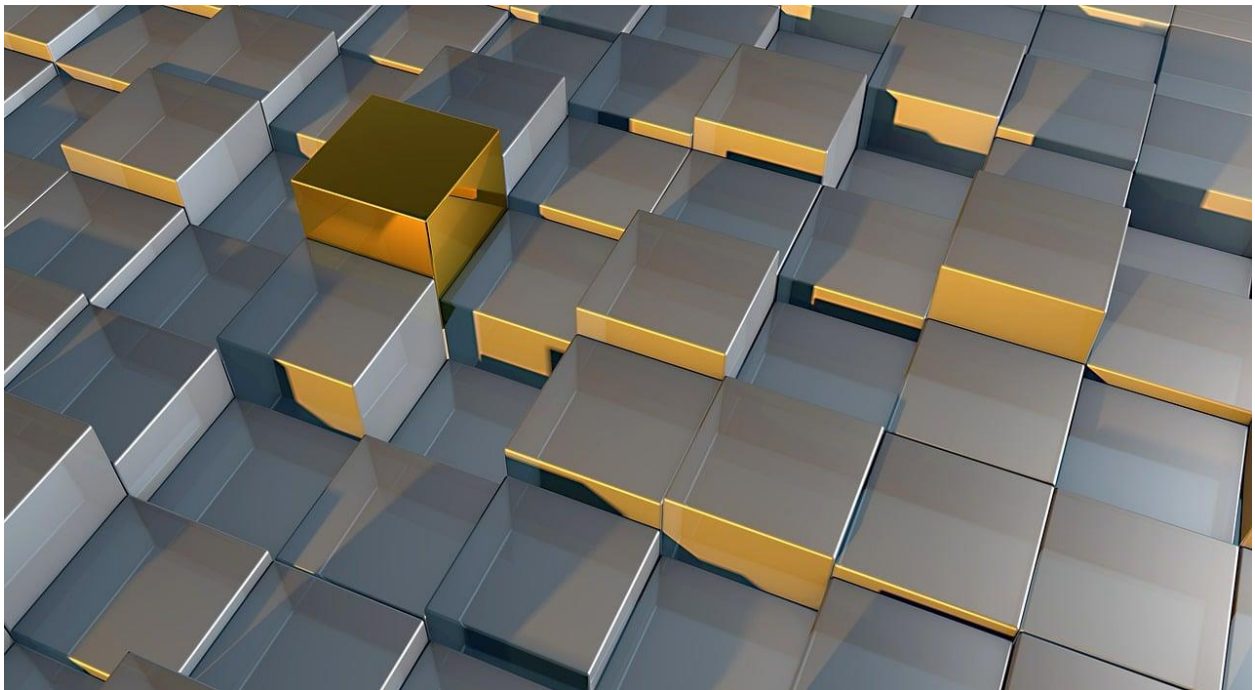


National and EU-level policy recommendations



*Reinforced and upgraded youth group methodology on building healthy relationships
(Re-GROUP)*



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Mihai Lupu (coordinator and author)

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CONTRIBUTORS

Vlăduț Andreescu

Ako Kārlis Cekulis

Ali Honaramiz

Madara Kanasta

Madara Mazjāne

Clara Badenes Torres

Raya Tsvetkova

The team of librarians from the Romanian public library system

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main components of the 'Reinforced and upgraded youth group methodology on building healthy relationships (Re-GROUP)' program is related to the policy recommendations, both nationally and at EU level. For this, each of the partner organizations conducted a series of actions: 1. research on existing policies at national level, and 2. focus groups with specialists on youth work. The conclusions of this work is briefly presented in the present document.

The context is straightforward, the project involved using a methodology on working with youth owned, tested and implemented in Latvia by Marta Centre for the last 10 years, and also internationally for two years. With the present project the methodology was implemented in additional communities in Bulgaria, Latvia, Romania and Spain, offering enough data to formulate a series of recommendations to be available for policy makers at local, national and EU level. The author of the present document, and also the national teams implementing the program, are aware that the policy making process is a long, sometimes complicated undertaking, therefore we are not having as a goal any policy change through the current project. Nevertheless, each of the partner organizations will be able to furthermore engage in discussions in their respective countries, also, being an Erasmus+ funded project, in any future discussion at the level of EU, on changes tackling youth programs.

I.1. Scope and goals

The idea behind the policy component is to engage each of the partner organizations in linking their activity done having adolescents as target group with the existing regulations, identifying any potential gaps, overlaps, and differences in between what exists in the laws but not implemented, and formulate recommendations for changing what exists and potentially coming with new proposals, not existing yet in the legislation.

We are not only consumers of what exists but we can and should be contributors to assuring that the laws and regulations we have are up-to-date to reflect the level of emancipation of the society, with its needs, realities and desires. Also, we need to look at how the institutional, and inter-institutional and inter-sectoral framework is mature enough to sustain the implementation of the legislation.

That's why testing such a methodology can and did offer valuable insights on: 1. how much our communities are absorbing it as something useful in the process of contributing to a better quality life at local level, 2. How can we rely on the existing local institutional and inter-disciplinary capacity to assure the continuity of the services we activated within communities through the methodology, after the funded project completion, 3. where did we contribute either to sustain existing legislation or propose new ideas that will improve what we have as laws, and even come up with things that are not yet covered.

I.2. How did we work / methodology

We have concentrated on four parts in order to have enough data for coming up with recommendations:

1. Implementing the methodology at local level, i.e. training youth workers to be able to use it, starting youth groups - from here, each team could see what is working, what is missing when compared to the legal framework;
2. Conducting desk research on the current legislation on youth well-being for each of the four countries, Bulgaria, Latvia, Romania and Spain - this gives us the picture of what we have, what exists and how is implemented;
3. Conducting qualitative research through organizing focus groups with youth workers and specialists in youth legislation - this is giving the chance to enter more into details on various themes related to the topic;
4. Preparing the recommendations - which is the goal of this document.

In each of the four areas mentioned above, there were elements related to the granularity of the process that should be mentioned. For instance, for the first one, implementing the methodology, youth workers used evaluation forms after each session with the adolescents, observing what worked, what can be improved, how the youth reacted to the discussed topic etc.

These data are useful to understand the level of openness in the community where the methodology is implemented. Knowing this, one can look for solutions in tackling the respective subject/s including proposing some changes at local level. For example, in Romania, Violeta, one of the youth worker which is a librarian in Ocnîța village, in Dâmbovița county, finished the meetings with the first youth group she facilitated, and presented the program and methodology at the level of Local Council of her community, asking for a small budget to be used to send the adolescents to a astronomy camp, something that was discussed during the last sessions of the youth group. The Local Council voted and the funds were obtained, with the promise that for each youth group started, funds will be allocated. This is one of the many examples where listening to the needs and desires of the teenagers participating in youth groups lead to a change of the local regulations.

For the desk research component, the intention was to look at the existing legislation in each country, either one that is dedicated to the wellbeing of the youth, or/and the laws where the rights of the youth are mentioned. For instance, in Bulgaria *all effective child protection systems are, by definition, multi-sectoral. In Bulgaria, this cross-sector approach is also operationally instated in the configuration of the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) and the National Council for Child Protection which is a body with consultative and coordination functions set up at the SACP. In other words, Child Protection is not “owned” by any ministry but cuts across various – Education, Interior, Justice, Social Policy, Culture and Youth. The*

nature of child protection policies is therefore “horizontal”, as put it by the Bulgarian partners.

The third component covered the qualitative research, through organizing focus groups in each of the partner countries, with the following recommended dynamic:

1. Time recommended to be spent in each focus group, approx. 2.5 hour, with 30 participants to be included in these events:
 - 30 minutes, making a presentation of what was done so far, get an input from the youth workers on how was for them facilitating the youth groups, how did they see the relevance of the program for the adolescents;
 - 45 minutes of discussions on the existing legal framework and different available methodologies & approaches and how can we build bridges;
 - 60 minutes, brainstorming exercise on what can / should be changes at local, national and EU level for adolescents to have more opportunities and contexts to discuss subjects of interests to them, at least the ones tackled by the methodology;
 - 15 minutes, final remarks, conclusions and next steps.

