



EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM
Youth Work Development

Report on the study visit to Bulgaria

4 – 7 April 2005

A Youth Forum Publication
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Introduction

On 4-7 April 2005, the European Youth Forum conducted a Youth Work Development study visit to Bulgaria. The study visit aimed at collecting information about the situation of youth work and youth policy development in Bulgaria, and the relations between youth organisations with public authorities from local to regional and national levels. Therefore, this report is based only on the information collected during the study visit and does not aim at presenting a comprehensive picture of the youth work in Bulgaria.

In 2002, the membership of the Bulgarian National Youth Council (NMS) was terminated due to inactivity of the organisation. This led to renewed interest among Bulgarian YNGOs to consolidate their efforts and cooperate on youth policy development, as well as on cooperation with public authorities. Two attempts to establish a national youth council with the partial involvement of the state failed. Furthermore, at the moment of the study visit, the European Youth Forum was contacted by two different initiatives – one coming from political youth parties, and one from non-political, mostly regional and local YNGOs.

To renew the direct contact with YNGOs in Bulgaria, and to determine the kind of support the European Youth Forum could provide to the development of youth work and youth policy, a Youth Work Development visit was conducted. The study visit was conducted by Mariana Turcan and Peter Torp Madsen, bureau members and Tanya Basarab, staff member, all responsible for Youth Work Development. Due to the existence of two parallel initiatives, the European Youth Forum chose an impartial coordinator in Bulgaria, to ensure openness and credibility at the national level of the objectives of the study visit. Youth Society for Peace and Development in the Balkans (YSPDB), member of European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO) offered the necessary support.

The European Youth Forum met both state actors and YNGOs at all levels to ensure a clear picture of the situation of youth work in Bulgaria.

The European Youth Forum would like to thank the people that contributed to the planning and organisation of the study visit in Bulgaria, as well as all the YNGO and state representatives that kindly met with us and shared their thoughts on the situation of youth policy and youth work development in Bulgaria.

Background information¹

Situation of young people in Bulgaria

According to data from the National Statistic Institute for the year 2000, the Bulgarian population decreased substantially (population growth was – 5.1 per 1000). This fact draws concern and describes the demographic situation in the country. This situation is the result of many factors including a decrease in the birth-rate (9 per 1000), the slow but steady rise in the rate of mortality (14.1 per 1000), and the increase in the emigration wave comprising mostly of people in the 10-35 age group.

The age structure of the population in 1999 shows that the young people are:

6.9 % - from 15 to 19 years;

7.6 % - from 20 to 24 years.

The main problems related to the young people in Bulgaria are a result of the social-economical conditions in the country. Another factor is the general society's lack of interest in the problems of the young people. These problems are similar with those in the area of South East Europe (SEE).

Health problems

The health status of young people is dependent on various social and economic factors. One main problem is the lack of regular, physical activity, which leads to a sharp deterioration of their health status, which prevents a positive lifestyle.

The problems that can be observed among children and young people are connected with the following:

- Increase in alcohol abuse among young Bulgarians between 15 and 24 – in 2001 this percentage was 70%, whereas in 1996 it was 50%;
- Smoking – the number of smokers in the 15 to 24 years age group has increased to 41.3% in 2001, in comparison to 38.8 % in 1996;
- Increase in HIV/AIDS and STD cases; 2001 data shows 41% in the 20 to 29 year age group and 7 % in the 14 to 19 year age group. The number of HIV cases reported was 447 people as of August 2003.
- Increase in drug abuse – About 200 000 – 300 000 people are addicted to heroine, and about 150 000 have experimented with “light drugs” and amphetamines – other new drugs, including methamphetamines are known on the street by the name of “Piko” which replaces cannabis and heroine. These stimulants are faster and stronger than amphetamines. According to the most recent data, 20 000 people between the ages of 15 and 30 years have experimented with various stimulants; however, unofficial data suggests the numbers to be about 100 000 people. Over 130 000 Bulgarians smoke marijuana, according to the Ministry of Health.

¹ The whole chapter on the background has been contributed by Vesselin Iliev from YSPDB, Bulgarian member organisation of the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection. The views of the author of this section do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Youth Forum

- High rate of teenage pregnancies; the birth and abortion rate within the 15 to 19 year age group is about 77 per 1000 people.
- Sexual contacts at an early age; young people age 17-18 already have an active sexual life; but only 35% use condoms;

