

Chapter 12

A new kid on the block: youth work meets youth policy in Croatia

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Introduction

Despite the fact that youth work is often seen as one of the key aspects of youth policy (Schild and Vanhee 2014), its development does not always follow the development of youth policy in general. Croatia is one of those countries with rather well-articulated youth policies but within which youth work still suffers from serious deficiencies in terms of regulation and recognition. Anchored mostly in civil society organisations (predominantly in youth clubs and youth centres), youth work practice in Croatia has followed a curious and peculiar path in its development. Starting in the socialist era of former Yugoslavia, followed by a war period in the 1990s, up to the contemporary understanding within the youth policy framework, youth work in Croatia has evolved into a rather atypical area of youth policy (Bužinkić et al. 2015). In this chapter we seek to describe and analyse contemporary processes related to youth work in order to situate youth work in the context of the youth field, youth policy and a wider societal perspective.

There are a number of disclaimers relevant for the story of youth work in Croatia that need to be addressed before proceeding with its description, analysis and critical reflection. As demonstrated in several cases (ibid.; Kovačić and Ćulum 2015), data on youth work in Croatia are scarce. There is no empirical research on youth work practice, nor academic texts on youth work conceptualisation applied to the Croatian context. Furthermore, until recently there have been no official governmental documents providing for youth work as a relevant element within a youth policy framework. One can say the state had no interest in its development, regulation and/or perspective. It is of no surprise, therefore, that most information on youth work in Croatia could only be acquired from reports developed by various youth organisations, while at the same time those who work with young people (youth workers) suffer from a lack of competence in the area (Kovačić and Ćulum 2015). In the light of these caveats, we argue that it is necessary to provide a context for youth work development and illustrate present-day attempts to professionalise this practice.

This chapter consists of three sections, which together follow a logical matrix: contextualisation – problem identification – policy response. Consequently, the first section provides a historical perspective of youth work development in Croatia. The second section offers an overview of Croatian youth policy with a particular emphasis on youth work, discussing the definition of youth work in Croatia, the platform of its practice, and what influences its framing in the way it is conceptualised today. In the third section, we delineate and analyse a number of issues and propose policy solutions regarding youth work regulation. The idea of this chapter is to critically examine youth work policy initiatives at the national level or, in other words, to offer an interpretation of the ongoing process of youth work professionalisation. We seek to provide a coherent academic argument about youth work as a policy priority, and offer some recommendations as well, aiming to make a contribution to holistic youth policy development in a national context.

Youth work in Croatia – how did we get here?

When discussing youth work in Croatia, three major developmental stages can be identified that led to contemporary understanding of youth work in Croatia: the Yugoslav period, the early 1990s, and the late 1990s to early 2000s.

Yugoslav period

As argued in the article on the history of youth work in Croatia (Bužinkić et al. 2015), the inception of youth work in the territory of Croatia can be found in the former Yugoslavia with directed development by the Communist Party. Conditionally speaking, three types of youth work can be identified in the former Yugoslavia – youth organisations, youth work actions and youth sections of other organisations. To a significant extent, this is in fact a false distinction: the three types of youth work overlap considerably in the sense that youth organisations often co-ordinated youth work actions in co-operation with youth sections of other organisations. For clarity of understanding, however, it is useful to address each of them separately.

The most important entities within the youth sector in the former Yugoslavia were certainly youth organisations, formally constituted as the youth wing of the Communist Party (Šarić 2016). Two of the most prominent (youth) organisations were The League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije) and The United League of Anti-Fascist Youth of Croatia (Ujedinjeni savez antifašističke omladine Hrvatske), from 1946 known as the People's Youth of Croatia (Narodna omladina Hrvatske). The main idea, as argued by Šarić (ibid.), was to transmit the values of the Communist Party and thereby create an enabling environment for ideological upbringing. The League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia and The People's Youth of Croatia, through debate clubs in schools, science groups, rural organisations and particularly youth work actions, promoted socialist values in order to strengthen dominant societal norms. Šarić and Jurić (1992) elaborately describe the negative effects of such organisations on youth and society in large. They claim such organisations suppressed liberty and creativity and at the same time produced repression and centralisation. On the other hand, these organisations supported youth engagement via youth cultural organisations, arts, sport activities,