2. Guiding questions during the event/s (not in this order):
 - What are the youth policies that are helping in the effort of scaling-up such methodologies, as Re-GROUP? How much from the existing framework is implemented and implementable? Where are the bottlenecks? What changes are needed (imperative, nice to have)?
 - What are the best anchor institutions / organizations / professionals to be in charge of implementing such methodologies? What are the opportunities and the challenges for them to assure continuity and scalability?
 - Is it a trap pushing such methodologies towards schools and thinking they can cover them by enhancing the existing curricula? Would this work (pros and cons)? Is it sustainable?
 - How much of the needed changes within the legal framework regards EU and national policies and how much local decisions (local council, mayor’s office etc.), and enforcement of the existing legal framework?
 - What is needed to have the needed budgets and other needed resources to assure continuity and scalability of such methodologies?
 - How can we make bridges among existing methodologies and programs tackling similar topics?
 - How can one assure a high level of professionalism in implementing such methodologies? What is needed at the level of legal framework (if any) to help in this process of keeping such programs and methodologies at high level of quality?

- If changes in policy are required, who are the best institutions to lead such processes (at local, national and EU level)?
- What is needed to push recommendations of legal framework changes (data, expertise, time-frame, funds, organizational support etc.)?

II. Where are we in terms of legislation related to youth?

1. Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the legal foundations of child protection are found in the Constitution of 1991 and in a number of substantive pieces of primary and secondary legislation that have been enacted and amended ever since then; these laws and policies have been developed at different times and paces and not necessarily thought as systematically interconnected as a coherent foundation of a child protection system. Amongst these, the most relevant ones include:

- The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria of 1991: article 14 establishes that “The family, motherhood and children shall enjoy the protection of the State and society”. Furthermore, article 47 also highlights the responsibility of parents for the care of their children and the obligation by the State to assist them in line with the obligations in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. While the Constitution imposes a duty on the State to protect abandoned children, it does not impose a specific duty on the State to protect children who are at risk of abuse, neglect or exploitation. However, the obligation to provide special protection and care to children could be taken as encompassing this role. The constitution also establishes that the conditions and procedure for the restriction or suspension of parental rights are established by law (article 47).
- The Child Protection Act (CPA) and the Regulations for its Implementation; the CPA was first promulgated in 2000, went through a major revision in 2003, and was amended several times afterwards; as article 1 states, the CPA “governs the rights of the child; the principles and the measures for child protection; the state and municipal bodies and their interaction in the process of performing child protection activities, as well as the participation of legal entities and natural persons in the said activities”. It established the bodies responsible for child protection.
- The Social Assistance Act (SAA) and the Regulations for its Implementation was first promulgated in 1998 and amended several times (last revision dates back from 2016). It is important to note that a new Law on Social Services was enacted and will enter into force on 1 January 2020; it will bring significant change to the Social Assistance Act and the Child Protection Act. The SSA formulates the types of social assistance benefits and social services available to the vulnerable citizens of Bulgaria, including children; it establishes the Social Protection Agency and its branches at local level, within which the child protection departments operate.
- The Family Code establishes the rights of parents and children in the family setting and regulates issues such as marriage, divorce, filiation and adoption; it also contains a specific section on the relations between parents and children. Within it, it establishes that the children have the right

to be raised and educated in a way that should secure their physical, mental, moral and social development (article 124); and also that parents should not use force or other methods of education which lower the child's dignity (article 125).

- The National Strategy for the Child (2008-2018) is the main strategic document in relation to children's rights in Bulgaria. The National Strategy identifies the priority directions and actions for improving the rights and well-being of the children in Bulgaria and aims to lay out a comprehensive Action Plan for children and youth. Amongst the priorities on child protection the national strategy 2008-2018 identified alternative care of children, protection of children from abuse, violence and exploitation, and the rights of juvenile offenders to a fair and lawful treatment.
- The National Programme for Child Protection is adopted every year by the Council of Ministers as an Operational Plan for the National Strategy for the Child. It regulates the obligations of all state institutions in implementing the activities for ensuring and observing the rights of children in the Republic of Bulgaria according to their best interests.
- The National Strategy "Vision for Deinstitutionalization of Children in Republic of Bulgaria" 2010-2025 defines a policy for transitioning from institutional to community care and prescribes a roadmap of successive disinvestment from non-family based care structures. The strategy is equipped with an Action Plan for its implementation. The first one was adopted in 2010 and after that it was followed by annual monitoring reports. In October 2016 a second action plan was adopted.
- The National Programme for Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children 2017-2020 and the Action Plan for its implementation (2017-2018) set the prevention of all forms of violence against children (physical, emotional, sexual) in all settings (homes, schools, alternative care institutions, digital environment, penal institutions) as a priority for the government. The action plan lays out the different structures and procedures, as well as resources – both human, facilities and financial for its implementation.
- In term of legislation related to children's access to justice the main provisions are included in the Penal Code and the Penal Procedure Code, the Law on Combating the Anti-social Acts Of Minors and Juvenile Act. The latter is the main pillar of the Bulgarian Child Justice System. Although at the time of its adoption it was considered a positive step as it established a separate system to handle child offenses (diverging them from the penal justice system), it remains outdated and punitive irrespective of the amendments introduced since 2001. There have been several attempts to start the reform of the child justice system during the last 20 years. The most recent one includes: 1) policy documents adopted by Government: Justice for the Child State Policy Concept (2011), the Roadmap for the implementation of the Justice for the Child State Policy Concept (2013)²⁸ and the Updated Strategy to Continue the Judicial System Reform (2015); 2) investments into the system and its improvement by the Swiss Bulgarian project implemented by the Ministry of justice (2012-2017) and; 3) advanced stage of drafting of Diversion of Underage Offenders from Criminal Proceedings and Implementation of Educational Measures Act (DUOCRIEMA) at the Ministry of Justice that resulted from the unprecedented dialogue between the main governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, including the judiciary in 2013–2016.¹

¹ For more details, see <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/media/9361/file>

2. Latvia

According to the Youth Law young people in Latvia are persons from 13 to 25 years of age. The youth policy is the purposeful set of activities in all the fields of state policy to promote the wholesome and versatile development of young people, their inclusion in the society and improvement of life quality. As a result of implementing the youth policy, stakeholders (state and municipality institutions, youth organizations, etc.) promote the initiatives of young people, their participation in the decision-making processes and social life, support youth work and provide children with easier transition to adult status envisaging corresponding activities for personal development of young people. The basis of the youth policy is youth work — a planned practical set of activities developed for young people (events, projects, programmes) in order to improve their quality of life.

The implementation of youth policy is influenced by several aspects, because the life of young people is connected with the majority of state policy fields, therefore this is the inter-sectoral policy which has to implement particular tasks of youth policy; support youth initiatives, non-formal education, opportunities for useful free-time activities, access to information.

In order to ensure the youth and youth workers, as well as the policy makers on the state and municipality level with the information connected with youth affairs, the Ministry of Education and Science administers the Youth Policy and Youth Opportunities Portal².

According to their functions, the municipalities carry out youth work taking into consideration the basic principles of youth policy and the state policy planning documents in the field of youth. Municipal youth affairs specialists work with youth and collaborate with persons involved in the implementation of youth policy, come up with suggestions for the development of youth policy, implement and coordinate informative and educational events, projects and programmes in the field of youth policy and other activities that promote the improvement of life quality of young people.

Youth policy guidelines for 2021-2027

The aim of the project is to plan an action policy to promote *the full and comprehensive development of young people, the improvement of the quality of life and to strengthen the participation of young people.*

The guidelines have set the following courses of action to achieve this:

1. Strengthening the quality of the youth work work.
2. Creation and development of the youth work system.
3. Encouraging wider and more active participation of young people.
4. Promoting the acquisition of skills and abilities necessary for the labor market and independent life.
5. Promoting the inclusion of young people with limited opportunities.

² See, www.jaunatneslietas.lv

The purpose of the guidelines and the directions of action are set in compliance with the European Union (hereinafter - EU) and national level development planning documents, which determine the priorities of the youth policy sector.

Latvia's sustainable development strategy until 2030

In the sustainable development strategy of Latvia, four areas are distinguished, which form the basis for the future of Latvian society: creativity, tolerance, cooperation and participation:

- 1) creativity – the ability to create new ideas, forms of action or to connect existing ideas, concepts, methods and actions in a new way;
- 2) tolerance – alleviating all forms of social exclusion and discrimination, including income inequality, age and gender discrimination in the labor market, ethnic prejudices and linguistic institutional barriers;
- 3) cooperation – creating horizontal and vertical cooperation between institutions and citizens;
- 4) participation - sustainable development also requires a certain change of attitude and habits, as well as the active involvement of society.

