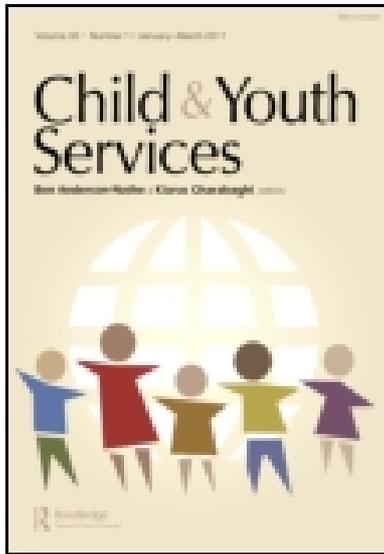


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### Youth Work in Croatia: Collecting Pieces for a Mosaic

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## **Youth Work in Croatia: Collecting Pieces for a Mosaic**

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*This article explores the historical development of youth work in Croatia. By drawing from available data and personal experience, we describe three key phases of youth work development in a post-conflict country: (a) the period of the early 1990s as a “direct peace building” youth work; (b) the rise of nonformal education during the mid and late 1990s; and (c) the growth of a networked youth sector and its focus on youth policy advocacy starting in 2000. In addition, we refer to today’s context, particularly because of its project-management orientation. Such categorization highlights various practices that we consider to represent youth work in a specific and contested national framework. Work with young people with fewer opportunities is being presented as a case, building on our observation that contemporary youth work continues to be embedded in civil society development and nonformal education, facing challenges of funding-driven discourse and unsystematic support.*

**KEYWORDS** *historical perspective, social exclusion of youth, youth with fewer opportunities, youth work,*

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Youth work is considered to be one of the most vital arts of youth policies (Schield & Vanhee, 2012). Besides aiming to (re-)organize young people's leisure time, youth work also aims to create and sustain a socially responsible environment for the development of active, critically reflective and socially aware young people that are both interested in their (local) communities as well as taking action to build more inclusive and just communities.

Data on youth work in Croatia is quite scarce. While youth work has been widely developed and implemented through various forms in a majority of local communities, it is barely documented and (expert) analysis of any kind is chronically missing. Although youth policy as such is in place on local, regional (county) and national level, there is no framework on youth work and no (explicit) guides for its practice in Croatia. Thus, it seems that everybody is currently free to interpret the concept of youth work according to his or her own subjective perspective, analysis, experience and/or competence.

Being a member of the European Union (EU), Croatia cannot ignore the EU youth policy or the EU youth work framework, especially as there is no comprehensive (national) Croatian youth policy. However, we argue that youth work in the current EU framework is missing the particular "youth work addition," necessary for effective practice in contested spaces, such as Croatia. In 2010 the EU launched the *EU Strategy for Youth: Investing and Empowering* (European Commission, 2009), whose three goals are (a) creating more education and employment opportunities for young people, (b) improving young people's access to and full participation in society, and (c) fostering mutual solidarity between young people and society. What is particularly important is that youth work is recognized as a key practice of the European youth policy, stating the relevance of education and mobility for youth workers and encouraging the usage of European tools for youth work development. Apart from the above mentioned EU strategy for Youth, the Council of the European Union has accepted the European Commission's proposition that youth work's contribution is "cross-sectoral" and can contribute to all fields of action (Devlin, 2010). Certainly the most important normative act at the EU level for youth work is Council Resolution on Youth Work where youth work is seen as supplementary to formal education and an adequate mechanism to:

Promote social participation and responsibility, voluntary engagement and active citizenship, strengthen community building and civil society at all levels (e.g. intergenerational and intercultural dialogue), contribute to the development of young people's creativity, cultural and social awareness, entrepreneurship and innovation, provide opportunities for the social inclusion of all children and young people, reach young people with fewer opportunities through a variety of methods which are flexible and quickly adaptable. Youth work therefore plays different roles in society

and can contribute to youth related policy areas, such as lifelong learning, social inclusion and employment. (Council of the European Union, 2010, p. 4)

In the EU youth work is defined as a national responsibility. Its regulation is not under the jurisdiction of the European Union. However, the EU does influence how it is practiced throughout Europe by employing the open method of coordination,<sup>1</sup> meaning by providing guidelines and good practice examples, using the “peer-pressure” method for comparing and improving. Thus, the EU actually often shapes youth work practice in (any) national context. Even so, various countries emphasize different aspects of youth work (see Table 1).

Unlike countries mentioned above, Croatia has no clear concept of youth work. Croatia seems to ignore the relevance of youth work and the potential it has for addressing issues in a post-conflict and contested space. We argue that the relevance of youth work becomes even more important in contested spaces. Contested spaces represent those kind of social spaces

**TABLE 1** Youth Work Definitions in 10 EU Countries

Country	The Conception of Youth Work
Austria	Focuses on extracurricular activities with an emphasis on leisure-time activities and prevention.
Estonia	Focuses on activities and practice that enables youth to act outside their family and obtain a career of their choosing.
Germany	Options that allow young people’s codetermination, foster self-definition, and encourage social responsibility and participation.
Greece	Provides education and welfare services to support young people’s safe and healthy transition to adult life, as well as leisure-time activities.
Ireland	A planned program of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is complementary to their formal academic or vocational educational training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organizations.
Italy	Initiatives focused on supporting employment and reducing youth unemployment.
The Netherlands	Supportive and reactive services, as well as broad leisure-oriented offerings.
Norway	A wide range of interesting and meaningful leisure-time activities and opportunities for personal development through participation and social interaction.
Romania	Any activity organized to improve conditions necessary for the social and professional development of youth according to their necessities and wishes.
Spain	Activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature with and for young people.

*Note.* Source: Institute for Social Work and Social Education (2008).

where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in the context of highly asymmetrical relations of power (Pratt, 1991). In Croatia, an emerging emphasis and expectation for youth is to address issues of division and support community development. Therefore, youth work could play an important role in addressing the legacy of conflict and violence in the country.

