



*by Sorin Mitulescu*

# **The history of youth work in Romania**

## **Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of several meaningful moments in the history of youth work and youth policy in Romania. In the last 200 years various actors have carried out initiatives to support children and young people. Youth care and informal education have been closely connected to each other. In youth work, like in many other sectors, Romania sometimes copied models from other countries, and sometimes rejected those models and developed its own solutions. Romanian youth work practice and policy was sometimes substantively different from standard definitions of youth work. Sometimes policy and practice have been subordinated to values which would be firmly rejected by current youth workers: nationalism, authoritarianism or formalism. Of course these periods are also relevant to our history, because they help to better understand the difficulties that youth work has to confront in contemporary Romanian society.

Romania does not have much of a tradition in what is today called “youth work”, in other words “the technique of creating a favourable environment for young people by involving them (voluntarily) in non-formal learning”(Smith 1988). Even today, the term “youth

work” has no equivalent in the Romanian language. Most Romanian people have no clue about the meaning of “youth work”. Recent Romanian books about school practices have focused on the relationship between formal and non-formal education (for example, Costea 2009). Costea uses the term “youth activities”, drawing on a document from the European Youth Forum and describing youth activities “as actions, activities, projects developed by the youngsters themselves or for the youngsters, in order to increase their status or to assure a better level of representation or participation” (2009:65). Unfortunately, the author does not try to develop a job profile for a professional youth worker. Costea focuses only on youth NGOs and their relationship with formal institutions such as libraries or schools.

There have certainly been moments in our history when Romanian society has paid special attention to young people, focusing on the provision of an adequate living environment to bridge the gaps in the socialisation process of young people, in the strong belief that such an approach would have good effects on their development. Could we call these moments youth work *avant la lettre*? Discovering these moments arguably has its own importance for the successful introduction of new methods of youth work today. It is important for Romanian youth policy makers and youth leaders to understand that their efforts take place in a long historical, cultural and national tradition. It is also important for any youth worker to avoid the excesses and mistakes that were committed in the more or less distant past of our society. There is yet another advantage of discovering our history: other youth workers and youth researchers from all over Europe can learn from Romanian youth work history and compare the Romanian situation to other places and contexts.

## Young people in the traditional Romanian village

Young people in traditional Romanian society only episodically received public attention, which was focused on supporting their transition to adulthood. From ancient times up to the present day, however, youth have exercised forms of self-organisation in Romanian villages. During the winter holidays, groups of carol singers (children but also teenagers and unmarried young people) would frequent in the streets of their village, collecting small sums of money or sweets which they shared amongst themselves. In some periods groups of young boys engaged in a military-type form of organisation, and practiced initiation rituals. Adults encouraged and appreciated these informal learning processes in peer groups.

## The 1848 revolutionary generation

In 1848 Europe witnessed a wave of revolutions which altered the political landscape in many countries. In the mid-19th century we see the first signs of a consistent public youth policy. The revolutionary generation of 1848 was especially valued, not particularly because its members were young, but because they had studied in Paris. In Romanian society France was, for a long period, considered the nest of democracy and progress. These young people were called by locals, somewhat sarcastically, *Bonjourists*.<sup>22</sup> This new generation of young people distinguished

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22. Refers to those young people with progressive ideas who returned from their studies in France and who were wont to greet people with *bonjour*.

itself from previous generations in fashion, too, being the first to adopt the western European style of clothing. Coming from the local aristocracy, they became the representatives of the Romanian political elite for the next half-century. They helped to achieve state independence and began the modernisation of Romanian society. It was this elite youth, educated and trained in western Europe, that established the first youth clubs in Romania, beginning in Bucharest in 1870. Their aim was to facilitate cultural development and social contacts. Admission was conditional upon one's level of education and financial situation (Itu 1981:184).

## Educational reform

Towards the end of the 19th century Romanian society became increasingly aware that its lower classes were lagging behind seriously. The situation was similar in other countries, but compared to western Europe Romanian society did not invest very much in the edification of the lower classes. In rural areas especially this deprivation was manifested very strongly in illiteracy, lack of hygiene and a perceived moral crisis. Therefore, for a long period to come, concerns about young people blended in with developments in the field of schooling and training. Efforts were made to set up schools in villages, including schools for adults. Educational institutions were obliged to abandon the old selective practices and reach out to all people. This was an advancement in the efficiency of teaching but it also reinforced the public belief that education could only take place in schools.

