



**Council of Europe**  
Slovenia 2009



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SPORT  
OFFICE FOR YOUTH



COUNCIL OF EUROPE  
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**SALTO-YOUTH**  
SOUTH EAST EUROPE  
RESOURCE CENTRE



## **Youth Policy and Youth Employment in South East Europe**

**Seminar, 21<sup>st</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> October 2009  
Brdo, Slovenia**

### **Concept paper**

**by Dr. Metka Kuhar**

Since the beginning of the 1990s the South East Europe region underwent rapid and radical change. All countries<sup>1</sup> were affected by the replacement of the state socialist regimes by market economies and by fledgling democratic institutions. The political and economic transition has been relatively smooth only in Slovenia but other countries continue to face a number of complicated problems in this regard. In some countries, the legacies of wars additionally triggered challenging socio-economic difficulties. A volatile mix of religions and sluggish transitional economies constitute political instability and even a fragile and insecure peace in some parts of the SEE region. While political, economic and social transitions affected all of these societies, young people, relatively highly socially protected during the socialist period, were among the most affected and vulnerable societal groups.

Despite the heterogeneity of the region, young people in South East Europe are facing a number of common problems and challenges within their respective societies. The issue of un/employment for young people remains one of the crucial challenges for youth policy in general (Williamson, 2002, 2008) and in particular in this region. A prolonged transition of young people through the education system, and a problematic entry into the labour market are common to all of these countries (European Youth Forum Report, 2002; UNICEF and World Bank, 2002; La Cava et al for the World Bank, 2004). The school-to-work transition of young people is not just extended but punctuated by frequent spells of unemployment, precarious jobs, attempts to start their own business and/or find work abroad, combining education with paid work of some kind. Especially striking are high rates of unemployment among young people. For example, in Bosnia-Herzegovina 45 % of young people are unemployed, which is two and a half times higher than the rate for the population as a whole. Large pools of jobless youth in the region are discouraged and no longer looking for employment. Their inclusion among the officially unemployed would further raise unemployment rates among youth considerably. In some countries, one of the main issues is widespread unregistered work in the grey economy with no written contracts.

The prolongation and destandardisation of youth transitions from education to employment is also characteristic of other European countries, but in the post-socialist and especially post-war countries such transitions are much more risky and insecure. The social agencies, themselves in a process of restructuration, are less supportive, and the family resources mostly cannot back-up open and uncertain individualized biographies. Disadvantaged groups, such as young people with little education, young women, disabled youth, and minority youth like the Roma are disproportionately affected.

The main institutional arrangement channelling young people towards adulthood that is subject to transformation and re-organisation is the education system. It is an institution that is extremely vulnerable to economic and political changes. In the frame of the post-state socialist transformation educational systems are exposed to reforms introducing liberalisation and pluralisation and create both more opportunities but also greater

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Greece, the other countries from the Balkan region (the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania and Albania) shared a similar recent political history: i.e. a state-socialist history that had lasted for several decades. The economic and cultural regional differences were renounced under the formally established Soviet or Yugoslav socialist regimes. However, the commonality of a socialist legacy cannot obscure the heterogeneity of socialist experiences and also the existence of a variety of divergent post-socialist transformations. Different courses of transitional processes in the SEE countries (for example, war in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia; political unrest in Albania; and the comparatively smooth Slovenian transition in the 1990s) entailed different effects and required different mechanisms to cope with the resulting uncertainties.

insecurity in educational outcomes. The establishment of new patterns of education, new types of schools and altogether new institutional structures changed the options and opportunities of both general and vocational and professional education in Central and Eastern European countries (Kogan 2008). For instance, La Cava et al. (2004) point out that particularly in post-conflict countries in the region the school environment has been disrupted. As a consequence, vocational education and training face a decline and university enrolment is rising. Secondary school enrolments in SEE are considerably lower than in other European countries. Secondary school enrolments declined in the post-transition period, then recovered slightly, but have yet to reach pre-transition levels of universal enrolment. Although there is a lack of reliable statistics on this subject it is evident that dropout rates are increasing. There is a high risk for young people, and especially for young men, to drop out of school before the end of compulsory education (La Cava et al., 2004). Altogether, the educational outcome is a polarisation of the youth population. On the one hand there is a growing share of young people without or with incomplete education and training that is susceptible to informal employment, illegal activities or emigration. On the other hand, there is an equally growing share of young people remaining in education as long as possible in order to avoid the rough conditions in the employment system without, however, having a clear professional perspective within the national labour markets. In other words, there is a risk that the solid base for an educated youth labour force is eroding.

