Elements of Formal Support for Youth Workers in Croatia

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ABSTRACT The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the fragility of organisations and institutions providing assistance to young people. While young people are facing uncertainties in their transitions, traditional safety nets have undergone a series of ruptures, and youth work providers are stretched between the needs and aspirations of young people and the scarce resources they have at disposal. Non-governmental associations in the field of youth provide a form of "out-of-school education managed by professional or voluntary youth workers that contributes to the development of young people" (European Commission, 2009, p. 11), often without a strong and structured support in tackling their professional challenges. This is especially pronounced in the cluster of 13 EU Member States, like Croatia, which, on average, have lower success rates in many fields (e.g. median income[1]). The public institutions of those countries demonstrate inadequate policy responses to youth vulnerabilities and requirements of the youth non-governmental sector. This paper focuses on the relations between experiences of youth workers within the organisational environment of youth organisations, with a focus on support received during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the analysis of respective national public policies. The semi-structured interviews conducted with eight youth experts and youth workers in 2021 focused on the institutional and policy framework and support structures for youth work during the pandemic. The analysis employed the Attride-Stirling (2001) model of thematic network. Five themes crucial for contemporary youth work in Croatia were identified: 1) prioritising youth; 2) cross-sectoral cooperation; 3) administrative and financial aspects 4) recognition of youth work, and 5) digitalisation and reinvention of youth work.

Key words: young people, youth workers, support structures, Covid-19 pandemic, youth policy.

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[1] Source: Eurostat: Mean and median income by age and sex - EU-SILC and ECHP surveys, available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_di03/default/table?lang=en, accessed December 28 2023.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerabilities of young people and revealed the inadequacies of the support structures for young people. Young people in Croatia are affected by the 'destandardization' of life trajectories due to economic fluctuations that have been affecting the economy and individual life prospects for more than three decades, accompanied by socio-political instability. Also, young people and their families from two Croatian regions were affected by the earthquake three years ago, and construction works have not yet been completed, which results in a lower quality of life for young people and the postponement of independent adulthood. The latest findings on the representative sample of youth in Croatia (Gvozdanović et al., 2019) point to an overall decline in the social position of young people compared to the position of the generations that grew up in the years after the War for Independence. The resulting social diversification led to a very sharp social stratification with an almost disappeared middle social class and a very narrow class of the new elite. The consequences are unequal access to quality education and leisure time activities, and unequal chances on the labour market, along with a long-term situation of social instability. Moreover, the social protection system in Croatia is marked by fragmentation and insufficiently developed youth support measures beyond the support that young people receive as family members or wards of institutions for dependent and neglected children and youth.

The social position of a significant share of young people in Croatia decreases the chance of young people becoming a social resource and link to a successfully functioning system of intergenerational solidarity. Instead, there are grim odds that due to a disadvantaged social position of an ineligible share of the population, young people will not be able to actively contribute to the development and growth of Croatian society and economy in the long term. Youth transition is defined by the interactive and reflective development of individual agency driven by individual aspirations and abilities to navigate structural opportunities. As Kovacheva and Rambla (2023:5) noticed, in response to the emergency, a number of policy actions that halted youth transitions were triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, such as stay-at-home orders, school and workplace closures, and infection tracking. The changes were sudden and rapid, leaving young people with fewer opportunities to navigate locally available opportunities.

Support from families and caring adults, consistent access to resources to meet their basic needs, and opportunities to access quality education and employment can help adolescents become healthy and productive members of society (Furlong, 2009). Resources and support for young people's transitions are provided by their immediate support networks, most commonly their family, friends, peers, and partners. However, individual trajectories are also shaped by the socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional structures that surround youth transitions, and not all young people have access to the resources and support they need. Gottlieb and Bergen (2010:511-521)

distinguish among social support, social networks and social integration, while they conceptualise social support as "[…] highly contingent on numerous personal, environmental, and cultural factors", which makes us conclude that social support is not permanent and inherent to social networks. Sources of support and types of support are interconnected, but empirically, it has been demonstrated that the closer the relationship, the greater the correlation among the various types of support, indicating sentiment override; people we feel close to are perceived as repositories of all types of support.

The positive contribution of family, peer groups and partner relationships has also potentially weakened during the pandemic, which has left young people in a hiatus of unfulfilled aspirations. Since the pandemic began, these gaps have widened, and an increasing number of young people are having difficulty meeting their basic needs for food, housing, health care, and income. Their struggles with material scarcity can, in turn, create major obstacles to their success as adults. Moreover, since early 2000, traditional safety nets, such as social welfare institutions, and educational and health institutions, have experienced a reconfiguration of their activities that can contribute to the wellbeing of young people. Unfavourable situation has been enforced due to the Covid-19 crisis, when youth services and medical and mental health providers had fewer staff available or were inaccessible, which had adverse effects on youth mental health (Matić, Babić and Vratan, 2022). Ajduković and Kožljan (2022) conclude that the data obtained in Croatia are in line with international research, which emphasises that the global Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to a significant increase in mental health problems both in the general population and among vulnerable groups, such as adolescents and young people.

