aligned with the targets of the [Europe 2020 Strategy](#), while it stems from the National/Regional [Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation \(RIS3\)](#), aimed at boosting competition in Greece and the wider region.

Public funding is available to entities providing [Adult Education and Training](#) for projects aiming at the integration and reintegration of individuals in the labour market and promoting professional and personal development. This funding does not target exclusively youth, but is rather open to all citizens.

Funds for youth-led or youth-targeting projects are provided via the INEDIVIM ('Youth and Lifelong Learning Foundation'), which is independent in financial and operational terms, yet supervised by the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. Financing for activities targeting youth is provided also by Greek cultural foundations of an important legacy, such as the [Onassis Foundation](#) or the [Stavros Niarchos Foundation](#). These opportunities are made available via competitions, following public calls.

Youth organisations in Greece lie heavily on the Erasmus+ program of the European Commission. Given the lack of regular state funding for youth work-related activities, many organisations, but also smaller informal groups, depend on the Erasmus+ funding. In this context, however, most youth work-related activities are short-term and limited in impact.

*Instead of helping each other, Greek NGOs compete for funding. We compete for Erasmus grants, or for any small opportunity that will allow us to survive for 3 months, then the next 6 months. The state does not support us. How can you bring solutions and think of progress when you are so preoccupied with surviving? (youth worker/NGO manager, Greece)*

Funding is also sporadically provided by foreign organisations and embassies operating in Greece. This type of funding usually favours politically oriented youth activities, building on a local tradition of employing youth work as a tool to instil ideological values in young people and trigger active political participation. Even today, a large part of youth-related activity has a clear political orientation and usually starts during university life.

It is also worth mentioning that in Greece, there has traditionally been an interesting connection among education, youth and religion. Early forms of youth work have been documented within activities conducted by Christian organisations, the aim of which was to "shape the features of the Greek Christian citizen and, by extension, to create a Christian political leadership" (Karamouzis 2010:117). Nowadays, a large part of youth-related activity is organised and funded by the Orthodox Church, while religious youth organisations that date back to the beginning of the previous century continue being one of the strongest providers of youth work. Among these is the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) or XAN (Χριστιανική Αδερφότης Νέων) in Greek, which provides a wide repertoire of activities for youth in the field of sports, arts and culture, such as training courses, seminars or youth camps.

### *Examples of practice*

Interviewees from Greece have pointed to the following examples of youth work that resulted in beneficial changes at a local level:

The creation of the [Balkan Heart](#) in Thessaloniki, the second large city in Greece by the [United Societies of Balkans NGO](#), has offered an alternative space for youth, in a city where there is a

vibrant young population, yet almost no spaces for youth to gather and engage into activities together.

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

The [Eurobalkan Youth Forum](#), an informal group based in Thessaloniki, Greece has started a consultation process with local universities, NGOs and experts, to promote the establishment of a pivotal academic course on Youth Work.

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

## Kosovo\*

### *Legal framework of youth work*

The [Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth](#) adopted in 2009 establishes the legal framework of youth work in Kosovo. It defines the: (i) basic responsibilities for strengthening the youth sector in Kosovo and for supporting the participation of youth in decision-making; (ii) responsibilities of the institutions of central and local government to young people and youth organisations in relevant areas regulated by the law; (iii) voluntary work and informal education of young people; (iv) instruction for the licensing of youth centres. The Law defines young people as persons between 15 to 24 years, thus establishing lower threshold than most of the countries in Southeast Europe which usually consider youth up to 29 years of age. Kosovo has the higher percentage of young people in Europe. According to [World Factbook](#), 16.95 percent of Kosovo citizens are between 15 and 24 years old. For the purpose of implementing the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth, four administrative instructions were issued: 1) Administrative instruction for youth participating in the decision-making process; 2) Administrative instruction on licensing youth centres; 3) Administrative instruction for voluntary work and 4. Administrative instruction for non-formal education of youth ([Stankovski](#): 2021). To this date, the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth has not undergone any revisions since its ratification in 2009. In its Article 6, paragraph 2, the Law states that: "the Government by sub-legal act will determine the key ministries, responsible for enforcing the provisions of paragraph 1 of Article 6 of this law." However, the Government of Kosovo has not yet issued a sub-legal act concerning this issue.

The establishment and licensing of youth centres was regulated through the specific [Administrative Instruction No. 11/2010 on the Licensing of Youth Centres](#), derived from the Law on Youth Empowerment and Participation. Youth centres operate within municipalities and offer spaces for youth programmes and activities based on their statute, in order to provide quality youth services. According to Article 3, it is asserted that each municipality must have at least one licensed youth centre in their locality.

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

### *Structures supporting youth work*

Despite the fact that the responsibilities of certain ministries regarding the enforcement of the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth are not clearly provided, the main central authority in charge for youth policies is the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The ministry was, in fact, among the first one to be created by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UMNIK) as part of the executive branch of the provisional institutions of self-government in Kosovo. According to [Regulation No. 2001/19](#) on the Executive Branch of the Provisional Institutions of Self-government in Kosovo and [Regulation No. 2005/15 on Amending the Regulations No 2001/19](#), this ministry is responsible for developing policies and strategies for the youth sector, including the identification of specific youth vulnerable groups, developing programmes to address their needs and to promote clubs, groups and youth associations. In addition, the Ministry is responsible for developing and implementing the relevant legislation for the establishment and functioning of organisations, clubs, groups and youth associations.

The Youth Action Councils were established by [Administrative instruction No. 9/2010 on Licensing of Youth Centres](#) issued by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The Central Youth Action Council serves as a youth representative body composed of members from youth non-profit organisations at central and local level. One of the main duties of the Central Youth Action Council is to participate in the drafting, implementing and evaluating youth policies. The same responsibility at the local level lies with the Local Youth Action Council. However, some of these councils are not yet fully operational, while significant part have felt short of promoting youth participation in the decision-making processes mainly because they have been politically instrumentalised (Youth Initiative for Human Rights - Kosovo, 2018: 25). Moreover, political parties actively try to influence the youth councils (youth worker, Kosovo). Similarly as with the rest of the Western Balkans, young people have joined youth



wings of the political parties in order to obtain jobs and even access some basic public services, thus turning the political parties into important actors in the youth sector (*Ibid*). They organise clubs, training courses and different events for their members, thus effectively shrinking the space of the youth civil society. However, despite their large membership, youth wings put the priorities of their senior party leadership over youth priorities, often remaining silent when issues important for the young people are discussed in the public.

On 11 August 2021, a [State Commission on Youth](#) was established for the first time as a key mechanism of the Government for cooperation, support and decision-making towards Kosovo youth. This Commission aims to harmonise the strategic documents, such as the Programme of the Government, the work plans of the ministries, and national youth strategy. The Commission will also be part of the process of drafting the new National Youth Strategy and propose measures and activities that should be undertaken by the sector ministries. It will also periodically monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Strategy. The establishment of such a body is a recommendation of the Council of Europe to ensure a horizontal approach to youth policy. However, it is yet to be seen if the Commission's work will bring concrete results.

Another important issue is the fact that Kosovo does not have a youth agency as a separate institution, as the current Department of Youth is established under the the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport. In this legal and institutional framework, there is lack of mechanisms to implement the legislation on youth (youth expert, Kosovo). As a result, large percentage of young people has not been involved in the civil society activities as political parties are the main mobilising factor. This is mainly due to lucrative reasons or, as a youth expert from Kosovo puts it, young people expecting to use party connections in order to find a job, than a raised awareness of political participation. This, along with the fact that the youth civil society sector still exists predominately on external funding, significantly reduces the sustainability of the youth sector. Similarly as in the rest of the Western Balkans, the youth civil society sector is the main provider of youth work. Several Kosovo organisations running youth centres, with the assistance international youth organisations, are trying to apply for the Council of Europe's Quality Label for Youth Centres. If achieved, this can significantly help them in improving the quality of their work with young people.

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

The Kosovo Strategy on Youth and Action Plan 2019-2023 includes a provision on capacity development of youth organisations' personnel. In order to preserve and promote the safe environment of Kosovar youth, the Strategy stipulates that the Department of Youth will increase the capacity of youth organisations staff in various centres of the country through "structured trainings on prevention and protection from violence, various threats from the internet, terrorism and other threats that undermine the safe environment for Kosovar youth." These training packages, according to the Strategy are dedicated to youth workers

which are part of Kosovar youth organisations and, as such, they were supposed to be organised annually. However, as a youth worker from Kosovo explains, these types of trainings have not been implemented, not at least in a number and quality that would have an effect on raising the capacities of the youth workers.

There are no formal educational opportunities for youth workers in Kosovo. On a non-formal level, trainings are provided predominately by the Council of Europe, or the regional organisations such as SALTO and RYCO. Also, there is no established accreditation procedure for youth workers or ethnical guidelines/standards regarding their conduct. Considering this, prospect youth workers join the existing youth organisations as volunteers in order to gain practical skills and be able to work with young people.

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

Although the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth does refer to “youth worker” and “youth workers”, the latter is not officially recognised profession. According to a local youth expert, recognition of youth work has been one of the main demands of Kosovo youth sector for legal changes. As there is no established system of validation, the recognition of youth workers’ experience is left to the discretion of their prospect employers.

### *Youth work financing*

The analysis of [the Law on the Budget Appropriations for the Budget of the Republic of Kosovo for Year 2021](#) as well as the previous budgets, indicate that there has neither been substantial changes in the allocated funds for the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport nor the Youth Programme in the last three years. Moreover, this analysis also points out that there are significant unused amounts dedicated to youth which have just been transferred from the previous fiscal years. This tendency can undermine implementing the activities according to the Action Plan. Moreover, as a recent United States Agency for International Development (USAID) report concluded, the “national government does not invest in positive outlets for youth, as budget lines for youth programming at both the national and municipal levels are woefully inadequate” thus creating a feeling of isolation and social exclusion among the young people (USAID 2021: 6).

The [Regulation No. 01/2015](#) on Subsidies in the Field of Culture, Culture Heritage, Youth and Sports in Article 9 states that the Department of Youth of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport provides support to stakeholders involved in this field. That includes subsidising youth organisations, youth centres, school councils, businesses and individuals contributing to the programme objectives in the field of youth. In addition to this, [Regulation No. 01/2018](#) on Defining Criteria, Procedures and Forms Concerning the Certificate of Sponsorship in the Field of Culture, Youth and Sport in Article 5 states that sponsorship beneficiaries in the field of youth may be individuals, informal groups and youth organisations, youth centres, that

are registered as NGOs, as well as natural persons and informal groups applying through NGOs dealing with youth activities.