As there are no “officially” recognized models of youth work in Croatia, and no analysis complete that could help to frame how it developed, this article focuses on identifying foundations as well as trends and patterns relevant for the analysis of youth work in the last two decades. Thus, this article represents a contribution to the discussion on the history of youth work in Croatia and its development.

Youth work in Croatia has a long history and can be tracked in the former Yugoslavia where it was directed and developed within the communist party. In 1991 Croatia declared its independence. This was followed by a civil and regional war, which lasted until the 1995. During and immediately after this conflict, civil society organizations and initiatives started a comprehensive anti-war campaign promoting peace building and avoidance of armed conflict. This can be seen as the inception of contemporary Croatian youth work. Over time, youth work has continued to develop within civil society organizations but has not been recognized as influential outside the civil society sphere. Today, when youth work in other European countries is seen to play an important role in supporting youth development, in Croatia a common and unified strategy or agreed upon regulation of youth work of any kind remains elusive.

We argue that the Anti-war Campaign Croatia in the 1990s has unquestionably affected the “birth” of youth work. Furthermore, we argue that today’s models and manifestations of youth work in Croatia keep youth work as a popular concept only within the civil society organizations (CSOs). This article describes how youth work developed in Croatia and what influenced its development in contemporary Croatia. To support this investigation, the method of historical institutionalism was considered as particularly well-suited.

## THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Young people today in the European Union are being recognized as a social group between childhood and adulthood and who are often characterized by their age. It is often argued that for the sake of social order in the modern democracy, they have a right and a duty to actively participate in creating a community in which they live and work (Barber, 2009). Youthhood is indeed a time of transition, and a concept that encompasses a wide range of diverse interests, needs, opportunities and aspirations of individuals. Therefore, it is necessary to guide young people adequately in order to exercise their rights

effectively. The rights of young people are especially important because they support young people to actively participate in society and provide a space where they can begin to decide how they want to participate, and on what issues. Promoting the rights of young people means encouraging equality of opportunity for all young people, regardless of race, background, sex, nation, or any other identity factor. Youth rights are focused on the supporting youth employment, developing the potentials of young people with fewer opportunities, strengthening opportunities for active participation in civil society, welfare measures, as well as better access to information for the sake of better and purposeful decision-making. In order for those rights to be achieved, youth work plays a significant role.

### Conceptualizing Youth Work

A plethora of studies explore and argue for positive effects of youth work on young people, emphasizing its relevance for the development of young people as well as its contribution to creating an active, vivid, and healthy society (Bowie, 2004; Devlin & Gunning, 2009; Forde, Kiely, & Meade, 2009). However, some authors (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Quane & Rankin, 2006) claim it is not the youth work per se that produces active, healthy and well achieving citizens, but active citizens that create youth work. In other words, the prerequisite for quality youth work that would then enhance active citizenry is the existence of self-aware and critical citizens that can thoughtfully plan and design programs and activities for supporting and motivating young people for taking active roles in their communities.

Despite the fact youth work is not a substantively theorized discipline nor is it replete with accounts of practice (Williamson, 2006), definitions and conceptualizations of youth work are numerous. In his attempt to conceptualize youth work, Baizerman (1996) argues that youth work praxis has many forms worldwide and it is therefore necessary to accept this variety and not to urge a single model. A definition of youth work as a family of practices gives legitimacy to this variety, he claims (Baizerman, 1996). Hurley and Treacy (1993) provided the first framework to understand youth work models from a sociological perspective and took youth participation as a key dimension. Perhaps the most famous conceptualization of youth work is the one that points out youth empowerment as the ultimate goal of youth work. According to the “Costello Report” (National Youth Policy Committee, 1984), “Youth work must empower young people and enable them to emerge from the enveloping state of dependence . . . young people must know, feel and believe that they have some control over their situations in the sense of having ability to influence intentionally what happens to them and their community” (p. 115).

While some authors claim that “the prevention of boredom” is what youth work should strive for (Furlong, Cartmel, Powney, & Hall, 1997),

others place youth work in the context of informal learning, personal and social development (Merton et al., 2004). At the first sight, these two rather unambitious perspectives can be quite challenging when one is reminded that young people are a heterogenic population with different interest and various identities. There are scholars, such as Young (2006) who praise youth work and poetically say that youth work is an art, or Baizerman (1996), who claims it is “a craft which can be seen but not described or analyzed”. On the other hand, there are authors who believe that youth work is an analyzable concept and understand it as a tool for achieving progress. Among them is Howard Williamson (2006) who defines youth work as being a “platform for moving into more structured volunteering and community service.”

Various types of youth work and its practices have to be acknowledged. Smith (2002) summed up core aspects of youth work practice claiming these are: focusing on young people, emphasizing voluntary participation and relationship, committing to association, being friendly and informal and acting with integrity, being concerned with the education and, more broadly, being concerned with the welfare of young people. As society changes and new policy areas develop, youth work changes its focus as well. Thus, in the current practice arena, youth work takes on many forms including detached and outreach settings, youth clubs, award schemes, information and counseling services in addition to targeted work with specific interest or identity groups (Ingram & Harris, 2001). Youth work is a concept that gained its reputation and popularity for its vision, rehabilitation and innovation potential. Today youth work is considered to be one of the pivotal features of contemporary youth policy (Coussée, 2008; Verschelden, Coussée, Van de Walle, & Williamson, 2009) and it is widely supported in youth development discussions (Davey, 2009; European Commission, 2009).

The partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the youth field, in its study on *The Socio-economic Scope of Youth Work in Europe* (Institute for Social Work and Social Education, 2008), list the most common types of youth work in Europe namely, (a) extracurricular youth education, (b) international youth work, (c) open youth work, (d) participation and peer education, (e) youth work in sports, (f) youth information, (g) youth counseling, (h) recreation, and (i) prevention of social exclusion/youth social work. Some types of youth work are more present in certain places, depending on cultural, social and political tradition. In the post-conflict societies of the Western Balkans, where countries have been experiencing transition into a full democracy, prevention of social exclusion is among the most present types of youth work in Croatia.

As a population, young people are generally most affected by social transition. Apart from being receptors and creators of (new) social values due to the transition from non-democratic regime into the democratic one, which is an inherently uncertain and hectic process, young people, unlike the adults, are experiencing the transition from childhood to adulthood as well.