National Development Plan of Latvia 2021-2027

The directions of action and tasks included in the Youth policy guidelines are subordinated to the three Latvian National Development Plan 2021-2027. priorities

Priority 1 "Strong families, healthy and active people":

a) the direction of action "*Social inclusion*" provides for the expansion and strengthening of the meaning and types of work with youth in order to promote an effective transition from childhood to adulthood;

b) the direction of action "*Psychological and emotional well-being*" provides for the **prevention of violence**, incl. reducing mobbing among young people, and timely intervention in various crisis situations, strengthening people's psychological and emotional resilience and ability to find a favorable solution. Within the framework of this course of action, strengthening of **sexual and reproductive health** in the society and reducing the risks of the spread of infectious diseases by improving psychological and emotional health, which are very relevant especially in the youth age group, are also planned.

Priority 2 "Knowledge and skills for personal and national growth"

"Inclusive educational environment" envisages the involvement of children and young people at risk of social exclusion (socio-economic risks, special needs, young people in disadvantaged situations, risks of early school leaving) outside of formal education (including informal education and hobbies) in measures (including in the school environment - both in general and professional education) and preventive and permanent measures to reduce all types of violence in educational institutions, as well as support measures for children and young people, educators, school staff and families.

Priority 3 "Unified safe and open society" includes the expansion of the skills and opportunities of self-organization, cooperation of the society, especially by developing the civic education of young people, the participation of citizens in non-governmental organizations, trade unions and voluntary work.

3. Romania

In Romania, the responsibility for youth policy is divided between the central level authorities and the local authorities. Within the limits of the Youth Law³, local authorities are free to develop initiatives, and there is seldom coordination at national level. Moreover, one of the most important instruments used for the implementation of the youth policy, by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, but also by the Ministry of Culture, is the allocation of grants for small projects of youth NGOs (until December 2021) / the Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities⁴ (since January 2022).

The county offices for youth and sports, the cultural student centres, as well as the county offices for culture, the Universities and schools have a large degree of autonomy in establishing their activities and calendars for working with the young people. This strategy ensures the accessibility to youth activities and youth work of a large number of young people from many regions, cities, towns and villages. However, the whole national territory is not covered in the same manner and the level of accessibility to youth activities and youth work varies largely across the country (young people in some cities benefit from a larger number of activities and services compared to other young people). The national coordination in the field is very challenging in the absence of strong monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in the field of youth activities and youth work.

The dedicated institution for youth policy was until December 2021 the Ministry of Youth and Sports, established in 1990. In January 2022 the Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities was funded. However, youth policy measures are scattered through other policy domains such as education, social affairs and culture. Since 2001, strategic documents in the field of youth, including the National Strategy in Field of Youth Policy 2015-2020⁵ have been reuniting youth policy general and operational objectives. However, the National Strategy in Field of Youth Policy 2015-2020 was not supported by an action plan, clear budget allocations and a monitoring plan. A new Youth Strategy for the next period was not adopted by the Romanian Government until March 2022. Therefore, coordination between top-level authorities responsible for youth policy is not systematic, and the responsible central authorities in the field of youth lack control over the timely and full implementation of actions to meet the youth policy objectives.⁶

³ See, <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/73834>

⁴ See, <https://www.mfamilie.gov.ro/>

⁵ See, <http://mts.ro/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Strategia-tineret-ianuarie-2015.pdf>

⁶ See the text in the original format here, <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/romania/overview>

A proposal for a new law of youth, is currently waiting to be discussed and voted on in the Romanian Parliament.⁷

4. Spain

For Spain, in order to grasp the legal framework on youth, one should look at least at the following pieces of legislation:

- *The Law for the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents against all forms of violence* was approved in the first half of 2021. This is a pioneering legislation to protect minors against any type of violence and with which it has been achieved, among other measures, the obligation to report to the competent authority any situation of violence against children, or that the statute of limitations for crimes of child abuse does not begin to count until the victim reaches 35 years of age. This Law also includes the creation of units specialized in the awareness and prevention of situations of violence against minors by law enforcement agencies, or the creation of the figure of the coordinator of welfare and protection in schools, which will ensure the creation of the protocols of action against bullying, cyberbullying, sexual harassment and gender violence.⁸
- The Government's *express reform*⁹ (September 2021) to address vicarious violence comes into force. This new law incorporates a modification of the Civil Code that restricts the visitation and stay regime for parents convicted of abuse, or with indications of having committed it. Before this law, children could be handed to parents that had committed domestic violence against their spouse.
- Female Genital Mutilation, whatever the type practiced, constitutes a crime of injury under the Spanish Criminal Code.¹⁰ According to the reform introduced in the Organic Law 11/2003, on September 23 of 2003, on specific measures regarding citizen security, domestic violence and social integration of foreigners, published in the Official State Gazette (BOE) No. 234 of Tuesday, September 30, 2003. This Law specifically protects young girls, as they usually suffer these procedures at early stages of their lives.

All these mentioned above are intended to give a glimpse into the legal framework related to youth, and not an exhaustive one, but can easily be used as a basis for further discussions on how each of the four

⁷ See the Romanian version here, https://www.cdep.ro/pls/proiecte/docs/2018/pr716_18.pdf

⁸ For more info, see, <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2021-9347#:~:text=La%20ley%20tiene%20por%20objeto,integral%2C%20que%20incluyen%20la%20sensibilizaci%C3%B3n%2C>

⁹ See, https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2021-13472

¹⁰ See, <https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?lang=es&id=BOE-A-2003-18088>

countries are committed to defending the rights of youth.

III. What is the work in progress on the legal framework on youth?

Below, one can find listed the latest pieces of legislation that are either passed at the national levels and are waiting to be implemented, or laws that are waiting the process of approval to be finalized. One thing coming from looking at both what exists and planned, is that EU countries are moving fast and seriously towards tackling the important subject of youth rights.

Some countries like Spain and Latvia are now more into passing very niched legislation on particular topics related to youth, like the guarantee of sexual freedom in Spain, or bullying prevention and intervention guidelines for education institutions in Latvia, while Bulgaria is now looking into more bridging opportunities among the several institutions having mandate on tackling youth issues, such as the multi-sectoral child protection system which identifies the responsibilities for each sector to prevent the need for child protection and respond to violence, alternative care, to criminal behavior, and Romania is in the middle of a large scale, cross-sectoral process of pushing an ambitious new strategy and action plan in the field of youth policy 2021 - 2026.



BULGARIA

A CONTINUUM FROM PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND TERTIARY PREVENTION
detection, reporting and referral, to service provisions to ensure rehabilitation and recovery

A MULTI-SECTORIAL CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM THAT MOVES OUT OF THE TRANSITION AND A PROJECT-BASE PERIOD

identifies the responsibilities for each sector to prevent the need for child protection and respond to violence, alternative care, to criminal behaviour in a coordinated manner

A CHILD-RIGHTS APPROACH
will assess and pursue his/her best interest by consulting the child and taking his/her opinions into account

LATVIA

CONSTRUCTIVE REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS
signed memorandum, May 2022

NATIONAL BULLYING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS
guidelines for education institutions created, August 2022

SPAIN

ONLY YES IS YES LAW / ORGANIC LAW FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE GUARANTEE OF SEXUAL FREEDOM,
waiting for approval

REAL AND EFFECTIVE EQUALITY OF TRANS PEOPLE AND FOR THE GUARANTEE OF LGBTI RIGHTS
presented in June 2022

ROMANIA

COMPLETION AND ADOPTION OF THE NATIONAL STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN IN THE FIELD OF YOUTH POLICY 2021 – 2026
in accordance with the strategic objectives established by the former Ministry of Youth and Sports through the consultation of civil society, TBD

URGENT COMPLETION OF THE TRANSITION PROCESS OF THE YOUTH COMPONENT FROM THE FORMER MINISTRY OF YOUTH AND SPORTS TO THE NEW MINISTRY OF FAMILY, YOUTH AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES
completion and operationalization TBD

MODERN
PROGRESS



IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are two parts related to recommendations that will be shown in this report. One is coming from the desk research part, being proposals discussed in other contexts, by various organizations active in the youth work around the four countries considered. Another is coming from the team of the project, from the discussions conducted during the period of implementation, from observing the dynamic of youth groups and from the focus groups with youth workers and experts in policy on youth.