Kosovo is a partner country of the Erasmus+ Programme, in the Western Balkans section, which means that [Kosovo can take part in certain actions of the programme](#). [An Erasmus+ Office in Kosovo](#) has been established with the aim of assisting the European Commission, the Executive Agency and the local authorities for the implementation of the Erasmus+ Programme. In the period 2015-2019, [total number of 4177 staff and students](#) of Kosovo obtained Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility (ICM) scholarships. Significant funds for youth cooperation project have been also granted by [RYCO](#) which, so far, had 4 open calls for proposals for the participants from Western Balkans, including Kosovo.

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

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

### *Examples of practice*

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

## Montenegro

### *Legal framework of youth work*

Government of Montenegro has adopted [Law on Youth](#) in 2019, which defines youth work as “an activity that is realized in cooperation with young people and for young people with the aim of their independence and transition to adulthood, learning, personal and social development, in accordance with their needs and abilities, and based on non-formal education methods”. A key document for implementation of the youth work in Montenegro – [the National Youth Strategy](#) and accompanying Action Plans for Implementation of the Strategy – expired in December 2021. During the interviews the information that [the Regional Cooperation Council](#) (RCC) will conduct evaluation that will serve as a basis for the new strategy development was confirmed, but at the moment of publishing this study there is no update on the process. There is also [the National Programme for Realisation of the Priorities in the Field of Youth Policy](#) (2020), which prescribes priorities in the youth field, instruments for monitoring and evaluation of the progress in the youth field and sources of their financing. Concerning the strengths and shortcomings of the legal framework of youth work in Montenegro, the shortcomings can be recognised in a hiatus between administrative settings and practices, especially on the local level. Youth workers on the local level have none or very low budget for their activities.

*“The strengths of the youth policy framework in Montenegro relates to clearly defined framework for youth policy and recognition of the actors in the field. The shortcomings arise from low financial resources on the local level and irregular public consultations.”*  
(youth expert, Montenegro)

### *Structures supporting youth work*

[The Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports](#) is responsible for youth work in Montenegro, which corresponds to institutional settings from some other SEE countries that have merged several domains under the same ministry. However, such a setting has only been recently introduced and was followed after years of independence of the Directorate for Youth and Sports. The interviewed youth expert from Montenegro expressed their dissent with youth sector being part of the current very heterogeneous structure:

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

On a local level, each municipality has a local action plan (LAP) and there are fines envisaged in the cases of not adopting the action plan. It has to be clarified that these fines are not constitutional and they are not aligned with the national law. Some municipalities have a small

budget allocated for implementation of the LAP, but most often support to the LAP implementation is missing. It has to be added that the interviews for this study were held in the context of a very serious political change when youth services were closed due to expiration of the youth services' administrators' contracts.

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

Potentials for resolving this crisis in Montenegrin youth work lies in assistance from the international institutions and organisations that are very present in part of the SEE (like [UN Office Montenegro](#), [Salto SEE](#), [OSCE Mission to Montenegro and Regional Youth Cooperation Office \(RYCO\)](#)) and international donors who are still providing funds in the scope of the Western Balkan development, as well as EU accession funds.: OSCE Mission to Montenegro has been supporting youth work, especially by financing development and implementation of the LAPs, and UN mission to Montenegro has provided financial support during development of the Youth Strategy.

[PRONI Centre for Social Education](#) holds a significant place in foundations of the youth work in Montenegro, which helped in establishing [Forum MNE, an umbrella association of the youth NGO in Montenegro](#), as one of the leading regional youth civil society organisation. Judging from the statement of the Montenegrin youth workers, nowadays a framework of youth workers socialization and non-formal education results in the youth workers less equipped with skills and knowledge required for quality youth work.

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

The interviewees expressed their agreement that youth civic sector in Montenegro is vivid, but often does not receive recognition. Many initiatives do not want to stick to traditional form of the NGO and such initiatives and grassroot movements cannot get financial support, and such rigidity deteriorates the civic sector. Young people fluctuate from one initiative to another and they get easily bored and/or would like to simultaneously join several initiatives. However, the state does not recognise such initiatives and it demotivates young people for

engaging in the society. The existing youth work framework does not differentiate among various profiles in the youth sector – activists, youth workers, curious young people and young people cannot rely on the same type of support when approaching institutions responsible for youth.

A certain generational and worldview gap is also noticeable in the relations between youth workers and public officials. The youth workers from Montenegro identify lack of the public officials' commitment to the youth policy as one of the challenges that is yet to be tackled. Assistance of the public institutions is praised in the context of providing physical space and infrastructure for organising the activities, but the youth workers are sceptical about existence of a coherent vision of the youth sector development.

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

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

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

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

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

## Youth work financing

According to the law, there are only two sources of financing available to the youth NGOs at the level of public organisations: the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports and the local government, although some other ministries also occasionally provide funding for youth related activities. The major deficiency of the evaluating procedure managed by the Government lies in the employees of the Ministry acting as evaluators, which cannot assure impartial funds allocation. [CRNVO](#) has conducted analysis on the grantees and the analysis indicates that the majority of the associations receiving grants do not have a good track record in the youth field. Moreover, the financed projects are to a limited extent focused on the young people with fewer opportunities, their main target group are active and educated youth. Statements of some of the interviewees from Montenegro suggested this council is influenced by politics and therefore not adequately promoting interest of young people and youth workers in Montenegro.

Montenegrin civil society organisations in the field of youth benefit from the internationally available funds, especially from the funds directed at the WBC6 members, as well as from [Erasmus+ programme](#) and Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). International funds present a significant support for vertical and horizontal development of the youth sector, especially in regard to youth mobility, intercultural exchanges, youth participation and non-formal education. Still, internationally available funds and funds from the governmental and local level do not suffice for sustainable quality youth work. Currently youth NGOs are focused to sustain basic project work and investments in knowledge and skills are sporadic. Alike other countries already mentioned, there is a lack of stable employment in the youth NGOs in Montenegro, which reflects in very scarce human resources. Youth experts are leaving the sector for better paid and more stable positions, which results in hardships of the new generation of volunteers who do not have enough support to cope with all challenges. EU grants are the most reliable source of financing but majority of youth NGO do not have capacity for attracting those funds.

*“It is crucial to emphasize there are only a couple of NGOs dealing exclusively with young people in Montenegro (otherwise they wouldn’t survive). It shows that young people are not a priority group in Montenegro.”* (youth worker, Montenegro)

## Examples of practice

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

[Education and Training Centre Montenegro](#) is running a [project CAN – Community Action Now](#) that aims at educating youth workers to work in the community. There are three stages of the individual involvement in the project 1) accept (UCan); 2) Share and 3) Challenge, where each person can decide to get engaged in at least one of the topics. The topics of engagement are: 1) I love Montenegro; 2) Become active; 3) Say no to hate speech; 4) Our language – our treasure and 5) Human rights.

## North Macedonia

### *Legal framework of youth work*

Despite a noticeable progress, the legal framework of youth work in the Republic of North Macedonia can still be considered as inconsistent. Namely, the country does not have a special law on youth work. Instead, the [Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy](#) adopted in January 2020, in its Article 3 provides definition of youth work as an “organised and systemic process of education and support of the authentic development of the youth in order to achieve their full personal, social and societal potential, and their active involvement in the life of the community”. The same article defines youth workers “as skilled people who have the competencies to work with young people by implementing activities that support their personal and social development through non-formal and informal learning.”

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

According to a youth activist who has been included in the legislation drafting process, even the formulation “worker with young people” was a product of a compromise between the representatives of the youth civil society and the representatives of the state administration as latter “neither understood the difference nor the reason why that particular terminology [i.e. “youth worker”] should have been adopted in the first place”. While there is an ongoing



initiative to adopt a Law on Youth Work and some progress and preliminary drafts have been prepared, the process has been halted.

North Macedonia has a [National Youth Strategy \(2016-2025\)](#) which includes nine thematic areas, local youth work being one of them. This thematic area has three objectives. First, recognition of youth work as a key tool for assisting the positive personal and social development of young people. Second, formal recognition and regulation of the use and availability of youth work as an integral part of the education system of the country. Third, ensuring the quality and availability of youth work in the territory of each municipality. The [Law on Volunteering](#) was also adopted which, among the rest, includes separate provisions on protection of minor volunteers, i.e. between 15 to 18 years old (Article 5), and also allows volunteering in civil society organisations (Article 6).

### *Structures supporting youth work*

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

The [National Agency for European Education Programmes and Mobility](#) is a national institution in charge for operative delivery of the decentralised actions of the Erasmus+ Programme in the country. The cooperation with the Agency is of extreme importance to youth organisations working on Erasmus+ projects. But, a recent [corruption scandal](#) involving its former director has undermined its credibility in the public.

Unlike other former Yugoslav countries who preserved the co-called pioneer houses (in Macedonian: *пионерски домови*), North Macedonia completely dismantled these structures. The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (2020) creates an obligation upon every municipality and the City of Skopje to create a “youth office” as a “primary contact point for youth on local level” (Article 21). Also, the institutions of the state administration, the municipalities, and the City of Skopje are responsible to appoint a “youth officer” (Article 23). As the Law is already in force, the first youth offices have been established and first youth

officers have already been appointed. However, it can be argued that these provisions are only formally implemented. It has been pointed out by a youth expert from the country that the new “youth offices” are effectively non-functional. Also, the “youth officers” have not been specially recruited through a merit-based process. Instead, according to the same source, in most of the cases, a person who has already been working in the municipality has just been given the “youth officer” portfolio without even knowing what this assignment actually entails.

The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy allows the creation National Advisory Body on Youth Policies (article 14). Although at the time of writing this Study this body was not fully operable, it is in the process of being established. Another important novelty is the creation of National Youth Assembly (Article 10) and the obligation that every municipality in the country and the City of Skopje have to create a youth council which will have an “advisory and representative role” (Article 16). As previous youth councils created in North Macedonia have been informal, this legal requirement is a significant step forward for ensuring a more meaningful youth participation. In order to fully utilise the opportunities created with the law, the OSCE Mission to Skopje has created a [Manual for Local Youth Councils](#) and delivered trainings for both the representatives of the youth councils and the staff of the municipalities. However, it is too early to assess the efficacy of the implementation of these provisions in practice. It is noteworthy to mention here that North Macedonia has a fully functional [National Youth Council](#), which is a leading youth umbrella organisation in the country.

Finally, the Law stipulates the creation of youth centres stating that the youth work conducted in the centres is the “responsibility of youth workers” (Article 22). Moreover, every municipality is required to establish a youth centre on its territory in the period of five years since the law entered into force (Article 26). Few municipalities have already started cooperation with the local youth organisations in order to create youth centres. These efforts have been supported by the international donors in the country. However, as youth expert from North Macedonia argues, there is a concern how this requirement will be implemented by the poorer rural municipalities.

#### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

On the level of higher education, the [Union for Youth Work](#) in partnership with the Faculty of Philosophy and the Institute for Social Work and Policy from Skopje is implementing KA2 project that aims to establish a master degree programme in youth work. For this purpose, representatives from these institutions conducted a study visit at the University of Tallinn, which offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees in youth work. The Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje has already adopted a decision to offer this kind of master programme, and currently it is preparing the teaching curriculum. The first generation of students is expected to be enrolled in the academic year of 2022-23. As master degree programmes in

North Macedonia are not free of charge, the Alliance for Youth Work is trying to obtain scholarship for the first few generations of students at least.

Additionally, both the Alliance for Youth Work and the [Coalition of Youth Organisations SEGA](#) have created 4 months training module on youth work as a part of adult education programme. They consist of a total 208 hours of teaching, out of which 144 hours of theoretical instruction and 64 hours of practice. The module is verified by the [Ministry of Education and Science](#) and the [Centre for Adult Education](#). The students receive a “Certificate for worker with youth.” Considering that the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy requires that “youth workers” are “qualified individuals with necessary competences to work with young people” (Article 3), creating this type of education opportunities is of significant importance. Other youth organisations have provided non-formal trainings on youth work, but certificates they award are not formally recognised. However, the creation of educational programmes for youth workers will remain futile if there are no attractive employment opportunities for them, as a youth expert from the country argues.

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

North Macedonia does not have a national system of recognition and validation of youth work. Currently, this is left at the discretion of the possible employers. Considering the changes introduced with the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy, this issue needs to be urgently addressed. As the Law requires qualified and competent youth workers, failing to recognise previous experience can create a vacuum period that can undermine its application.

### *Youth work financing*

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

Generally, as it is the case with the other countries from the Region, the youth sector in North Macedonia, in the absence of sufficient domestic funding, is dependent on foreign grants, which ultimately undermines its sustainability. Also, considering that most of the international grant opportunities require significant technical knowledge, almost all these funds are allocated to larger organisations that have the expertise in project applications while, at the same time, the smaller local NGOs are being squeezed out. Additionally, as a result of the excessive partisanship in the country, many young people decide to join the youth wings of the political parties because they expect that this will allow them to find a job and/or granted easier access to public services. As a result, the youth wings of the leading political parties have more members than all the youth civil society organisations in the country combined. The result of this negative politisation effectively shrinks the space of the civil society in North Macedonia.

### *Examples of practice*

The “[MultiКулти](#)” Youth Centre was established by the [Centre for Intercultural Dialogue](#) in 2010 in Kumanovo, North Macedonia, as a neutral platform where young people from different ethnic backgrounds can follow activities together. These types of activities are particularly important for a post-conflict, ethnically segregated municipality as it is Kumanovo. Each year, more than 1.000 young people participate in different educational programs organised by local youth workers. MultiКулти is currently cooperating with the Municipality of Kumanovo in becoming one of the first licensed youth centres in the country according to the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (2020).

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

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

## Romania

### *Legal framework of youth work*

The first official reference to the term ‘youth worker’ – defined through activities implemented – was in the [National Youth Law of Romania](#), established in 2006, a document which created a legal framework for youth policy in Romania. In the summer of 2012, a draft National Youth Strategy 2014-2020 was launched for public debate. After a turbulent process, the bill was eventually approved by the Romanian Government in July 2018. The law was approved by the first chamber of the Romanian Parliament (the Senate) in November 2018. The 2018 Youth Law introduced novelties, that were of paramount importance for the status of youth work in the country. Among these was a provision to upgrade community youth centres, setting them up for young people to benefit from integrated and personalized youth services; also, the law paved the way for the establishment of consultative councils at the level of the county's county municipalities, the county councils and the Ministry of Youth and Sports with the purpose of an effective implementation of the youth policy.

Romania is in the process of establishing its new Youth Strategy, be based on relevant research and needs analysis conducted by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and presented to advisory structure, the National Council For Youth (NCFY). In this framework, a new bill on youth was drafted. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2021, the [draft Youth Law](#) received a favourable report from the Youth and Sports Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, a decision-making chamber. The new Youth Law aspires to safeguard the presence of youth in civil society and promote the participation of young people in democratic processes.

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

### *Structures supporting youth work*

In Romania, the dedicated institution for youth work and youth policy, overall, is the [Ministry of Youth and Sports](#), established in 1990. Youth work-related measures, however, are scattered through other domains such as education, social affairs and culture. The responsibility for the implementation of relative policies and measures is divided between the central level authorities and the local authorities. It is mainly the [Directorate for Youth Programmes and Projects](#) that is in charge of working with actors in the youth field to organise, implement and monitor governmental schemes. This includes a Department for Camps and Recreation, which coordinates activities of leisure centres and youth tourism, and

a Department of Programmes and Activities for Students, promoting students' participation in cultural and civic activities as well as combating the marginalization of students.

During the last years, the Ministry's monopoly of the Youth sector has become a source of public debate, as shared by the interviewees. The ongoing debate of decentralising a significant part of youth activities currently undertaken by the Ministry of Youth and Sports has been the apple of discord among the aforementioned Ministry, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, as well as the representatives of local (community and county) public authorities.

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

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

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

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

Many educational and training opportunities for youth workers are provided by the NGOs, youth centres and cultural associations in Romania, which have a wide repertoire of activity to exhibit. The most recognized among these educational opportunities is the compulsory training foreseen within the Occupational Standard, as part of the official accreditation system for youth workers.

Most opportunities are located in the big urban centres, some of which have a long tradition in youth work, like Bucharest, Iasi and Cluj Napoca. Romanian youth workers address this phenomenon by peer training and by consciously choosing to return to their home town or village, where they can share and put in practice what they have learnt. This is how a Romanian youth worker describes this phenomenon:

*I studied in the capital, Bucharest, and worked there for a couple of years after I graduated. I understood, however, that it was in my hometown that I could start something of my own and actually make a change. In Bucharest there are many*

*opportunities, but not where I come from. I came back and with 3 other friends we started a social enterprise working with Roma. I think it was the best decision I ever took in my life. (youth worker/project manager, Romania)*

Likewise, when asked if she ever considered moving to a bigger city or even abroad where she would have more educational opportunities to develop herself in the field, a Romanian youth worker provided the following answer:

*I never considered leaving my city, because I always found a purpose here. I know that as youth workers we might not have the same opportunities to educate and develop ourselves as in central Europe, but thanks to my work, I get to travel a lot and see what other countries do in the field of youth work. I get inspired, recharge my batteries and try to implement here what I have seen abroad and raise the standards of my organisations. We cannot depend on the state alone to help us. We should try to set an example by ourselves and disseminate what we know. (youth worker, Romania)*

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

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

Romania has a rich and unique tradition in youth activity, that differentiates it from other countries of Southeast Europe. “In Romania, the earliest roots of the expression of youth and “youth activities” organised and put together by a non-formally selected “youth worker” can be traced back some hundreds of years ago, strongly linked with the initiation rituals of young men, conducted mostly within the traditional Romanian villages. Such rituals would start a rather long, challenging and sometimes even dangerous skill development, competence gaining and educational process which would lead the way to adulthood.” (Schwartz et.al, 2016: 117).

Despite its long history and culture, the road to the validation and recognition of youth work started opening up in the beginning of the previous century, coinciding with an educational reform that encouraged people, both in urban centres and in rural areas, to become more active in social affairs and get involved in community-led educational activities: “It can be said that the rural teacher who had to deal not only with children but also with adults (especially young adults who did not have the chance to go to school at the right time) became a kind of youth worker” (Mitulescu, 2016: 83).

Important steps towards validation were taken in the decades that succeeded the World War II, when the scout movement and educational as well as sports activities with young people

gained appreciation as tools for active citizenship and youth empowerment. The work of sociologist Dimitri Gusti on personal developments at schools, especially in the Romanian periphery, played a pivotal role in the recognition of youth work as a field separate from traditional education, yet vital in the moulding of people and communities. Gusti's contribution had an important effect on the establishment of social services in rural areas (Schwartz et.al, 2016: 118).

Romania is one of the few countries in Southeast Europe that have developed a viable, widely accepted system that standardizes youth work and accredits professional youth workers. In October 2012, a scheme called "Occupational standards for the youth worker occupation" (referred to from now on as "Occupational Standard") was approved. The [Occupational Standard](#), which underwent revision in 2016, is a scheme defining a youth worker's competences at a national level and providing training based on these. This scheme was achieved as an output of a strategic project entitled '[Constructing 'the youth worker': institution for a better insertion of young people in the society'](#)', part of the Sectoral Operational Programme "Development of Human Resources", which was implemented by the Department of Youth and Sports, in cooperation with the National Convention of Youth Foundations and Schultz Consulting. This was the successful result of a series of actions including a vigorous needs analysis, documentation of existing practices in the field, as well as research on the legislative and regulatory framework of youth work at a European level.

In this context, to become a youth worker, one should go through a 5-day course that is being delivered by a private entity - Schultz Consulting, as mentioned above. These competencies are based on the '[8 key competencies for Life-long learning](#)'. The occupational standard identifies the following role for youth workers: "The youth worker mobilises young people with the purpose of developing life skills and proactive behaviours, stimulating associative life and cooperation among young people, facilitating their participation in the community."

Marius Dontu, an expert in the field and a manager at Schultz Consulting Romania, the company behind the initiative to have this occupation recognised officially, was part of the team that drew up the occupational standards for this new profession. In his opinion, this step was indispensable, so as to clarify who and under what criteria can be called a youth worker, given that "too many people were working with young people and anyone working with young people thought they were experts in the field" (Dontu in [Radio Romania International](#) 8.8.2018).

The specialized training received in the context of the Occupational standard is the most important educational accreditation that Romania-based youth workers can receive. To apply for this training, one does not need to have an academic background in higher educational institutions. The training course within the Occupational Standard is conducted specific times per year with an affordable fee. This training course consists of different thematic units: i) key competency units (involving communication in the official language and in foreign languages, as well basic competencies in mathematics, sciences, and technology); ii) general competency units (related with activity planning) and iii) specific competency unit (focused on the creation



of a personal and professional development plan and basic skills in non-formal learning processes). After completing this course, the participants receive the 'Certificate of Youth Worker' that is being recognized by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education and the National Authority for Qualifications. The certificate recognizes the skills and competencies required to practice the profession of Youth Worker – COR Code – 341205. Registered professionals can pursue a job in a variety of places, such as non-governmental organisations, youth centres, community centres, state institutions, cultural centres and/or the County Offices for Sport and Youth.