Social and economic problems of the young people in Bulgaria

- **Bulgarians emigrating** – One of the main problems is that many Bulgarians leave the country and settle abroad despite the fact that they usually live in bad conditions. This is especially true for those from small towns and villages where social mobility is almost non-existent.
- **Youth employment** – A large percentage of young people between the ages of 15-18 are forced to work. The average age of the workers is 16. Unfortunately, they are exploited by their employers who pay them less than minimum wage. They are not provided with any health and social insurances. They are essentially working illegally. On the other hand their parents encourage them to continue working despite the fact that they are aware of all this.
- **Conflicts in the family are very prominent.** The main reason for this is the social conditions of the family. There are no family consultation offices available for families to seek help or advice. There are many single parents who must provide for their families on their own. Domestic violence is another huge problem that plagues the Bulgarian Family.
- **Increase in criminal behaviour among young people:** children are raised in a family environment which is not conducive to their well being. Thus, criminal activity against their peers and parents has increased. The reason for such juvenile delinquency, according to specialists in pedagogy, is due to the lack of interest on the side of the state to initiate laws and work for the welfare of the young people. A large number of young girls are sold into prostitution, in Bulgaria and others, especially in the European Union such as Germany and Italy.
- **Educational problems** – The Bulgarian society places on a great deal of emphasis education. Despite the difficulties experienced in the last several years, its goal is to maintain a competitive education system. A relatively small number of Bulgarian children do not attend school, while some drop out at various stages. The decreasing percentage of children and young people enrolled in schools at different educational levels are due to the social and educational nature. The high poverty level, as well as the proximity of low-populated and poor areas to educational centres hinders school attendance for many. The educational aspects of the problem are related to the following factors: lack of diverse and interesting teaching methods, young people's lack of interest in attending classes, insufficient language skills among children from the different ethnic groups, as well as lack of motivation on the part of the parents.

Situation of youth NGOs in Bulgaria

Unfortunately, the non-governmental sector in the country has an exceptionally bad reputation. Usually NGOs are involved in illegal activity especially money laundering. Scandals among Bulgarian foundations have become sensational headline topics in the media. Youth NGOs are put under the same scrutiny as the other NGOs in Bulgaria. A large number of active youth NGOs are struggling financially since the only way to finance these NGOs is by applying for outside grants.

NGOs lack the ability to hire qualified staff. Volunteering is not very popular concept here. Youth NGOs focus their efforts on party political activity which essentially distracts them the real problems of the youth. These organizations usually work to attract voters to the polls. They work to implement a certain campaign platform that would put youth issues on the frontlines of political debates. However, their efforts deem questionable results.

Youth NGOs lack resources for active and effective work. Many of the organizations do not have offices, computers, or quality Internet connection. On the other hand there are many cases where it is evident that there is a strong rivalry among the NGOs which deters their activities away from the youth problems.

Situation in the field of youth policy and relations with the government

In 2003 the Ministry of Youth and Sport established the Strategy for National Youth Policy. This strategy includes different programs, activities, and methods for development of a real youth policy. This strategy was created for implementation for the period 2003-2007;

Unfortunately relations with the government are difficult. Bureaucracy, lack of communication among the NGOs and the government, and the constantly changing labor force in the institutions are barriers that must be broken to achieve success. The introduction of the network EURODESK in Bulgaria has improved methods of communication. There are 35 EURODESK info points in Bulgaria at the moment. Its main goal is to help NGOs find partners, funding, and projects presented by the EU.

The more prominent NGOs based in the capital city are forced to aid the smaller NGOs since the government is not willing to help them. The communication between NGOs and the government is more difficult for the organizations which are based out of Sofia. The local representatives are ineffective and unable to provide the needed information.

Many of the European programs are managed by corrupt governmental agencies. This causes NGOs to seek money from abroad and cooperate with strong European organizations. An example for that is our cooperation with European Bureau for Conscientious Objection.

Notes from the meetings in Bulgaria (4-7 April 2005)

Meeting with Youth Political Party Organisations

The European Youth Forum met with representatives of Youth Political Parties in Bulgaria, however not all parties were represented at the meeting. They presented their perspectives on the situation of youth work and youth policy in the country, as well as the initiatives:

In Bulgaria there have been initiatives to establish a National Youth Council (NYC), but these do not include representatives of political parties; these only include Regional Youth Councils (RYCs). The Ministry of Youth and Sports does not cooperate with Bulgarian political Youth Non-Governmental Organisations (YNGOs). National Youth Report on Youth Policy is prepared by the Ministry of Youth and Sport, but the political YNGOs were not involved in the drafting process. Several regional YNGOs participated in the meetings organized by the Ministry. Political YNGOs have combined in a non-formal way around several projects. The meetings are not regular, and the cooperation is not formalized, but they are organized according to necessity since February 2004.

The result is a draft youth law, developed and discussed. Political YNGOs feel there is a need to have a youth law, which can settle problems in the youth sector. The whole political spectre has been represented in the drafting process. The formula to create an NYC as a non-governmental organisation does not work in Bulgaria, so a law would settle this issue. The law should determine the subjects of youth policy, both national, local, non-governmental etc. The main principle is to have a stable NYC in Bulgaria, regardless of the political orientation of the government.

This non-formal group for discussion included some YNGOs, representatives from trade unions, Bulgarian Red Cross Youth, BG association of Medical Students, National Youth and Children Parliament of Bulgaria, European Youth for Security and others. The main draft was prepared by the Bulgarian Socialist Youth.

Another problem is lack of dialogue between the government and political YNGOs; the state does not accept them. Main arguments are that political YNGOs depend on their mother parties and are, therefore, heavily influenced.

Lack of communication with the Ministry of Youth and Sports is not only related to the law, but is of a general nature. There is no Government policy for association and motivation to participate in YNGOs in Bulgaria is relatively low.

The civil society sector in Bulgaria is not well developed. People who are more involved or have more experience, are people who are members of political YNGOs. A minority political party, which is part of the governing coalition, includes 15.000 members, and the projects around which they bring their members are not only political. Socialist Youth activities focus on political issues.

Local governments/municipalities have a small budget for youth affairs, and not all communities allocate such budget lines. Sofia's budget for youth activities is bigger than the national level. Sofia – 600.000 levs (300.000 €), 200.000€national budget.