technical education and a youth press. Despite Šarić and Jurić's (negative) review of the activities of youth organisations in the former Yugoslavia, there are certain positive interpretations missing from their analysis. Firstly, they ignore the development of social cohesion and social capital as a direct result of youth organisations' activities (Senjković 2016). In addition, the beneficial effects of volunteering and young people's social contact with other young people from different backgrounds are not recognised at all. Lastly, Šarić and Jurić only modestly explore the effect of these organisations on the professional development of young people. To sum up, even though The League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia and The People's Youth of Croatia were without any doubt an important link in the promotion of undemocratic practices within the communist regime, their activities had, without any doubt as well, quite positive effects on young people and society as a whole. It was, indeed, their heritage that has facilitated present-day youth work.

Perhaps the most well-known type of youth work in the former Yugoslavia was youth work actions, popularly known as ORAs – Omladinska Radna Akcija. Being recognised as the most Yugoslav social phenomenon of all (ibid.), youth work actions were in fact public activities conducted by young people and organised by The Young Communist League of Yugoslavia with two main goals in place – (re-)building public infrastructure (such as dams, roads, bridges, railways, hospitals, etc.) and (re-)building trust and collective identity and spirit – all needed after the Second World War. Such need for (re-)building infrastructure and society at large was in common with so many other countries, therefore the internationality of ORAs was fully in place, with young people coming from more than a dozen countries regularly and sometimes working "24/7" (Senjković 2017). Participation in such activities was strongly encouraged by the state and one of the goals was to spread the communist propaganda. These youth actions were meant to be "the great school of socialism builders" (Senjković 2017: 9). Having around 60 000-70 000 young people engaged in every action was a "common thing" for around two decades, when youth interest and participation started to decline during the 1970s (ibid.).

Such youth action activities were indeed a source of (cheap) and fast labour for the state, but on the other hand, they also provided vocational and professional educational experience, a precursor to getting into the labour market/industry, exercises for building character, places where good friendships and love relationships were made, as well as great fun and a kind of free holiday, even a heroic adventure – as reported by many who had participated (Senjković 2017). Those managing the youth work actions and being responsible for their outcomes – brigade commanders – were young people themselves with no necessary experience in working with young people, nor training in youth work, pedagogy, the educational field, social work and/or psychology. However, they represented "professional youth workers" to a certain extent and were prone to invest in their own educational and professional growth by engaging in many non-formal courses offered by The Young Communist League of Yugoslavia.

ORAs were undoubtedly very efficient platforms for associating with different and various young people from one's own country as well as from other countries, deliberation and interpretation of the socialist doctrines, and vocational out-of-school education. The youth work actions experienced their own transition over time and the educational

character outgrew the political one, making ORAs the most socialist phenomenon in the former Yugoslavia – one that had had significant educational and professional influence on hundreds of thousands of young people throughout that time.

In comparison with contemporary youth work, youth work actions of that time had four distinctive features not typical of youth work. Firstly, there was no co-creation of activities with young people, as all those were carefully planned beforehand, structured by the state and “simply” delivered by The Young Communist League of Yugoslavia. Secondly, unlike contemporary youth work practice where voluntary participation is highly praised and desirable, in the case of the 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 Yugoslavian industry. In that particular context, gender-tailored vocational/professional education, as a fourth distinctive feature, was in place. While young men usually engaged in courses for drivers, electricians, masons or welders, young women were offered courses in tailoring and sewing, typing, doing make-up, arranging flowers, etc. Regardless of all these differences, youth work actions also had an immense impact on the development of youth work in Croatia.

Coupled with youth organisations that were an integral part of the communist regime, the youth service-providing organisations were the third type of youth work in the former Yugoslavia. Mostly oriented towards organising cultural, technical, sport and leisure-time activities, such enterprises were an important feature of everyday life for (young) people. Organisational forms such as youth choirs, women’s youth clubs and youth sport clubs helped young people to develop their skills and discover talents they might have.

Early 1990s

After the collapse of Yugoslavia, former Yugoslav countries experienced armed conflict in their territories. The war impacted heavily on various social, political and other spheres of life and the youth sector was no exception to that rule. In order to understand youth work in the 1990s one should be aware of the political situation at that time. From 1991 to 1995 Croatia was facing a war between Croats seeking independence from Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav People’s Army consisting mainly of Serbs. At that time, in 1992, Franjo Tuđman won the first presidential elections, becoming the President of Croatia, a function he held until his death in 1999. Franjo Tuđman saw Croatia as an independent and nationalistic entity of Croats in which other nations and nationalities were often seen as the enemies of the state (Kovačić 2013).