IV.1. The desk research

1. Bulgaria

The team in Bulgaria is concentrating on four priority areas of interventions, as per a report of UNICEF¹¹, with recommendations for well-being for children and safety in schools, and also two cross-sectoral, systemic ones, one on budget and one on institutional capacity building.

Opportunities for improvement in the field of well-being:

- Clearer role of schools in the social services network at community level: role in sharing information, identifying families in needs, identifying individuals at risks;
- Increasing and professionalizing a school-based workforce for MHPSS (school psychologists, social workers, etc.);
- Better MHPSS interventions and services in schools, embedded in a whole-school approach;
- Improving the well-being of school staff, recognising burnout risks and equipping them with the skills to cope with stress and become more resilient;
- Strengthening cross-sector collaboration between education, health, social and protection services.

Opportunities for improvement in the field of safe schools:

- Schools with better water and sanitation equipment and personal hygiene equipment and practices;
- Strengthening parent participation in school planning processes;
- Strengthening the role of students in sharing health messages.¹²

¹¹ See the report of the UNICEF report, Analysis of the child protection system in Bulgaria, p. 110, <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/media/9361/file>

¹² idem

The Situation Analysis on Public Finance Management (PFM) identifies some systemic PFM issues that affect children rights realization AND could be addressed to promote child well-being and to minimize the negative impact of COVID-19 on children, adolescents, and their families.

- Insufficient focus of budget allocations on child outcomes and on the most vulnerable groups of children. In absolute terms, the total expenditures on children (total and per child) increased since 2017. These allocations, however, are not focusing on results and are not targeted enough to support the most vulnerable groups of children.
- Limited availability of budgetary disaggregated data. Availability of good budget data is crucial to support budget planning in the areas related to children, and to track how well policy commitments are being translated into direct action. Budgetary disaggregated data is often not collected to ensure that policies and interventions are well targeted, effective, and monitored and this limits also the possibility of equity analysis.
- Limited focus on results in policy and budgeting cycles. Public policy involves the reconciliation of conflicting priorities and risks through good analysis to arrive at the best option and to determine the instruments, institutions and management required for implementing and maintaining policies that ensure the achievement of sustainable outcomes.
- Monitoring of implementation is inconsistent and is often unclear why the existing legislation and policies do not achieve their targets: reasons may be different and include not well targeted policies, inadequate implementation, poor timing, improperly selected target groups, insufficient funding, etc.
- Limited funding of cross-sectoral interventions addressing such complex issues as early childhood development, inclusion of children with disabilities, and mental health needs of adolescents. There is evidence of partnerships at the levels of ministries, regional and local providers but they are often inconsistent, and the funding mechanisms do not promote cross-sectoral interventions.
- Local authorities may not have sufficient capacity, budget, and authority to develop and implement solutions addressing the needs of children and adolescents. It can be partially attributed to limited authority provided to the local public administration, misalignment of responsibilities among the central, regional, and local governments and service providers, lack or limited capacity of local government administrations, and inadequate funding. As a result, access to quality healthcare, ECEC and social services vary dramatically across the country.¹³

2. Latvia

The team in Latvia concentrated on three main issues considered a priority now, as follows:

Constructive reproductive health and rights education in schools

¹³ idem

On 20th of May 2022 Association of Young Doctors of Latvia, 15 NGOs, 3 political parties, Association of Gynecologists and Obstetricians, Association of Latvian Rural Family Doctors and Minister of Education and Science signed a memorandum, agreeing on the following:

- The parties acknowledge that currently children's knowledge of sexual and reproductive health is insufficient;
- Together, the parties undertake to develop a sexual health education program for school-age children, including in it appropriate and reliable information for the children's age and development about creating safe and respectful relationships, contraception, protection from sexually transmitted diseases, as well as education on healthy sexuality;
- In cooperation with non-governmental organizations, the Parties undertake to develop educational materials for teachers to use in lessons, talking about issues of sexual health and building responsible relationships according to the specific age of the students;
- The parties undertake to consider the possibility of restoring health education in the primary school program or to agree on the scope of subjects or lessons that will include safe relationship and sexual health education;
- Political parties undertake to consider the possibility of including the issue of relationship and reproductive health education in their pre-election programs in order to promote the actualization of this issue in the political debate and legislative agenda.¹⁴

National bullying prevention and intervention guidelines for educational institutions

The conceptual report "On reducing the spread of bullying in the educational environment" (hereinafter - the Conceptual Report) has been developed in cooperation with the Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry of Education and Science (summer 2021) in order to draw attention to one of the most common forms of violence in educational institutions - bullying, as well as to offer possible solutions for reducing the spread of bullying in the educational environment. The solutions contained in the conceptual report envisage the development and implementation of state-developed guidelines and recommendations for reducing the prevalence of bullying in all preschool, general and vocational education institutions, while reducing the prevalence of bullying and its possible consequences.

In August 2022 the first draft of guidelines for education institutions was created and in September 2022 piloting in several schools will start. MARTA Centre, the initiator and owner of the methodology used in the current program, together with other NGOs who are pioneers in the field of violence and bullying prevention, provided their feedback and recommendations for these guidelines.

Non Ratification of Istanbul convention

¹⁴ Initiator of the memorandum was the NGO "Papardes Zieds", see <https://papardeszieds.lv/>

The Istanbul Convention¹⁵ recognises violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women. It covers various forms of gender-based violence against women, which refers to violence directed against women because they are women or violence affecting them disproportionately. So far Latvia has not ratified the Convention, due to the arguments and disagreements on the “gender part” of the convention. As in the case of ratification education on gender and gender equality would evolve, conservative parties are fearing the gender mainstreaming, thus not letting through the ratification as such.

3. Romania

The Romanian team looks at the following five priority areas as outlined in the *2022 Draft Country Program Document of UNICEF*¹⁶:

Tackling poverty within vulnerable youth groups

Despite earlier advances in children’s well-being, recent years saw a slowing of the improvements in children’s outcomes. Following the pandemic, the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion increased. Eurostat figures show that 41.5 per cent of all children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2020, compared with 40 per cent in 2019, the highest level in Europe and much higher than the European Union average (24.2 per cent). Poverty levels are higher among Roma children, rural children, adolescents, and children living in single-parent and large families.

Increase the budget invested in youth

Despite prevailing deprivations, recent investments in children have not increased significantly. Annual budgets allocated to education, health and social protection are among the lowest in Europe. Investment in education is 3.2 percent of gross domestic product, half of what Romanian law dictates. Investing in children requires systematic coordination and cooperation between ministries and departments and national and local administration. However, coordination within the Government remains weak due to the fragmented distribution of responsibilities in the social sector. Central government transfers and equalization transfers dominate local administration revenues. The local administration budgets’ low and unpredictable levels have contributed to the lack of services or low-quality service delivery in some areas.

¹⁵ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210), see, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/text-of-the-convention>

¹⁶ *Children’s rights in Romania*, see, https://www.unicef.org/executiveboard/media/11646/file/2022-PL28-Romania-draft_CPD-EN-2022.06.13.pdf

Health investments for youth

Over the past five years, health investments increased but have not significantly impacted child health and well-being. They continue to favor the tertiary sector, with little strengthening in public health services or health promotion. Years of low investment in public health contribute to a relatively high infant mortality rate and low vaccination coverage, as well as high vaccine hesitancy, which further increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic there was a slight increase in the number of children benefiting from preventative community-based services; during the pandemic, this dropped by 20 per cent.

Increase the digital literacy among youth

The level of digital skills in Romania is one of the lowest in the European Union – only 31 percent of Romanians have basic or above-average digital skills, and 15 percent of all households do not have access to the Internet. Education and health services make very little use of new technologies and digital solutions. As a result, 32 percent of school children could not access online schooling during the COVID-19 school closures in 2020, resulting in significant learning losses.

Prevent and protect children from separation, violence, discrimination and neglect The long-term vision for change in this area is that, by 2027, a protective environment for children, free of violence in all settings (offline and online) that prevents child separation from their parents, is supported by child protection services and systems and protective social norms. This component includes a strong focus on addressing discrimination across the multiple layers of society, particularly Roma children and children with disabilities.