Spiru Haret, a professor in mathematics who had studied in Paris and who was Minister for Education between 1897 and 1910 (with short interruptions), marked this period with his ideas of educational reform oriented towards raising the standards of the rural population (Schifirnet 1997). His basic aim was to establish applied, practical education, adapted to the child's needs and to the community. Students were encouraged to explore, make observations and experiment on agricultural plots distributed to schools. With his first attempt to impose the practice of school trips, another new educational method was introduced. Haret framed his reforms in terms of what he called the concept of "extra-curricular education". This was not a completely out-of-school education, but he did create a series of institutions parallel to school – like courses for adults, cultural clubs, and public libraries. He also encouraged publications with a popular character. He promoted the idea of moving the emphasis in education from the accumulation of knowledge to the formation of civic consciousness:

*It is perhaps acceptable for a good citizen and father of family to live without knowing the history of Alexander the Great's helmet, but someone who does not love his family and country and does not show energy, honesty, civic and military courage, diligence and a sense of justice cannot be a useful citizen  
(as cited in Schifirnet 1997:29, free translation).*

Teachers were the social and educational agents stimulating these extensive activities of literacy and adult enlightenment in the villages. 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 *avant la lettre*. Teachers did not restrict their educational efforts to the transmission of theoretical knowledge, but also introduced "physical and military exercises". Haret's Ministry of Education published (in 1900) a volume of methods for teachers, *Teaching the people*, a

real tool kit for adult education (Istoria invatamantului 1993). For the first time in Romanian pedagogy, interactive methods and even the projection of photos or films were recommended.

## Youth movements in the first half of the 20th century

In the years preceding and immediately after the First World War, the modernisation of Romanian society, supported by the political elite (and the royal family), consisted also in encouraging the emergence of successful western European youth movements: scouting and YMCA received official recognition. Other initiatives such as the Zionist youth movement were, however, suppressed, due probably to the fear at that time of the spread of communism (Ofir 2011).<sup>23</sup>

The scout movement started in Romania in 1912, drawing on the initiative of a group of teachers, scientists and officers of the Royal Army. The scouts organised periodic “Sunday trips” for pupils from Bucharest high schools. In 1914 Baden-Powell’s manual *Scouting for boys* was translated into Romanian and the National Scouting Organisation was established. Romanian scouts received congratulations from Baden-Powell himself, who added some advice on the adaptation of scouting to the local environment. In 1930 the Boy Scouts already had 45 000 members in Scout Romania and there were 14 000 Girl Guides. At the beginning, scouting was seen as a powerful instrument for promoting the values of democracy, tolerance and peace. In that sense it was seen as an antidote to the fascist and communist movements that were also interested in attracting children and young people. The royal dictatorship in the late 1930s tried to subordinate and use scouting for the purposes of education and nation-building. The autonomy of scouting was severely restricted and in 1937 the movement was transformed into an official governmental organisation called the Youth Guard (Străjerii), supporting the royal dictatorship.

In a much more spontaneous way and despite some restrictions imposed by government officials, the Legionary Movement developed. This youth movement attracted a good part of educated youth, who were encouraged to assert themselves as a moral force of the new society. Legionnaires tried to attract young people with work camps and marches. Their nationalist, Christian and anti-Semitic rethoric was a sharp protest against the so-called “democratic” authorities. Between 1924 and 1937, the Legionnaires organised many voluntary work camps in order to restore churches, hermitages or monasteries, and build shelters for the poor, mountain roads, barrages and bridges.

## The national “social service”

The 1930s were marked by a major offensive by ideas coming from the Third Reich. Some democratic intellectuals, such as Professor Radulescu Motru, a philosopher and politician, objected to the adoption of laws inspired by the

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23. From the perspective of the authorities any idea coming from Russia could generate Bolshevik propaganda.

German National Socialist Party encouraging education through work. Motru argued that such an organisation would not fit the psychological specificities of the Romanian people (Schifirnet 2003:145).

In the meantime the social-pedagogical framework initiated by Spiru Haret was continued through the commitment of the sociologist Dimitrie Gusti (1880-1955), Minister for Education at the beginning of the 1930s. Gusti was also concerned with rural schools. He wanted to stop young people's migration from the villages to the cities and wanted to achieve the long-term stabilisation of Romanian rural society. Gusti's policy attracted significant political support as it was perceived to be a barrage against the influence of right-wing organisations (such as the so-called Iron Guard) on young people.