There are open debates about the nature of the Croatian political system in the last decade of the 20th century. Some consider it authoritarian (Pusić 1998), while others believe that such an attribution is exaggeration, though they admit to there being some authoritarian elements (see Kasapović 2001). Others (still) claim that in the early 1990s Croatia was nothing more and nothing less than true democracy (mostly politicians attached to the right-wing party – the Croatian Democratic Union). Despite these disagreements, there is a consensus among political scientists that Croatia at that time was a highly institutionalised semi-presidential country without extreme right and left populism (Zakošek 2008: 509).

The civil society arena in the early 1990s was very limited, as Veljak (2001) argued, it was the case of a “reduced civil society” (2001: 2). He emphasises that Croatian polity was not liberal-democratic at that time and that civil society could not have been fulfilling all of its roles. Non-governmental organisations that were pro-democratisation and transparency were not usually taken seriously by the government – the President of the Republic of Croatia himself either ignored their efforts or publicly devalued their work and achievements. It is within this broader context that the situation regarding youth work should be considered. The main “paradigmatic shift” of youth work in the early 1990s in Croatia was built upon a very different notion towards young people – Croatian youth was seen as a subject in need of various social services, while previously youth work was treated as a subject that delivered services following the agenda of a (former) political regime in order to build an infrastructure and mobilise support for the socialist political regime.

As argued by Bužinkić et al. (2015), the Anti-war Campaign in Croatia presents the salient point for understanding the (historical) development of youth work in Croatia. It was established in 1991 as a civic voice against the violence that occurred after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The Anti-war Campaign was created and energetically pushed forward by a significant number of youth peace activists in Croatia and was supported by many international and supranational funding organisations. Thousands of young people from Croatia and abroad were engaged as volunteers in designing and delivering various bottom-up and direct fieldwork actions throughout war zones and in many divided communities. These actions can be divided into three groups (ibid.): Direct peacebuilding, which was one of the main activities of the Anti-war Campaign during and after the war, symbolising the bottom-up peace building directly supported by the United Nations and based on the principle of exchange with international volunteers; Direct protection of human rights, played out through fieldwork with civilian victims of war (the work of an organisation, Suncokret, in refugee camps, offering psychosocial and economic support in daily life); and Media activism, mainly represented through publishing one of the first politically radical and ultimately critical fanzines *ARKzin*, but many other fanzines and alternative newspapers as well.

In addition, many involved in this emerging field of practice were also in the constant search for, and worked to build, the horizontal, co-led and co-operative structures between young people and other relevant actors, and to create a culture of consensual decision making. As Zakošek (2008) argued, advocating the right to conscientious objection for military service, and protesting against violence and requests for solidarity, were the basis of youth work during that period. Zakošek (ibid.) further argues that such a specific context of youth advocacy undoubtedly contributed to the creation of a specific sub-political field.

From this overview, several conclusions regarding youth work in the 1990s can be drawn. Youth work was exclusively based within civil society. Furthermore, it was subversive and avant-garde in relation to the political and social context of that time. In the early 1990s, youth work was not perceived by the state as a threat, more as an activity without substantial influence (Bužinkić et al. 2015). Moreover, youth work was strongly supported by the international community and due to its peacebuilding character it developed very distinctive principles and *modi operandi*, as will be seen in the text that follows. As a result of such a specific context in the early 1990s, youth work at the end of the 1990s continued to develop towards a strong field of non-formal (youth) education.

Late 1990s to early 2000s

After the end of the war, certain legacies remained within the youth sector. Youth organisations engaged in delivering various youth work activities, mostly focusing on different non-formal educational programmes but still with a strong emphasis on non-violent communication, non-violent action, conflict resolution and transformation (ibid.). Such non-formal activities were designed to enable young people to engage in community-building activities and to develop their leadership skills. One of specificities of this period was close co-operation between youth civil society organisations and educational institutions. Different youth organisations' programmes were taking place in elementary and secondary schools, offering a real-life perspective in contrast to the outdated official curriculum.

