

In Transition: A European perspective on Youth work and non-formal education in Eastern Partnership countries and Russia

When thinking about countries of Eastern Partnership and Russia it is good to start by asking two questions:

- ? Did youth work exist in the Soviet Union?
- ? Did non-formal education exist in Soviet times?

The answer to the first question is yes. Of course: Soviet communist ideology like all other totalitarian ideologies very actively used youth work as a tool for political education and social control. But, the notion of non-formal education was not known at all. In the Soviet Union young people did not have freedom of choice and volunteerism was not truly voluntary... Some remains of such thinking still exist in societies of post-soviet countries. However, thanks to internal work in particular countries, as well as international exchange of good practices, the situation is changing quite fast.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

The European Union recognized the needs of the youth field of international support in the region in 2000, opening the YOUTH Programme to seven countries of the former USSR: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia

and Ukraine – first at centralized and, in 2003, at decentralized level. At the same time a decision was made to create a SALTO Resource Centre to be responsible for coordination of the programme in the region, called at that time Eastern Europe and Caucasus (EECA). The centre opened in 2003, in Warsaw.

Since then SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Center (SALTO EECA) has been promoting and supporting youth work based on the principles of non-formal education and European values in the EECA region. The main objective of its work is to encourage participation and involvement of young people in international youth cooperation in the field of non-formal education; promoting international volunteerism and mobility as complementary to formal education, but also a way to raise and strengthen bonds between particular nations. This, in a region with such a complicated history and current international political situation, is of a great value.

The next signal that young people are an important target group for the European Neighborhood Policy was creation in 2007 within Youth in Action Programme, of the new specific Action 3.1 for the cooperation between Programme and Neighbouring Partner Countries. It became very important to involve youth policy actors

from different sectors in order to highlight the European dimension of youth work and youth policy in an Europe-wide context.

Exploring youth work realities in EECA

It became clear that only with the involvement of all youth stakeholders will the recognition of youth work in the region increase. At that time, the Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission in the field of Youth (YP), already well experienced in similar initiatives taking place in countries of EU, came with an initiative to organize a seminar on youth policy in the EECA region. The event, co-organised by SALTO EECA and the YP, took place in 2008 in The European Youth Centre in Budapest and aimed to gather three types of actors from the youth sector in the region: youth workers (i.e., practitioners from youth organisations), youth policy makers (i.e., decision makers from governmental or self-governmental structures) and youth researchers. The objective of the meeting was to analyze the current state of the art in the countries of the region; to identify similarities and differences in approach towards the topic of youth policy and to support networking and future cooperation in the region in this field.

One year later SALTO EECA and YP organized a second Youth Policy seminar that took place in Poland. It was just a few weeks after the

official launching of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, which introduced a new EU strategy towards the region and placed emphasis on people-to-people contacts in the spheres of culture, education and youth.

An added value brought by SALTO EECA in the character of these seminars was a new approach, stressing the importance of focusing on the practical dimension of the discussed issues and greater involvement of youth workers in the dialog with decision makers.

One of the outcomes of these two seminars was the creation of an international group of experts on youth policy development in EECA countries to prepare detailed youth policy papers on the situation on youth policy development in individual EECA countries. The results of the research done by this group were presented during the Symposium on Youth Policy in July 2011 in Odessa, which was co-organized, by the YP, SALTO EECA and the Ukrainian Ministry of Science, Education, Youth and Sport. The research and further discussion during the symposium showed that terms like “youth worker” and “non-formal education” are hardly recognized in the EECA region. All the youth work is done on the level of non-governmental organizations, without a comprehensive and sustainable policy of particular governments or their support. As a result of this, the topic of recognition of youth work was chosen by SALTO EECA as one of the key priority for the further activities.

**Was
Cheburashka
a first youth
worker?**



Since 2008 SALTO EECA, together with the YP started organizing Youth Policy seminars almost every year and engaging the national ministry of the hosting country – so far they have taken place in Odessa, Tbilisi, Yerevan and, recently, in Chisinau. As a result of this process, in some of the countries of the region, working groups have emerged, cooperating with ministries responsible for youth affairs.

All these initiatives have brought closer cooperation between SALTO EECA and national governmental institutions in particular countries which are in charge of youth.