A brief discussion on the draft law revealed many contradictory proposals and lacked inclusion of YNGOs at many levels. While it proposes to regulate everything from funding to structure of the platform, the draft law has not been consulted with other YNGOs than the few large national ones.

The European Youth Forum offered further support in ensuring cooperation with all types and levels of YNGOs, and encouraged contact and networking with smaller and non-political YNGOs from the country as a first step towards consolidation.

Meeting with national and local YNGOs from Bulgaria

The European Youth Forum met a diverse group of YNGO representatives from Sofia and other communities to discuss the situation of youth work and policy.

According to statistics, four percent of young people in Bulgaria are active in an organisation. Generally, the government of Bulgaria supports YNGOs with logistics, but very rarely with funding. There is no information about the work of YNGOs in rural areas. In addition, in the past two years there was zero budget for youth. Furthermore, an average Political YNGO is far stronger than an average YNGO because of the support and availability of all necessary administrative facilities from the mother-parties, while YNGOs do not get basic administrative funding from any source, being vulnerable and instable.

Regarding funding, the government explained that it paid the Bulgarian membership in the European Union YOUTH Programme, and YNGOs could apply for that. The Political YNGOs also mentioned that in the past five years, three Ministry teams changed, four strategies have been developed and the last one adopted in the Parliament, but the budget for youth for two years was non-existent.

The Council of Europe's educational programmes changed priority region, leaving the capacity-building and strengthening of youth leaders in Bulgaria without much support. Fewer people are trained to develop youth work, and when they move from the youth field, there is no transfer of experience. In addition, private foundations are not interested in youth policy.

Now, there are a lot of initiatives, many organisations, but they lack basic skills to ensure sustainability. Generally in the region, and in Bulgaria in particular, policy or perception of ideas are rooted and closely linked with the past. YNGOs quickly learn about the past failures of NYC establishment and they do not trust the idea that they can consolidate for future cooperation. After the collapse of NMS – previous Bulgarian NYC - there have been several initiatives to establish a national platform, two of which were top-down, and they all failed.

Representatives of YNGOs asked the European Youth Forum to lobby European and international institutions to increase regional capacity-building and training agenda for YNGOs.

Bulgarian Youth Council, a second initiative of the government failed because (1) the government refused support, and (2) YNGOs were not interested in the idea.

Approximately 300 National YNGOs are members formally. However, the platform did not manage to advance as the Ministry backed off from supporting it financially, and political YNGOs initiated a parallel process of their own.

Meeting at the Presidential Advisory Council on Children and Youth

The European Youth Forum delegation was hosted by the Presidential Advisory Council on Children and Youth. The Council was represented by Mr. Vesselin Valchev, chairperson of the Council, Mr. Teofan Ghermanov, member, and two support staff for the Council from the Presidential administration.

The Council is a voluntary meeting of expertise on Youth. The Council was created at the initiative of the President of Bulgaria, and experts joined this Council at his invitation. However, the body is not institutionalized, and the experts act in their personal capacity, not representing any organisation or institution. There are 18 members of the Council, each carrying experience in the field. The Council's work focuses mostly on children. The Council conducts its activities along two lines:

1. Addressing or analyzing concrete issues put forward by the President; and
2. Initiatives coming from the Council itself, such as organizing Open Door Day meetings, every month focusing on a concrete topic and inviting interested stakeholders to attend these meetings. The April open door day focuses on *why young people join YNGOs*. All topics for the coming months can be found on the presidential website.

The Council has good cooperation with the Ministry and the Parliament, and it ensures follow-up of the issues raised, redirecting them to the relevant authorities. However, its powers remain advisory, and so it can only recommend steps to be taken, and its recommendations are not binding.

With regards to Youth Policy in Bulgaria, the Council pointed out the slow implementation of such vital documents as the National Youth Report of Bulgaria. The 2003 report is yet to be adopted by the Parliament, which leaves out the implementation of its recommendations. Finally, the Ministry of Youth and Sports has produced a National Youth Strategy 2003-2007, which is still pending parliament's adoption, two years after its development.

Coming from a YNGO background, the Chair of the Council stressed the importance of cross-European networking, exchange and cooperation.

Regarding the situation of youth work and youth policy in Bulgaria, Mr. Valchev stressed two issues that lay at the foundation of YNGO development in Bulgaria after 1989:

1. young people asserting their right of association after the independence of Bulgaria;
2. distribution of property of the former state youth organisation became a disputable issue.

One dominant issue in the cooperation of YNGOs in Bulgaria is the political vs non-political aspect, which led to the collapse of the previous National Youth Council in Bulgaria.

Finally, the Council stressed the importance to bring back the Youth focus to state policy, mainstreaming it, and re-establishing the national research institute on youth policy, as well as ensuring cooperation on regional level with the ultimate aim to create and support the functioning of a strong national youth council, partner to the state in all its youth initiatives.

Meeting with the Deputy Minister for Youth Affairs

The European Youth Forum met with the Deputy Minister for Youth Affairs at the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Bulgaria, Ms. Elitza Neshevska.

The current government of Bulgaria is a right-centre one, and in its pre-elections campaign it set Youth as its No. 1 priority. From the beginning of its mandate, the Ministry developed a Strategy of National Youth Policy for 2003-2007, which is a critical one, strengthening Bulgaria's capacity in the field of youth policy, before joining the European Union.