At that time there was a proliferation of youth, cultural and other civic initiatives registered as civil society organisations and their numbers increased dramatically, which soon led to the Croatian Youth Network being established, as noted by Bužinkić et al. (ibid.: 41):

gathering of a majority of youth organizations happened in 2002, when the Croatian Youth Network was established as a program for exchange and an advocacy coalition. Bringing together twenty eight active civic, peacebuilding, cultural, media activism, environmental and other youth organisations, The Croatian Youth Network gathered these main actors to ensure continuous advocacy and support in youth development.

The focus on personal and social development of young people, while relying on non-violent communication, peacebuilding and peace-maintaining activities in different contested spaces at the same time helped in strengthening social capital and social cohesion among different youth groups. Despite empirical research results that show low values of civic and political trust, and participation, and high levels of social distance among youth, this started to change in the direction of a better-developed civic and political culture (Ilišin and Radin 2002). Civil society organisations providing youth work slowly started to consolidate their role, becoming partners or watchdogs in different governmental initiatives and moving in the direction of youth advocacy. Today, as a result, youth work has a specific place within the youth policy framework of contemporary Croatia.

Youth work within youth policy today

The current state of youth work development in Croatia is characterised by a strong orientation towards advocacy for the professionalisation and regulation of youth work. Youth civil society organisations in Croatia have considerable influence on creating youth policy in general (Kovačić 2015). Following youth policies in terms of infrastructure (state bodies), regulations (acts and youth strategies) and decision-making processes (certain aspects of co-management) (Williamson 2002), Croatian youth policy has certainly started to be comparable to those of different European countries. Despite relatively well-developed youth policy in Croatia, interestingly, the weakest link is youth work itself. Before exploring the present-day situation regarding youth work, however, the broader situation regarding youth policy in general will be presented in order to convey the wider context in which youth work is positioned.

A very brief overview of youth policy in Croatia

There are two fundamental aspects of any public policy overview – normative acts and actors. In today's youth policy landscape in Croatia, there are several normative acts that construct youth policy. The National Youth Programme (NYP) is a key policy document in the youth sector. Its goal is the advancement of activities in the public administration and public institutions that help young people improve their lives and optimally integrate into society (NYP 2014: 18). The table below presents a grid of priorities and objectives which summarise youth policy in Croatia. Apart from the NYP, there is also an Act on Youth Advisory Boards, which is a document that regulates youth participation in decision-making processes and governs public affairs at local and regional level, including informing young people and securing their participation by consulting them on decisions that have an impact on their lives.

Youth policy in Croatia: priority areas and objectives

Priority area	Objectives
Education, professional training and lifelong learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Active citizenship and non-violence – Youth work – Competitiveness in the labour market
Employment and entrepreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Labour market integration
Social protection and social inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Determine the category “youth in poverty risk” – Raising awareness among state authorities about different vulnerable groups – Improving the support system for vulnerable youth
Health and social care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Multidisciplinary advisory centres – Health education
Active participation of young people in society and politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Enabling environment for youth organisations – Youth in the decision-making process – Quality and availability of volunteer programmes
Youth in the European and global context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Financial support for active participation – Mobility and better representation in IGOs
Youth and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – More cultural content in formal education – More accessible cultural content – Financial support for culture – Sustainability and stability of places where culture can be exercised – Analytical support

Source: Kovačić 2016

The distinction between state and non-state actors and within non-state actors, civil society organisations and experts is key to understanding youth policy in Croatia. The constellation and role of state actors in Croatia is rather hard to determine in a simplistic manner that corresponds to the reality of the current state of affairs. On the

one hand, the consolidation of responsibilities, which the Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy has undertaken in terms of co-ordination and direction of youth policy, is apparent. Even though there is only one service that deals with a variety of youth issues within the ministry, certain shifts towards more coherent and rational youth policy fields are actively being pursued. Apart from the ministry, two more entities are relevant to youth policy outcomes, namely the Committee on Family, Youth and Sports of the Croatian Parliament and the local and regional/county governmental units. Unfortunately, despite the ambitious jurisdiction, the Committee on Family, Youth and Sports of the Croatian Parliament did not succeed in creating stronger relationships with any relevant youth policy stakeholder, while local and regional/county governments usually lack both (policy) aspirations and the resources to support initiatives focused on creating local youth policy frameworks.