Understanding the safety net functioning in support to a healthy transition from childhood to adulthood is one of the fundamental topics that should be tackled in a public discussion. Results of the research on the intergenerational solidarity and mental health of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic (Baketa et al., 2021) conducted by the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb served as a signpost for a qualitative research analysed in this paper that was conducted shortly after. The results of this research (n = 512) indicate that 15.0% of young people have never felt like they could ask someone for help during the Covid-19 pandemic, and 21.5% of them have rarely felt like they could ask someone for help. A total of 27.3% of young people said they were almost always or frequently troubled by their own thoughts and feelings, and 25.9% of respondents felt helpless about their problems frequently or almost always. In the last 6 months prior to the survey, 25.8% of young people stated that they almost always or often did not feel like talking about their worries. In addition, 17.2% of young people said they often or almost always had problems sleeping, while 10.0% of young people sometimes or often harmed themselves. Also, there were 6.8% of young people who claimed they had not accomplished any of their goals in

the observed period, while 24.6% of young people very rarely achieved their aspirations. Among other things, these data demonstrate the necessity of providing adequate help to young people. Often, young people feel like they have no one to turn to for assistance when faced with life challenges due to the complexity of their concrete life situations and transitions. This represents one of the key basis for the explanation why youth civil society organisations (CSOs) are essential for providing meaningful support to the young people.

In a rather rigid institutional framework, such as the one in Croatia, where there are no youth-friendly services and where a young person can access their rights predominantly through a highly bureaucratised process, the role of civil society organisations is of high importance. Youth friendly centres for young people and one-stop services for young people are practically non-existent in Croatia. The analysis by the Croatian Youth Network (Kepčija Pavlović and Tukara Komljenović, 2021) shows there are only 16 youth centres in Croatia, out of which 11 have been established by a youth CSO and five are founded by joint public-civic partnership. At the same time, the feedback mechanism teaches us that civil society organisations can fulfil their role in the field of youth only if they are supported by institutional structures through the provision of public policy frameworks, infrastructure, financial support and cross-sectoral cooperation.

2. Methodology

The main aim of this paper is to provide foundations for evidence-based youth policies by analysing the framework of youth work in Croatia and gathering insights directly from youth experts and youth workers. Policy framework analysis was intended to depict a formal framework for youth work and to identify thematic areas for semi-structured interviews. Desk research sources were consulted both at the national and international level, which also served to identify interviewees for the second phase of the research. Croatia's civic scene in the youth field is rather small and there is a high turnover of youth workers and experts working with young people due to unfavourable working conditions. The selection of respondents took into consideration the representation of experts from organisations and institutions at the national and local level. Youth workers who work with marginalised young people were also involved in the study. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted in late 2021, which included youth workers (n=5), and youth experts working in academia (n=2) or international organisations based in Croatia (n=1). A criterion for the selection of the respondents included assessment of their public recognition through participation in decision making on youth policies and managing youth research or belonging to an organisation that manages youth research. Additionally, the criterion of university diploma and at least five years of professional experience was used. Four female and four male experts, two from each of Croatian NUTS2 regions (Croatian Bureau of

Statistics, 2021) were interviewed. The interviewees signed the informed consent and agreed to the publication of the collected data for scientific purposes. Due to the already mentioned small scale of the Croatian civic scene and the risks of breaching the privacy of the respondents, no further data on the interviewees will be revealed in this paper. To safeguard respondents' anonymity, identifiable information such as age, gender, and location was omitted, and interview excerpts were referenced using their designated interview number and status (e.g. youth worker 1). The author upheld research integrity by engaging in multiple readings and conducting an initial thematic analysis, which was initially performed in Croatian and subsequently translated into English. The template for the interview consisted of 20 open-ended questions, 14 of which were analysed for the purpose of this paper. The interview template was originally designed in 2021 for the Youth Partnership (Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the Field of Youth) study on youth work in Southeast Europe (SEE), which included analysis of youth work in 12 SEE countries that has not been published. At the project's inception, only 3 interviewees from Croatia were included in the Youth Partnership study. This paper does not refer to any of those 3 interviewees' statements.