Despite a legal mechanism, fiscal recognition and an official accreditation scheme in place, the perspectives of conducting youth work for a living are far from ideal. At least, this is what Romanian interviewees claim, a phenomenon that they attribute to four main reasons: i) lack of social recognition, ii) insufficient support from the state, iii) absence of a labor market that can absorb trained practitioners, iv) limited number of youth centres and generally, spaces where youth work can be conducted. Many people classify youth work in the sphere of leisure, activism or volunteering, probably due to the fact that a large part of youth work is conducted on a voluntary basis, driven by people's passion to contribute to a better change in their communities. One of the respondents explains the frustration of trying to introduce herself to people outside the field:

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

The fact that youth work is strongly based on non-formal education methods and experiential learning makes many people fall into the stereotypical thought that this type of work with young people is less serious. A practitioner from rural Romania shares her viewpoint:

*Working with young people is an important job. You deal with souls. You deal with the future. We might be working with playing to facilitate learning, but this is not a playground. (youth worker, Romania)*

Speaking of the contribution of youth workers in the empowerment of Romanian youth, the findings of personal interviews conducted separately with four young beneficiaries in Romania are also interesting. All young people interviewed expressed gratitude for receiving the fruits of youth work yet did not seem aware of the term 'youth work' and what exactly it stands for. The impression conveyed is that they see youth workers in their community as mentors who help them reach their potential and get access to better opportunities. Although they enjoy the 'alternative' -as they said- type of education, they do not necessarily realize that this is a systematic, well-thought-of approach, that should be carried out by specialized practitioners.

Overall, all youth workers interviewed for the purposes of this study agreed that the state should do more to support youth work and its practitioners; the government should showcase

with concrete actions its recognition of the value of youth work to social cohesion and prosperity; consequently, the state should promptly invest more in the youth sector and should do so 'before a generation is lost', as one of the interviewees characteristically said.

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

The state should also invest more in less advantaged areas, especially rural communities, where opportunities are significantly less, yet very much needed. These are the words of respondents from smaller towns who are pointing out to needs and deficiencies:

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

A similar message is communicated by a youth worker active in a rural community, where opportunities are scarce, yet very needed.

*My dream is for every young person to access the services meant for them. I want to see young people have more opportunities than I had when I was at their age. Right now, there is a lack of youth spaces. Local governments do not consider these important enough. The role of the youth worker is important, however, because we are the ones we know the needs of young people, the needs of our community. (youth worker)*

### *Youth work financing*

At a national level, the [youth-related budget](#) is administered by the Ministry of Youth and Sport. Specifically, the Ministry of Youth and Sport (and the National Authority on Youth, before the Ministry's establishment) implements 4 framework programmes every year, supporting youth Centres, youth projects, student projects and youth research, respectively. Part of this budget is allocated to administrative and staff costs for the Ministry and for its County offices. The Romanian Youth Law obliges local communities (local and county councils) to allocate local budget for local youth policies and activities, based on the consultation of the local youth civil society. Nevertheless, concrete figures on how this budget is allocated are not available. The Ministry of Youth and Sport is accountable to [Romanian court of accounts](#), a body dealing with issues of compliance and ethical distribution of funds. Private institutions

receiving public fundings, such as NGOs receiving grants from the Ministry to implement youth projects, also answer to this court.

A significant number of projects or educational opportunities are also being made possible thanks to support provided by the private sector. As an outcome of this, there are youth projects where youth work is conducted in different frameworks than conventionally associated with: for instance, recent examples of youth projects in Romania investigated within this study have been in the realm of [fashion and beauty](#) or [intergenerational folk dance](#). Certainly, this phenomenon is facilitated by the fact that local NGOs have great autonomy over the nature and range of youth-related activities that they can organise. What these projects have in common is that they are usually oriented towards youth employability, aiming at equipping young people with skills and competences that will render them more competitive in the labour market. Another effect that might come together with financial support from private entities is that, just like any other donor-dependent project, youth activities might be ideologically subject to the donor's values, political orientation and priorities.

Romania is among the countries that are heavily reliant on European funding programmes, with the National Agency for Erasmus+ being the main funder of training courses and relevant initiatives targeting youth.

### *Examples of practice*

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

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

Between July and August 2021, the [Eurodemos Association](#) organised in Iasi, Romania an international project called 'Social Promoters for inclusiOn thRough sporT', in which 30 youth workers shared their knowledge, models of good practice from their communities and worked to find new perspectives on how to include marginalized groups through sport activities. The

team is currently in the process of preparing a manual for youth workers working via sport activities. The project was co-funded by the [Erasmus+](#) Programme of the European Union.

## Serbia

### *Legal framework of youth work*

Youth work in Serbia is defined through the Law on Youth (2011: 91): youth work shall mean activities organised by and for young people, based on non-formal education, carried out in young people's free time and undertaken with the aim of improving the conditions for personal and social development of young people, in accordance with their needs and abilities, in which young people voluntarily participate. The foundations of youth work policy in Serbia are defined by three core documents: [the National Youth Strategy \(adopted for a period 2015-2025\)](#), [the Action Plan for the Implementation of the National Youth Strategy 2018-2020](#), and [the Law on Youth](#) (2011). The oldest of those documents – the Law on Youth – tackles youth work and so is the case with the succeeding documents. However, the interviewees declared there are certain shortcomings concerning the legal and administrative framework of the youth work in Serbia.

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

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

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

Serbia can be presented as an example of the evidence-based youth policy, at least when it comes to the youth policy at the national level. However, there is a certain lack of detalisation

of the goals and their operationalisation, especially in regard to the local level policy and dedicated budgets for policy implementation:

*“There are also significant issues on the local level; local actions plans are often just copy-pasted from the national one and thus not adapted to the needs and aspirations of the young people on the local level. Even if there are serious efforts and local actions plan gets aligned with the needs of young people it is very unlikely they will be implemented as there are no dedicated budgets.”* (youth worker, Serbia)

It has to be added that inclusiveness of planning and timing of the process of new Strategy drafting comes into question as it started in the middle of the summer when many actors in the youth field were not available for public consultations.

### *Structures supporting youth work*

The overall responsibility for coordination, development and improvement of youth policy in Serbia falls under [the Ministry of Youth and Sports](#), established in 2007. This Ministry is working with other ministries and governmental bodies in charge of areas relevant to the young people (i.e. in the areas of health, employment, etc.). The Ministry is also a managing body for reviewing and proposing the new acts in the youth field, including review of the active National Youth Strategy (NYS). There are annual reviews of the NYS and prior to each review of the NYS the Ministry coordinates a field survey for analysing the needs of the young people and impact of the NYS in the previous period. This could be accentuated as a good practice example if there was a similar focus on review and evaluation of the state of youth work. However, inadequate evaluation of the state of youth work and prerequisites for quality youth work is a common trait of the entire SEE region.

Besides the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the main body accredited for professionalization of youth work is [the National Association of Youth Work Practitioners \(NAPOR\)](#). [National Youth Council of Serbia - KOMS](#) is a leading actor in advocacy, but it is also a service that provides youth workers with capacity building activities and opportunities for networking. Association NAPOR has engaged in formalisation of the Bonn process in Serbia; NAPOR proposed to the National Youth Council introduction of the vacancy for the expert coordinating implementation of the Bonn process in Serbia. This proposal resulted in establishment of the expert team for implementation of the Bonn process and it should be a basic structure supporting this process in Serbia. [Office for Cooperation with Civil Society Organisations](#) was established by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in order to provide an institutional mechanism for support to development of the civil society organisations and dialogue between civic society and governmental institutions. This office also takes part in monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the strategic documents concerning civil society, but they are in charge of entire civil society in Serbia with no specific focus on the young people or youth workers. Other important supporting structures encompass [Ministry of European Integration, RYCO Office Serbia](#), and [the European Youth Centre in Sremski Karlovci](#) that is

accredited by the CoE. International organisations play a significant role in supporting youth work in Serbia, which includes, but is not limited to: [GIZ Serbia](#), [Embassy of Sweden in Belgrade](#), [Royal Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade](#) and [UN Serbia](#). All interviewees from Serbia emphasized importance of logistic and financial support of the international organisations, stating that the governmental institutions lack human and financial resources for determined implementation of the youth policy:

*“The state can change course of the processes only in it accepts a concrete and strong role in logistics and financing. In other words, only if the state becomes a coordinator/manager of the processes. So far, it hasn’t been a problem to put on the agenda almost anything proposed by the youth experts and representatives of the civic sector, the ministry most often approves such proposals stating that “it can be added to agenda if it is aligned with the rules of the European Commission”. However, state drops out of the process the moment they become aware of the lack of competences and finances for managing what has been incorporated in the programmes and strategies. So, I could say this is the core issue: we have a state that demonstrates nominal will, but lacks essential interest, which results in unsustainability.”* (youth expert, Serbia)

On a local level, Local Youth Councils and Local Youth Offices perform consultative actions and implement youth policy. There are Local Youth Councils, or advisory bodies, supporting youth work in 80 municipalities in Serbia and since 2009, the Local Youth Actions have been adopted in 144 municipalities. 137 Local Youth Offices are registered and while their main role is to support youth initiatives and provide services to the young people. Following the need to establish an umbrella association of the Local Youth Offices, [the National Association of Youth Offices \(NAKZM\)](#) was founded in 2014, and nowadays it brings together 110 cities and municipalities. However, not all youth offices have the same structure and capacity for undertaking actions as allocation of funds is highly dependent upon the local government. Moreover, some municipalities introduced a specified position of the youth programme coordinator that is accompanied by a contract while other programme coordinators still carry out their roles on a volunteer basis.

Autonomous province of Vojvodina has established [the Provincial Secretariat for Sports and Youth](#) in 2002, which is in charge of monitoring and supporting the work of youth associations and youth offices, preparation of programmes in order to improve the position of young people and supporting the projects relevant to young people. [The Youth Council of Vojvodina](#) was established in 2012 at the initiative of the Provincial Secretariat for Sports and Youth, with the aim to encourage and coordinate activities related to development and implementation of youth policy and to propose measures for its improvement. The Provincial Secretariat has developed [the Action Plan on youth policy for the Autonomous province of Vojvodina 2015-2020](#).

Serbia has the most diverse structure supporting devising and implementation of the youth policy among all ex-Yugoslav countries and the other countries from this circle can learn some

lessons from the structures established. Nevertheless, as one of the interviewed experts said, there are additional efforts required as

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

Concerning individual membership in the youth associations, the youth workers in Serbia are gathering around the civic society organisations networks and networks of the youth workers. However, one of the interviewees pointed out that these networks cover less than 50% of all youth workers in Serbia, and many youth workers still struggle with their professional identity and finding a suitable support for their activities. The latter is especially the case with the youth workers with 20 and over years of professional experience as they find current system of accreditation downgrading since it demands completing the same trajectory for all youth workers irrespective of their previous experience in the field.