4. Spain

The team in Spain concentrated on five main areas considered a priority and needing to be addressed by the legal framework, either by issuing legislation, or assuring the implementation of the existing one, as follows:

In Spain, since 2010, the teaching of Sex Education in public schools is a reality in the Equality Plans. Each

school decides their framework of action. The reality is different in each center and among the different regions depending on the political situation of each region, since the competences in education are regional. The Education Law¹⁷ (LOMLOE, 2020) allows comprehensive sex education, but does not guarantee it. Private schools continue to choose whether or not to develop equality plans. The appearance of something called the ‘Parental Pin’ (a new term coined by far-right political parties) in some regions like Murcia, meant a before and after in the social reality of the Spanish state. Therefore, due to the competences that each region has in terms of education, Sex Education (and what this means in terms of gender violence prevention and sexual health) is not guaranteed to every young person.

Abortion is allowed in the Spanish state from the age of 16 without the need for parental permission. This measure is supposed to protect young girls in cases of incest and child marriage. The current law¹⁸ provides that it can be performed in public health centers in each region (each region in Spain has full authority in terms of the administration of healthcare services). This is not currently the case, and it is often necessary to travel to different regions as many procedures are performed in private centers. Just as it happens with Sex Education, the access to this right will depend on the region and the political party that is currently in power.

The Council of Ministers (July 2021) approved a *Draft Organic Law for the Comprehensive Guarantee of Sexual Freedom*¹⁹, proposed by the Ministries of Equality and Justice, which aims to protect the right to sexual freedom and the eradication of all sexual violence. The Law contemplates the adoption and implementation of effective, comprehensive and coordinated policies among the different competent public administrations, which guarantees the prevention and punishment of sexual violence, as well as the establishment of a specialized comprehensive response for women, girls and boys, as the main victims of all forms of sexual violence. The Law places the victims at the center, reinforcing prevention and awareness-raising measures, on the one hand, and reparation and support mechanisms, on the other. Kinship relationships are considered aggravating factors. Greater sex education will also be included in all educational stages. The creation of specialized children's homes for underage victims will be encouraged. This Law is commonly known as the ‘only yes is yes’. The Law is awaiting approval by the Parliament.

¹⁷ See, <https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-2020-17264>

¹⁸ See, <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2010-3514>

¹⁹ See, <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2021-9347#:~:text=La%20ley%20tiene%20por%20objeto,integral%2C%20que%20incluyan%20la%20sensibilizaci%C3%B3n%2C>

The Council of Ministers presents (in June 2022) the *Draft Bill for the Real and effective equality of trans people and for the guarantee of LGBTI rights*²⁰, prepared by the Ministries of Equality and Justice. The future Law recognizes the right to self-determination of gender identity. Trans people will be able to be recognized by the administration without being required to submit any kind of psychiatric report. The Minister of Justice has explained that the text contemplates the change of legal sex from the age of 12, in different age brackets and according to the maturity and stability of the applicant. An important part of this new law is that ‘conversion therapies’ will now be prohibited, something that is still being practiced by religious organizations, and that will particularly protect young gay and trans kids.

IV.2. The focus groups and youth groups dynamic

1. Bulgaria

What are the best anchor institutions / organizations / professionals to be in charge of implementing such methodologies? What are the opportunities and the challenges for them to assure continuity and scalability?

While most participants agree that non-governmental organizations may be the best for this case, after discussing more about the case of Romania, participants also agree that libraries would be a good environment for the youth group methodology. Especially in smaller places (not the biggest cities), communities are more connected to their local libraries and librarians, trust them more, and would be more willing and enthusiastic to participate in their work. Local organizations, which have regular work with young people, or organizations that are more specialized with a specific group (children with disabilities, orphans, problematic teens, etc) could be also great targets for using a methodology like this one.

The problems of funding and scalability, though, are serious. Some of our participants, who had experience with getting funding from a municipality to have their third youth group (after two were funded by the Re-GROUP project) mentioned their struggles in trying to expand their efforts in nearby municipalities – there was a lack of budget, a lack of desire or much hearing out for their ideas. In the municipality, which did fund them, they have to be extremely strict in reporting and they are planning to transform the youth group to be more a part of the Youth Center of the town, so as to have more of a backing from them.

Participants agreed that having the youth group as a regular part of an organization’s activities (like the types of organizations described above) would be ideal, as it doesn’t need much additional resources and could be housed within the offices of the organization and potentially scaled through youth leaders and volunteers.

²⁰ See, <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/consejodeministros/Paginas/enlaces/290621-enlace-igtbi.aspx>

A big challenge to the implementation of the methodology is the attitude of society towards the topics of gender and sexuality. Educational workshops with parents might help, but oftentimes they are not as effective as we wish them to be. Rising far-right and nationalistic, “traditional” values make it difficult to talk about these “taboo” topics when the youngsters are too young.

Is it a trap pushing such methodologies towards schools and thinking they can cover them by enhancing the existing curricula? Would this work (pros and cons)? Is it sustainable?

The consensus for Bulgaria is that schools are sometimes equipped and sometimes completely not, to be able to implement something like the Youth Group Methodology. As part of the official curriculum, everyone agrees that it’s rather a no – it would be incredibly difficult to impossible to make it an official part of the taught material, moreover there are some very hostile moods towards adding education regarding sexuality, gender or even violence in the mainstream of the Bulgarian politics and civic life. It would be difficult even to implement it not in the curriculum but as part of possible extracurricular activities – what participants suggested as a possible workable option is to involve school counselors and school psychologists, which might have a better chance of implementing it. Still, participants agreed that schools in Bulgaria may not be a good home for this methodology or something similar. If the topic is more “appropriate” by societal standards, it may have a better chance for extra-curricular activities but as part of the curriculum, non-formal education is not very accepted or celebrated.

How much of the needed changes within the legal framework regards EU and national policies and how much local decisions (local council, mayor’s office etc.), and enforcement of the existing legal framework?

Most participants believe for Bulgaria the problems are mostly with societal attitudes and pressure against non-governmental organizations. Enforcement of many EU frameworks is missing and their values are dismissed, but local governments could be the key for implementation of something like the methodology.

In the current political climate of Bulgaria, it is difficult to say, as there is high levels of insecurity, lack of productivity and many times, of a functioning government at all. In this tough political climate, participants agree what is needed is more support from EU and on a local base, where at least there is work being done.

What is needed to have the needed budgets and other needed resources to assure continuity and scalability of such methodologies?

Currently, on a governmental level, there aren’t many funds allocated to youth activities. We recommend there is a bigger budget for youth development. One critical example is the Safe Internet Center, which is at a risk of being shut down for lack of funding, but no structure is taking responsibility, even though the Center has responsibilities, written out in the National programme for prevention of violence and defense of children.

On a local level, the same is true, and more municipal budgets need to be allocated towards youth and towards violence prevention.

Another recommendation from participants is for the creation of more hybrid types of funding, which is more long-term and less project-based, for cases like this one. Instead of applying for project after project, which should all show some innovation, there should be more continuous funding for initiatives and methodologies like Re-GROUP, which need continuity and time in order to truly show their effect.

How can we make bridges among existing methodologies and programs tackling similar topics?

Like we discussed before, many participants agree that funding should go beyond short-term projects and focus more on the possibility of long-term financing of methodologies that work and show results.

What participants find very important is continued monitoring and evaluation, in order to prove the necessity and the progress, which these programs provide. This could prove to the funding structures – on whichever level they may be, the continued need for support for these initiatives.

To make better connections between these methodologies, there should be more openness about using them, more insight into the results they produce, and more visibility. Participants believe that it's not just due to "close-mindedness" of organizations to share – but instead, a lack of opportunities and fora for their work to be recognized and supported.

How can one assure a high level of professionalism in implementing such methodologies? What is needed at the level of legal framework (if any) to help in this process of keeping such programs and methodologies at high level of quality?

As was discussed before, participants mentioned having a robust mechanism for oversight, monitoring, continuous evaluation. When hearing about the organization in Romania for the youth groups, they agreed that this kind of approach (creating a community of professionals, working with the youth groups, keeping track of their work, progress, questions, etc) would be ideal but would maybe also be taxing if scaled. Conversations went towards having a structure that works predominantly to manage the implementation of the youth group methodology, which would provide support, resources, and would collect data and support fundraising, visibility and further scalability.

Mostly, conversations went towards transparency rather than legal framework changes.

If changes in policy are required, who are the best institutions to lead such processes (at local, national and EU level)?

In Bulgaria, municipal structures mainly; ministry of youth and sports; ministry of education.