In this qualitative study, pivotal components of youth work in Croatia were identified, as well as accomplishments and hindrances to its implementation in Croatia during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews aim to respond to three research questions:

1) What is the context of youth work at the national level in regard to the structures supporting youth work, the sources of funding and the organisational capacities of youth organisations?
2) What is the state of validation and professionalisation of youth work in Croatia?
3) What are the potentials for growth and innovation in the youth field in Croatia?

A key result of the interviews lies in grasping the current state of youth work in Croatia, inconsistencies in its implementation, as well as connections and cooperation among stakeholders in the youth field. Apart from contributing to the body of knowledge on the existing support to young people and to youth work in Croatia, this study intends to contribute to the development of public policies concerning youth work and the development of systemic support to young people. Although this paper is based on a small-scale qualitative study, the results can be considered indicative and provide a foundation for discussion about future research and youth policy directions.

3. Results

3.1. Youth work policy framework in Croatia

Morciano and Scardigno (2014) suggest that the existing framework of the European Union's youth policy falls short in comprehensively capturing the unique characteristics that set youth work apart from other services or educational practices for young individuals. Across Europe, youth work encompasses a broad spectrum of fields, objectives, and intervention approaches. This diversity is often viewed as a strength of youth work because it enables adaptation to the multifaceted challenges it encounters. Nevertheless, this adaptability may result in ambiguity regarding the specific contribution expected from youth work and how it should be carried out. The term "youth work" is not yet recognised in Croatia, so it is often called "working with young people", while youth work still has not gained recognition as a profession. The competence framework, which was not accepted for inclusion in the Croatian Qualification Framework, was developed by the University in Rijeka, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb and civic society organisations in the field of youth. As a concequence, only a small number of youth experts and civil society professionals fully understand and apply the concept of youth work.

Youth policy in Croatia is mainly governed by Croatia's Central State Office for Demography and Youth, although it is also governed by other ministries, such as the Ministry of Science and Education and the Ministry of Labour and Pension System, Family and Social Policy. Previous National Programme for Youth 2014-2017 (Ministry for Social Policy and Youth, 2014) expired in 2018, and the new programme was adopted in June 2023 (Central State Office for Demography and Youth, 2023), which indicates a very long period without a consolidated youth policy framework.

In relation to youth work, there is the Volunteering Act (Ministry of Labour, Pension, Family and Social Policy, 2021) that provides basic principles, mechanisms for engaging in volunteer activities, and tools for recognising the competencies gained through volunteering. Youth policy in Croatia is also defined in the Law on Youth Advisory Boards (Ministry of Labour, Pension, Family and Social Policy, 2023), which outlines the focal elements of local youth policy. In terms of strategic orientations set up by public institutions, the guiding principles of the European Commission and Council of Europe are being followed on a very general basis, with a few important links remaining missing (i.e. the national priorities of the Bonn process).
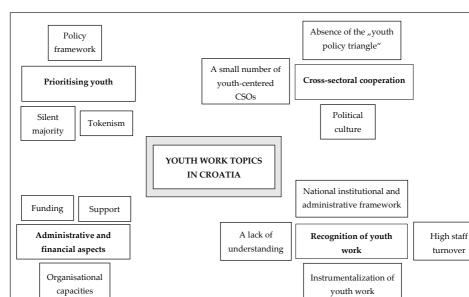
According to the analysis of the representation of technical types of goals by strategies in the youth field (Kekez at al., 2023:171), strategies related to young people are characterized by the highest degree of generality in Croatia. General goals are represented by 44%, goals focused on the method of achievement by 9%, goals focused on the responsible actor by 3%, user-oriented objectives by 0%, concretely oriented

objectives by 16%, semi-structured links by 0% and structured by 28%. The results of this analysis imply a highly generalized framework of youth policies, with a low degree of adaptability to the needs of young people and CSOs. Concerning the missing components of the national youth policy, the Covid-19 pandemic revealed inadequacies of the support available exclusively to young people. Young people are not in the focus of public policies when it comes to health; educational institutions, especially universities were the most determined in providing support to their students, while the responses from the national and local government were sporadic. In the domain of health protection, Ministry of Health is the main governmental agency responsible for health and wellbeing. On a policy level, the National Health Development Plan 2021-2027 (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Croatia, 2021) represents a strategic framework for developing health care policy. However, there is no mention of young people or their specific health needs in this strategy. Some guidelines on mental health provision are listed in the Strategic Framework for Mental Health Development Until 2030 (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Croatia, 2022). Still, the Croatian government does not have specific public policies targeting young people in the field of mental health, although some measures are being implemented on a regional and local level within the public policies.