We already pointed at diverse support systems for youth work in Serbia and youth workers in many municipalities are provided support for their activities and they have channels to engage young people. Still, during the interviews an issue of quality control of youth work on the local level was raised, as well as a lack of systemic feedback from the young people on the local level. Moreover, one of the youth workers expressed their concern that youth workers sometimes have insufficient insights into wider social phenomena and they are reluctant to step out of their comfort zones, which prevents them to provide quality advice to the young people.

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

[National Association of Youth Work Practitioners - NAPOR](#) in past twelve years has reached several significant milestones in providing non-formal educational programmes for youth workers and assisting to other youth organisations in organising such courses. There are two programmes available to the experts in the youth field: 1) youth leader and 2) youth worker. NAPOR has also contributed to development of the standards for mechanisms of accreditation process of youth work programmes based on eight areas of skills and values relevant for quality performance of youth work related activities. [Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Youth Work in Serbia](#) have also been adopted by NAPOR, along with [the Ethical Code in Youth Work](#) and the standards of qualifications for youth leaders, youth workers and specialist for youth work and youth policies. It has to be added that standards of qualifications for three levels of youth worker occupation developed by NAPOR are yet to be included in the National Qualification Framework.

Pivotal milestones reached in Serbia are sustained by the youth civic society organisations, primarily NAPOR, and some youth workers have recognised there is a space for more resourceful youth workers education that is supported on a wider scale.

*“Youth workers' practice and working experience is often not recognised and it is at the expense of the experienced youth workers who have at least 10 years of working experience. There is not diversified programme for youth workers that would acknowledge differences concerning working experience.” (youth worker, Serbia)*

Some interviewees' inputs suggest that certificate is not a tool all youth workers are striving for, especially those with several decades of experience in the field. It has to be added that an issue of identity and understanding what is required to maintain a framework of non-formal education is partially missing and there is an evident need for better networking and understanding between the current leading stakeholders in youth worker education in Serbia and un-organised (freelance youth workers) and youth workers from smaller associations.

Concerning the future prospects of youth worker education in Serbia, NAPOR currently undertakes comparative analysis of several European countries in order to grasp possible modes of organising youth work study in Serbia. The second step is proposal for a university curriculum, which will be followed by setting up qualification standard for a Master study. Nevertheless, the interviewed youth experts and youth workers expressed their concerns regarding viability and success of such study as there are only a couple of university professors who understand a concept of youth work and who have been cooperating with the civic society organisations in past decades.

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

In last two years civic society organisations, primarily NAPOR, and governmental institutions, have accomplished some key elements of recognition and validation of youth work: [Sector Councils](#) were established and youth worker occupation is included in [the National Qualification Framework](#) list of occupations ([Classification of Occupations](#)). However, at the national level mechanisms for full recognition of the youth worker occupation are yet to be developed and youth worker is still not recognised as a profession.

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

### *Youth work financing*

Lack of financing is emphasized as the main challenge the structures supporting youth work in Serbia are facing, which affects not only immediate actions and projects, but also causes long-term reduction of the sector:



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

The interviewees as the most prominent ones listed two sources of financing youth work in Serbia: the public calls from the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and international organisations. Nevertheless, in comparison to the international funds, financial resources allocated through the public calls or decisions made on a local level make the smaller share of available funds. The interviewees have not reached consensus what type of change is required in order to make publicly available funds more helpful for development of youth work in Serbia. Still, they all agreed there is a lack of transparency in allocation of funds from the national and local level, which is coupled by insufficient amount of financial resources that do not foster quality of youth work, sustainability and implementation of the long-term aims. Concerning the international funds, the most prominent programmes are [Erasmus+ programme](#), [TEMPUS programme](#), [ESF Serbia](#), [RYCO Office Serbia](#), [GIZ Serbia](#), [Embassy of Sweden in Belgrade](#), [Royal Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade](#), and [UN Serbia](#). Statements of the youth experts and youth workers indicate that thanks to the long presence and stability of the international organisations in the region cooperation between the international organisations and youth organisations is very fruitful and indispensable for youth work development in Serbia.

### *Examples of practice*

Examples of practice that contributed to transformation of the youth work in Serbia encompass a wide range of activities that engage youth workers and young people in creative approach to resolving issues on the individual or social level. The first example:

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

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

[Belgrade Centre for Human Rights](#) holds authorship over project [Sofa: Solidarity First Aid](#) that matches couples made up of one young person (18-30 years old) and one elderly person (65+ years old), who contribute to encouraging intergenerational solidarity and exchange and create cohesion through both offline and online modes of work.

Absence of the programmes and projects focusing on the young refugees and asylum seekers, coupled by the national policy guidelines that mostly focus on the 'mainstream' young people was mentioned as one of the major deficiency of the youth policy in Serbia. Youth NGOs recognise such a need as there is one more example of practice that helps young people and youth workers to step out of the comfort zone and to reach out to the young people in need. The Programme [CoolTour Tube](#), coordinated by the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights with the support of the UNHCR, offers an opportunity to learn more about human rights, interculturality, prejudice and acceptance of diversity.

## Slovenia

### *Legal framework of youth work*

[The Act on Public Interest in the Youth Sector](#) defines youth work as “an organised and goal-oriented form of action targeting young people, in which young people, based on their own efforts, contribute to their own integration into society, strengthen their competencies and contribute to community development. The implementation of various forms of youth work is based on the voluntary participation of young people, regardless of their interests, cultural, ideological or political orientations”. [The Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2013–2022](#) was adopted in 2013 for the period 2013–2022, adding to recognition and support to youth work in Slovenia. Youth work is acknowledged as one of the areas that needs fostering and active support and this document prescribes mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of the national and local youth policy implementation. Resolution also addresses prerequisites for achieving quality youth work at the national and local level and modes of advocating and promoting youth work on the national and local level. [Youth Council Act](#) (2000, 2010) regulates the status, areas of work and financing of [the National Youth Council of Slovenia \(MSS\)](#) and the local youth councils. Youth policy is part of policies with shared responsibilities among different governmental bodies on the national and local level, depending on the topic of interest.

The interviewed youth workers and youth experts from Slovenia emphasized that the youth policy implementation is to a certain degree standardised on a national level. However, they pointed at major discrepancies when it comes to policy implementation on a local level; everything depends on the willingness of the local policy makers and politicians to engage in supporting activities in the youth field. The further objection to the implementation of the youth work policies concerns insufficient inclusiveness of the strategies and actions plans as they keep the marginalized people out of focus. Orientation of the strategies and action plans reflects on the policy implementation, as stated by one of the interviewees:

*“Social security youth work is one of the worst affected by bureaucratisation, youth NGOs and young people have to fulfil ridiculous criteria. For instance, at the last call for subsidised housing only a few young people could fulfil the requested criteria. And those*

*were young people who are coming from more stable social background, so they did not need subsidised housing at all.” (youth worker, Slovenia)*

### *Structures supporting youth work*

The principal national public authority in youth work in Slovenia is [the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport](#) and its autonomous body [Office of the Republic Slovenia for Youth](#). Office of the Republic Slovenia for Youth is targeting youth on the policy level. [Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth](#) is a consultative body that proposes measures and monitors the consideration of youth interests in various public policies at the national level. Some interviewees from Slovenia suggested this council is influenced by politics and therefore not adequately promoting interest of young people and youth workers in Slovenia.

An [Expert Committee for Youth Work Quality](#) was established in 2019 by the Government, but no concrete steps were made so far in regard to introduction of the quality control mechanism. One of the interviewees suggested, “activities and processes in the field of youth work seem to happen through parallel processes and structures, which results in questionable quality”. (youth worker, Slovenia)

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

[Local Youth Office in Ljubljana](#) has established youth work as one of its priorities and youth needs are recognised and get into the focus. The interviewees made an observation that although the general youth work framework is well-set, youth work in Slovenia is heavily centralised and rather often “the closest the municipality is to Ljubljana, there are more efficient implementation and more funds” (youth worker, Slovenia).

Slovenia has been a member of the European Union for 17 years and international policy guidelines and programme influence and shape youth work policy in Slovenia. The crucial actor in advocating youth work development in Slovenia and promotion of the access to the international programmes is [MOVIT](#), providing support in regard to development and financing of the youth work, and setting up agenda for development of the civic society and framework of youth work. Inputs from the interviewees indicate that MOVIT’s contribution to the youth work development is highly convincing and some of the interviewed youth work experts ranked cooperation with MOVIT significantly higher than outcomes of cooperation with some of the governmental bodies or institutions.

Interviewed youth workers and youth experts in Slovenia differentiate among five challenges the structures supporting youth work are facing in Slovenia:

1) a high degree of centralisations, which especially affects system of youth work financing;

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

2) a lack of continuous national research on young people that hinders establishing youth-friendly actions and policies and which is often coupled by a high degree of bureaucratisation of youth work;

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

3) youth policies focusing on ‘mainstream’ young people, which contributes to further marginalisation of vulnerable youth;

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

4) inadequate indicators evaluating impact of youth work:

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

5) visibility of youth work and youth workers:

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

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

Official documents defining youth workers' education in Slovenia recognise the need for integrating education on youth work in a system of formal education. The Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2013–2022 addresses current non-formal channels of youth workers' education and call for integration of the extracurricular courses on youth work in the secondary education. At the university level, [University of Ljubljana](#) is co-ordinating a [programme of life-long learning](#) for youth workers, together with [the University of Rijeka](#), and [the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb](#). The first generation of youth workers took part in the programme in the academic year 2017/2018 and the second generation obtained their certificates during Covid-19 pandemics – 2020/2021. The on-site lectures and workshops are held at the premises of the University of Rijeka and the programme is performed in a hybrid manner, with majority of courses organised via online tools due to the Covid-19 pandemics. This programme is part of the project [Supporting Evidence-based Education of Youth Workers](#) that aims at development of youth work provision in Croatia and Slovenia. The programme is implemented via three modules covering the most important issues in the youth field – (I) youth research, (II) youth work, and (III) youth and community development.

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

Youth work is still not recognised as a profession in Slovenia and youth workers still suffer from inadequate working conditions and difficulties in access to social security and stable and payment that is adequate for fulfilling their everyday needs. The interviewees agree that majority of the youth workers work on the temporary contracts and are earning salaries that are below the national average.

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

Regarding the recognition of the youth worker occupation in Slovenia, [National Qualification Framework Slovenia](#) marked a beginning of recognition, which is still more an exemption than a rule as insights suggest that non-formal education is more recognised than the youth work and youth workers.

*“There have been two generations of youth workers educated, but there are several serious deficiencies of the current system of the youth workers' education. It seems to me that experienced and committed youth workers do not have a strong need to obtain such certificate and I cannot help to wonder what is a point of such system of youth workers education. In reality, youth workers formal education is not as recognised as it*

*was expected from the policy makers and those who provided support in establishing framework for education. We have the structure set, but that's it.” (youth worker, Slovenia)*

[Youth Worker Occupation Standard](#) prescribes a mode of obtaining qualification of youth worker. The process includes an oral and written exam at [the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education](#) and is open to everyone who can provide evidences of their professional trajectory. However, the youth civic sector displays dissatisfaction with such a process as the exam committee is composed of people who do not have background in youth policy or youth work. Recognition of informally acquired knowledge during secondary education is enabled through [the Vocational and Technical Education Act](#), and the certification of non-formally acquired knowledge is the responsibility of [the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities](#).