Furthermore, in order to become effective formal education needs to be combined with other forms of learning, including non-formal and informal education. Manuela du Bois-Reymond (2003), reflecting upon the relationship between non-formal and formal education in general, identifies specific challenges of providing and organising non-formal education in post-communist countries. They are related to the sudden 'openness' of young lives, the devaluation of youth work and the collapse of state-organised 'voluntary work', and the necessity to establish a concept of non-formal education that manages to equally attract young people with very different socio-economic backgrounds. As it does not seem to directly contribute to employability as one of the most urgent requirements of today, non-formal education needs to compete with other, more conventional and formalised ways of learning. But indirectly, involvement in non-formal learning opportunities, in particular through youth NGOs, represents an efficient way of gaining competencies that are rarely promoted by the present formal educational system. According to information of SALTO South East Europe Resource Centre only around 5 – 10 percent of young people in South East Europe are involved in the work of youth NGOs, and even less in international youth work. Nevertheless, the non-governmental sector is becoming a relevant means to gather young people, providing chances for non-institutionalised socialisation, encouragement of their creativity, and increased active citizenship, youth entrepreneurship, and employability.

Under these circumstances the transition out of education and into employment remains largely uncertain and the troubled entry into the world of work has serious welfare repercussions on young people. The risks of income poverty and deterioration of human and social capital are increasing. The unemployment experience forces young people into a position of long-term material dependence on parental families. This practice also leads to a rise in social inequalities and a reproduction of disadvantage across generations. The delay of marriage and parenthood are but two consequences.

Research evidence shows that the longer unemployment spells are the more difficult it is to find work because of stress and the loss of skills and morale. Early unemployment in a person's life may have scarring effects and permanently impair his or her future employability in decent jobs. Besides marginalisation and alienation of youth from the

economic development process above-average youth unemployment rates increase the likelihood of engaging in risky health behaviour.

Furthermore, among those young people who successfully entered the labour market a large number are working in contexts where they are deprived of basic employment rights and entitlements. Low-quality employment includes jobs that may provide higher salaries, but do not offer any of the following: job security, health, retirement benefits, or unemployment insurance, access to training and career development opportunities. Another problem is that commonly referred to as 'brain-drain': the difficulties faced by young people in the region over the last 10-15 years have led to a situation where highly educated and skilled young people leave their country of origin in pursuit of better opportunities abroad. For instance, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, according to a 2008 survey presented by the Youth Information Agency (OIA), 73 % of young people wish to leave the country for better opportunities abroad. The mass emigration of young people has caused a tremendous loss of human capital and has sometimes taken dangerous forms such as human trafficking.

Against this background of rapid and ambiguous social change this seminar aims, first, to reveal the main problems young people are facing in the area regarding employment in these societies and seek for opportunities for young people. Second, the seminar wants to contribute to the political debate as well as the policy development and its implementation for managing and improving the situation of employment and employability of young people in the SEE region and, consequently, in the existing and enlarging European Union. Sharing information about positive initiatives that have been taken already and may be developed further by various actors in this context will assist this process.

While addressing these two aims it is crucial to see young people not only as 'victims' but also as powerful agents of change for whom the ideas of democracy, civil society, human rights, freedom of opinion and greater mobility present new chances and challenges. Now, more than before, they also have the option of choosing the context in which they want to work and live.

The issues that will be discussed at the seminar will focus on the following areas:

1. Context and realities of youth (un)employment
2. Integration/Inclusion of unemployed youth
3. Formal education-employment link
4. Professional training
5. Non-formal education and civic involvement/active citizenship
6. Information and counselling
7. Roles of youth research, policy making, youth work and civil society

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