The process of growing up is characterized by identity issues, internalization of norms and values that young people adopt in order to establish themselves in society, changing roles, but also by the changing perception of themselves. This so-called *double transition* is potentially dangerous for young people who are often “exposed to new and greater challenges than the possible benefits of what the new system might bring to them” (Ilišin & Radin, 2007). Youth work, as a corrective mechanism, plays a great part in directing the healthy development of the young people. Youth work here is seen both as a safety net and as a platform for the empowerment of young people.

In order to understand youth work in a certain social context, it is necessary to understand its evaluative process. There is a vast amount of literature focusing on the historical development of youth work where the tendency is to discover if there are traceable patterns in the history that influenced the present youth work models. In the line with this tradition, and having in mind that such literature on the historical development of youth work in Croatia is missing, the authors of this article will provide a description and analysis of Croatian youth work by pointing out historical focal points that are found relevant for understanding the contemporary practice of youth work in Croatia.

### Methodological Framework

Our central research question focuses on exploring and understanding the historical path youth work has taken in Croatia, and how this history influences contemporary forms of Croatian youth work. We use historical institutionalism as a *meta* approach to assist us.

Historical institutionalism as an approach is well known in the social sciences, as a subcategory of “new institutionalisms” that see societal and political sphere as an interplay of different institutions and their duties, norms and interactions that determine the behavior of individuals. Whereas old institutionalisms were more focused on the government’s way of imposing rules for citizens, new institutionalism argue this process is two-way. There are three main approaches within the new institutionalisms, namely sociological or normative institutionalism, rational choice and historical institutionalism (Thelen, 1999). The sociological institutionalism emphasizes the importance of the correct code of behavior, rational choice centers on the maximization of the good for individuals, while historical institutionalism relies on the heritage as the main variable for explaining the exact course of action. Historical institutionalism emphasizes the importance of initial decisions and choices of venues and introduces notions such as path dependency, traditions and response to structural-functionalism (Thelen, 1999). Decisions of actors are set on a given path, from which a shift is extremely costly in terms of past investment. Ikenberry (1994) captures the essence of a historical institutional approach to path dependency in his characterization of political

development as involving critical junctures and developmental pathways. In other words, actors act within the set institutions due to the predictability and traditionalism they offer, however critical junctures are moments where evolution and change can occur and thus creates a new path dependency, or ways of acting.

As it was previously noted in the article, data on youth work in Croatia is scarce and little analysis exists on its development, current practices and performance, or on its future perspective and challenges. However, for the past two decades plenty of youth work practice and its various modes have been “documented” within not-for-profit organizations active in the field. In addition, the authors have rich experience as well as broad knowledge about the youth work in Croatia, as we have been engaged in most of the youth work “developmental phases” in Croatia, (re-)playing our roles either as (certain) CSO founders and active members, members of governing and executive boards in CSOs, volunteers, and members of various working groups and advisory boards of the Government of the Republic of Croatia as well as for the local and regional authorities. Therefore, we draw on our conceptual framework for analyzing youth work development in Croatia not only from data available (e.g., project reports, annual reports, very few texts on the social work approach to youth work, surveys on youth), but from our own experience as well.

By all means, we do understand the limitations of a chosen methodological approach, and are aware of the necessary restrictions in offering any kind of generalizations on youth work in Croatia. However, we still believe that this article has potential to offer a (new) perspective on this issue. Although still a work in progress, our perspective and proposed (conceptual) framework of youth work development in Croatia, seeks to offer a historical and path-dependent scenario for describing the “evolution” of youth work in a national context.

## THE “EVOLUTION” OF YOUTH WORK IN CROATIA: FROM PEACE BUILDING TO PROJECT-ORIENTED

The development of youth work activities in Croatia has been embedded within the development of civil society, meaning in this case, the not-for-profit sector. Both have been shaped by the immense turnover from socialist to declaratively democratic society in the beginning of the 1990s, followed by a five-year long war, and then by a postwar transition throughout the mid and late 1990s and into the early part of 2000s. This legacy of violence remains and division remains still quite present in terms of the transition challenges.

A specific political environment characterized each of these periods. We propose a four-phase framework to assist us in analyzing the development

of youth work in Croatia. By drawing from our own experience, as well as from available data, we describe those phases and recognize various patterns and trends. While it is hard (not to mention incorrect) to assign many of the Croatian youth work practices exclusively to one of those phases, such a framework has been created for this particular purpose to support an analysis of those significant and major influences and emerging trends in various phases of youth work development in Croatia. This does not mean that other forms of youth work were not characterized for a particular phase, but rather that they were not recognized as the *spiritus movens* of youth work in a particular time-line. We have recognized several fields of development of youth work in line with relevant sociopolitical changes. The following are youth work pillars: peace building, nonformal education, networking and advocating for youth policies, structuring youth work through projects of youth organizations. Each will be portrayed in following subsections.

### Early 1990s: Youth Work as “Direct Peace Building Platform”

With the aim to create as much visible distance from the socialist type of engaging youth in publicly based working activities, popularly known as youth work actions (in Croatian: *omladinska radna akcija*—ORA), youth work in the early 1990s in Croatia was shaped in different ways—a main difference from previous work with youth was in treating youth as a subject in need of various social services, rather than as a subject who delivered services following agenda of a (former) political regime in order to build an infrastructure and mobilize support for the socialist political regime.<sup>2</sup> During the early 1990s, youth work portrayed young people as subjects engaged in creating local changes and contributing to broader social development.<sup>3</sup> While youth work activities were dominantly influenced and shaped by the Homeland war, this initial phase of youth work was still strongly shaped by youth rebellion towards the old authoritarian regime. Youth struggled to overcome their (previously) marginalized position in politics and decision-making as well as to overcome the created distance from their own involvement in shaping the life of their (local) communities. We argue it was the Anti-war Campaign in Croatia that strongly advocated for the bottom-up peace building and nonviolent civic actions and created a new space for young people and their engagement.