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

### *Youth work financing*

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

### *Examples of practice*

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

Network MaMa has conceived a [Logbook](#) — an instrument introduced by assistance of [the Europe Goes Local project](#), primarily of the Swedish organisation that have developed methodology for monitoring local youth work and evaluation of the youth work processes and impact.

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

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

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

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

## Turkey

### Legal framework of youth work

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

In 2013, the Ministry produced the [National Youth and Sports Policy Document \(Ulusal Gençlik ve Spor Politikası Belgesi\)](#), which provides a general outline of the vision and scope of youth policy and youth work in Turkey. According to this document, youth work is based upon two main pillars: “youth participation” and ‘youth empowerment’, respectively. The aim of the

first pillar is to promote civic engagement, by launching or supporting initiatives that motivate young people to have a more active role in society and become more involved in decision-making and policy-making mechanisms and processes. The second pillar, based upon the principles of social inclusion and equal access to opportunities, envisions the empowerment of young people by providing the right infrastructure, as well as educational and vocational opportunities that promote the overall well-being of youth at a personal and social level. Both pillars foresee regular and close cooperation between public authorities and NGO's. The content and language of the documents itself is very much aligned with the European discourse, featuring keywords of European youth policy such as 'education and lifelong learning; employment, entrepreneurship and vocational training; disadvantaged young people and social inclusion; democratic participation and civic consciousness; voluntary work and mobility' (Lüküslü & Osmanoglu, 2017, 2018).

A framework law aimed at strengthening and enhancing civil society was introduced within the [2016 Action Plan of the 64th Government \(2016 64 üncü Hükümet Eylem Planı\)](#). In particular, this law was served as a tool to regulate 'the legal statutes of civil society institutions, their institutional structures, activities, their relations with public institutions and financial resources'. The legal and structural provisions underpinning the activity of youth associations and other entities that belong to the realm of civil society are defined within the [Law on Associations \(Dernekler Kanunu\)](#) and the [Law on Foundations \(Vakıflar Kanunu\)](#) adopted in 2004 and 2008, respectively.

The Turkish state does not have an independent law on volunteering or youth volunteering, yet references are made to various laws, such as [Municipal Law \(Belediye Kanunu\)](#), [Environmental Law \(Çevre Kanunu\)](#), [Basic Law on Health Services \(Sağlık Hizmetleri Temel Kanunu\)](#), [Civil Defence Law \(Sivil Savunma Kanunu\)](#), [Law on Social Services \(Sosyal Hizmetler Kanunu\)](#), [Law on Probation Services \(Denetimli Serbestlik Hizmetleri Kanunu\)](#), [National Education Basic Law \(Milli Eğitim Temel Kanunu\)](#) or the [Law on Primary Education and Training \(İlköğretim ve Eğitim Kanunu\)](#) .

### *Structures supporting youth work*

The most robust institution supporting the youth sector in Turkey is the national [Ministry of Youth and Sports](#), which was re-established as an independent ministry in 2011, uniting under its umbrella different governmental agencies had been working towards a youth-related agenda in various capacities. Together with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and its affiliated structures, there are also many other public bodies providing services related to young people. Among these: the [Turkish Employment Agency \(İŞKUR\)](#), the [South East Anatolia Project/ GAP](#) , the [Center for EU Education and Youth Programmes](#) etc. The [National Agency \(Ulusal Ajans\)/Eurodesk Turkey](#), affiliated with the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is the body operating Erasmus+ and ESC Opportunities. Youth work in Turkey is not limited exclusively to the central government. Youth work activities are conducted also at a local government level



(municipalities) and civil society level, even though at times there might be different priorities or conflicting interests among these, subjecting youth work to the dynamics of local political influence and competition (Lüküslü and Osmanoglu, 2018).

Turkey can pride itself in the fact that there are youth centres in every city of its territory. The majority of these are supported by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, which has invested heavily on the construction of high-quality venues, especially in rural and peripheral areas, where young people usually have limited opportunities compared to those living in big urban centres. According to figures provided within the [3rd European Youth work Convention](#), in December 2020 Turkey numbered 354 Ministry-led youth centres. Among these high-standard youth centres is also the one in Adrasan, then converted to become the [EuroMed Youth Centre](#), a multifunctional venue in accord with the criteria established by the [Council of Europe Quality Label for Youth Centres](#). Youth centers have been created also by local administration (municipalities) yet in a less standardized way (Lüküslü & Osmanoglu, 2018:1). One of the many positive aspects of youth centers is their potential to play a vital role in the cultural and social life of a city/community and reach a part of population that is not part of the formal educational system.

Turkey does not have a National Youth Council, yet, although this is something for which local civil society organisations have been advocating for years. In a [declaration](#) dated in 2015, the [Civil Life Association - Sivil Yaşam Derneği - SİYAMDER](#) underlines the need for coordinated action among different sectors towards the creation of a National Youth Council. The text features a number of arguments in favor of this statement, among which Turkey's duty to align with obligations stemming from its role as a member country of the Council of Europe and the European Youth Forum- organisations ardently supporting the active role of youth in decision making processes.

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

### *Educational opportunities for youth workers*

At a national level, educational and training opportunities for youth workers and youth trainers are provided on a regular basis by the National Agency/Eurodesk and the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Moreover, local NGOs, youth networks, but also universities, organise

educational activities directly or indirectly related with youth work. Still, there is no specialized vocational training or academic pathway to accredit youth workers. University studies on youth work per se do not exist either, nevertheless, there are academic courses at a graduate or post-graduate level highly interrelated with youth work, ranging from topics such as Education and Sociology to the management of NGOs. Many practitioners in the field come from different disciplines and background.

Youth work in Turkey, at least in its state-affiliated dimension, is in complementarity with the formal education system (Lüküslü & Osmanoğlu, 2018). It is a fact that many senior youth workers, members of the Turkish National Agency and other pools, are also affiliated with a Turkish university and sometimes even hold the position of a lecturer, project coordinator or research assistant. Moreover, the most significant part of research on youth work in Turkey has also been conducted by teams of people who bear the dual role of being a scholar/researcher and a youth worker. Their findings have been published by prominent Turkish universities, among which the Istanbul Bilgi University, which has contributed significantly to research in the field, via publications providing insight into youth work and youth policy in Turkey in different points in time.

Despite visa-related restrictions that impose a number of bureaucracy-related difficulties in trips outside the country, Turkish youth workers have access to courses and other educational activities provided at a European, regional and international level, such as the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission, programs launched within the [Anna Lindh Foundation](#) or training courses and seminars organised by the Council of Europe or the Youth Partnership.

### *Recognition and validation of youth work*

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

To provide some examples of the polyphony that exists even among various CSOs, in the following definition published at the [‘Student Daily Life’ section of the PI Youth Association website](#), one can find the following definition of a youth worker:

*Youth workers are professionals who work with or for young people and who help them develop life competences, to establish healthy relationships and to take the right decisions for themselves. Youth workers generally work at youth centres, youth*

*associations, youth units of public and private bodies, and they take up the duty of facilitating projects and activities.*

The specific definition has been chosen for the fact that it aligns with the state ideology viewing youth work at large as a means aimed to keep young people away from ‘bad habits’. (Lüküslü & Osmanoğlu, 2018). This definition would probably be contradicted by many youth workers who would argue firstly, on what consists a ‘right decision’ in a person’s life and secondly, whether it is really a youth workers role or ‘duty’ (to quote the text) to *help people take the ‘right’ decisions*. A recent article expressing the view of [Go-For – Gençlik Örgütleri Forumu](#) (Forum of Youth Organisations) explains the burden imposed on youth workers by expecting them to mould the ‘good young person’, as this is perceived within the cultural, religious and ideological standards promoted by the dominant political voices ([Gazete Duvar](#)). Other organisations<sup>1</sup>, such as the [Network of Local Youth Associations](#), count upon a translated version of the [definition provided by the Youth Partnership](#):

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

### *Youth work financing*

At a state level, a generous provider of funds for youth projects is the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Financing is envisioned within the [Youth Projects Support Programme](#). Moreover, unregulated, ad hoc funds are also allocated by other ministries for projects involving youth work, yet targeting culture, environment, education etc. Moreover, Turkish universities allocate large amounts of money on grants for youth projects, in which they partner up either with state institutions or with Turkey-based external donors.

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

Turkey has a solid presence in the Erasmus+ project. Moreover, in October 2021, the EU Commission and Turkey signed three agreements granting association status to EU programmes for the period 2021-2027: [Horizon Europe, the EU research and innovation programme](#), [Erasmus+](#), [EU programme for education, training, youth and sport](#) and the [European Solidarity Corps](#), which means that Turkish actors in the youth sector can participate under the same conditions as participants from EU Member States. Turkish youth workers can also count on financial support coming from the numerous international

organisations operating in the country. In the last years, large sums of money have been allocated to NGOs working with refugees, which is expected to continue for as long as there will be large migratory flows inside Turkish territory.

### *Examples of practice*

The Youth@Work International Symposium on Youth Employment Challenges” ISYEC, organised by the Turkish National Agency and conducted between 2-6 November 2021 in Istanbul, aimed to promote among private sector professionals and youth workers an advanced level of cross-sectoral collaboration and networking for more effective and sustainable partnerships.

The [Youth@Work “International Symposium on Youth Employment Challenges” ISYEC– “Crossing the Bridge”- Special Edition](#) has been an initiative aligned within the objectives of the Youth@Work Partnership, of the new EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027) and with the European Youth Goals. The Symposium promoted among private sector professionals and youth workers an advanced level of cross-sectoral collaboration and networking for more effective and sustainable partnerships. These new partnerships can potentially be a tool to tackle youth unemployment, promote employability and increase the capacity of the private sector representatives through non-formal learning.

The [Youth work Academy Camps 2020](#) was a project by TOY Youth Association that lasted for 18 weeks and which involved youth work academy camps for young people aspiring to become youth workers. The greatest part of the project was conducted online due to the lockdown in Turkey that came as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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

### III) COMMON ELEMENTS AND DIFFERENCES ACROSS THE REGION BASED ON THE INTERVIEWS

SEE region is marked by a strong tradition of youth work, emerging from the efforts of peace-building, reconciliation and the fight for democracy. All the states in the region have encountered a period of civil unrest, civil wars or wars for independence, which has given an impetus for the development of civil society organisations. More recently, youth workers in some SEE countries try to address other, more nuanced, security counters such as radicalisation and violent extremism. There have been effective, established networks, especially among civil society organisations, which are additionally enhanced by the support

from the Council of Europe, Salto SEE, RYCO and other international networks and donors. On a bilateral level, the full implementation of the Prespa agreement of 2018, which ended the long-standing dispute between Athens and Skopje over the use of the name "Macedonia," is crucial to enhancing cooperation between the two countries and to North Macedonia's prospect of accession to the European Union. Additionally, Bonn process could also present a platform for consolidation of youth work in entire region.