What is needed to push recommendations of legal framework changes (data, expertise, time-frame, funds, organizational support etc.)?

A stable government that is working for the betterment of society.

Budgets for meaningful initiatives. Interest by policy makers.

Training and educational activities for youth workers but also support for those for parents, young people, teachers, etc.

2. Latvia

What are the youth policies that are helping in the effort of scaling-up such methodologies, as ReGroup? How much from the existing framework is implemented and implementable? Where are the bottlenecks? What changes are needed (imperative, nice to have)?

Ministries could help, but at first it is necessary to agree which Ministry is responsible for this. Local governments, educators and a separate subject at the school could also help, which would help young people recognise violence and have a clear action plan once recognised.

Changes could be made to the existing education system, for example by complementing non-formal education, where prevention of violence would be taught. Building cooperation with Members who would be willing to listen and address problems. It would be worthwhile to meet party representatives instead of speaking in front of the entire Saeima. The introduction of methodology requires funding (possibly European projects), after which training implementation coordinators should be provided for each municipality.

What are the best anchor institutions / organizations / professionals to be in charge of implementing such methodologies? What are the opportunities and the challenges for them to assure continuity and scalability?

The Ministries of Education, Welfare or the Interior, whose representatives could be invited, could decide which Ministry is responsible.

They could face no support at the political level, no funding and no trained specialists. The Department of Health should respond because it affects physical and emotional health. As well as NGOs. There is a problem right now with emotional health (mobbing prevention) issues being driven from one Ministry to another and no one taking responsibility for solving problems.

Is it a trap pushing such methodologies towards schools and thinking they can cover them by enhancing the existing curricula? Would this work (pros and cons)? Is it sustainable?

It could work if, for example, parenting lessons were used to bring in specialists who could tell the topic. It would be good to discuss this topic in a lesson rather than in a youth center, as it would then be attended more often. It is important that it is accessible to young people rather than waiting for young people to search for information themselves. It could work if it sets up parent-teacher collaboration to ensure more parental engagement. It would also be important to educate teachers about what their rights are in the face of violence from pupils and their parents.

It could work if the issue is dealt with at the national level and not just by local governments.

And if more parents were educated, because working with young people would be more effective if a young person didn't get back into a violent environment when they came home. From experience – the Orphan's Court tends to engage in promoting cooperation between parents and teachers.

What is needed to have the needed budgets and other needed resources to assure continuity and scalability of such methodologies?

Local authorities should allocate the budget so as to have sufficient resources to implement this methodology. It is concluded that not all municipalities have sufficient budget, therefore State aid would be necessary. Make the introduction of this methodology a priority, seek cooperation in ministries, funding, involve youth centres and existing programmes such as “papardes zieds.”

How can we make bridges among existing methodologies and programs tackling similar topics?

To start by creating a common vision for training young people on the part of the government. Seeking funding to enable schools to bring in specialists to train young people, parents and educators. Funding is the biggest problem at the moment because specialists are willing to talk about this, but schools have budgets that don't include education about preventing violence.

How can one assure a high level of professionalism in implementing such methodologies? What is needed at the level of legal framework (if any) to help in this process of keeping such programs and methodologies at high level of quality?

The prestige and funding of teachers and youth workers should be raised. It is necessary to attract a competent specialist and not to “push” duties on a person who is not competent in the subject. A responsible person who will perform his duties in good faith should be attracted. Depends on who will be responsible for implementing this programme. Once the responsible person/authority is agreed, training of that person should be organized.

If changes in policy are required, who are the best institutions to lead such processes (at local, national and EU level)?

Ministries, teachers' associations, local governments. Needs someone in government who would “backfire” on this one. The best drivers would be specialists who face and deal with situations of violence. It would also be worthwhile to organize a group of specialists representing different sectors (teachers, social workers, etc.) to look after public education on violence issues, as many parents do not recognise violence, resulting in violence perpetrated by young people because they are themselves victims of violence.

3. Romania

What are the youth policies that are helping in the effort of scaling-up such methodologies, as ReGroup? How much from the existing framework is implemented and implementable? Where are the

bottlenecks? What changes are needed (imperative, nice to have)?

It's important that the rights of youth are guaranteed by the Romanian constitution and various laws in place, this being the framework that permits various types of response from the society, i.e. NGOs, private sector, citizens and of course the governmental structures. Anyone that wants to design and implement youth programs are able to do it both at national and local level. This does not mean it is an easy ride, one needing to fight stereotypes and tabu subjects in more conservative communities (like rural communities and small urban), securing continuity once a program is working and linking it to other initiatives in order to improve and scale-up. The bottlenecks, therefore, are mainly about the resources allocated, trained human resources, access to a mature anchor institutional infrastructure for youth activities and of course, budgets available through various forms.

We need consistency in running and financing effective youth programs, and this can be reached in a stable political environment. Or, if this is not a realistic perspective, to ensure that the funding stream is easy accessible for the civil society to organize interventions using the existing social infrastructure (schools, public libraries, cultural houses etc.), and also to start new institutions at the local level (community hubs, maker-spaces, computer & coding hubs, volunteering hubs etc.), or to combine them (e.g. activating a makers-space or coding hub within a public library).

What are the best anchor institutions / organizations / professionals to be in charge of implementing such methodologies? What are the opportunities and the challenges for them to assure continuity and scalability?

Here there were different approaches, some participants having experience in working with schools, or using school library spaces, and have created their own training spaces and spaces where volunteers can run various activities. Some use the leadership and management class²¹, the optional health education class, or others, and created post-curriculum programs - coming up with resources for teachers to help them plan lessons.

The experience that we have implementing the Re-Group methodology is working with public libraries as anchor institutions, having the public librarians as youth workers to facilitate the groups of adolescents, especially in small to medium size communities (rural areas, small urban). In a country like Romania, where more than half of the population is living in rural areas and small towns, working with libraries is a viable solution, being able to push non-formal education programs, for all ages, not only adolescents. The library is a neutral space, opened to anyone, with no curricula, providing a public service for the community. The librarian is a professional that is used in working with all types of people, in most cases

²¹ *Ora de dirigenție*, in Romanian

is trained as a youth worker and being trained into new methodologies, means that she/he can provide new services at local level. The library can do three things in order to facilitate good quality knowledge for its citizens: 1. organize various types of events, trainings, workshops using the expertise the librarian has, 2. host various events, offering the space and the available equipment and resources to NGOs, other communities of professionals, 3. Curate knowledge from various sources. By using the library space and involving the librarian as a facilitator of such methodologies, we are helping the process of organizational capacity building, strengthening the libraries as important, useful hubs in the communities.

Is it a trap pushing such methodologies towards schools and thinking they can cover them by enhancing the existing curricula? Would this work (pros and cons)? Is it sustainable?

Some participants are used to working mainly with schools, and got good results, by nurturing good relations with the professors and the management, they could implement their programs. There are bottlenecks, but it can work.

In the case of Re-Group methodology, where there are 17 topics to be addressed, each topic in a meeting of around 2 hours, 2 hours and half, working with schools can be tricky, since there are limited hours dedicated to non-formal education in schools. Therefore, our recommendation both to national level decision makers, but also at EU level, is to consider public libraries as an alternative to schools, in such longer term approaches. The good thing is that schools remain involved, since recruiting participants to such youth groups means involving the professors. Specifically, the librarians are going to the local schools and present such programs, and for those interested, the continue the talks at the library. This is a practice to nurture and grow, having the local institutions working together to tackle topics of interest for the local communities.

How much of the needed changes within the legal framework regards EU and national policies and how much local decisions (local council, mayor's office etc.), and enforcement of the existing legal framework?

The consensus here was that most of the things can be done at local level, but allocating funds for assuring the continuity of the viable programs need to come from EU and national level. The EU structures can give the tone and recommend best practices from those programs which proved that are working, can create the discussion space for practices to be shared and discussed, can create financing mechanisms that are helping both new initiatives and methodologies to appear, and also the existing ones to scale-up and become more mature.

What is needed to have the needed budgets and other needed resources to assure continuity and scalability of such methodologies?

Two critical institutions in Romania are the National Association of Communes²² and the National Association of Cities²³, here having all the mayors together, and having them on board, understanding the utility of investing in healthy adolescents, which is leading to having healthy adults, ones that are actively participating in the social, economic, cultural and political life.