The Anti-war Campaign was established in 1991 as a civic voice against the violence that occurred after disintegration of Yugoslavia. It was pushed by a significant number of youth peace activists in Croatia. The Anti-war Campaign involved thousands of young people from Croatia and abroad. Various direct fieldwork actions were common in war zones and in many divided communities. Young people were engaged in various bottom-up activities, such as: (a) direct peace building, as part of the Volunteers Project Pakrac, for example—this project represented one of the main activities of

the Anti-war Campaign during and after the war, symbolizing the bottom-up peace building, directly supported by the United Nations (UN) and based on the principle of exchange with international volunteers; (b) direct protection of human rights and direct fieldwork with civilian victims of war (work of an organization Suncokret in refugee camps through psychosocial and economic support in daily life); and (c) media activism, mainly represented through publishing one of the first politically radical and ultimately critical fanzines *ARKzin* and many other fanzines as well as alternative newspapers. Advocating for the right to conscientious objection for military service, protesting against violence and requests for solidarity were the basis of youth work during that period. In addition, many involved in this emerging field of practice were also in the constant search and working to build the horizontal, co-led and cooperative structures between young people and others and build a culture of consensual decision-making, creating at the same time a specific sub-political field (Zakošek, 2008).

These initiatives were strongly influenced by general theories of “civil society” and, in particular, by the concept of “non-violent conflict resolution.” A number of civic initiatives and CSOs that are still active today have emerged from the Anti-war Campaign and Volunteers’ Project Pakrac, such as the Centre for Peace Studies, the Centre for Women’s Studies, and Volunteers’ Centre Zagreb. These and newly established organizations in the after war period began their work in the field of nonformal education as a form of capacity building of youth activism and youth work in local communities, strongly supported by various foreign (international) donors.

#### Mid and Late 1990s: Youth Work as “Nonformal Educational Platform”

From the mid to the end of the 1990s, youth work in Croatia was being developed through a number of nonformal educational programs mainly focusing on nonviolent communication, nonviolent action and conflict transformation, listening skills and youth participation in development of local communities. During this time period a youth organization Mali Korak (*Small Step*) initiated one of the first nonformal education programs on nonviolent communication for citizens and teachers mainly, thus setting up educational practices based on experiential learning and participatory learning methods in building and shaping civic competence. A number of others CSOs, similar in the scope of their activities, followed this example. Those CSOs have established innovative civic and human rights educational programs that were focused on nonviolent communication and nonviolent transformation of conflicts. Such programs were brought into classrooms and classes in many of Croatian elementary and secondary schools, especially in the war-affected areas.

Building such cooperation between CSOs and schools was not an easy path, but has proved to be one of the most influential patterns in terms of delivering services to schools. Those organizations from mid and late 1990s

set up the “cornerstone” for the upcoming CSOs and various opportunities in building fruitful cooperation between CSOs and schools. From that period on it was the CSO scene that invested an immense amount of resources into further education of teachers, supported by number of published handbooks on content and methods to be used in schools through the framework of civic education.

Until today, nonformal educational programs, together with youth work that covers the area of working with young people with fewer opportunities, remain two of the most developed approaches of youth work in Croatia, covering different fields and topics by engaging young people in peer-to-peer support and action based problem solving. Such nonformal educational programs were widely supported and enriched with youth involvement in community work, primarily targeting capacity building of youth leadership and youth groups. One of the pioneers of such youth work was the Centre for Social Education—PRONI, which supported the development of a number of youth-led clubs and youth centers in eastern part of Croatia.

The work of PRONI, and similar organizations like the Centre for Peace and Nonviolence, the Centre for Peace Studies, the Forum for Freedom Education were part of the second wave of civil society development and subsequently youth work that “came out in the scene” after 1998. These organizations have set up a number of nonformal educational programs aiming at empowering young individuals in their local communities (trainings on communication and conflict resolution skills, mediation, youth leadership, nonviolence, decision-making), strengthening youth organizations and their role in developing youth work in their communities as well as structuring the first advocacy initiatives to promote changes in educational policies oriented toward building youth civic competence. This period was mainly marked with the process of the Peaceful Reintegration of Podunavlje region (Western and Eastern Slavonia). Such youth work was even more structured and empowering after 2000, marked by the election of social democrats. That period is usually portrayed as a more serious step towards democratic changes and political pluralism in Croatia.

The late 1990s was a period of strong youth involvement through independent cultural forms and activism as well. The work done by these initiatives remains vibrant today, such as the cultural cooperative exchange platform Clubture. The language used also has influenced how practice is understood and described. Started in 2001, the Clubture has built strong programmatic platform of independent cultural (many youth) organizations, initiatives and youth cultural clubs focused on exhibitions, festivals, publishing, street actions and performances, and many other cultural forms. Those CSOs and initiatives that developed during this time period have strongly influenced (national) cultural policies, and have demanded cooperative models in the governing of public space and infrastructure, infrastructure for youth and their leisure time (locally supported youth clubs and youth centers) and

have supported themselves and the work of youth organizations in various Croatian communities.

Within this period, we can track a significant rise in the number of youth, cultural and other civic initiatives registered as CSOs. The cultural CSO scene remains one of the strongest sectors in the country. That is why, we argue, that in addition to the peace-building sector, cultural focused youth programming and youth organizations play another important foundation for contemporary youth work in Croatia. While peace building has been dispersed through a variety of other approaches, nonformal education and cultural youth work remain strongly articulated priorities of current youth work in Croatia. The independent cultural sector has been strongly connected to these approaches and recognizes cooperation and networking as a key step for policy change.

### From 2000 Onward: Youth Work as “Networking and Youth Policy Advocacy Platform”

After the initial 1998 mapping of youth work in the country, the first serious gathering of a majority of youth organizations happened in 2002 when the Croatian Youth Network was established as a program exchange and advocacy coalition. Gathering most of the active civic, peace building, cultural, media activism, environmental and other youth organizations, the Croatian Youth Network gathered the main actors to ensure continuous support in youth development. The network was established in 2002 by 28 youth organizations aiming at stimulating continuous cooperation in improving conditions for developing youth activism and youth work in Croatia. All of those organizations shared the same dedication to advocacy and creating just and concrete youth policies that would enable the development and sustainability of youth organizations.