On a regional level, opportunities for networking and inclusion in the meaningful youth-targeting activities are significantly smaller for the young people from smaller municipalities, primarily due to the negligible efforts made by the national and local government. The youth workers in the region are striving to keep track on the international processes and to get included in the trainings that could facilitate delivering of the quality youth work. We can say that the SEE youth workers manage to organise and conduct activities despite the scarcity of infrastructure and financial resources. They demonstrate adaptability to ever-changing political structures and economic crises, which are often accompanied by high turnover in the officials occupying positions at the governmental bodies in charge of youth and youth work. Despite current negative developments streaming from Covid-19 pandemic, the youth workers have accomplished better visibility of youth work and efforts of youth workers who contribute to positive societal changes and mitigating the impacts of the pandemic.

Next four sections will summarize findings on the four crucial aspects that are common or diversifying traits of the twelve SEE countries: cross-sectoral cooperation, financing, politicisation and shrinking space for civic society, and digitalisation.

### *Youth work practice: Cross-sectoral cooperation*

Desk review and interviews revealed some drawbacks in cooperation among the stakeholders in youth work in SEE. Support structures to youth work and youth workers have been addressed from different angles in this study, one of which considers suitability of the state established structures responsible for youth work on the national level. We have collected evidences that young people and youth work is being merged in inappropriate institutional frameworks that divert attention from youth work. Here we can emphasize an example of Greece where there is the Ministry of education and religious affairs in charge of youth, or Croatia where youth topic is merged with demography under the State Office for Demography and Youth. In other countries, the structures supporting youth work are usually put under the auspices of institutions in charge of education and/or sport. However, even in these cases, youth work is usually given less priority and funds. For example, in North Macedonia, the main institution supporting youth work, the Agency of Youth and Sport, disproportionately invests more in the sport component because of the political visibility in creates for the Government. Similar situation can be observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Kosovo. Albania is the only country among the observed ones that has a ministry dedicated exclusively to the children and youth, established in 2021.

There is a significant space for improvement in regard to joint efforts in devising youth policies; current practices are failing to achieve coherent youth policies that directly employ competences of the state officials from different ministries. Instead, youth policy is being addressed as an area that is completely separated from the general public policy. Due to this issue, experts for some specific areas, like education, employment, health, etc., are not being consulted in drafting the youth policy acts. Moreover, youth strategies do not enclose vulnerable groups of young people; they are mostly focused on the 'mainstream' young people, denying opportunities for social inclusion to already marginalised youth.

Cross-sectoral cooperation has been a buzzword in the youth sector for more than two decades. Nevertheless, a genuine and inclusive cross-sectoral cooperation that is respectful towards all participants, is still more an exception than a practice in the SEE. A triangle of policy-makers-youth workers/practitioners and researchers, which is directly engaging young people and is fostered by political will for devising and implementing relevant and sensible youth work policies and actions is still not a reality in majority of the SEE countries. In regard to intersectoral cooperation, the interviewees were very clear when expressing concerns about deficiency in the skills and competences of the public officials. Majority of the officials at the institutions in the youth sector do not have background in youth work of civic sector and they are uncritical towards their own competencies. At the same time, they do not utilise opportunities to include people with relevant experience in decision-making and policy-making.

There is a general impression that young people do not have a complete overview of the situation, especially in regard the intersectoral cooperation. Due to a lack of insights, young people often address only the youth organisations when seeking to find an answer about main hindrances to implementing actions in the youth field. This way we have a closed circle of lack of strategic documents, lack of support and widespread mistrust. Youth policies are only partially being implemented and there are no clearly designated financial resources for their implementation. There is an evident lack of trust and hesitance to engage in a productive dialogue that would include partners from various sectors. Young people do not demonstrate confidence in politics and governments and young people (and youth workers) do not believe they are a priority.

*There is generally a public mistrust towards youth NGOs and people presenting themselves as youth workers. This is a direct effect of the fact that in the previous years, there have been NGOs and individuals getting public funds to do nothing. Things became even worse during the refugee crisis. Civil society in Greece has been very political; it is about who you know and which party you support. (young activist, Greece)*

## *Financing*

Financial resources for youth work activities and development are very scarce in the region, and if there were not abundance of grants from the international organisations and programmes, the situation would be even worse. International funds present a noteworthy source of the youth work financing in the SEE, and they are being used for youth work both on the nation-wide and on the local level, although the actions covered by the international grants cannot always be applicable on the local youth work. The youth sector in SEE is generally unsustainable and donor-driven. The current international funding schemes are usually complex and require expertise in grant application process. As a result, the small, grassroots youth organisations cannot obtain support for their projects and have to reduce or even completely halt their activities. Paucity of sustainable funding presents one of the major challenges in SEE youth work.

Funding is dependent upon factors that are not directly related to youth work or quality of youth work; first of all, it results from low prioritizing of youth-related topics, but it also depends on the political will of the fund managers. The latest is sometimes, as we could note in the earlier sections, used as 'subtle' manner of keeping the civic scene 'under control'. In such a situation, it seems that managing public calls for youth work activities is being used as an instrument of pressure. The interviewees identified several channels of official political structures influencing youth work financing: 1) higher scoring of the youth associations established by the political parties; 2) allocation of grants to the youth organisations that advocate the same world-view and values of the ruling party or the state Church; 3) giving a mandate in the local youth councils to the members of the political parties and 4) hiring local youth office coordinators via temporary contracts or volunteering schemes, which keeps them in a uncertain situation and prone to manipulation by allocating grants. Closely related to the official politics influencing youth work is also employing the young members of the political parties at the public institutions, which creates clientelistic networks and suspicion of the young people towards youth work, as well as mistrust of youth workers towards state institutions and agencies.

Project-based funding predominates in SEE youth work, as support coming from the state level do not suffice for activities targeting young people. There are only one-year grants available, and the interviewees have been trying to advocate for establishing funding for programmes that would last for at least two to three years. According to the interviewed youth workers and youth experts, transparency of the evaluation procedures and allocation of grants is very questionable. Scarce financing has always been elevating vulnerability of the youth sector in SEE, with the project proposals that have to claim '150% of milestones and deliverables' while available funds do not allow to implement even 50% of foreseen activities. Criteria to be met by the applicants should also be changed as currently they are mainly based on the 'large numbers', which means that associations working with discriminated and marginalised youth cannot get grants via public calls. Those inadequacies also bring into question a quality of youth work and depletion of energy, motivation and commitment of the youth workers.

Youth associations on the local level, especially in smaller municipalities in rural areas are facing hardships in providing financial means for implementation of their activities. In other words, financing on the local level largely depends on the economic strength of the municipality. Many municipalities do not have grants dedicated to the young people. Usually only smaller amounts are on disposal and due to the pandemic many calls were significantly downsized.

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

### *Politicisation and shrinking space for civic society*

SEE region is still, eighteen years after the first countries from this circle entered the EU, struggling with consolidating the political processes and employing democratic practices, which also reflects at the youth work and results in the shrinking space for civic society. Therefore, one of the questions used during the interviews asked about youth work and potential impact of the political developments. There are two main streams of responses to this question. The first one is mirrored in the response of one of the Croatian interviewees: "political developments do not influence youth work in Croatia as young people are not a priority", and the interviewee from Montenegro: "local youth services have been closed and their contracts haven't been renewed, it shows to what extent young people are a priority in Montenegro." The other stream includes a range of influences of the political system, starting from omitting young people from the overall policy framework and focusing on young people only when it is suitable to the leading political actors, namely during political elections and for tokenistic actions that serve for claiming changes while negotiating for accession to the EU.

Due to excessive politicisation in the countries of the Western Balkans, youth wings of the political parties have become the main source of youth mobilisation. In fact, in any of these countries, the youth wings of only the few leading political parties have more members than all the youth civil society organisations combined. The reason for this "negative politicisation" is that, in most of these countries, party membership is often required to obtain a job in the public sector or to use the vast clientelistic network that the political parties have created. Moreover, youth wings do not have important role in the decision-making processes of their respective parties, and they put party over genuine youth priorities. Although political parties



do organise different types of activities for their members, this cannot be called a youth work. Actually, this phenomenon effectively contributes to shrinking the youth civil society in the SEE, the Western Balkans in particular.

Undemocratic circumstances are closely connected to the statements of the youth work experts and youth workers elaborated on earlier in this study, who addressed concerns in regard to political settings affecting selection of the members of the national or local youth councils. In some cases, it is not only corruption and nepotism, but fear of marginalisation and public persecution that discourages youth workers from working with specific groups of people or talking their minds about current issues affecting youth in their setting. There were several examples of youth workers from Turkey reporting on sudden change of governmental relations to the youth NGOs ('blacklisting' the associations) just for public expression of their attitudes or advocating youth rights. Interviewed youth workers testified about failing democracy and fear of engaging into public debate and activism. Sometimes, the undemocratic settings pervade official politics so deeply that people trying to actively engage in society fear for their safety, as in example of the ex-youth worker from Turkey.

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

There are also controversial examples of local political elites occupying spaces meant for youth, as in the case of a small town in Romania, where a heated public debate emerged following [public decision to hand over the premises of a youth centre to the local council](#). Local counsellors have justified their decision to displace the NGO by claiming that the latter has 'abusively invested in public spaces'. This dispute has escalated into a heated political debate over the value of youth and the public space allocated to young people, especially in peripheral areas. It is not so rare that undemocratic jargon in politics and questionable practices in functioning of the public institutions, coupled by corruption, lead to negative impact on youth work.

An interesting parameter linking youth work with political and civic life is the role of youth centres. Youth centres, in Turkey, for instance, are 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, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia 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. Youth workers expressed their gloomy feelings when visiting youth centres in Central and Western Europe. They feel deprived and stress out the fact it is highly unfair that youth workers and young people suffer from unfavourable economic, social and political conditions not due to their mistakes but due to mere place of birth or residence. In North Macedonia, for example, youth organisations advise the municipalities on how to

establish youth centres according to the new legislation, but their recommendations are not always accepted or fully implemented. In brief, there is no organisational, structural or financial support to opening the youth centres.