Of course, the central Government plays an important role in budget allocation to the villages and cities in Romania, but there are many things the local council and Mayor's offices can do also, since most of the time implementing such methodologies, such as Re-Group, is not involving high costs.

Another complementary solution for securing funds for youth programs, is using CSR money, but in a way that is less about corporate marketing and PR and more about sustaining middle to long term programs that are addressing various societal issues, as the Re-Group methodology is doing.

How can we make bridges among existing methodologies and programs tackling similar topics?

The consensus here was that there is a need for spaces of discussion for such programs to be presented and accessible to those interested. A highlighted point is that there is no common online space with a repository of existing methodologies and programs for youth, there are many resources scattered on various platforms, usually on niched topics, i.e. sexual education, addictions, gender etc. The discussion was centered on presenting existing instruments, developed within other financed projects by various organizations (mostly NGOs). Usually, this info is available online and ready to be used, but it depends on each organization to find it and integrate it in their programs and activities. Of course, having either a non-governmental organization, or a public entity to centralize and make these resources available, would help a lot, not only at national level but also at EU level. And if such repositories already exist (for instance at EU level), making them more visible will make life easier to the organizations and professionals focused on youth work. What was evident in the discussion is that there is an openness in sharing findings, tools and other resources among organizations. Usually, this happens on specific topics, since there are coalitions or partnerships among various NGOs on different topics. One example is looking at how the NGOs working on women's rights and anti-trafficking are functioning, having an inter-institutional platform, called PROTECT, that is very active and makes it much easier for info and practices sharing. If the Government, through its youth focused structures is not activating a space of discussion on more integrated, interdisciplinary approaches, at least some financing lines or other types of resources are welcomed and will be useful to those that have the capacity and will to do it.

How can one assure a high level of professionalism in implementing such methodologies? What is needed at the level of legal framework (if any) to help in this process of keeping such programs and

²² See, <https://www.acor.ro/>

²³ See, <https://www.aor.ro/>

methodologies at high level of quality?

There were different approaches mentioned during the discussion, from training people at national level (and this could grow in a snow-ball effect), to standardizing the themes and handouts, and also how the themes should be addressed. Continuing supporting and growing the existing networks is seen as a priority, including facilitating the resources to upgrade and update the methodologies.

If changes in policy are required, who are the best institutions to lead such processes (at local, national and EU level)?

We have policies and the rights of youth are guaranteed and supported through the national legal framework. It was agreed that we can, of course, improve the legislation, but more important, we need a better implementation of the existing measures, first, through developing a proper action plan, second, through a more efficient budget allocation (covering both small and larger communities all around the country, encouraging both new initiatives and supporting the continuation and growth of existing successful programs), third, through a monitoring and evaluation flow that will help designing new measures and changes of the legal framework. When changes of legislation are needed, all sectors should be involved in making proposals, but the governmental institutions are expected to lead the process, in a transparent and inclusive way.

What is needed to push recommendations of legal framework changes (data, expertise, time-frame, funds, organizational support etc.)?

The down-top approach was mentioned as a solution for pushing changes of the legal framework. Data is available, funds are available (though, they can be better channeled, covering both more strategic programs, and the simpler projects and activities). Organizational support is paramount for having more chances of continuity for those initiatives that prove to be useful for the target group. By financing random projects and not also mapping and monitoring the running and pipeline initiatives, the results, plus the expected impact and how all these programs are fitting into the larger strategy and action plan, we might end up not knowing what are we contributing to, and also risking to have organizations, therefore programs that will be forced to end their activity on youth, or to lower the involvement and the scale of action, not to mention those NGOs that are closing down entirely, because of lack of available financing, even if they are doing great job.

4. Spain

What are the youth policies that are helping in the effort of scaling-up such methodologies, as ReGroup? How much from the existing framework is implemented and implementable? Where are the

bottlenecks? What changes are needed (imperative, nice to have)?

When participants were enquired about the youth policies helping in the effort of scaling-up methodologies such as ReGroup, they provided very similar responses. The majority mentioned *The Law for the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents against all forms of violence*²⁴, which was approved a year ago. Participants expressed that this was a step forward and an improvement on previous provisions. This legislation vows to protect minors against any type of violence and, among other measures, adds the obligation to report to the competent authority any situation of violence against children. The statute of limitations for crimes of child abuse does not begin to count until the victim reaches 35 years of age. This Law also includes the creation of units specialized in the awareness and prevention of situations of violence against minors by law enforcement agencies, or the creation of the figure of the coordinator of welfare and protection in schools, which did not exist by law before.

Some participants also mentioned the *Organic Law for the Comprehensive Guarantee of Sexual Freedom*²⁵ (which places the victims at the center, reinforcing prevention and awareness-raising measures. Kinship relationships are considered aggravating factors. Greater sex education will also be included in all educational stages. The creation of specialized children's homes for underage victims will be encouraged. This Law is commonly known as the 'only yes is yes') and the *Draft Law for the Real and effective equality of trans people and for the guarantee of LGBTI rights*²⁶ (the main feature of this Law is that it recognizes the right to self-determination of gender identity, and that it will ban 'conversion therapies', something that is still being practiced by religious organizations, and that will particularly protect young gay and trans kids). Both laws are still in the process of being approved.

In terms of how much of the existing framework is implemented and implementable, most of the participants were either 'not sure' or 'assumed' that all laws were implemented without issues.

When asked about 'bottlenecks' or changes needed, the most common response was in reference to the education and health competences, which are managed by each region (or *autonomous community* as

²⁴ See, <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2021-9347#:~:text=La%20ley%20tiene%20por%20objeto,integral%2C%20que%20incluyen%20la%20sensibilizaci%C3%B3n%2C>

²⁵ See, https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/BOCG/A/BOCG-14-A-62-5.PDF

²⁶ See, <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/consejodeministros/Paginas/enlaces/290621-enlace-igtbi.aspx>

they're called in Spain). When applying the national law, depending on the ideology of the political party of each region, it may take longer or even not happen at all. Conservative political parties usually don't agree with sexual education in schools or abortions in public clinics, so they can put administrative obstacles to prevent these from happening.

What are the best anchor institutions / organizations / professionals to be in charge of implementing such methodologies? What are the opportunities and the challenges for them to assure continuity and scalability?

When asked about which are the best institutions / organizations / professionals to be in charge of implementing such methodologies, participants found some consensus on 'a combination of all of them' and especially on educational institutions.

Regarding what are the opportunities and the challenges for these institutions/organizations to assure continuity and scalability, the answers varied. The essence of most of the responses would be: consistency (that these types of policies shouldn't change when the government changes) and not let commitment from all institutions.

Is it a trap pushing such methodologies towards schools and thinking they can cover them by enhancing the existing curricula? Would this work (pros and cons)? Is it sustainable?

When participants were asked if they thought that it was a trap pushing such methodologies towards schools and thinking they can cover them by enhancing the existing curricula, the majority agreed that it wasn't a 'trap' as such, but rather a mistake to assign them too much responsibility. Participants stated, nonetheless, that schools play a big part in the success of these methodologies. About 1/3 of the participants thought that this should not be part of the school curricula and it should be a separate activity taught in school. Regarding the sustainability of these actions, some participants mentioned again the political implications of changes in government and how this can affect the effectiveness and sustainability of certain policies.

How much of the needed changes within the legal framework regards EU and national policies and how much local decisions (local council, mayor's office etc.), and enforcement of the existing legal

framework?

Some participants reported to be 'unsure' while others believed that these changes need to have at all levels and advances should be connected.

What is needed to have the needed budgets and other needed resources to assure continuity and scalability of such methodologies?

To this question, participants replied 'more political implication', social commitment and again, consistency with this type of policies when local governments change.

How can we make bridges among existing methodologies and programs tackling similar topics?

The answers provided resembled the ones in the previous question, and the main themes were 'political consensus', 'political commitment' and 'responsibility by all the institutions involved'.

How can one assure a high level of professionalism in implementing such methodologies? What is needed at the level of legal framework (if any) to help in this process of keeping such programs and methodologies at high level of quality?

The main themes in the answers were 'with responsibility at both personal and institutional level' and 'constant training to all relevant personnel'. A couple of participants mentioned adding legal responsibility to staff involved with working with minors, a measure that is part of the new *The Law for the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents against all forms of violence*.

If changes in policy are required, who are the best institutions to lead such processes (at local, national and EU level)?