The Ministry has two main Youth programmes:

1. EU YOUTH Programme (administration and coordination is done by the Ministry of Youth)
2. National Programme for Youth Activities 2004-2005. This programme supplements the EU YOUTH programme. It was developed by the Ministry of Youth and Sports to fill in the gaps of the other one, and focusing on projects at the local level. The programme started in 2004 with a small budget 400.000BGN (approx. 200.000€), and it was doubled in 2005 to 800.000BGN (approx. 400.000€).

In addition, Bulgaria hosted a Conference on youth of the Central European Initiative countries: *Regional, National and Local Youth Policy – the Power of Partnership*.

Other ministries also have programmes targeting youth. One such programme focuses on youth unemployment, mainly addressing the first-step employment of young people with a University Degree in the public administration bodies; targeting high school students with skills training programmes such as computer and other.

The Ministry of Transport and Communication has been implementing the programme *Bulgarian Dream*, connecting Bulgarian students with employers. An Annual Career Forum has been organized last year, which was opened by the Prime Minister.

Regarding the development of the YNGO sector, the Deputy Minister stated lack of cooperation between the non-political YNGOs and Youth Political Parties. The Ministry's initiatives in this field have been to try to mediate and encourage communication. According to the Ministry, a NYC could be established in two ways. First, if Regional Youth Councils are established in all regions of Bulgaria and bring

their cooperation at the national level; and second, if the old structure of NMS (Nationalni Mladezhki Sovet) would be revitalized.

There is a silent understanding by YNGOs that the Ministry should initiate the dialogue on the establishment of a National Youth platform, appointing NGOs and people to be part of such a structure. YNGOs are not ready to work together, so there has been no constructive process of consolidation.

In case the government wins another term, the Ministry is ready to organize a national consultation meeting that would bring together all political and non-political YNGOs, however, the rest of the process will depend on the YNGOs themselves.

One of the main focuses of the Ministry has been the implementation of the Youth Strategy. In 2002, a survey was conducted by the Ministry in different meetings with 450 YNGOs. Based on that survey the priorities of the Youth Strategy were identified; the final document includes a large frame on a broad range of issues, and concrete benchmarks for the implementation of this Strategy. The implementation process involves all government institutions. The priority for 2005 is *Education for Democratic Citizenship*, and it focuses on the participation of young people in local community decision-making processes.

While the government implements the National Strategy, local governments can develop their own programmes, which is not a practice in all the regions. Bulgarian regions have similar problems, so a centralized Strategy has been seen as a more effective mechanism for addressing issues such as youth unemployment, quality of education, bridging the information gap, developing leisure activities, etc. Young people are drawn into solving all these problems.

Young people in Bulgaria are deeply disappointed with the previous big communist structures, and there is no interest in participation, on the one hand, and there is no balance between political and non-political youth organisations. The Ministry itself works mostly with non-politicized YNGOs. And, while showing interest in recognition, the Ministry will promote a potential initiative of establishing a national youth council if it comes from the YNGOs themselves.

The Government has been organizing local meetings to promote its programmes and activities for young people in order to get their interest to participate in them. All YNGOs registered at the local municipalities have been invited to participate in these meetings. The Ministry of Youth and Sports is the first one to conduct practical training activities for local youth initiatives and YNGOs on project writing and management. Young people have been helped for the first time with actual knowledge. These courses have been very popular, and other ministries are taking over this practice. Youth seeks accessible institutions who help young people, and that is what the Ministry has been trying to do.

Annual youth reports are prepared by the Ministry of Youth and Sports since 2002. The 2002 report-drafting involved wide consultation with young people, while the 2003 one was written in short timeframes and the Ministry could not organize regional consultation meetings. However, the 2004 report will be drafted in due time to reflect also the youth opinion.

Meetings with the Mayor and local youth centre in Krichim

In order to get a fair and broader understanding of the youth work and youth policy situation in Bulgaria, YFJ visited the community of Krichim, which is a small town between the two largest cities of Sofia and Plovdiv.

The Mayor of Krichim presented the Municipality's actions related to support of young people. The Municipality has a Youth House exclusively for the use of different youth activities. The economic situation in Bulgaria and in Krichim specifically, is an obstacle to implementing a lot of good initiatives. However, from the limited funding available for that, the Municipality pays for all the utilities and maintenance of the Youth House, including several staff members, as well as a sports centre. Private funding has been drawn to support the two junior and youth football teams, and the centre's facilities are open to all children. The budgetary situation allows the Municipality to continue supporting the two buildings, but it cannot improve the situation in the coming years.

The meeting at the Youth House Krichim involved a brief discussion with young people (pupils and high school students). The Youth House offers art and leisure activities that help children improve their skills in certain school-taught subjects, and give space for their own initiatives. The Youth House is open to all children from the three schools of the community (two primary and one high school). While own initiatives are supported, these are few, as the staff of the Youth House are also teachers in the local schools, and the methods used are those used in the formal education. Both the young people and their teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the current formal education system of Bulgaria, which is too conservative and does not encourage personal development. The only space left at the teacher's creativity is the one "free" lesson per week focusing on issues other than what the formal education system demands.