Influences of political developments have deteriorating impact on the fulfilment of the youth needs, which is coupled by modest skills of the governmental officials and by a lack of commitment at the governmental bodies in charge of youth. There is also omnipresent over-bureaucratisation and prolonged procedures that make almost impossible for the youth workers to reach the public officials. The rare occasions of demonstration of willingness to engage with the civic sector usually occur during political campaigns, when youth workers and young people are used for tokenistic purposes. Moreover, politicians often make harm to the image of the youth as they proclaim young people to be irresponsible, immature and without skills that could benefit to the society. The latest such example is blaming spreading of Covid-19 on young people.

### *Digitalisation*

Long periods of lockdown in some countries have had a direct effect on the youth sector in many countries; on the one hand, there have been youth workers who have found it hard to adjust to the 'new normal'. On the other hand, many communities have not been privileged enough to have access to digital tools and resources. There are of course, cases where digital youth work is simply not possible and cannot substitute human interaction. While there have been countries, like Croatia, Serbia or Romania, for instance, where youth workers managed to keep up with activities due to shorter periods of lockdown, in other cases, where strict measures were applied, youth workers had to face a new reality. This is the case of Greece, North Macedonia and Slovenia, for instance. Even when digital activities started becoming more popular, not all youth workers felt that they could move their activity to the digital world; some felt that they lack the digital competences to do so, while others were hindered by a lack of resources in the communities that they used to be active in. A significant portion of youth workers had to leave the youth sector in order to provide for the necessities; they transferred to the sectors with less financial liabilities.

The interviews' insights indicate young people are usually reached by youth associations via Instagram and other social media, as well as by volunteer clubs at schools and public prize games in Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. Direct communication via social networks is also often used, especially via Viber and WhatsApp, and paid promotions on social network and associations' web portal are employed. However, usage of digital technologies was sporadic before the pandemic and majority of the youth associations were not using digital technology in a structured way. Some youth associations had limited access to equipment prior to the pandemics, and some of them managed to purchase the equipment through international funding. Many young people, especially those from rural areas, still struggle with very slow internet connection.

*The ones who can benefit from digital youth work activities are those who have access to a private computer and stable internet connection. Sadly, this is not the reality for*

*many young people who live in less privileged areas of Turkey and who grew even more isolated during the pandemic. (youth worker, Turkey)*

Usage of digital technologies has increased with Covid-19 pandemics. However, the interviewees agree quality of online and direct youth work is not even and it is very difficult to establish trust and immediate cooperation between young people and youth workers.

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

Lives of young people, especially of those who are still in formal education system, are impregnated by digital technologies and educational contents, and young people directly express their desire to engage in direct personal communication. During the interviews, there was frequent reporting on the young people’s saturation by usage of digital technologies, which lead to resistance towards the digital means. At the same time, the youth workers expressed their concerns that the prevalence of digital youth work over direct youth work had probably influenced rating of their association, and if the youth associations would like to sustain their activities, they feel obliged to commit to hybrid events as long as they can.

Out of the total number of youth workers interviewed for this study in different SEE countries, the majority responded that they feel they could make good use of extra training on digital skills before they can say that they feel confident in operating efficiently in the digital realm. The interviewees agree that digital youth work cannot replace real-life experience, mainly for the following reasons: 1) their target-community does not have access to the necessary digital equipment, space and infrastructure to participate fully in digital activities; 2) digital youth work is a new trend in SEE, therefore, conditions are not ripe yet; 3) youth workers often lack the necessary skills and competences, but also the space, capacity and equipment to perform efficiently online and 4) digital activity cannot replace the first-hand experience of trust that comes with one-to-one, interpersonal communication. It should be also emphasised here that particularly affected have been organisations that implement conflict resolution and intercultural learning projects for youth in post-conflict areas as it is extremely difficult to conduct these types of activities online.

The vast majority of respondents said that during the pandemic they discovered new tools, which they had not been previously aware of and that they experimented with new platforms. It was almost unanimously shared that if there is one thing that should be kept as a lesson for the future, it is flexibility over communication. As almost all respondents shared, connecting digitally when physical presence is not possible is something that can be preserved even in the after-Covid era. The same goes for flexibility in working hours and styles, as long as the desired deliverables are reached.

The youth sector in 12 observed countries demonstrated its resilience as they embraced new forms of interacting with young people. Except for seminars, training courses and panels online, there were also youth organisations which organised art exhibitions, language tandems, storytelling evenings or even theatrical plays online. Some organisations, like NAPOR in Serbia, have recognised a need for developing expertise in communicating with young people and such expertise due to high demands during pandemics would require a full-time position in the association. NAPOR has just completed analysis of channels and messages sent by digital tools towards young people and based on that NAPOR will develop its communication strategy, which adds to their previous efforts, such as organising [a regional conference on online methods](#) in November 2020.

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

#### IV) CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVOCACY AND REVISION OF THE YOUTH WORK FRAMEWORK IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

Based on the interviews and desk research, we can say in order to implement sensible and constructive measures tailored according to the needs of the young people both on the national and local level, the stakeholders should engage in open wide consultations and 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. Aiming at wider usage of this study for advocating positive changes in SEE youth work, we divided recommendations in three sections according to the type of stakeholders: the policy-makers, the youth workers and the youth researchers.

##### *Recommendations directed at policy-makers*

Policy-makers and politicians on the national and local level **should respect impartiality and provide support to all youth organisations on an equal basis, regardless of the target group or area of youth work the organisations are dedicated to.** The government should pay especial attention to **enhancing a political culture** that is based on mutual respect and

compliance with the law. Their actions should result in **tailored-made and responsive youth policies** that timely react to the needs and changes of the youth sector. Funds should be allocated through a transparent and merit-based procedure. Overall, SEE societies have to undergo a process of significant depoliticisation, especially of the public sector, and this should inevitably affect the youth sector as well.

Interviewees from all analysed countries agree there are pronounced differences in access to opportunities for quality youth work across different regions at the national level. Those differences are especially evident in insufficient opportunities for exercising youth work in rural areas, which also reflects in a lack of youth access to support from the civic sector. Equally important, youth workers from less affluent SEE Countries feel deprived of possibilities that are provided to their colleagues in economically more prosperous countries. **Institutions in charge of youth work should advocate for recognition of importance of youth work and provide support in building structural, financial and human capacities of youth associations.**

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

### *Recommendations directed at youth workers*

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

### *Recommendations directed at youth researchers*

The youth researchers are somehow in an inconvenient position, which stems from the various professional trajectories and (a lack of) possibilities to engage in applied research and evidence-based policy analyses. It is often difficult to keep on track academic career and to participate in expert studies and policy analyses. Still, **youth researchers must acknowledge that youth policy and insights into youth work practice are indispensable components of almost all areas of youth research.** Therefore, the youth researchers should be **more committed to developing in-depth knowledge on the youth policies, youth work practices and support structures available to youth workers.** In order to do so, researchers should **cooperate on the international youth studies, both with policy-makers and other youth researchers** and they should **encourage the funders to recognise the importance of internationally comparable data on youth work.** In addition, **the value of large anonymised longitudinal data-sets that are supplemented by the insights obtained by qualitative methodology,** should not be neglected.

To conclude this study, we can say that the current state of play concerning cross-sectoral cooperation in the youth field in the region adversely affect achieving quality youth work, which negatively affects motivation of the most qualified experts to stay in the field and contribute to the changes. However, practice examples are being shared and presence of international organisations in the region could enable changes in the pace, quality and direction of the youth work development. In order to accomplish quality youth work all actors have to show willingness to contribute and provide support to the process. This should include youth organisations, public and international organisations and institutions and young people on the national, regional and local levels.

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[Regional Cooperation Office](#)

[Regional Youth Cooperation Office \(RYCO\)](#)

[RYCO Office Montenegro](#)

[RYCO Office Serbia](#)

[Quality Label for Youth Centres](#)

[SALTO SEE Resource Centre](#)

[SALTO South East Europe](#)

[SALTO-YOUTH](#)

[SEE YOUTH WORK: Peer-learning seminar on youth work and its relevance for youth policy in South-East Europe, \(Ljubljana, 2018\)](#)

[Serbia: Action Plan for the Implementation of the National Youth Strategy 2018-2020](#)

[Serbia: Ministry of European Integration](#)

[Serbia: National Youth Council – KOMS](#)

[Serbia: the Law on Youth](#)

[Serbia: the Ministry of Youth and Sports](#)

[Serbia: Sector Councils](#)

[Singing Shelter](#)

[Slovenia: the Ministry of Culture](#)

[Slovenia: Network of the Youth Centres](#)

[Slovenia: the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities](#)

[Slovenia: Youth Worker Occupation Standard](#)

[Slovenian Institute for Adult Education](#)

[Slovenska filantropija, Association for Promotion of Volunteering](#)

[Supporting Evidence-based Education of Youth Workers](#)

[Sofa: Solidarity First Aid](#)

[TEMPUS programme](#)

[The European Youth Centre in Sremski Karlovci](#)

[The Youth Council Slovenia](#)

[UN Office Montenegro](#)

[Union for Youth Work](#)

[University of Rijeka](#)

[University of Ljubljana](#)

[Volunteer Centre Istria](#)

[Young Dragons](#)

[Young Volunteers' Club](#)

[Youth Association No Excuse](#)

[Youth Association P-4](#)

[Youth Centre Grabrik](#)

[Youth Club Budva](#)

[Youth in Contemporary Society](#)

[The Youth Council of Vojvodina](#)

[The Youth Initiative for Human Rights - Kosovo](#)

[Youth Network MaMa](#)

[Youth Network Young Dragons](#)

[Youth Partnership](#)

[Youth Partnership: Mapping educational paths of youth workers](#)

[Youth Partnership: Recognition of youth work and non-formal learning](#)

[Youth Partnership: Youth Work](#)

[Youth Wiki](#)

[Zdravo da ste](#)



## ANNEX: Guiding questions for personal, semi-structured interviews

### 1. The context of youth work

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

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

9. Are there educational opportunities for youth workers in your country at an academic / vocational level?
10. Is there a nationally established system of validation of the previously acquired knowledge / competences in the youth field? If yes, please describe it briefly and give a reference for further info.
11. Is there a nationally established system of recognition of the youth workers' profession (accreditation procedure)? If yes, please describe it briefly and give a reference for further info.
12. Is youth work considered a profession in your country? Do youth workers enjoy benefits that other professionals do (prevalence of open-ended over fixed-term contracts, social security, medical insurance, payments etc.)?
13. Are there professional requirements for youth work developed at the national level? If yes, please describe them briefly and give a reference for further info.
14. Are there ethical standards for youth work developed at the national level? If yes, please describe them briefly and give a reference for further info.
15. How do you think youth workers in your country could be better prepared and supported in order to deliver quality youth work?

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

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

#### Youth work practice examples

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

Please, briefly elaborate on the good practice example:

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

... additional questions:

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