When discussing non-state (non-formal or non-institutional) actors involved in youth policy in Croatia, in accordance to Colebatch's criteria (2004), there are several that are significant enough to be mentioned and analysed. In theory, the most important stakeholders in youth policy are young people themselves. As argued by many (Williamson 2002; Hall, Williamson and Coffey 2000; Tolman and Pittman 2001) young people should be co-creators of decisions and policies that concern them directly.

In Croatia, however, young people do not believe that their voice matters. Recent studies (Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš 2015; Ilišin et al. 2013; Kovačić and Vrbat 2014) show that young people are indifferent towards politics and that the level of their participation in politics and society in general is very low. The second relevant non-state actors in youth policy in Croatia are youth organisations. As seen in the previous section, their development was strongly influenced by peacebuilding initiatives and an orientation towards advocacy. A third non-state actor worth mentioning in this context is the academic community. In Croatia, there are very few researchers whose focus is on youth. Those who are, however, have been involved in all policy processes and consulted for all major decisions in the youth sector, thus contributing significantly to youth policy development at both national and local level.

Youth work – where are we now?

For the first time, in 2014, youth work found its place within a national youth strategy. This National Youth Programme stipulates that an analysis and definition of youth work in Croatia should be completed by the end of 2017, as a starting point for its professionalisation. So far, there has been no empirical research on youth work in Croatia which would portray the scope, dynamics and perspectives of youth work. Nevertheless, from the literature, interviews with relevant stakeholders and ministerial and civil society organisations' reports, and the (recent) survey on the youth work profession conducted by the Croatian Employment Service in 2016, four major features of contemporary youth work in Croatia can be observed.

First, youth work as a term is still not recognised in the Croatian discourse. A literal translation of youth work in Croatian is "working with young people" (*rad s mladima*). We argue, however, that this is not a coherent concept but rather a descriptive category without specific and concrete meaning. In other words, youth work as such is accepted and understood only among a limited number of youth

experts and some civil society professionals. Due to the lack of standardisation in understanding what youth work actually is, it is difficult to offer an unambiguous definition of this practice. Furthermore, this is compounded by the lack of academic texts, empirical research and policy measures about youth work. As a result, there are various interpretations and understandings of youth work, even among people working with young people. The survey on the youth work profession (Croatian Employment Bureau 2016) discovered that youth professionals understand youth work as project management, running workshops for young people, designing education intended for young people, providing youth information and counselling, and organising activities for young people. From this list it is obvious that youth work suffers from considerable vagueness and can be understood as a “stretched concept” (Sartori 1970). Besides, it seems that the “youth for youth by youth” principle, one that nurtures youth engagement and empowerment, has been used interchangeably and sometimes even replaced more by a “servicing youth” principle.

Second, youth work is not recognised as a profession, meaning that neither in the national registry of professions nor within the Croatian Qualification Framework is there any reference to “youth worker” as a profession. Furthermore, in Croatia there are no formal educational programmes that offer a degree in youth work, and so those working with young people are often not qualified sufficiently as “youth workers” (there are, for example, many sociologists, IT experts and primary school teachers who call themselves youth workers, but their formal education has not provided them with an adequate set of competences in the field of youth work). Moreover, Croatia still does not offer recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning; as a result, youth workers cannot get official documents where their competences acquired through practice or non-formal education would be officially acknowledged.

The third relevant feature of youth work in Croatia is its approach to projects and funding. Relevant sources (Bužinkić et al. 2015; Croatian Employment Bureau, 2016) reveal that youth organisations are forced to deliver a number of projects in order to secure basic (and usually only one-year) funding for offering activities for young people. Due to such inadequately developed institutional support for youth organisations, youth work activities are mostly (short-term) project activities and heavily influenced by the criteria of different donors and calls for proposals. Such project dynamics make activities less sustainable and it becomes more difficult to focus on the process of engagement with young people, which is one of the key principles of youth work (Young 2006). On the other hand, there are some (Spence 2004; Zeldin 2004) arguing that while process is important, it is outcomes that actually count. Moreover, the project dynamics of youth work do not allow youth workers to focus on developing their competences due to extensive administrative tasks that the management of projects requires (Croatian Employment Bureau, 2016).