Inspired by the Danish educational model, Gusti wanted schools to educate pupils in rural areas about hygiene and health. He also favoured cultural education and wanted schools to foster co-operation as an essential value for young people. Reading, singing and dancing in the Romanian style were also viewed as important. All of this was framed in a climate of religiosity. Like Haret, Gusti was in favour of experiential learning. He asked schools to take their pupils on trips and study visits, teaching them new skills that they could practice and apply back in their villages. Gusti also facilitated the functioning around schools of "work communities". He saw this as a means of social education and training and at the same time a means for the selection of political leaders. In this work community the student was to come as a volunteer. On Gusti's initiative, the first "peasant schools" were established in 1933. Gradually their number increased so that by 1945/46 there were a total of 43 schools with nearly 1 000 students.

Gusti considered that the university did not exhaust the creative possibilities of young people and did not satisfy their aspiration for social action. Therefore he proposed complementary preparation and participation for young people: a social service. Young professionals (fresh graduates) were asked to support, voluntarily, the functioning of cultural centres (foyers) in the villages. Later the social service became mandatory for graduates who were interested in social promotion.

In 1938 the social service trained more than 3 200 youngsters, working in 128 villages. This ambitious programme included the improvement of the roads, the prevention of diseases, the optimisation of agricultural techniques, the reduction of illiteracy and the establishment of foyers, dispensaries and baths. This was all in order to elevate the social condition of the peasant classes. However, due to the unfavourable international events in 1939, only a few months after the formation of many teams of young people, the activity of the social service was suspended (Badina and Neamtu 1970).

## **Work camps, communist style**

Communists did not consider age differences very relevant. They promoted a concept of "flat evolutionism". Therefore refining methods of education or social assistance specific to age stages was not deemed necessary. Communist propaganda attracted young people to certain activities applying training methods to cultivate the "new type of man".

The beginning of the communist regime was characterised by the need to restore the country after the war. Young people were attracted with the promise of a better life and they were asked (frequently forced) to join the reconstruction efforts. In line with this policy, Soviet-style pedagogy praised the educational role of (manual) work. Under these conditions, one of the most advertised forms of youth work in the early years of communism was represented by “youth yards”.

Romania copied the model of the Soviet Union that had been initiated two or three decades earlier, during the Russian Civil War. During the first Soviet Five Year Plan the youth yards worked on the construction of the Baltic-White Sea Channel. This was not a completely new experience for Romanian youth, as the method had already been used by the right-wing opposition during the old regime (the Legionnaires or Iron Guard).

In opposition to the objectives of the Legionnaires, which had a greater symbolic meaning reflecting their ideology, governmental projects were thought out more pragmatically, and more focused on economic aspects. In late January 1948, the Ministerial Commission for Economic Recovery and Monetary Stabilisation announced the opening of six major yards of “national interest” that would work alongside other projects that were smaller and more of local interest. They focused on the construction of two main railway lines that crossed the mountains and on the restoration of those cities affected by the war. The recruiting of volunteers was done by the local organisations of the Youth Labourers Union. On the 1 April 1948, when the sites were opened, each county organisation had to send a group of 150 to 220 volunteers to the “labour front”. Departures were staggered. Each group of volunteers was to stay on-site for two months, before being replaced by another shift. Students arrived on-site in the summer months, once the holidays started.

During the economic crisis of the regime in the 1980s, the ruling Communist Party propagandists tried to revive this appeal to the revolutionary spirit of young people, resuming (or rather trying to resume) the tradition of youth yards; these were the same as work camps, but with a much more important economic dimension. At the beginning of the summer of 1984, in a festive setting, the Danube-Black Sea Channel was inaugurated. Part of the work had been carried out by members of the Communist Youth Union and students. Three months after the opening, the efforts of young people were once again rewarded: a day in August was dedicated to honouring the so-called “Brigadieri”,<sup>24</sup> the young people who had literally built up the structure of the socialist homeland.

In the last years of the communist regime, groups of students from all counties were going to the work yards again. Organising their departure was handled by the local organisations of the Communist Youth Union, together with secondary- and higher education institutions. A letter from the management of the yard sent to the high schools from where the young workers came assessed the students’ work as “very good for its contribution to the achievement of the plan tasks of the site, to communist, revolutionary education, through labour and for labour, of the young workers” (Popa 1978).

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24. “Brigadieri” were appointed in the 1950s. These were youngsters who more or less enlisted voluntarily for reconstruction activities organised by the communist authorities. Most of the work was manual labour, digging or carrying construction materials. Some of these youngsters also received certain qualifications or were politically promoted at the end of training.