When asked about one critical problem in the community, the young people pointed out lack of information. The community has internet cafes, however, these are private and there is no practical training on the benefits of internet.

While Krichim is not a small community, only one NGO visited the schools to bring information about HIV/AIDS – Bulgarian Red Cross Youth. This was a modest conclusion of the interest of national YNGOs in working with young people outside the big cities.

Finally, the participants in the meeting discussed about the possibility to initiate the establishment of a local YNGO and development of a partnership between such a YNGO and the municipal authorities, to improve the situation of young people in Krichim together.

While young people mentioned the lack of information and were not aware of the benefits of own initiative, representatives of the Regional Euro Desk info point mentioned that all municipalities of the Plovdiv region, which also includes Krichim, have received information about the possibilities to get funding for youth initiatives in the town. However, the main criterion that the project has to be developed with the

involvement of young people from the community does not interest municipal administration, and as a result information stays closed and the available opportunities are not used.

Meeting with YNGOs in Plovdiv

Several meetings were organized with local and national YNGOs based in Plovdiv. The first one included two large and experienced national organisations and two small local YNGOs.

The participants in the meeting shared their views on the situation of youth policy, civil society development in Bulgaria, in general, and specific aspects of youth work at the local and national level.

Several organisations have joined efforts to draft and propose a law on volunteering encompassing any type of volunteering. The draft was discussed with different experts, representatives of the Ministry of Youth and Sport, and Parliamentary Commission for Civil Society. Until now, only one meeting took place.

Regarding youth policy in the country, the Ministry of Youth and Sports focuses most of its resources on sports, and it shows too little interest in youth policy. A new trend in Bulgaria has been that most government representatives have their own NGOs, so there is a constant competition among them for available funding. Representatives of local public administration also do not find available opportunities for small grants attractive, as that implies working with youth initiatives, and it takes a lot of efforts in preparation, bringing few financial opportunities. This implies that they do not want to share this funding, and they neither have the interest nor the time to focus on youth policies. The problem with establishing a national platform is the politization and conflicts around leading positions in the governing structures of such platforms, as it was the case with the old NYC in Bulgaria. One participant mentioned three reasons why it is difficult to consolidate YNGOs into one national youth council:

1. YNGOs are put in competition with each other for survival;
2. the state has no policy/strategy towards youth to ensure good communication, i.e. no priorities and a frame to interact; and
3. the government does not want to provide mechanisms to delegate rights and responsibilities where YNGOs provide services to communities.

While the Ministry of Youth and Sports speaks about a Youth Strategy, there is nothing about that on the website.

A similar situation goes for the municipal level. There have been different initiatives to write a youth development strategy, but these proposals were not taken on board until now. Therefore, lack of youth policy and no national youth platform are linked problems. This is a long-term challenge for Bulgaria. Umbrella structures at regional or national level are politicized in their functioning, and generally they cannot exist without international cooperation. Additionally, budgeting both at local and national level is not transparent, and there is no clear answer on that from institutions, when asked.

The difficulties of consolidating YNGOs in Bulgaria lie in different issues. Two initiatives of former NMS members failed until now. YNGOs look for stronger support from the state in the initial phase.

The parties exchanged views on the difference in bottom-up and top-down processes, and the local participants agreed that several national YNGOs could try to initiate a wide and inclusive consultation process, ensuring a balanced involvement of both political and non-political organisations. Finally, the European Youth Forum spoke about the principles of autonomy and independence of national youth platforms, which is expressed in its *Policy Paper on the Independence of National Youth Councils*, adopted by the Council of Members in November 2001.

Meeting with Ms. Katrin Gutman, expert on ethnic and demographic issues, culture and education in the Plovdiv Regional Administration

The regional structures in Bulgaria aim to introduce to the local level the policies that the government is developing. The regional structure has established a committee on interethnic integration, which involves 79 NGOs. The regional committee has its own structure. It is chaired by the representative of the regional administration, and NGO representatives are elected as deputy chairs. The Committee has eight working groups, in which participation is open and voluntary. A big part of the NGOs' activities in the Plovdiv region targets youth. There are both YNGOs and NGOs working for youth represented in the Committee. In addition, NGOs with different priorities work with other ministries on different issues. The Committee works in two ways, initiatives can come from NGOs and be supported by the regional administration, or vice-versa. In this sense, it is a good cooperation.

Generally, the NGOs represented in the Committee work with different target groups and on a broad range of issues, including education and access to formal education; employment; training on using the internet; access to information; networking, and partnership establishment with NGOs from the European Union member states and the Balkans; promoting European Union principles at the local level; possibilities to study abroad; available EU programmes; leadership, sports and leisure activities and other. Several initiatives broadened the cooperation with the local education inspectorate and branches of the ministry of labour and social affairs.

An important priority in the Plovdiv region is integration of Roma people. The region of Plovdiv has 740.000 inhabitants, of which 340.000 live in the city of Plovdiv. In Plovdiv itself there are about 45.000 Roma people. Some of them identify themselves with Turkish minority as that offers them more chances of integration and job opportunities. In addition, there are other ethnic groups, including Bulgarians, Turkish, Jewish, Armenian, Karachai, Russian and others. While it is relatively easier for other ethnic groups to establish their organisations, in the case of Roma, there are more organisations working with Roma, but not necessarily established by them.