We find it is quite important to emphasize that most of those actors were the same (young) people and CSOs that were active in the phases we previously described. Mobilizing organizations and individuals to advocate for youth policy in Croatia remained one of the primary foci in the past decade. As a result of this newly established national youth umbrella organization advocacy, the (first) national youth policy framework has been created, although many challenges still remain (e.g., infrastructure, sustainable funding, framework for analysis of youth work, recognizing youth workers in national classification of professions). Today, the Croatian Youth Network represents an alliance of 69 youth CSOs acting as the National Youth Council in the Republic of Croatia. However, the work remains on the level of advocacy to create and enable a (sustainable) framework to support youth work throughout Croatia. It works to support the formation of youth work as a practice and because this work is at a beginning stage and it remains endangered.

The youth work has yet to be institutionalized and systematically supported. Its development is not guaranteed. Since youth policies have not recognized youth work formally and have not ensured adequate support to youth organizations, much of the work has become project-oriented, marked by continuous fundraising to keep the (youth) work alive.

### Today: Youth Work as “Project and Funding Oriented”

It is too early to capture the historical perspective of the past five to six years, yet we feel that a (simple) review might contribute to a better understanding of the eclectic context of youth work in Croatia. While previously described phases had quite clear foci and pathways for youth initiatives and (youth) CSOs “paved” the way for young people to be involved in peace building, activism, advocacy, and cultural work, we notice this has not been the case in the last couple of years. We do witness a strong interweaving of youth policy advocacy within a number of youth initiatives working with young people on both local and national levels. However, collaboration and synergy between the actors involved in youth work, as recognized in the previous phases, has disappeared. This is just one of the consequences of the weakened youth sector and youth CSOs’ position to advocate at the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth (2013), to address the numerous issues and challenges young people and youth work face in Croatia.

Having (scarce) national, but also EU funds at their disposal, it seems that (most) CSOs produce projects to get funding with the aim to keep their organizations “alive.” Another new and important aspect represents EU policy on youth work, as there are notable differences between what has been praised as youth work in the EU context and what we consider to be youth work in a doubly deprived (postconflict and transitional) contested space like Croatia. While most of the EU countries’ definitions of youth work merge with services, leisure time, personal development, and especially educational opportunities for entering the labor market, we believe that the particular reality of doing youth work in postconflict zones has to be acknowledged as well. That is why, among other reasons, we find the systematic analysis of youth work in our national framework important.

While there is large number of CSOs in Croatia that describe children and youth as their direct beneficiaries, it is remarkable that there has been no analysis or research of any kind in regard to their impact on youth development. As time goes by, many organizations that played a very important role as grassroot organizations during the 1990s when youth work was beginning to develop now represent professional organizations. Some of these have changed the scope of their work, some have lost that particular informal contact with young people, some produce projects for young people

to engage in but without actually engaging them in planning and designing such projects and activities, and most have developed this particular project-management approach that young people find for the most part unappealing. In addition, the “getting old” phenomenon of the youth sector is in place—individuals, initiatives, and organizations who have been most active in building the youth sector in Croatia from the early 1990s are disappearing from the youth scene. Those who have built the youth sector are no longer represented. In the meantime, new generations of youth (projects) consumers, instead of youth leaders, have filled the void. Obviously, such observations are in need of a much deeper analysis, but here we presented our informal observations with the aim of merely scratching the surface of describing today’s context of youth work in Croatia. The accuracy of our observations will be determined by what happens over the next several years.

To avoid any misconceptions, we do not claim that youth work is exclusively related to CSOs, but argue that CSOs have been more dominant in supporting youth work in Croatia. For example, while extracurricular activities have historically been part of Croatian (and former Yugoslavian) youth work, we argue that such activity has never been dominant let alone most influential in the context of youth work development in Croatia. That is why in particular we argue for a more in-depth analysis of the role that youth work has played, especially with the respect to its early foundations.

In the light of the findings stated in previous paragraphs we present a case of youth work in the area of working with youth with fewer opportunities, offering the dense description in order to get an impression of the conjunctures of youth work in Croatia. This particular area was chosen mostly due to its relevance for post conflict societies, but for several other reasons as well. In comparison to other social groups, young people in Croatia undergo “double-transition” process—not only the one from childhood to adulthood, but the social transition as well (from non-democratic to democratic society), one that affects young people the most. As this “double-transition” is not challenging enough, it has been weighted by the economic crisis as well, placing young people in Croatia, and especially those with fewer opportunities, in a very precarious situation of huge unemployment and with scarce resources for their own growth and independence. Recognizing the immense challenge that economic crisis has put on young people in the EU, Council of the European Union emphasize the importance of youth social work and the prevention of youth social exclusion (Institute for Social Work and Social Education, 2008). Since this type of (social) youth work has been rather well developed in Croatia, both as a “safety net” of services as well as a platform for youth with fewer opportunities empowerment, by presenting such paradigmatic case, we want to illustrate the particular challenges faced by youth work in contested spaces.

## CASE OF YOUTH WORK: YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FEWER OPPORTUNITIES

Due to its relevance for understanding youth work in post conflict societies, we provide a case of youth work in Croatia, by describing youth work practice with young people “with fewer opportunities.” The European Union defines youth with fewer opportunities as “*Young people that are at a disadvantage because they face one or more obstacles, such as social, economic and geographical obstacles, cultural differences, educational difficulties, health problems or disability*” (Youth on the Move Initiative, 2010). In certain contexts, these situations/obstacles prevent young people from having effective access to formal and nonformal education, (transnational) mobility, participation, active citizenship and general inclusion in society. In contentious places young people with fewer opportunities are in greater need for care and support than any other social group.

In the Croatian context, some groups of young people are more vulnerable and have a higher risk of long-term unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. The most prominent groups facing such risks include: young people with disabilities and health problems, young people belonging to ethnic or national minorities (especially Roma girls that face obstacles connected with gender inequality and ethnicity), young people who have not completed their primary and secondary education, young criminal offenders, and those without adequate family support and from institutions of social care (UNDP, 2006). These groups of young people face more obstacles and often have more problems associated with achieving success in education, accessing educational programs and with employment. In addition, these groups of young people are more likely to need alternative educational programs and additional support around employment and inclusion. An additional problem is that needed measures are often not provided in a systematic and effective way.