Covid-19 added additional pressure to fragile routines of youth work that were already shifting boundaries and breaking out of the 'standard' practices (Shaw, Brady and Dolan, 2022), and this critical moment is even more emphasized in countries with underdeveloped national youth work frameworks. Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, youth services were unequally accessible to young people, depending on their socioeconomic background and residence. Potočnik and Ivanian (2022) used a combination of desk research data and in-depth interviews with experts in the youth sector and organisations providing services to young people to develop the study on youth services during the Covid-19 pandemic at the European level. Their insights indicate that access to youth services varies significantly due to unequal opportunities for the provision of these services. Due to the decrease in connections and resources, fewer youth workers and youth professionals could participate in joint actions during the pandemic. Youth organisations had difficulty developing new approaches to working with young people and providing quality user-friendly activities. These findings are supported by evidence from an analysis of public sector programmes and services (Bošković and O'Donovan, 2021), which suggests that countries with developed public sector programmes were less affected and responded better during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to these authors, public sector initiatives designed to address the changing conditions of youth services across the Council of Europe member states are an exception rather than a rule. In line with these findings, the following sections will present the results of the qualitative study on the elements of support structures for youth work and youth workers during the pandemic in Croatia.

3.2. Results of the interviews

As a result of the pandemic's onset, young people and students have been among the most affected subpopulations from a psychological perspective, especially with regard to worries and stress (Chadi et al., 2021; Gamonal-Limcaoco et al., 2021; Zhou, 2020; Ranta, 2020). On a global level, youth transitions were postponed and became more diversified than ever before (Muratori and Ciacchini, 2020). Having said this, a conclusion made by Heinz (2009) about youth transitions in an age of uncertainty can be applied to the Covid-19 pandemic as well. Because of the dramatic changes in the lives of young people resulting from the pandemic, it is likely that their wellbeing has been significantly reduced, while their family resilience and social support systems have collapsed, become ineffective, or have faced partial or complete disintegration (Samji et al., 2020). Adverse impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and crumbling of some support structures for young people put a high demand on civil society organisations in the field of youth. Having this in mind, the interviews that form the basis of this paper were conducted with the aim of gathering insights into the enabling and disabling factors for youth work in Croatia during the pandemic. Eight interviews with youth experts and youth workers resulted in five themes that emerged during the dialogues. A model of thematic network analysis by Attride-Stirling (2001) is a foundation for analysis of the themes emerging from the interviews. Attride-Stirling thematic network analysis implies the extraction of: (i) fundamental ideas visible in the text (Basic Themes); (ii) clusters of these basic themes organised to outline broader concepts (Organising Themes); and (iii) overarching themes encapsulating the primary metaphors throughout the entire text (Global Themes). These are visualized as interconnected elements, illustrating the prominent themes at each level and showcasing their interconnections. In our case, youth work topics (Global Theme) in Croatia include five Organising Themes: 1) prioritising youth; 2) cross-sectoral cooperation; 3) administrative and financial aspects; 4) recognition of youth work, and 5) digitalisation and reinvention of youth work. Each of these Organising Themes consists of three to four Basic Themes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:
Graphical representation of youth work topics in Croatia

Five quotes that contribute to the understanding of the position of youth work during the Covid-19 pandemic were selected for each of the five organising themes.

3.2.1. Prioritising youth

Youth is a time of great opportunity and potential. It is a time when individuals are just beginning to discover who they are and what they are capable of. Young people have the responsibility to make the most of their talents and abilities, to take advantage of the opportunities that come their way, and to contribute to their communities and society as a whole. In order to become supportive members of the community, young people should from early childhood experience social inclusion and the right to express their own opinions and aspirations. The initial reflections by two interviewees of different background suggest young people are still not considered equal members of the community and participants in public discussions, which contributes to the further retreat of young people from the public sphere, and their marginalisation.

Politicians have an instrumental attitude towards young people, they use them as justification for their own actions during elections. I consider it closely related to the paternalistic patterns that are present in political life, and therefore also in public policies in Croatia. Young people are simply not seen as equal partners in public policy design and implementation. (Youth expert 2)

Tokenism is still widely present in youth policy and general politics in Croatia. Young people are often there just to make a nice 'facade', while they are not given a genuine right to speak for themselves. (Youth worker 3)

A lack of genuine interest for the young people as a distinct social group is also evident from the small number of civil society organisations that are dedicated exclusively to working with young people, as described by the interviewed youth expert.

In Croatia, it is difficult to work on the civic scene, funding is irregular and there is no stable support for youth work. And society is burdened with various issues and marginalised groups. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that there are only a few associations that deal exclusively with young people. (Youth expert 1)

The desk research results indicate there is a lack of a formal policy framework adapted to the needs of young people and based on recent research on young people that would enable effective implementation of youth work activities in Croatia. The major shortcomings also concern mere formal recognition of equal rights and opportunities for marginalised young people. One of the interviewed youth workers also recognised difficulties in the realisation of marginalised youth's rights.