In terms of places where youth work actually happens, youth clubs and youth centres are the two most important. Youth clubs in Croatia are understood as entities at local level, where young people co-create their activities. Youth club programmes are based on the needs of a specific community, and activities should be free of charge and open to all young people. Youth workers supervise these activities. In addition, youth clubs should have their own space exclusively intended for the club’s activities

and should promote healthy lifestyles for young people (Kovačić and Čulum 2015). In other words, youth clubs are the embodiment of youth work – autonomous spaces and incubators of ideas and initiatives, seen as seeds of (youth) active citizenship (Williamson 1995, 2007). Youth centres, on the other hand, encompass many more services, and do not necessarily include only youth work activities but can offer various cultural, media, sports, social, voluntary, sociopolitical and other programmes, under a more diverse “umbrella” of “working with young people”.

All these policy challenges and features of youth work call for the state to regulate youth work and create enabling environments for its development. Since 2015 some important steps have been made in that direction.

Policy responses

Following earlier discussion in this chapter, it is evident that youth work in Croatia is still facing severe challenges, particularly due to its lack of recognition by the government. Nevertheless, in the last three years there have been several policy responses that aim to regulate and professionalise youth work. The first step in the process of professionalisation of youth work at governmental level is the fact that the National Youth Programme now acknowledges the regulation of youth work as one of the priorities of Croatian youth policy. Within this document a policy measure was stipulated which states that the ministry responsible for youth should define and analyse the situation regarding youth work in Croatia. In order to meet this objective, in 2015 the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth (now called the Ministry for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy) decided to establish a national working expert group whose task would be to analyse the situation regarding youth work and propose recommendations for its professionalisation. Relevant policy actors (state officials, civil society and academic community representatives) were appointed to start working on this issue. Very soon it became clear that this task was more demanding and too ambitious for one working group to deal with without a quality needs assessment. As a result, it was decided that the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth would apply to the European Social Fund for resources to conduct a quality and comprehensive analysis on the situation regarding youth work. It was envisaged that results from this research derived from the perspectives of youth work providers, other youth organisations and young people themselves would be the basis for the development of a coherent qualification framework for “youth worker” as a profession. Meanwhile, members of the expert group agreed on the nature of youth work relevant to the Croatian context and clarified the differentiation between youth work and other similar professions/activities (so-called “working with young people”). Youth work is therefore understood as a process activity of education, oriented towards young people as its primary beneficiaries, which is created with the purpose of offering support to young people in their process of independence. This is done under the supervision of professional youth workers who support young people in their personal and social development in order to become full members of the society of which they are already a part. Youth work encompasses activities and programmes co-created with young people, based on methods and principles of non-formal education, with the goal of offering support to help young people develop into conscious, responsible and active members of their community.

Parallel with the inception of this professionalisation process, at the academic level certain initiatives for establishing a formal educational programme for youth workers have already taken place. By signing the memorandum of understanding, the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb and the University of Rijeka embarked on a joint project of creating the lifelong learning educational programme Young People in Contemporary Society, the first of its kind in the Western Balkans region. One semester-long programme, accredited with 30 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits is designed as a certified programme for the professional development of those already working with young people in civil society organisations or in other institutions relevant for carrying out the measures and activities outlined within the National Youth Programme, as well as for those considering a career in the youth work field. The first cycle of the programme will start in January 2018 and its evaluation will certainly influence the future agenda of development and professionalisation of youth work and youth workers in Croatia.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief overview of youth work development in Croatia. Youth work in Croatia has its origins in former Yugoslavia and continued its development within the political and societal context faced by Croatia in the early 1990s. Youth work in Croatia subsequently remained strongly influenced by the wider sociopolitical context in which it was taking place. Only recently, Croatian youth policy makers have started to understand the relevance of the recognition of youth work. Despite numerous challenges facing the youth sector (and youth work as part of it), it is encouraging that the regulation and professionalisation of youth work is one of the political priorities. Therefore, the steps presented towards the professionalisation of youth work, as outlined in the National Youth Programme (the establishment of the expert working group, insisting on an evidence-based approach for policy making and launching academic programmes for youth workers) are unquestionably positive. The important question remains, however, whether or not the constellation of powers and interests remain benevolent, or become indifferent, towards the further professionalisation of youth work in the future.

In the light of this question, we argue, the metaphor of “a new kid on the block” is appropriate for illustrating the present-day situation regarding youth work in Croatia – youth work could fit into the existing youth policy context without any problems, but it could equally end up being bullied and harassed and, ultimately, excluded once again.

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