According to Ms. Gutman, the problem is not intolerance or discrimination, as the city of Plovdiv has a diverse ethnic population. However, Roma people have a hard time integrating because they lack education, basic skills, they are unemployed and live on social benefits, marrying young and having many children who end up not attending school. So the problem is partly self-perpetrating. Several successful training programs

have been initiated in this field targeting education of Roma. One programme provides basic reading and writing skills for young Roma women, in order to ensure that when their children go to school, parents can take part in their basic education.

Given the size of the city and the region, there are many opportunities for NGO development, and as a result there is a broad variety of NGOs representing other marginalized groups or working with different target beneficiaries, such as umbrella organisations of disabled people, deaf and blind, foundations focusing on children's rights and fighting violence, human trafficking, etc. In addition, there are other agencies who work with children's rights. The role of the regional administration is also to link NGO initiatives with these other agencies.

While there is a national youth strategy, its implementation has to be carried out by the local administration. The role of the regional administration is to make sure the government's initiatives reach the local level. According to Bulgarian legislation, local administration can manage their own budget and develop own strategies/programmes in different areas, including youth.

Another initiative has been the development of municipality and regional development plan. The process involves representatives of all groups, including youth. This initiative is part of Bulgaria's preparation for joining the European Union. Bulgaria has a regional-administrative division to ensure decentralisation and outreach of all policies, as well as to facilitate work with structural funds.

The education and employment situation for young people is relatively good. As Plovdiv is a large city, it seeks to draw skilled people and there are several universities in the region to provide adequate education. The recently organized Bulgarian Economic Forum has focused on providing links between young people, higher education institutes and employers, in order to adapt the education system to the market needs.

Meeting with Municipal Youth Council Plovdiv

The European Youth Forum met with several organisations that formed the Municipal Youth Council of Plovdiv (MYCP). The MYCP was created a year ago by NGOs and Plovdiv Student Councils. Cooperation with the High School Student Council in Plovdiv started later. Membership also includes individuals and MYCP includes branches of national YNGOs. The initiative started one and a half years ago, and then it was established one year ago. Some of the members of MYCP have long experience, and all the positive experience has been taken into the foundation of this new structure. A future priority is to involve new members, as some of the current participants will leave the youth sector at some point.

Most people participating in MYCP have worked previously on joint projects, and this led to the establishment of the MYCP. The Council identified its main aims and got the support of the Mayor and the municipal administration. The lobby process started before the establishment of MYCP, which led to an effective dialogue with the public authorities.

The structure is open to all non-political YNGOs, and an important accomplishment has been the organisation of the Council's work into different thematic working groups. A municipal youth ombudsman has been nominated also as a result of the lobby actions undertaken by MYCP. Two of the commissions of the municipality of Plovdiv (1) on youth and (2) education include representatives of the MYCP. After the nomination of those two people, there was an official meeting of the municipal council, and they have had the chance to speak up about the youth policy that the municipality is developing and other relevant issues.

It was decided by voting that those people should have the right to participate in all the meetings of the municipal committees and bring the issues of MYCP into those discussions. Another important issue has been that Plovdiv initiated 2007-2013 city development plan, and the MYCP was invited by the Mayor of Plovdiv to participate in different commissions (12 working groups) that have been working on this plan. MYCP promoted youth interests in every chapter of the future city development. The next issue is the development of the Municipal Youth Strategy. After the approval of the strategy by the young people of Plovdiv, the strategy would be submitted to the municipality decision-makers for comments and official endorsement. MYCP works on the problems of different target groups: high school students, university students, other groups.

MYCP commissions have been working on different aspects of the future youth strategy. The Plovdiv youth strategy is not connected with the national one, it is a local initiative. First the people who are members of the municipal youth structure have initiated the work, and then young people, individuals, interested in developing this could join the process. This proved to be a very efficient method.

One of the ideas before developing the strategy is to make a survey and include the results of the survey into the final strategy. In different activities implemented so far, surveys have been conducted, and now one global survey has been developed.

In 1997 a RYC was established, but the problem was that most people involved were part of political YNGOs/parties and they tried to take over the structure. This led to the collapse of the RYC. Communication is difficult with some communities in the region of Plovdiv; that is why MYCP limits its membership to the municipality level. Twenty-one YNGOs representing 300 people are members of MYCP, and about 2500 people have been reached through different activities. All YNGOs are invited to be part of the structure, and the rest is a matter of their choice. There is a decision-making body and all its meetings are open; these meetings take place almost every week.

The new MYCP is not a politically affiliated structure and the issues addressed by its work are relevant to all young people living in Plovdiv. No dialogue takes place between MYCP and Political Youth organisations. MYCP prefers not to include them. Informal meetings have been organized, but there was no interest to continue such meetings. An ideal solution would be for the political YNGOs to establish only a political platform, and solve their purely political matters. After that, cooperation with MYCP would be useful. Before any cooperation, political YNGOs should have a common position on youth policy issues. When political youth structures approach MYCP, it is not because they want to cooperate, but because their mother party pushes them to enter such structures and to influence them; which is awarded with

advancements for different youth leaders inside the party, was the opinion of MYCP. In addition, political youth structures have not had a step-by-step concrete approach to youth policy.