The youth policy framework is incoherent, but the existing public policies seem to be inclusive towards marginalised youth. Still, when it comes to implementation, marginalised youth hardly ever have their needs met. (Youth worker 1)

In addition to the policy framework and recognition of the role of young people in society, the readiness of young people to step out of their comfort zone is also pertinent for the realisation of their rights. At the same time, there are significant differences in young people's willingness to actively stand up for their rights with regard to their socio-demographic background. Young people of a higher socio-economic status and young people who have succeeded in one of the areas that are publicly recognizable more easily exercise their rights or are more willing to stand up for their realisation.

In my experience, most young people belong to the 'silent majority'. They do not know how and when to express their aspirations and look for options for their realisation. Or they don't even know they have the right to it. Outstanding individuals, very often of a privileged background, or young people with serious issues come to the fore. (Youth worker 4)

3.2.2. Cross-sectoral cooperation

In the last twenty years, the term "golden triangle" has often been used in the youth sector, indicating the way in which cross-sectoral cooperation in the youth field should function. More specifically, it is about multidirectional communication and cooperation based on respect among all partners in the process – civil society organisations, public institutions and researchers in the field of youth. Besides, the need for direct involvement of young people in the cross-sectoral cooperation has been increasingly advocated for in the last decade, and youth workers and youth researchers are trying to promote this postulate, as stated by one of the interviewed youth workers.

> *There is a need to develop cross-sectoral and intra-sectoral cooperation and civic dialogue between various stakeholders, giving a voice to young people.* (Youth worker 1)

However, as illustrated by the statements of interviewed youth workers and youth experts, effective cross-sectoral cooperation in the youth field has not been realised in Croatia so far.

> *Youth policy triangle is often present in public discussions. In the youth policy triangle young people are at the centre, and politicians, youth workers and researchers cooperate in order to achieve youth well-being. In reality, youth workers do not trust politicians due to past negative experiences. At the same time, young people feel abandoned due to the lack of opportunities to fulfil their aspirations. Young people do not have a complete insight into the situation and often blame those who create at least some opportunities, i.e. youth workers, for the lack of opportunities at the local level.* (Youth expert 1)

The lack of cross-sectoral cooperation and hasty statements labelling young people further diminish the potential involvement of young people in the process of creating and implementing public policies and activities for young people. Youth workers have highlighted the detrimental impact of negative public discourse about young people as one of the obstacles to cross-sectoral cooperation.

> *Public discourse and politicians' statements about young people are often characterised by harmful phrases, such as "youth are irresponsible". During the Covid-19 pandemic, similar statements were repeated in the context of young people spreading the virus through irresponsible behaviour. It is difficult to have an honest and constructive dialogue with politicians after such statements.* (Youth worker 5)

Updated policy framework adapted to the recent data on youth status and aspirations can present a basis for deepening cross-sectoral cooperation only if policy makers and state structures provide support to researchers and use research data without adapting them to political programmes.

Effective implementation of public policies can be achieved only through honest dialogue and a clear division of responsibilities. And implementation must be preceded by analysis, that is, regular monitoring by youth research, which is not the case in Croatia, since the politicians do not want to take existing data into account. (Youth worker 2)

In Croatia, for the last thirty years, the research community has been facing a superficial overview of research data in the process of creating or reviewing public policies. In addition, due to the frequent changes of government officials, researchers would often lose public policy partners with whom they have already agreed certain research activities.

Youth work is marked by insecurity due to deficiencies in political culture, i.e. in the continuity. After every political election, key public officials change their position, which prevents the development of quality youth work support and demotivates experienced youth workers to stay in the youth field. (Youth expert 3)

3.2.3. Administrative and financial aspects

The infrastructure of youth work refers to the resources that enable the performance of youth work activities, such as physical spaces, youth organisations and organisations for youth, state organisations and public bodies that directly or indirectly deal with youth work and national and local public policy documents in the field of youth. In Croatia, public services for young people are accessible in the macro-regional centres, while youth people can access services at the local level rarely.

While in large cities there is generally a solid youth work infrastructure, this is almost completely absent in villages and small towns. (Youth worker 5)

The lack of support directed at young people at the local level, the level where young people live and try to solve everyday challenges, is also evident from the statement of another interviewed youth worker. Additionally, when discussions about the need to open and develop local youth centres emerge on the agenda, decision makers show incomprehension and reluctance to get to know the needs of the youth scene.

