

Youth information and counselling in Croatia

The way we do it!

by Vedrana Biličić and Ivan Medić

Images by Marlies Pöschl

A key event in the development of organised youth information and counselling in Croatia was an initiative of the Ministry of Family Affairs, War Veterans and Intergenerational Solidarity during the 2006 National Conference on Youth, which established concrete collaboration with organisations that could, according to the estimation of the ministry and based on experience, carry out pilot programmes for youth information centres in the four largest cities of Croatia: Split, Rijeka, Zagreb and Osijek. The official government document summarising all the measures for improvement of the status of youth in our society, the National Programme of Action for Youth, recognised the need to establish centres which would increase the level of youth information and inclusion and which could proactively counsel young people and help them to find adequate sources of quality and complete information more easily.



A youth information centre based on European practices was a whole new challenge for Croatian associations as they were only to starting to build their recognisability and to earn credibility in a society in which informing was still fairly abstract and marginalised. In 2006, almost no organisation, apart from the educational system, was providing organised youth information. Only a small number of organisations were focused on informing and counselling, and only in a small number of fields, while general informing and developing media information services were completely neglected. Accordingly, the development of youth information centres in Croatia is strongly connected with the development of information channels and with approaching young people. Unfortunately, non-profit media (portals, TV and radio shows) are significantly underestimated in Croatia. There is no comprehensive and continuous strategy for their development, which is additionally constrained by bad legislation.

In 2013, some positive changes were made at the national level in the context of legislative amendments and funding for non-profit media. It is also expected that the new national youth programme, for 2014 to 2018, will pay adequate attention to informing and counselling and thus provide a better response to challenges regarding the promotion of youth media. Their development hitherto, in spite of recognised needs, has not been encouraged adequately. The upcoming Law on Youth, which will standardise and define roles and terminology, should contribute to the improvement of the situation in the youth sector.

It is imperative to ensure, through an adequate financing system, the sustainability of youth information centre programmes. They are still being financed through annual tenders which are not called on a regular basis; they are usually late for more than six months every year.

The membership of Croatian youth information centres in the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA) has significantly strengthened the status of youth information centres, especially at the local level, where the membership is perceived as proof of excellence. Communication and meetings with government and ERYICA representatives, as well as the structured work of organisations to strengthen the programmes of youth information centres have improved the already good reputation of these organisations.

By signing the European Youth Information Charter in 1982 the current government recognised the problems concerning youth informing and counselling and at the same time acknowledged ERYICA and its members. Since the early stages of the youth information centres programmes, each organisation has been applying its knowledge and adapting its services to local conditions. The experience of the PRONI Centre for Social Education is very important because PRONI has been applying the experience of similar centres in Europe in its work from the start. Although a significant level of diversity in the means of informing and in paying attention to certain subjects is present even today, the social inclusion of youth is a mutual goal.



» Youth information and counselling in Croatia – The way we do it!

There is also an effort to conduct, through the Croatian youth information centres, a strategy at the national level, which focuses primarily on consolidating the capacities of organisations working in youth information, increasing work quality and expanding the network of youth information centres. This is why the membership in ERYICA is very important. In addition to the exchange of information and knowledge, this membership also gives us the possibility for capacity consolidation through licensed and standardised education, which has led to the establishment of a Croatian team of trainers. This is essential when it comes to increasing the number of workers educated for youth information.

Generally speaking, young people are mostly interested in information regarding the fields of education, mobility and employment. In some youth information centres, the priority is to provide individual youth informing and counselling. Others pay more attention to public discussions, round tables, lectures and other similar forms of group informing. Activities of youth information centres, outside the facilities of the centres, are focused on web-portal maintenance, media appearances, guest lectures in schools and presentations at stands during public events, co-organisation of lectures and participation in public discussions and other similar events.

Some youth information centres have developed their own, original ways of providing information. For example, an event called “Info kopča” is organised within the RICM (regional youth information centre) of the city of Split. During this event, professional speakers visit secondary schools and inform young people about the fields covered by the national youth programme through a series of short and dynamic presentations. An advisory committee, formed by representatives

of institutions and organisations that work with young people, is a successful model of collaboration, development and information exchange between different sectors. This model came to life in 2009 at the RICM in Osijek and other youth information centres are accepting it gradually. In order to establish an even closer contact with young people at the RICM of Osijek, a youth information fair called “Informiranje mladih Osijek” (IMOS, Youth Information Osijek) is held every year. During the fair, institutions and organisations present their services to young people.