MYCP is participating in national meetings to learn about the situation at the national level and in other regions of Bulgaria. Unfortunately, there is no national youth council; there is rather a political platform that is changing every four years, according to the election results. The problem at the national level is that YNGOs cannot divide the leading positions among themselves. Invitations to participate in BGYC meetings were received, but those organisations represented only one region of Bulgaria. More often municipalities are establishing their own structures. An example is that YNGOs claim that there is no youth information policy in Bulgaria, however, Bulgaria is a member of Eurodesk with 52 info points, and these points have difficulties spreading out information to local communities, as the authorities have not been very cooperative.

With regards to the general situation of young people, and the critical problems they face in Plovdiv region, there is little influence that young people can make on matters related to education and participation. Youth have no power to influence any decision of the educational institutions, nor the public administration structures. One aspect of this is that young people are not interested in their rights, they are not interested to participate and they do not seek to learn about their rights and responsibilities. When information is available, it is not used by young people. Building a positive model would change things, and MYCP is trying to create such a model.

Meeting with National Assembly of Students' Councils

During the study visit to Plovdiv, the European Youth Forum delegation met the representatives of the National Assembly of Students' Councils, which was holding its General Assembly.

There are two national student organisations in Bulgaria, one being established on students' initiative and the other one, National Assembly of Students Councils (NASC) being established by the Law on Higher Education of Bulgaria. The main difference between the two is that the Bulgarian Student Union (BSU) represents the interests of its member organisations, while NASC is the representative structure of all students in all higher education institutions in Bulgaria. The main reason why NASC was created by law was to influence the decisions at the academic level. Currently, NASC is represented in all university governing structures, and its existence as well as power to influence is ensured by law.

NASC is not well recognized at the national level, but it is working to improve its status. As a young organisation (5 years), NASC has gone through several changes, and in the past two years it has become more functional. NASC works for the interests of students in Bulgaria, ensuring that both education and facilities are adequate. NASC seeks to establish equally strong city student councils, as is the case of the Plovdiv student council, in all university cities across Bulgaria. There are about fifty universities in Bulgaria, and the organisation represents about 200.000 students across all of these universities. Both NASC and BSU are members of ESIB, but there are no conflicts

between the two organisations. NASC organizes its General Assemblies four times a year, as well as additional thematic seminars and training activities for members.

In relation to the establishment of a national youth council, NASC intends to initiate a national consultation meeting without own ambitions, but to bring all the stakeholders at the same table. It feels that it can take such a role because it is represented in the entire country and it can find the links with all the YNGOs in the country.

Meeting with Mayor of Plovdiv, Dr. Ivan Chumakov

The final meeting of the study visit was with the Mayor of the city of Plovdiv, Mr. Ivan Chumakov. The Mayor spoke about the involvement of young people in different local initiatives. Although Bulgaria has undergone many changes in the past 15 years, youth participation in society is still very low. The municipality has given opportunities to young specialists to work in public administration for the first time since the independence of Bulgaria. Furthermore, the municipality has supported the establishment of the City Student Council and the High School Students' Council (10-11 grades). While the situation is not at its best, certain improvements can be observed. According to the Mayor, around elections time, three groups are generally targeted for manipulation: the poor, the Roma and the youth. He then added that youth has been disappointed with the politicians and have shown it with extremely low interest in participation, both at elections and in general. That is partly because youth neither gets enough space, nor enough support mechanisms for involvement in political life. Youth lack self-confidence and are afraid to take initiatives.

The city of Plovdiv hosts about 25.000 students at its five large universities and colleges. The establishment of the City Youth Council of Plovdiv has been a positive step in developing continuous dialogue with youth organisations in Plovdiv. These are involved in different committees for the development of the Municipality Development Plan for 2007-2013. In addition, development of a concept for youth policy has been initiated at the local level.

While student organisations have managed to be more stable, the youth wings of political parties have failed several times in being constructive and cooperative, as these usually inherit the mother-party's rules and problems, and often end up being manipulated by the latter.

The Mayor called on the European Youth Forum and its member organisations to bring more experience to young people in Bulgaria, involve them in European processes and raise their confidence and capacity to improve their lives. Information and direct contacts are important for the YNGOs in Bulgaria, as they need positive models of cooperation. Finally, the Mayor spoke of the potential of youth and of the necessity to win their trust in order to achieve positive changes in Bulgarian society, and in Plovdiv in particular.

Conclusions and Recommendations

YNGOs in Bulgaria are concentrated around the bigger cities, which provide more opportunities for existence of civil society. Projects are implemented all over the country, but the organisation of young people in rural areas is at a very low level. Little information regarding youth participation and empowerment has reached outside the big cities. It is also clear that local authorities have not received any training on involving young people in decision-making processes.

From its strong educational past, Bulgaria still prides in having around 50 universities, each creating opportunities for small and large student organisations to co-exist and implement their activities in different fields. However, the educational reform lags behind the demands of youth and of the market requirements to provide adequate knowledge and skills for employment. While there are several state employment and skill-training programmes for young people, these target another category of young people who do not continue studies at universities.

The youth civil society is strongly divided into political vs. non-political, and the state chooses to work with the non-political YNGOs. From the side of political YNGOs, most of them strongly depend on the mother-party in terms of existence and activity, which raises the mistrust among non-political YNGOs who can only rely on their own capacity. This also results in two parallel initiatives of establishing a national youth council – one on the side of political parties, and the other on the side of non-political YNGOs, both exclusive in terms of consultation and inclusion of a wide number of YNGOs.