### Facing and Overcoming the Obstacles

Young people from remote areas, young people living on small islands or peripheral regions, young people from disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, and young people from less serviced areas (e.g. limited public transport, poor facilities, abandoned villages) usually face geographical obstacles. In Croatia, geographical obstacles are present in those places that lack infrastructure or transportation connections. Young people from island communities and rural areas face these obstacles the most in Croatia. Often, those young people also face economic obstacles because they do not have sufficient opportunities for employment in their communities.

Economic obstacles such as low standard of living, low income, long-term unemployment or precarious living situations and dependence on social

welfare system are a reality for a large number of young people in Croatia (Youth on the Move Initiative, 2010). Groups that are especially vulnerable are young people in debt or who have financial problems; young people living in poverty and homeless young people. According to the Croatian Employment Agency, Eurostat<sup>4</sup> and the most recent research done by the Croatian Youth Network, youth unemployment (of young people up to age of 30) has been around 50% for the past three years, a comparatively high level of unemployment compared to other European countries. After Greece and Spain, Croatia is considered to be third worse when it comes to youth unemployment in the EU. In addition, those young people that are working usually have unsecure jobs. Educational difficulties that young people with learning difficulties face, as well as those early school-leavers and school dropouts, nonqualified persons, young people that didn't find their way in the school system and young people with poor school performance, represent quite serious obstacles for social inclusion and especially for economic stability (Youth on the Move Initiative, 2010).

Most authors emphasize that lower levels of education and a lack of relevant knowledge and skills (especially soft skills), present the highest risk factors for social exclusion (Bynner & Parsons, 1997; Hobcraft, 1998; Milas, Ferić, & Šakić, 2010). Low educational achievement, defined as completing only primary school, can have a negative impact on employment (Matković, 2009). Better education decreases the risk of long-term unemployment as well as of poverty and welfare dependency, all of which cause huge economic and social losses for the society as a whole (Youth on the Move Initiative, 2010). That is why additional attention should be devoted to young people that are not included in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). In fighting against economic obstacles, the priority is to secure a place in the labor market for young people or involve them in further education or vocational training (Youth on the Move Initiative, 2010, p. 35). Therefore, the following measures are proposed to help young people from the NEET group: development of adequate records of young people excluded from education and the labor system in order to compare data and mutual learning between EU Member States and the development of active labor market policies that will enable every young person who has been unemployed for more than 6 months to find a job or continue education or have access to another form of vocational training (Youth on the Move Initiative, 2010, pp. 14–15).

Active inclusion of young people, with particular focus on the most vulnerable groups, requires a combination of adequate income support, inclusive labor market measures and access to quality services (Youth on the Move Initiative, 2010, p. 36). Many unemployed young people, especially if they have never worked, have no access to unemployment benefits or other income support. To address this problem, access to social benefits, where appropriate, should be ensured, and where necessary, expanded to

provide income security. At the same time, effective and efficient measures should ensure that benefits are only awarded if the young person is engaged in active job searching or in further education or training. This is of key importance to avoid benefit traps. Modernization of social security systems should address the precarious situation of young people. A growing number of young people are being moved into (permanent) disability benefits. While some may not be able to work fully, even with suitably adapted workplaces, others could find a way back to the labor market through well-designed policies (Youth on the Move Initiative, 2010, p. 36).

Social obstacles that prevent full inclusion of youth are discrimination (because of different origins such as gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and disability), lower social skills or antisocial and risky behaviors. Groups in need for additional support are: (ex-)offenders, (ex-)drug addicts, young people who are single parents, young people without adequate family support and young people placed in public institutions (Youth on the Move Initiative, 2010). Cultural differences often lead to social exclusion as well. Young immigrants, refugees, or descendants from immigrant or refugee families, young people belonging to a national or ethnic minority, young people with linguistic adaptation face (social) exclusion (Youth on the Move Initiative, 2010). In Croatia young people who are at most risks include those that belong to a national or ethnic minority, especially Serbian and Roma youth (primarily Roma girls), LGBTIQ youth, offenders and ex-offenders, and youth placed in public institutions.

Young people coming from uneducated parents as well as Roma youth face greatest risk for school dropout, which often connects with social exclusion (Matković, 2009; Milas et al., 2010). Official data from the Croatian Ministry of Education reveal there has been a continuous increase over recent years of the number of Roma minority pupils in elementary schools. Official data on enrollment in secondary schools however indicate an alarming rate of interruption of education at the primary level, and further highlights the problem of Roma students dropping out of high school. Roma pupils often come from families where their parents often failed to complete primary school or completed only primary school and are often low-income. The ongoing cycle of school drop out suggests that the education system did not manage to provide equal opportunities and often functions to reinforce existing social inequality and deepen social exclusion of certain groups (Matković, 2009; UNDP 2006).

Disabilities such as mental (intellectual, cognitive, learning), physical, sensory or other disabilities are recognized obstacles for social inclusion. In addition young people with chronic health problems, severe illnesses or psychiatric conditions often face social exclusion.<sup>5</sup> Also, because there is a lack of programs to support young people with chronic health conditions in the local communities a lot of them live in public institutions their entire life or when they are going to school. Such institutions are usually placed outside

their own local communities, meaning separation from their families as well. They face severe obstacles in social inclusion, including institutionalization, exclusion from the labor market and physical obstacles that prevent them from moving in the public space.

### Youth Work With Youth With Fewer Opportunities

Through different periods, different approaches were used to provide support for youth with fewer opportunities, from biomedical to human rights and inclusion approaches that emphasize the importance of individual needs and potentials as well as the importance of connection between individuals and the community. The role of the professionals differs from the universal approach based on the biomedical model to understand what is needed and what services are provided for support to a more postmodern approach focused on acceptance of diversities and creating unique individual supports and partnerships between the professional and the young person. Through partnership and through recognizing the perspective of a young person the so-called professional is learning with the young person and the supportive activities are planned together.