Most often, young people at the local level do not have access to a youth centre where they could get professional support, gather and creatively spend their free time. At the level of public policies, youth centres are discussed occasionally, but public officials do not understand what the roles of youth centres are, nor what is needed to open a youth centre. (Youth worker 4)

The Croatian system is still not welcoming multi-thematic youth centres that would provide on-site support to young people. Instead, there is a highly bureaucratized pub-

lic sector that requires much time and efforts from their users. It is especially visible in the low or non-existent support provided to youth mental health outside of hospital centres. At the same time, youth organisations feel an increasing need to support young people at the local level, which was especially evident during the Covid-19 pandemic.

> *It seems to me that even before the pandemic, policy makers began to place more and more emphasis on the role of civil society in resolving social issues. But these demands were not followed by support and matching funding from policy makers and public officials. Youth workers were simply left to themselves to solve what public institutions could not.* (Youth expert 2)

Youth organisations, along with other CSOs, rely heavily on project-based funding to sustain their activities and they most often do not have secured structural funding. This reliance becomes particularly challenging for organisations that struggle to secure projects through higher-profile tenders.

> *There are insufficient funds for increasing and maintaining organisational capacity, both with regard to infrastructure and to human capital. In the first case, it means that organisations are often unable to cover basic costs like rent, bills and fixed costs and maintain or improve the equipment they use.* (Youth expert 3)

Following the lockdown and the inability to directly engage with young people, and implement project activities as planned, the amount of funding provided has decreased.

> *Although there are some grants allocated to youth work at the national level, those have been significantly reduced during the pandemic. And many municipalities do not have grants dedicated to youth work.* (Youth worker 2)

Croatian Youth Network (2021:16) identified the critical challenges faced by the youth civic sector during the pandemic – funding and influence on activities. Most public calls, which determine the funding of organisations, were postponed or cancelled. Allocation of grants was postponed or cancelled due to redirection to the health sector. Additionally, the work of the international organisations and organisations that mainly work on youth mobility activities was suspended, despite the efforts of the national and regional organisations that provide volunteering opportunities. Scarce resources of the CSOs often result in an imbalance between personal and professional life, an uncertain nature of employment within these associations, and financial instability within the sector, hindering the attraction of human capital. Consequently, this creates a cycle where organisation members are overburdened, leading to an inability to address issues due to the lack of a stable workplace. In Croatia, this phenomenon, referred to by Primorac (2021) as "self-exploitation," is a prevalent pattern within civil society organisations.

3.2.4. Recognition of youth work

Currently, the Croatian national institutional framework and administrative settings do not act as enabling factors in the youth field. Concretely, National Occupational Classification still does not include the occupation of youth worker and there is no formalized educational pathway that would lead to the title of youth worker. Youth work in its contemporary meaning emerged only after the War of Independence.

> *Youth work has started to draw attention in the Croatia region only in the last three decades, after the dissolution of the socialist regime. Prior to that, it was mainly a form of after-school activity of young people, often focused on scout and sport organisations.* (Youth expert 1)

Young people engaged in youth work activities benefit from the opportunities to embrace problem-solving approaches, creativity and innovation, which can all help them in establishing meaningful life patterns and satisfaction. Despite the widely acknowledged benefits of youth work and non-formal learning, youth work still has to struggle for recognition. The lack of formal support leads to youth workers' demotivation, human resource depletion and their departure to more stable sectors.

> *The sector's biggest challenge is the lack of recognition of youth work, which leads to a high turnover in youth workers. This way, significant resources are lost because organisations and institutions keep losing those with formal qualifications, as well as those who have acquired them through work and experience.* (Youth worker 3)

Two statements of youth workers depict challenges faced by the youth workers, primarily with regard to understanding the role of youth work and youth workers in society.

> *During the pandemic, there was greater recognition of the role of youth work in society. However, there is still no understanding of the role of youth work and the kind of support that youth work needs to ensure meaningful and effective activities for young people.* (Youth worker 5)

It can also be noticed that public officials sometimes make use of youth work when it is convenient for them, that is, that they tend to instrumentalize the role of youth work.

> *Youth work is kind of recognised only at the instrumental level - when it needs to solve some social problem or fill in the gap in youth leisure time activities.* (Youth worker 4)

Individual decisions whether and when to join youth work activities are strongly affected by a lack of a systemic approach to youth work. The absence of formal edu-

cational pathways for youth workers and non-recognition of competences acquired through informal education close the channels of entry into the world of professional youth work.

> *Youth workers become youth workers mostly because of ad hoc choices rather than planned educational and career plans. Therefore, it is necessary to work on the establishment of clear educational frameworks and paths that youth workers can choose in the early stages of their education and careers.* (Youth expert 2)

Absence of recognition of youth work as a profession completes the picture of the shortcomings in the support available to youth work in Croatia. Civil society organisations in the youth field were left to cope with fewer human and financial resources during the Covid-19 pandemic. Unregulated youth policy framework does not support confidence in the imminent change in the status of youth work in Croatia. However, as the next section will show, youth organisations and youth workers showed resilience and found a way to reinvent youth work during the pandemic.

