

European Youth Forum

Youth Work Development Report on the Study Visit to Croatia

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**YOUTH
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Report on the Study Visit to Croatia

On 1-2 March 2006, the European Youth Forum (YFJ) conducted a Youth Work Development study visit to Croatia. This study visit aimed at learning about the youth policy and youth work development in the country, the situation of youth organisations and the areas where YFJ could increase its support to youth work and policy development.

Meetings with youth organizations were held at national and local levels. CYN - Croatian Youth Network, the platform uniting 39 YNGOs at national and regional levels has organized and hosted the study visit. Thus, meetings with CYN, its member and non-member organisations, national and local government representatives responsible for youth policy were held during the two days.

This report is based solely on the information collected during this study visit, coming from different actors met during the two days, therefore, while it aims to give as clear picture as possible, it cannot be taken as a comprehensive presentation of the situation in the field of youth work and policy in Croatia.

The report can be used as a tool for Youth Non-Governmental Organisations (YNGOs) and state authorities in Croatia and by YNGOs and institutions involved in youth policy in Europe with a focus on Southeast Europe.

Youth in General

The National Programme of Action for Youth adopted in 2003 has identified young people as those between the ages of 15-29. According to the 2001 Population census, young people falling in this age group form 20.25% of the Croatian population. Although no official data exists on the level of youth participation in public life, reality is optimistic, and that is proved by increasing number of initiatives in youth policy implementation at national and local administration level.

Among the problems of young people, NPAY lists:

- high unemployment rate;
- lack of education opportunities;
- participating in YNGOs, especially outside Zagreb;
- lack of access to information both of general nature and on policies affecting youth.

The Human Development Report of 2004, which focuses on Youth, lists other problems, with economic issues on top. Young people extend studies to increase their chances at getting jobs, as the unemployment rate is constantly growing, especially among young people.

YNGOs

About 28000 NGOs are registered in Croatia, of them about 2000 are YNGOs, however, a small percentage of them are active, of which only five qualify as national Youth NGOs, being present in most of the 20 administrative regions of Croatia. While NGO registration is very easy in Croatia, there is no monitoring mechanism on their existence and activity, except for applicable legislation in case the NGO has paid staff. This essentially means that such a large number of NGOs cannot be considered as a sustainability factor in the country. Despite that, an easy

procedure in establishing an NGO does play an important role in civil society development.

There is no general youth law in Croatia, and the main guiding document in the field of youth policy is the National Plan of Action for Youth (NPAY). However, in the past two years, as a result of increased lobby from the side of YNGOs, local governments in several regions of Croatia have initiated the development of local youth strategies, and establishment of consultative bodies on youth, as well as creating a youth budget lines. These are very few, however, lobby actions are targeting other municipalities and regions in the country. This has contributed to the consolidation of youth initiatives at the local and regional level, with regional youth councils being established in three out of the 20 administrative districts, several more being under development.

Most YNGOs in Croatia face challenges of finding adequate space, developing cooperation with local public authorities, marginalization of youth and lack of prioritization of youth policy.

Croatian Youth Network - National Umbrella of YNGOs from Croatia

Croatian Youth Network (CYN), known in Croatian as Mreza Mladih Hrvatske (MMH) is the third attempt to establish a national youth council in Croatia. Founded in 2002, CYN includes 39 member organizations, of which the 5 biggest national YNGOs or networks and other 34 active in 12 out of 20 regions in Croatia.

Member organizations of CYN represent a broad spectre of areas. However, according to Croatian legislation, student organizations are established by a separate law, and youth branches of political parties are not registered as separate legal entities. This creates some obstacles in gathering all YNGOs that wish to unite under one single umbrella structure. To eliminate these obstacles, as well as to ensure financial and political stability for the national umbrella structure, CYN has been working on a draft law addressing these and other youth work development aspects in Croatia.

Activity and registration of student organizations is regulated by legislation on higher education. However, youth wings of political parties are not registered separately from their mother-parties, nor do they express any will to register as youth NGOs. This formally impedes CYN to become a representative platform for all youth organizations; however, strong informal cooperation has been developed. CYN has considered drafting a law by which it will be established as an all-inclusive platform, representing all types of youth organizations, including student and political.

Upon election of new board in 2004, CYN has adopted strategic goals for 2005-2007, which focus on capacity building, financial sustainability, international representation an, local youth participation and youth policy, drafting legislation on local youth councils establishment and finally, monitoring of the National Programme of Action for Youth (NPAY).

CYN has played a key role in calling upon the government of Croatia to draft an implementation plan for the National Programme of Action for Youth. The Programme has been adopted in 2003; however, it has not yet been implemented. At the National Conference on Youth 2005, which is the thematic annual activity organized by the state in the field of youth, CYN and its member organizations

have called upon the drafting of an operation plan and implementation of several priorities from NPAY.

Currently CYN is focusing on establishment of regional youth councils, local youth work development, NPAY implementation monitoring, as well as networking and knowledge transfer among member organizations. This process is however influenced by different criteria set by the Department of Family within the Ministry of Family, War Veterans and Intergenerational Solidarity which sets too strict criteria for YNGOs with no possibility for change for the next mandate period.