In contemporary Croatian public youth policies, the human rights approach is predominant. Policies are directed toward inclusion, access to rights and activities, describing the responsibility of the community for inclusion and requiring the community to remove physical and other barriers to insure access with only the help of a personal assistant. The basic options for providing support include: deinstitutionalization, participation of youth in decision-making and respecting their perspective. All the ways for supporting youth with fewer opportunities should be developed in partnership with the youth, or with their representatives, and with the aim of equalizing opportunities.

The influence of EU policy is evident through financial support of the social inclusion programs and through an open method of coordination that is softly encouraging (national) policies to follow the same goals recognized on the European level. However, the challenge of this process is to keep continuity of support given the reality of the discontinuity of finances. The other challenge is a lack of understanding of the basic principles and concepts of social inclusion, participation of youth in decision making, and the human rights approach to youth with fewer opportunities, that can be seen especially in the big “path dependent” systems such as public social and institutional care. Path dependence can be seen as a part of the institutions of social care and the approaches usually followed while working with young people in such institutions. Strongly entrenched practices of the past still continue to firmly influence methods and forms of working with young people in such institutions. These are illustrated with the example of young people

not being able to participate in simple decision-making process about their life in such institutions, like having a choice over the color of the walls in their room or choosing their own roommates. Every day practices are very different and not all young people have the opportunity to participate in this process in such a way that their voice can be heard.

The governmental system of support is mainly secured through big public systems that are free of charge for the beneficiaries. The most important systems for youth are Education and Health. For young people who face social and economic obstacles a very important system is Social Welfare. These systems are highly regulated. While publically stating that they operate with respect for human rights and within an individual approach, this happens with an often too formal and inadequate implementation. From the perspective of young people, governmental systems are often seen as unfriendly with no concrete place for individual needs and young people's opinions. Some of the challenges and problems that are evident in every day practice of working with youth with fewer possibilities are:

- Unclear process of deinstitutionalization that may lead only to physical adaptation of facilities but not to any substantial change in the approach towards youth;
- Emphasis on local service could stay only declaratory and support could be provided to former institutions still without the (adequate) evaluation of their work;
- The challenge of involving youth in decision-making process. For some institutions the challenge is to hear the voice of the young person in making decisions about their life—from basic decisions such as the color of the room in which the young person lives to the more important decisions such as an appropriate care.

On the other hand, programs and projects offered by CSOs in Croatia are more flexible, often innovative, and can be adjusted by following young people's feedback. This is why young people/beneficiaries usually portray such activities provided by CSOs as more youth friendly. In addition, young people can influence changes and the ongoing development of such CSOs' programs/projects. CSOs use nonformal education and social services in local communities that covers various intentional, structured and organized learning situations but through interactive methods, participation, experiential learning and problem solving. The biggest challenge CSOs face is having stability of funding. Thus, (unpredictable) changes by Croatian and EU policies in terms of their funding priorities, directly influence such programs provided by CSOs. Additional challenges include program continuity and outreach to those participants that really need activities/projects/services of such a profile.

Moreover, in the end, a brief overview of the role of the youth worker as an individual (professional) that provides support and services for the youth with fewer opportunities is needed. Youth worker as a profession is still not recognized within the national classification of professions, and consequently, there are no educational study programs as part of a secondary and higher education. However, in Croatia, as in some other countries of continental Europe, there are few professions that work with youth (including youth with fewer opportunities):

- Social workers dealing with social and economic obstacles that youth is facing;
- Education and rehabilitation sciences experts, especially rehabilitators for youth with disabilities, and social pedagogues/social educators specialized for life and social skills development and prevention of risks and behavioral problems;
- Pedagogues<sup>6</sup> dealing mostly with professional orientation and education.

All of these professionals can work in different settings, from governmental systems and public institutions where their role is more structured, to the CSOs that are designing and (re-)organizing activities tailored for young people and with young people engaged. It is still the CSO space where youth work with young people with fewer possibilities can be seen in its fullest.

#### FINAL REMARKS: HISTORY ACKNOWLEDGED AND CHALLENGES RECOGNIZED

It is challenging to grasp the concept of youth work in a country where youth work is not recognized nor (formally/legally) regulated on the national level, and where the youth worker does not exist as a profession in the current Croatian Qualification Framework. It was therefore quite challenging for us to analyze the historical path of youth work in Croatia, especially without it being documented, and yet with youth work widely spread at the same time in most local communities. The conceptual framework of youth work development presented in this article was our first attempt to identify those moments in the (recent) history that influenced and shaped dominant discourse of youth work embedded in a broader civil society.

Since independence in the early 1990s, Croatian youth work was “happening” as part of broader civil society initiatives and organizations. At the time, peace building activities, youth initiatives and nonformal education had been opposed to the state values. It could be argued that youth work in the 1990s was subversive. Youth work and youth workers’ emphasis on promoting peace building and strongly criticizing the war, as well as challenging dominant narrative (as Croatia was seen only as a victim of the war without

questioning any of the governmental decisions and atrocities the Croatian military committed), has been the *modus operandi* of Croatian youth work. Despite the fact youth work was promoting values not complementary to those of the ruling party, youth work in the 1990s was not perceived as a threat but rather as an activity without much influence. Accordingly, there was lack of funding and political support from the state for various youth work programs. Youth work therefore stayed as a practice within the broader civil society and grew within those “structures.”

Therefore, we find quite important to acknowledge such initiatives and their legacy to “up to date” youth work in Croatia. Thus, we argue that contemporary youth work practices in Croatia have been strongly influenced by the antiwar and peace building activities, despite not being always recognized as such in public discourse. In addition, we find nonformal educational practices equally influential, and still very much present as a dominant form of practice for working with young people, regardless of the particular professional field. Up until now, youth work has been located within CSOs whose “rhetoric” has been more responsive to young people and their needs than the state mechanisms and institutions—the case presented on youth work with young people with fewer opportunities served as an example of how the two systems, CSO and State run, differ in their approach and ethos when working with young people. With this context in mind, it is important to acknowledge that youth work is still mostly carried out as part of CSOs’ projects, often on a voluntary basis then as a paid work, continuously facing a lack of (sustainable) financial and institutional support, being at the same time unrecognized not only in formal and legal sense, but also by the beneficiaries and general public as well (Morić & Puhovski, 2012).