3.2.5. Digitalisation and reinvention of youth work

The Covid-19 pandemic caught us unprepared at the beginning of 2020. European societies' line of thought can be summed up under the phrase "not in my back yard". It is equally valid for all parts of society, that is, for civil society organisations as well. Intergovernmental institutions, crisis headquarters, national and local authorities, business organisations and civil society organisations had to devise a response to the crisis and organise their activities in a short period of time.

> *The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the reshuffling of the youth sector and there are new elements of youth work emerging. This crisis proves that youth work is in a constant process of invention and reinvention.* (Youth expert 2)

Nowadays, four years after the start of the pandemic, some organisations and institutions have embraced a hybrid mode of work. It seems that hybrid activities have taken root especially in civil society organisations since this mode of functioning makes it easier to sustain their activities despite the lack of organisational, human, and financial resources.

> *During lockdown, provision of the majority of services was put on hold and there were no organised efforts to provide youth services digitally, while some services were accessible on rather strict conditions that required phone or e-mail appointment before a meeting or consultations.* (Youth worker 5)

Sociologija i prostor

The pandemic not only increased young people's vulnerability, it also made support services more crucial for them (RAY Network, 2020). Escamilla and Lonean (2021:8) point out that "research on the impact of the pandemic on youth work, youth organisations and the digitisation of youth services has revealed increasing inequalities and the risk of marginalisation for young people with limited access to technology". Statements by two Croatian youth workers demonstrate one of the shifting points in youth work actions during the pandemic.

> *We had to manage Covid crisis in various ways. Not only with acquisition of new equipment, because most associations only have computers for administration and accounting purposes, but we also had to learn how to communicate in an entirely different ways and how to use digital technology in a youth-friendly way.* (Youth worker 4)

> *It has become extremely difficult to achieve a display of authentic emotions and to share vulnerability via digital technologies. It is evident in both one-to-one and group communication.* (Youth worker 2)

Despite the obvious benefits of digital technology, there are some serious shortages of its usage in providing services to youth. The uneven quality of youth work carried out online and directly is striking, and it is widely accepted that digital youth work may not always be feasible or a substitute for human interaction (Liu et al., 2019).

> *Digital technologies enable communication in a situation of closures, but they also present an additional obstacle youth workers and young people have to overcome in order to share a message. We have to be very attentive to the youth needs and very innovative in order to reach young people in need, especially the vulnerable ones.* (Youth worker 1)

There are a number of reasons why digital youth work cannot replace real-life experience, according to the interviewees: 1) young people often do not have a 'safe' and quiet space to access the internet; 2) digital youth work has emerged relatively recently; 3) online youth work requires the skills, space, capacity, and equipment that youth workers often lack, and 4) there is no surrogate for direct communication and trust that comes from direct one-to-one interaction. Challenges identified by youth workers and youth experts remain the ground on which new solutions for youth work improvement can be developed. Many of these challenges can be solved by youth organisations and youth workers themselves. However, the quality development of youth friendly services requires both an institutional and policy framework, which remain the main responsibility of the public sector.

4. Conclusions

The evolving nature of youth work renders it vulnerable, shaping its identity, which has historically been closely tied to societal contexts. Its meanings and models shift in response to socio-political climates, ideologies, and societal values. In Croatia, youth work and youth organisations are not recognised by public sector actors as essential service providers for young people. Desk research and interviews resulted in the identification of five crucial issues (Organising Themes) concerning youth work in Croatia: 1) a lack of systemic prioritising of young people; 2) inadequate cross-sectoral cooperation; 3) insufficient support, organisational capacities and funding; 4) under-developed recognition of youth work and 5) digitalisation and emerging reinvention of youth work. It can be said that the policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in Croatia were not aligned with young people's needs due to the lack of consultation with young people and youth workers, and insufficient recognition of the specific position of the young people and CSOs during the pandemic.

Analysis by Kiilakoski (2019: 31), who has developed a framework for the classification of youth work, provides a basis for the contextualisation of youth work in Croatia. Kiilakoski identified Croatia as one of 13 countries in the fourth developmental stage (practice architectures in need of development). According to Kiilakoski, legal definitions are usually present in this group of countries. However, these countries lack the youth workers' competency framework and quality assurance. In the majority of these countries, there are no identifiable career paths of youth workers, and support from the formal education system is sporadic. The interview results conducted for this paper correspond to Kiilakoski's conclusion on the developmental stage of youth work in Croatia. These challenges faced by CSOs cannot be seen in isolation; they are intertwined with broader issues within the local environment, particularly in the political context.