A sociological research study conducted in the 1980s (Cinca 1982), beyond a mandatory laudatory tribute to official youth policy, had the courage to also mention the dissatisfaction of young participants in such work yards. The author commented especially on the conditions for leisure time during the work yard internships in the work yards, which were deemed unsatisfactory. Cinca also pointed out that the educational effects of working on such a site were very limited. It contributed to some elements that supported the functionalist social integration of young people: discipline, a sense of responsibility, honesty, mutual aid and interest for work. Other features, at least as important, such as creativity and a sense of initiative or citizenship, were not promoted through the work yards (Cinca 1982:45).

An official from that period claimed that by “fighting drawbacks, shortcomings and difficulties young people become stronger, providing for themselves at the same time a better life, dignified, civilised” (Popa 1978:126). In other words, he justified the poor organisation and poor living conditions offered to the young people through the positive role model of material shortcomings for their education and development.

## **Youth clubs in the 1980s**

Another attempt by communist educators to foster the correct development of young people involved attracting them to leisure clubs for youth. The communist youth organisation managed a youth club in nearly every major city. But despite the relatively large investments to build such institutions, not many young people were interested in participating in the proposed activities. The author of an analysis conducted during those years on the leisure behaviour of young people tried to explain the extremely low rate of youth participation in youth clubs in terms of the lack of such a tradition. He argued that young people in the 1980s remained attached to classical sources of information and learning: school, family, books, theatre and cinema, avoiding stronger ideologically controlled channels such as youth clubs (Schifirnet 1987:76-7).

## **Youth work since 1989**

The main trend since the fall of the communist regime in Romania in 1989 has been to destroy everything to do with the old regime – both the bad and sometimes the good provisions made for young people. Thus, youth clubs started up by the communist regime, instead of being reorganised, were simply excluded from public funding. Most of them closed down. The educators were fired, and their work was considered useless. Some years went by before the belief grew again that young people needed specific services.

At the beginning of the 1990s the lack of trained staff for youth work was noted and criticised. Some youth organisations benefited from exchanges with experienced western European youth workers. They were initiated by a number of French associations as facilitators or animators (*animateurs* in French) for holiday camps or for local communities. The results were not as expected, despite the passion and talent of many Romanian trainees, because

the authorities failed to create a favourable setting for the implementation of new skills and methods in summer camps or in local communities. It took some time before youth work in Romania started to attract the public recognition it deserved. As in other post-Soviet countries, Romanian society was focused on other priorities.

The situation in Romania, however, was even worse than in other former communist countries. In countries like Hungary and Slovakia, the new authorities inherited youth clubs or entrusted them to local authorities, while in Romania these clubs were offered to private foundations (organisations for youth concerned with taking over assets of the former communist youth organisation). Between these foundations and the authorities (either central or local) there was no collaboration, and neither was a common pedagogical strategy developed, so a large part of the former resources have been wasted. On the other hand, a Ministry of Youth was set up, which tried in the late 1990s to create its own network of youth clubs (after the German model). But this project was also gradually abandoned. Therefore, so far no one can say that there has been serious and effective involvement of local or central authorities in supporting youth work.

The only notable achievements may be said to be the small youth organisations or student organisations that have tried to develop their own methods of working with youth, though youngsters have only limited access to them. As for disadvantaged youngsters (especially in villages, or from the Roma minority), who have wanted to upgrade in cultural and material terms, they have remained completely unaffected by any kind of youth policy, and suffer from an acute lack of non-formal education.

## **Some conclusions**

This review of important moments in the history of youth work in Romania seems disappointing from the perspective of contemporary youth work in Europe. Most of the developments in the field of youth work and youth policy do not fit well with current definitions and frameworks for youth work in terms of voluntary participation, equal treatment of participants, and professional youth workers.

It is difficult to find in more than 100 years of “Romanian youth work” any experience related to “girls’ work” (except in the case of Girl Guides). Youth work has been almost exclusively a business concerned with boys.

There has not been much interest either in distinguishing different groups, classes or categories in Romanian youth work. The only dividing line within “Romanian youth work” was focused on rural youth. Even such tradition was lost after the Second World War. Ethnic minorities – such as Jews – were not encouraged to develop their own initiatives.

There have also been some attempts to professionalise informal learning, but all have been abandoned too early, before results were obtained.

Romania needs to take all these experiences into consideration as it continues to develop and implement “youth work” reform.

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