We must acknowledge that the Croatian government did start to support youth work, however this support was only partial and usually focused on allocating funds for sport and similar leisure-time and activities for personal development. Although, one may say there is a theoretical ground why youth work is largely present in the civil sector, using the argument proposed by Harland and associates (2004) that the youth work profession is value-driven. According to those authors, it is the profession where financial or other material benefits do not play a major role (which automatically dissimulates state to engage in it), but rather is driven by personal satisfaction and the notion that one can help another human being. This might be the reason for youth work being “off the radar” in Croatian politics.

This argument corresponds with the more general picture of youth sector. Namely, for more than 20 years, the whole idea of youth policy in Croatia has been poorly recognized, although targeted by (youth) CSOs and their advocacy efforts as something important to put on the political agenda. Youth policy, however, has not been perceived as a policy sector worth developing. Young people did not have effective political mechanisms to influence decision-makers, nor institutions that would encourage their civic

and political development. Occupied by problems that were perceived as having greater social value (because these problems affected social groups with more power), the conceptualization and definition of youth policy and youth work never became part of the (political) agenda in Croatia.

In the last four years, more and more effort has been focused on the youth sector in Croatia. Apart from getting a ministry with “youth” in its name (i.e., Ministry of Social Policy and Youth), the youth sector also got several normative acts passed that defined some of the important issues within the youth sector. However, serious and sustainable support is still missing. Such governmental “stance” might influence the youth work with young people with fewer opportunities even more than some other aspects of youth work, having in mind the importance of socioeconomic scope of youth work with such beneficiaries. Strongly dependent on funding-driven discourse and (annual) projects provided by the CSOs, youth work in Croatia is facing serious challenges of keeping up with the real needs of young people and their social inclusion.

Even though there is lot more to be done, it is encouraging to see that the state has finally decided to put more of its focus on young people outside the classic educational policy setting—for the first time there is a working group (set up by the prospect ministry of social policy and youth) whose assignment is to define youth work in national framework as well as to set up necessary requirements for the professionalization of youth work and establishing youth worker as a profession. It is still early to tell if recent political moves of the policymakers can be understood as a critical junction (Thalen, 1999) or just a modification of the historical practice where civil society plays the major role in supporting youth work in Croatia.

## NOTES

1. The “Open Method of Coordination” (OMC) was introduced by the European Council of Lisbon in March 2000. It was a method designed to help Member States progress jointly in the reforms they needed to undertake in order to reach the Lisbon goals. The method included the following elements: (a) Fixing guidelines and timetables for achieving short, medium and long-term goals, (b) establishing quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks, tailored to the needs of Member States and sectors involved, as a means of comparing best practices, (c) translating European guidelines into national and regional policies, by setting specific measures and targets, and (d) periodic monitoring of the progress achieved in order to put in place mutual learning processes between Member States. OMC is a relatively new and intergovernmental mean of governance in the European Union, based on the voluntary cooperation of its member states. The OMC rests on soft law mechanisms such as guidelines and indicators, benchmarking and sharing of best practice. This means that there are no official sanctions for laggards. Rather, the method’s effectiveness relies on a form of peer pressure and naming and shaming, as no member state wants to be seen as the worst in a given policy area. The OMC is a light but structured way EU Member States use to cooperate at European level. The OMC creates a common understanding of problems and helps to build consensus on solutions and their practical implementation, without regulatory instruments. Added value is created by addressing common responses to problems that are supra national. The European Commission is responsible for managing the OMC, as well as representing the interests of the EU at an international level. Under the OMC, national authorities appoint representatives and individuals to be part of specialized working groups. These working groups, specializing in specific sectors, provide

input in the form of reports and studies to better tailor the European Commission's approach to dealing with priorities in various areas.

2. Youth work actions were well organized labor activities of young people in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The actions were used to build public infrastructure such as roads, railways, and public buildings, as well as industrial infrastructure. The youth work actions were organized on local, republic and federal levels by the Young Communist League of Yugoslavia, and participants were organized into youth work brigades, generally named after their town or a local national hero. Initial actions were organized during the Second World War in territories liberated by the partisans. After the war, actions were numerous and massive and the youth brigades made significant contributions to the rebuilding of their country, which was badly ravaged during the war. In addition to 'cheap labor' for the state, youth work actions provided a form of 'free holidays' for teenagers. As the country was rebuilt and its economy stabilized, youth work actions went out of fashion. However, they were revived in the late 1970s, in an effort to organize youth in political and cultural activities, as the work actions proved to play a large role in the socialization of those involved. (Srđić, 1979).

3. Recently the documentation of the Anti-war Campaign was systematized and opened for research and public usage at the Human Rights Archives coordinated by Documenta—Centre for Dealing with the Past ([www.documenta.hr](http://www.documenta.hr), [arhivzaljudskaprava.org](http://arhivzaljudskaprava.org)).

4. Eurostat is the statistical office of the European Union situated in Luxembourg. Its task is to provide the European Union with statistics at European level that enable comparisons between countries and regions.

5. There was a recent case of two young girls facing discrimination and problems with access to education because of their HIV positive status. Firstly parents and then the local authorities refused to send other children in school while those two young girls don't abandon school, so their foster parents were forced to move to another city to enroll them in another primary school.

6. Pedagogue is a profession in Europe specialized for planning, designing, monitoring, evaluating, improving, and innovating the process of children/youth/adult upbringing and education. Usually they work as experts in kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools as well as in other educational institutions and public institutions for social care (e.g., institutions for neglected and abandoned children). Recently, they engage in CSOs working in the field of professional orientation and education and in the profit sector as well, particularly targeting adults and the development of lifelong learning educational opportunities and programs. As opposed to pedagogy in the USA context, pedagogy is a scientific discipline in Europe, and pedagogues require higher education degree.

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