While the civic sector expressed flexibility and responsiveness to the youth needs during the Covid-19 pandemic, the public sector in Croatia, with the exception of educational institutions, lagged behind in actions addressing directly young people and youth work. Croatian youth CSOs operate not with the help of the official structures, but despite the official structures, and the pandemic just added to the bitter situation of the youth CSOs and youth in Croatia. According to Heinonen and Strandvik (2020), a crisis can serve as a catalyst for reorientation of existing management strategies, and acceleration of critical thinking by questioning the fundamental assumptions of the previous operating model. This study indicates a number of positive aspects of youth work practice that emerged despite the stress associated with the pandemic. In response to the changes, civil society organisations demonstrated agility and speed that increased confidence in their organisations.

The youth workers and youth organisations have made efforts to improve the visibility of their work and mitigate the impact of the pandemic. All interviewed youth workers and youth experts reported discovering new tools they were not aware of beforehand. Prior to the pandemic, digital technology was used sporadically and most youth associations did not have a structured approach to using it. With the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, youth workers were forced to adapt to new conditions. Youth workers and youth experts agreed that the ability to connect digitally regardless of physical presence can be preserved after the Covid-19 pandemic. Youth sector innovations and inner strengths are a foundation for growth and development, and this should be acknowledged and supported by genuine cross-sectoral cooperation in Croatia.

Despite the methodological limitations, especially with regard to a small number of interviewed youth experts and youth workers, this study has a value in providing a basis for the development of better tailored evidence-based youth policies in Croatia. The Croatian Youth Network (2021) in its publication on the impact of the pandemic on young people, youth organisations and organisations for youth provided insights that align with those gathered from interviews with youth workers and experts in the qualitative study forming the basis of this paper. Therefore, the Organising Themes and corresponding Basic Themes resulting from the qualitative survey should serve as a foundation for development of well-tailored youth policy measures and support structures.

The insights gained through this study are already incorporated in the research design of the research project on the youth wellbeing and support structures before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic in Croatia and Slovenia[2]. The results of the study presented in this paper facilitated the construction of quantitative and qualitative phases of the bilateral research, both with regard to the construction of the research samples and the instruments. We can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the quality and effectiveness of public policy goals only by comparing the situations before and after 2020. Additionally, conducting a more profound analysis of how these goals interrelate, their connections, and thematic coherence is imperative. As well as applicablity of the research results and willingness of the stakeholders in the youth field to advance and further promote policy documents, support structures, organisational and administrative frameworks and recognition of the needs of young people and youth work(ers).

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Elementi formalne potpore omladinskim radnicima u Hrvatskoj

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Sažetak

Pandemija Covida-19 povećala je krhkost organizacija i institucija koje pružaju pomoć mladima. Dok se mladi ljudi suočavaju s neizvjesnostima u svojim tranzicijama, pandemija je na tradicionalnim sigurnosnim mrežama ostavila niz pukotina, a pružatelji usluga u području rada s mladima razapeti su između potreba i težnji mladih i oskudnih resursa kojima raspolažu. Nevladine organizacije u području mladih pružaju oblik „izvanškolskog obrazovanja, kojim upravljaju profesionalni ili dobrovoljni radnici s mladima, koji pridonosi razvoju mladih" (Europska komisija, 2009., str. 11), često bez snažne i strukturirane podršku u suočavanju s njihovim profesionalnim izazovima. To je posebno izraženo u klasteru od 13 država članica EU-a, poput Hrvatske, koje u prosjeku imaju niže stope uspješnosti u mnogim poljima (npr. medijan dohotka). Javne institucije tih zemalja pokazuju neadekvatne političke odgovore na ranjivosti mladih i zahtjeve organizacija civilnog društva u području mladih. Ovaj se rad usredotočuje na povezanost iskustava osoba koje rade s mladima unutar organizacija mladih, s fokusom na podršku koja im je bila na raspolaganju tijekom pandemije Covid-19 i analizu nacionalnih javnih politika. Polustrukturirani intervjui provedeni 2021. s osam stručnjaka za mlade i omladinskih radnika bili su usredotočeni na institucionalni i politički okvir struktura podrške za rad s mladima tijekom pandemije. U analizi je korišten model tematske mreže Attride-Stirling (2001). Analizom je identificirano pet tema ključnih za suvremeni rad s mladima u Hrvatskoj: 1) davanje prioriteta mladima; 2) međusektorska suradnja; 3) administrativni i financijski aspekti; 4) prepoznavanje rada s mladima i 5) digitalizacija i reinvencija rada s mladima.

Ključne riječi: mladi, radnici s mladima, struktura potpore, pandemija Covid-19, politika za mlade.