In 2009, one year after the first youth policy seminar in Budapest, two study visits were organised: one to Belarus, organized by SALTO EECA with the support of Belarusian Ministry of Education and the second to Azerbaijan, organized by SALTO EECA and Azerbaijani Ministry of Youth and Sport. These events are particularly significant because of the fact that Belarus and Azerbaijan were and still are the less active countries in the region in the field of international youth cooperation; therefore more efforts need to be taken to increase their participation. What is more, the Azerbaijani Ministry also started establishing youth centers in the country and simultaneously started to focus on the training of youth workers. The culmination of the cooperation between SALTO EECA and Azerbaijani authorities was the international and inter-regional forum “Youth Cooperation Beyond Borders” in 2012, during which the Polish governmental Foundation for the Development of the Educational System and the Youth Foundation under the Azerbaijani Ministry of Youth and Sport signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of youth policy.

On the other side of the fence there are Georgia and Armenia who are the most active EaP countries in the field of international youth cooperation and, what is more, this involvement is balanced between the capital cities and the regions. Even bigger decentralisation in this area one can observe in Ukraine and Russia. In contrast in case of Azerbaijan, Belarus and Moldova, majority of active youth workers and youth organizations come from the capitals.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

The launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 in Prague was a very important moment for the youth sector in the six countries included in this initiative, i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The Fourth Platform of the programme covers topics of culture, education and youth, and opens the way for further initiatives between EU and EaP countries in these fields. The EaP initiative was an important factor for fostering new bilateral association agreements between the EU and Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia which were signed in 2014. All of these agreements include also a paragraph referring to international youth cooperation and the Erasmus+ programme.

Since the EaP initiative was launched, SALTO EECA together with other EU institutions lobbied for stronger and more direct support for the youth sector in the region; similar to those used in the EU neighboring countries of the Balkans through implementation of Western Balkans Youth Window.

The effect of these efforts was the launch of the Eastern Partnership Youth Window for Youth in Action programme in 2012. With a budget of 31,5 million of EUR for the years 2012-2013, the initiative enabled a spectacular increase in international youth projects between EU and EaP countries, giving the last ones also, for the first time, the possibility to apply for grants and coordinate projects by themselves. The two-year-long experience of the EaP youth window significantly strengthened the youth sector in the region. It also made the non-governmental sector in EaP countries realize the importance of youth work and the benefits it can bring in the future. It is very highly appreciated by both – EU and EaP youth policy actors – as demonstrated by official EU Presidency events like the Eastern Partnership Youth Forums in Kaunas (Lithuania, 2013) and in Riga (Latvia, 2015) as well as by Eastern Partnership Youth Conference in Tbilisi (Georgia, 2014) which was initiated by the Georgian Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs.



LOOKING IN THE FUTURE

A big success of SALTO EECA Resource Centre is the fact that currently it is recognized as an expert institution disseminating European experience in the field of youth and non-formal education in the countries of EaP and in Russia. The network of youth workers, trainers and experts created by SALTO EECA supports the spread of good practice and indirectly influences reforms in the region.

However there are still many challenges for the development of consistent youth policy in the countries of the region.

One of the biggest obstacles is a fear of political groups in some of the countries; of participation of youth in political life, enhanced especially after the so-called “colour” revolutions: Rose revolution in Georgia (2003), Orange revolution in Ukraine (2004) and Twitter or Grape revolution in Moldova (2009). It makes some of the governments reluctant to actively engage in international dialogue and youth cooperation.

This issue is related to the next obstacle, which is limited participation of young people in

decision-making processes in various fields – from school, through local governmental institutions to the state level.

Another challenge is the still low recognition of youth work and non-formal education in the region – both in the legal and the social sense; and lack of synergy among formal, informal and non-formal educations.

In the future SALTO plans to continue its active cooperation with all the actors in the youth policy field, both decision makers and practitioners. We want to focus on the promotion and use of instruments of educational mobility for youth workers, being convinced that an exchange of good practice in youth work is the most effective way to raise recognition of the youth sector.

We do believe that youth work in the future will not depend on internal and international politics of particular countries and will be based on universal principles and values.

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