“Info zona” started its work in 2006 as a non-formal coalition of associations. Since then, it has been constantly developing in the field of youth information and youth policy. Info zona bases its work on sociological research into the need for youth information, which the organisation conducted in the area of Split in 2011. The research confirmed that young people today can be informed, counselled and encouraged to actively participate in social life while using means and services which are interesting to them. It is important to emphasise that printed brochures and flyers, as well as public discussions, which are the most common means of youth information and inclusion in different activities within many associations, are considered dull by young people.

Info zona pays a considerable amount of attention to informing through different types of media, such as the Internet, radio shows and TV reports on local networks and uploaded on Internet channels. The diversity of information channels is extremely significant when you consider that many young people live in isolated areas, especially on the islands, where young people in general are constrained in many ways, including from the lack of services which could strengthen their personal growth.



Since the very start, the ministry insisted on the inclusion of local authorities in the programme implementation. However, their engagement is often reduced to conducting tenders and sometimes to confrontations with opposing political parties at the state level. Institutions perceive the role of youth information centres, and the possibility to make their services more available to youth, very differently. However, in general, the possibilities for collaboration have not yet been recognised. The city of Split has collaborated extremely well with Info zona. On the local level, Info zona is perceived as an excellent partner when it comes to projects focused on the social inclusion of youth. The city of Split and Info zona are working together towards creating a youth centre and thus using the potential of all institutions and youth associations in the surrounding region.

Croatia's membership in the European Union brings many new challenges. This is why it is imperative for Croatia to become more actively involved in European strategies in all fields. In recent years the Croatian Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes has been trying to implement a Eurodesk service in partnership with civil society organisations. Progress has already been made in youth information centres, but it is necessary to standardise the work of all the centres as soon as possible. Standardisation would facilitate all mutual actions, comparisons and evaluations. It is important to underline the need for the expansion and strengthening of the network of local youth information centres, especially in rural parts of the country and on the islands, where young people are significantly limited when it comes to their personal growth. Government authorities on all levels must assume their role in this process, which is why we hope that the new national youth programme will provide a more adequate response to current challenges.





Imagining "Imagine"

Marlies Pöschl interviews Ivana Kuzmanic, Svjetlana Marijon and Maja Dragojevic (Zamisli, Zagreb)

Images by Marlies Pöschl

What is it like to be a teenager in need of information in Zagreb? I put on my sneakers and set out to find the answer at the Youth Info Centre Zagreb, which is a project of the association "Zamisli". This might already show you that I'm not that young at heart anymore, because as I will find out later on, most requests are actually happening online – via e-mail or Facebook. This seems understandable since the youth info centre is located in the south of the city, 20 minutes by tram from the central square. The office of Zamisli is a small but friendly space, packed with books, folders and leaflets. The six women who work there are like living books: they have lots of information and experience to share – and like in youth information, each of them joined in the conversation to give her views and expertise.

Zamisli (Imagine) could be called an octopus in the youth field: it is not only one of the four regional youth info centres in Croatia (covering Zagreb and the provinces in the north), but the organisation also provides counselling and support to teenagers with disabilities. Being a professional youth counsellor, Ivana tells me "doesn't mean that we know everything. But we do research and contact people who know the answer, so we can gather all the necessary information or connect the young people with them."

The organisation tries to react in very flexible ways to the needs of the young people that come to consult them – for example they invented a special typewriting service for deaf students, as Svjetlana Marijon (president of Zamisli) told me. "One of the deaf students told us: 'I would like to study, but I am not able to participate in class – so what can you do?' We remembered that at a conference in Innsbruck, we saw that someone was typing for a deaf participant. We thought: that's an example of good practice; we could try that."

One of their aims for the future is to spread out, says Ivana Kuzmanic: "We are hoping to have a bigger youth centre – not just a youth info centre, but a real youth centre." This is an ambitious project since youth info centres and youth clubs, for example, usually have to be in separate spaces in Croatia. "We're now in the starting phase, but eventually we have to talk to the city about the space we would like. The problem is that you need constant money if you want to maintain the quality of your work." The fact that their funding is always project based makes it difficult for Zamisli to plan for the future.

But the organisation wouldn't be called "Imagine" if they hadn't already got an idea on how to make their plan possible. Maja Dragojevic imagines the future like this: "Now that Croatia is entering the European Union, the structure fund will be open for us and we would like to apply for it. Like this we will have more chances for our ideas to be recognised."