The State and youth

The Youth Unit, within the Department of Family within the Ministry of Family, War Veterans and Intergenerational Solidarity is responsible for youth affairs in Croatia. A Parliamentary Committee for Family, Youth and Sports monitors the implementation of youth policy. Other governmental bodies target youth in some of their programmes.

The Ministry's priority in the field of youth is the implementation of the NPAY which has 110 measures. In a national Conference dedicated to the implementation of NPAY, young people have identified 40 measures which are to be implemented in 2006, following the adoption of the operational plan in December 2005. A results impact evaluation has revealed that although many measures were implemented at the national level, there are few tangible results. This has led the state to further the implementation of some of the measures at the local level, starting with regional conferences. Some have already been held and raised the interest of local governments in the implementation of NPAY.

Given that employment is the biggest challenge for young people in Croatia, especially outside Zagreb, an Action Plan on Employment has been adopted by the government. The Action Plan prioritizes youth along with elderly citizens.

A Council of Youth with four out of 18 representatives coming from YNGOs was established to monitor the implementation of NPAY. It gathers representatives of all the state structures involved in the implementation of NPAY along with the four YNGO representatives.

The Ministry is also proposing a draft law on youth councils, with the objective to establish youth advisory structures in all the regions of Croatia.

Lottery funds and state budget allocations are given in project funding to YNGOs.

In addition, the National Foundation for Civil Society Development is managing grant programmes to NGOs, also accessible to YNGOs. This however works with the civil society organisations in general, where youth is not prioritized.

State and youth at the local level

Youth policy is becoming an important element in the work of local governments in Croatia. High unemployment has caused high levels of migration from small communities to the big cities in Croatia. This population drainage has been taken up, although not on a comprehensive scale, by small communities. In this context, YNGOs, and particularly CYN, have been liaising with local governments of several regions to encourage development of local programs of action for youth and

support YNGO development. Good examples of youth initiatives, such as in the community of Kutina, have been taken up by the YNGOs to other regions.

In addition, through strong lobby actions, CYN has lobbied for the establishment of a 4mln Kuna (approx. 600.000 €) youth budget line in the Zagreb municipal budget, which will be used to create a macro-regional youth centre in Zagreb.

In the communities where YNGOs are cooperating, there are more visible elements of youth policy taken up by local governments. Yet, a difficult task has been to make the advisory structures more transparent.

Conclusions and recommendations

Unemployment, forced migration, low participation in public decision making and lack of information on policies affecting youth are among the main challenges that young people in Croatia are increasingly facing.

Despite the lack of an organic youth law in Croatia, since the adoption of NPAY in 2003, Croatian youth policy development improved considerably. The operational plan has been adopted in December 2005, along with the prioritization of 40 measures out of the total 110. Youth NGOs have been instrumental in this process, which strengthened cooperation among themselves as well as between YNGOs and state structures at national and local levels.

Youth work development has strong resources in Zagreb, but lacks basic support outside the capital. As a result, youth policy at the national level is developing, and creating a trickle down effect to local level. In the past years, as a result of NPAY implementation, several local governments have started to develop local programmes of action for youth and established cooperation with YNGOs. These actions led to increased funding for youth work, strengthening the youth NGOs and establishing budget lines for youth NGO funding. Common projects are being implemented by local governments together with YNGOs. While good examples are promoted to other regions, as long as there is no national legislation clearly stipulating the responsibilities of local governments to support youth work and develop youth policy, the effects of initiatives taken at national level will not be as strong as desired.

There is a strong will from both the YNGOs and the state side to strengthen youth policy and improve the lives of young people. However, cooperation established is not structured enough and does not give YNGOs the full role of partner. There is a general lack of trust, especially on the YNGO side towards the government. These stem from past experiences of disrupted cooperation.

While legislation governing civil society development facilitates easy establishment of an NGO, there are legal obstacles to consolidation of YNGOs under one single platform. CYN has been an important catalyst in youth work in Croatia, gathering an important number of YNGOs in the country and pressuring the government to improve and implement youth policy. Based on the experience gathered, and with its main aims in mind, CYN should continue youth work development and consolidation at national and regional level in Croatia. Capacity building is a critical need for strengthening local youth work, and developing sustainable YNGOs; CYN is encouraged to take the lead in this process, especially because its member organizations have built considerable experience from their international youth work.

Furthermore, firmly standing by the principle of co-management, the European Youth Forum strongly encourages both CYN and the Ministry of Family, War Veterans and Intergenerational Solidarity to base their cooperation on mutual trust and an equal decision-making partnership, either transforming the current State Council on Youth or establishing a different co-management structure.

While taking final steps in pre-accession preparations, Croatia has yet to embrace the European Union youth policy processes, including the Open Method of Coordination in the field of Youth, as well as the Lisbon Strategy.

Finally, Croatia is an important player in ensuring development of youth policy and youth work in Southeast Europe. The European Youth Forum recommends and stands by to support Croatia in becoming a responsible partner in this region's development. By actively supporting regional cooperation and integration of YNGOs into European and regional processes, Croatian youth work and policy will gain momentum and become more sustainable.

Finally, the European Youth Forum would like to thank for time and effort all those who organized and hosted meetings in Zagreb and Kutina, remaining dedicated to supporting youth work and policy development in Croatia.

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