The state and the YNGOs hold conflictual positions regarding youth policy and the youth programme. YNGOs have been explained that the existing programme established is to supplement the funds available in the YOUTH programme in Bulgaria. In this context, while the Ministry is responsible for both Youth and Sports, the youth budget was non-existent for two years, and large investments have been made in repairing some sports facilities in the country.

In addition, there is no strong will in the parliament to adopt the National Youth Reports for the past years. These reports are prepared by the Ministry, in partial consultation with YNGOs, and they include recommendations to be implemented in the following year. However, if the parliament has not adopted the previous reports, some of those recommendations are outdated by the time the reports will be adopted. Moreover, the Ministry has faced the challenge of organising inclusive consultation with YNGOs in the country on the preparation of these reports. YNGOs are waiting to be contacted by the Ministry on this, but do not feel they should take the initiative of getting in touch with the Ministry themselves. This lack of communication speaks for a silent disagreement on the approaches to the youth sector work between the state and YNGOs.

Based on all these conclusions, the European Youth Forum sees the need to intensify partnership with all actors in the field of youth in the country, who work well independently but have so far not established communication and cooperation.

Furthermore, lack of smooth handover of knowledge from the past leaders to the current ones calls for additional focus on capacity building to YNGOs in the country. Efforts are needed on both sides to support capacity building of YNGOs and permanent partnership with state authorities in the field of youth.

We encourage European and international institutions working in the field of youth to support both the state and the YNGOs in Bulgaria on youth policy development, implementation, and monitoring, as well as to support financially initiatives of YNGOs that contribute to the sustainability of the whole YNGO sector in the country.

While being positively predisposed for cooperation with youth organisations, we hope the Bulgarian state authorities will adequately reflect its prioritisation of youth from the pre-election campaign in all the fields of its activity. A functioning youth policy with programmes reflecting adequately the needs and interests of young people in the country is the responsibility of the state at all levels of decision making and implementation. While there are positive examples from various regions, it is the responsibility of the state to ensure that all young people, especially those in rural areas are given access and opportunity to implement such core documents as the Revised European Charter for Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. Furthermore, the YOUTH Programme of the European Union should not be neither promoted nor taken as the main resource of project and administrative funding for YNGOs in Bulgaria, and the leading role of the state in regional cooperation should be reflected in the daily work at the national level with the primary target of the state structures – young people of Bulgaria.

Forthcoming membership of Bulgaria in the European Union will bring a lot of new opportunities for the society and particularly for its young people. A strong national youth information network can ensure best use of these opportunities. Coordination of Eurodesk programme could be handed over to a non-governmental organisation rather than the Ministry, ensure that the Ministry's efforts are focused on youth policy coordination. Many processes of the development of the EU youth policy have emerged since 2000. Bulgarian young people have participated in some of them, but the level of awareness of these processes in the country remains rather low. Common objectives of the European Union in the field of youth should receive a much larger recognition on the Bulgarian youth policy agenda, as there is an obvious need for action in the field of youth information, participation, volunteering and development of youth research. Moreover, current adoption of the European Youth Pact by the Heads of States of the EU raises the problem of youth unemployment and a need for immediate solutions in addressing this issue, as well as increasing social cohesion, both in Bulgaria and Europe-wide.

Acknowledging the positive contribution of the Bulgarian state to regional policy development in Southeast Europe, the European Youth Forum encourages the development of Bulgaria's potential in strengthening youth regional cooperation. Establishment and support of youth structures and networks in the region, and the dialogue with other transition countries can be beneficial to shaping youth policy in Bulgaria itself. Bulgaria's potential of transferring EU youth policy messages across Southeast Europe should be emphasized here.

The European Youth Forum addresses Bulgarian YNGOs to develop non-partisan cooperation across political and social interests, in order to build a strong voice towards the public authorities and to carry that message far beyond those who fund their activities. Inclusive consultations and detailed discussions over organisation and implementation of youth work and youth policy in Bulgaria will only strengthen the efforts initiated by the YNGOs in the country. Reaching out to different categories of socially disadvantaged young people is an important element of representing youth of Bulgaria.

The European Youth Forum encourages its member organisations and other civil society actors to target Bulgarian YNGOs when organizing activities on cooperation with public authorities, knowledge sharing and cooperation among YNGOs in a spirit of solidarity and common objectives to achieve youth participation in public life in Bulgaria.

The potential that young people of Bulgaria can give to the state at such a historic moment for the country is yet to be realized.

Meeting of Youth Political parties, Sofia

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1st Meeting with YNGOs in Sofia

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2nd meeting with YNGO's Sofia

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1st Meeting with Youth Organisations in Plovdiv

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3.	Victor Serafimov	Youth Parliament of Plovdiv	
4.	Trendafil Meretev	National Debate Association	tmeretev@ngoedu.org

State Representatives

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3.	Ivan Chomakov	Mayor of Plovdiv	mayor@plovdiv.bg
4.	Katrin Gutman	Plovdiv Regional Administration Expert on ethnic, demographic issues, culture and education	etnosi@pd.government.bg
5.	Vasil Kuzev	Mayor of Krichim community	Kmet_krichim@abv.bg

Plovdiv city Youth Council meeting

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Meeting with National Assembly of Student's Councils

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