Participants answered unanimously that all institutions need to be involved in some way, and in terms of leading, some believed that changes should start at European level and then followed at national and local level.

V. CLOSING REMARKS

Treat proven strategic projects differently

I will take the existing project, *Reinforced and upgraded youth group methodology on building healthy relationships (Re-GROUP)*, as a case study, to highlight some closing remarks. The idea behind it, as mentioned in the beginning of the present document, is that a methodology of working with youth developed in Latvia for 10 years, was scaled-up and promoted in other European countries, using EU financial mechanisms. This is in line with the legislation at the level of the European Union and is pushing knowledge and expertise across the continent. Being a complex approach, implementing such methodology is requiring not only interested persons to be trained in the method and its instruments, but also the organisational framework to sustain such an approach, middle to long term. Or, for this, it's useful to have resources to adapt and test such methodologies in various national, and local contexts. Once proved useful to the target groups (in this case, youth workers and adolescents), such programs should enter in a new, let's call it maturity and strategic phase of assistance, through appropriate support (financial, networking, share practices opportunities etc.), that will allow to move toward an continuous scale-up stage (national and international), building organisational capacity at the level of local partners, investing in upgrading and updating the methodology by the author organisation (through additional research, input from national implementing NGOs, libraries or other groups of professionals), refining the EU policies and subsequently the recommendations for the enhancement of the national legal frameworks. And this should be done by default, not through a painful and counterproductive process of finding the right additional financing lines, or adapting the project to seem like it is a new one, in order to be eligible for funding on similar schemes. The reality is that many times organisations, like NGOs, are struggling to maintain active professionals outside financed programs, since they are depending many times solely on grants. That means that there is a continuous effort and stress to find the right financing opportunities that will allow continuity in implementing a specific program. That means, usually, that the same people, the implementers of projects, are also the ones that are writing the new applications, in a constant balance in between expert work of assuring the success of the activities and finding solutions for assuring the growth of the concept & program. This can and should change and it is one of the main recommendations, that is, to treat proven strategic projects differently, and have designated financing lines that are encompassing not only the piloting stages but also the growth ones, including mid to long term support for keeping active teams (for assuring continuity, scale-up, updating and upgrading the methods).

Continue the inter-institutional approach / youth within all policies

Each of the four countries included in this document have some sort of inter-institutional approach when regarding youth policies. Nevertheless, sometimes this needs additional forms of action for making them

reality. Our take and recommendation is to have a tandem approach, both inter-institutional and interdisciplinary, and for this mapping the existing institutional ecosystem needs to be done. This will allow seeing where we are, what areas are still to be addressed, what is the potential of growth of various entities in the ecosystem (e.g. what programs are mature enough to be scaled-up, to reach new audiences and what support is needed), what are the needs, what bridges among organisations, institutions, and groups of professionals should be made. This is a strategic work and cannot be done properly without the involvement of EU and national bodies.

Look at more anchor institutions

One of the most important takes of this program, and subsequently one of the main recommendations is to consider additional anchor institutions when implementing such youth methodologies. One example, which is already proven a best practice, developed through the current program, is involving the network of public librarians as youth workers that facilitate youth groups. This was tested already in 30+ libraries in Romania, especially in small to medium size communities (villages and small towns, less than 30,000 inhabitants). The match was instant, the library gaining a new service to be provided to the community, the librarian obtaining new skills and expertise, the adolescents having the proper context to talk in a safe space about the issues they are facing. An important strength involving libraries in such approaches, is that the librarians are already used in working with youth, and the continuity of the program is more likely to be assured, since the attrition rates within librarians professional community is lower than in the case of NGO professionals. Having such a useful service to the community is adding to the prestige and significance of the library as a main social, cultural and knowledge based hub at local level. What we say is not that the librarians should replace the NGOs in implementing youth methodologies, but to complement and work together. Other professionals that should be considered, could be, for instance, the school psychologists, where they exist, and if they exist, this is a good chance to build capacity at the level of these groups of professionals. We did not test working with them, but we had discussions and it seems there is an interest in this. The point is, let's try to look at additional anchor institutions, than, let's say schools. They seem the perfect match, since the youth is already there, but we might end realizing there are other important institutions out there, like libraries, that are actually more suitable for longer term non-formal education initiatives. As Jamie Robert Volmer put it, 'Schools cannot do it alone'.²⁷

Invest in training and re-training

This point is very much related to the first one, once a methodology is proving its efficacy, being able to tap into additional resources to scale-up and grow the program and approach, means also resources to keep the professionals up-to-date with new techniques of facilitation and managing youth groups. This means, training and retraining opportunities.

²⁷ See an article by John McKnight, <https://johnmcknight.org/re-functioning-a-new-community-development-strategy-for-the-future-learning-nine/>

Deal with youth related actions both at national and local level

In democracies, decentralizing the power and the way decisions are taken is a norm, not an exception, therefore a lot can be done focusing on measures at the local level, including investing in programs related to youth. The way a town hall is, for instance, conducting the urban planning, to be youth friendly and attractive, involving the youth in the decision process, gives an indicator on how much can be done, without asking for national level interventions. The way a private company is creating the context for parents to be able to access various services that are useful and needed by their youngsters (e.g. discounts for sports, cultural and social related activities, for therapy sessions, career guidance and mentorship etc.) is also an example of how much can be done if we concentrate on small scale victories, and create an ecosystem of support that gives to each local stakeholder in a community an opportunity to take action in supporting youth programs and initiatives. Youth work is not the job of one entity, of one sector, is an invitation to the whole society to get involved, and when that happens, is giving us a sign that we are taking youth seriously as youth and not as people, not yet adults.

Recognising the professionals and organisations that are doing youth programs

Working with youth is amazingly rewarding but is not easy, cannot be done by anyone, not good, for sure, and is getting not as much credit as it should. Creating more contexts to recognize at EU and national levels the tremendous work of youth workers and organizations working with children and adolescents, is essential to give the prestige to these professionals and their work. These are the people that are preparing the next generations of citizens that should furthermore make the communities they care about, better places, better than the current generations are doing. Let's find ways to better value the youth workers and their work. EU and national institutions can give a boost to this process of giving prestige to the youth workers. This ends in getting to changing the social norm, and here we are proposing investing into behavior change campaigns and programs.

Invest in soft-diplomacy

To put it simply, let's have MPs at national and EU levels, on board to push legislation related to youth programs, in an interdisciplinary, inter-institutional way. This can be done for sure down-top, and is already happening in many places by the work of NGOs and various groups of professionals, but having also a top-down approach is complementing the first actions, and contributing to the point mentioned above, on creating the context for prestige, for and to the youth workers and organizations working with and for youth.

Look for budgets at local level even if it's not enough

The reality we have seen during the implementation of the youth methodology in Bulgaria, Latvia, Romania and Spain is that a combination of using the right anchor institutions, focusing on certain communities, being flexible to adapt the instruments and method, tailored on the local specific, gives a lot of room for new ideas, and tapping into various resources, including financial one and expertise. In Romania, for instance, working in villages, with librarians, meant in various cases, a simpler and easier access to the decision makers, i.e. the local council, and obtaining funds for the youth group to continue, offered also a chance to the librarian to look for support directly within community, finding for instance a psychologist willing to volunteer in covering certain topics of the methodology, finding a local sponsor willing to support certain materials needed for the youth group to undertake a community project (e.g. cleaning the local parc). These are important steps towards self-sufficiency and assuring the continuity of proven successful methodologies, but should not be the only source of support, the optimum scenery being a mixed way of covering the needs for such programs to have recurrency and to grow, over the years, in quality, content, and scale.

In the end, let us finish with some open reflections, saying that:

- There are different stages of development and implementation of youth related policies in the four countries;
- The youth rights are protected by constitutions, by laws, but this is not enough, policies and strategies, even allocation of funds, are not the end of the story, they are actually just the normal beginning of the discussion on how we behave and act as society towards having healthy children and adolescents;
- We are still in a phase of connecting the dots;
- What is happening is good but certainly not enough;
- Being part of EU matters a lot, it gives more tools of making it right;
- Prevention actions should prevail to punitive actions, and this is about the paradigms that are at the base of designing our youth policies and action plans, ultimately, the youth rights approach and actions show the degree of emancipation we are ready to undertake in our societies;
- The civil society is crucial but cannot do it alone, neither the schools, or libraries, or local authorities; we need smart approaches that give to all a stake in this.

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