

Implementation of youth policy in Lithuania

Lithuanian youth policy is aimed at young people (14-29 years old), of whom there are more than 800 thousand – i. e. 24 percent of the total population – in the state at the moment. The legislation ensures the youth's right to participate in relevant decision making and implementation at both the municipal and the national levels.

Lithuania has been developing its youth policy for more than a decade already. It has created the legislation and the institutional system for the development and implementation of youth policy. Policymakers have defined the principles and areas of youth policy, as well as the organisational and management schemes. Seeking to create the adequate conditions for young people to be actively involved in an open and democratic society, the state carries out programs that encourage the initiatives of young people and youth organisations. In addition, it strengthens the youth NGOs' links with state and municipal institutions and channels the support coming from EU structural funds and programmes.

The new long-term strategy for youth policy, adopted in 2010, determines the action lines that correspond with the needs of youth and aims to create favourable conditions for young people in Lithuania.

The activity of Lithuanian youth policy structures is regulated by the Law on Youth Policy Framework of the Republic of Lithuania (Official Gazette (Valstybės Žinios), 2003, No. 119-5406; 2005, No. 144-5238). This law establishes the main concepts of youth policy and the principles of implementation of this policy, as well as defines the areas of youth policy. Of particular importance is this law's section on the establishment of youth policy organisation and management institutions at the national and municipal levels. The section was included under the influence of the European Union's regulations, which enforce interagency cooperation not only between organisations registered in Lithuania, but also between Lithuanian and foreign ones. Youth policy must be integrated in order to be successfully implemented. It can be said that youth policy is integrated if the structures of interagency and intersectoral cooperation are working, an integrated database of young people and youth organisations is being stored, the activity priorities of the different institutions are coordinated and human and material resources are mobilised.

Youth policy is being developed in two directions in Lithuania:

First, it is the protection of youth's interests in individual public policy areas – education and science, culture, sports, labour and employment, housing, healthcare, and so on. *Second*, it is youth

activity aimed at providing the conditions for young people to learn from experience and experiment (volunteerism, autonomy and self-governance – these are the three aspects of informal education).

Seeking to ensure interagency and intersectoral cooperation in the sphere of youth policy and drawing on the best practices of the foreign countries, the State Council of Youth Affairs was established on the basis of equal partnership while creating the youth policy structure in Lithuania and adopting the State Youth Policy Conception. At the moment, the Council of Youth Affairs is a collegial advisory institution, functioning under the Department of Youth Affairs. The Law on Youth Policy Framework also establishes the areas of youth policy implementation (civic education and military service, informal education, social and health protection, etc.) and the principles of youth policy implementation (parity principle, interagency cooperation, involvement, etc.), which constitute the foundation for the development and implementation of integrated youth policy on both national and local level.

Numerous institutions and organisations with similar names (e. g. youth centre, youth club, open youth centre, mobile youth centre, etc.) offer various kinds of extracurricular activities to young people. Developing the conception of open work with youth and seeking clarity in this sphere, i. e. wishing to better define what open work with youth is, the Department of Youth Affairs produced the Conception of Open Youth Centres and Spaces (hereinafter referred to as the Conception) and the publication Open Youth Centres for the Needs of Youth (both the conception and the publication can be found at <http://www.jrd.lt/en>). The Conception defines the objectives, tasks, target groups, principles, operators and quality requirements of the open form of work with youth. One of the Conception's principal *objectives* is to establish the open youth centres and open spaces as institutional forms of open work with youth that would seek to encourage young people with limited opportunities to engage in meaningful activity, thus pursuing diversity and quality of youth work services, accessibility to the widest possible circle of young people, and rational use of financial and human resources. The Conception defines the following terms:

Youth worker is an adult who has reached the age of 21, working outside the formal education and training system, as well as family and work activities, seeking to encourage personal and social improvement of young people through both one-on-one work with separate individuals and working with groups or communities, and possesses the professional competencies necessary for this work. The youth worker is entitled to receive payment for professional work. The youth worker's professional attitude consists of personal convictions and views, ability to establish and maintain relationships, as

well as the methodological, application, and structural competencies. It is desirable that the youth worker has an education in pedagogy, psychology or social sciences, or has otherwise acquired the competencies necessary for social work with youth. A year ago, the state youth workers training programme (the Youth Workers Certification Methodology) was launched in Lithuania, initially in the test mode in just one of Lithuania's regions. It is planned to begin to fully implement the programme starting the coming September, thus providing professional knowledge, competencies, and the associated certificate to youth workers in the rest of Lithuania.

This methodology is one of the first steps in validating work with youth in the Republic of Lithuania by creating a methodology for the certification of youth workers, which will define the procedures of qualification acquisition, upgrade and recognition for these specialists who will implement public policy. It is also the first attempt to create a national model that will link the formal and informal modes of learning. This is a considerable challenge, because the authors of the methodology, who took the European context into consideration, constantly focused on and debated the following questions: "Where does professionalism begin? Is higher education the indispensable prerequisite, or are informally acquired competencies sufficient?". This led to numerous questions and discussions. The authors of the methodology hope that the foundation for further improvement of the system has been laid, and it will only take testing it in practice, increasingly developing and improving the sphere of work with youth and educating the trained specialists. Work with youth is one of the forms of youth policy implementation that employs informal education. Work with youth, informal education, and the benefits they provide are defined and regulated by the European Council's Lisbon Agenda, adopted in March 2000, and the European Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, issued on October 30, 2000.

The second term of the Conception – *Open work with youth* – refers to a form of work with youth that amounts to the totality of educational activities and suggestions, which follows specific principles of operations; it is open to all young people living in a particular territory regardless of their social status, and is capable of attracting youth with limited possibilities to engage in other activities that are available or unavailable in their environment. In consistence with the subsidiarity principle, the priority to organise open work with youth is given to NGOs and religious communities. In areas where these organisations are unwilling to engage in this activity or lack proper competence, the local government assumes active responsibility for organising open work with youth through its institutions.

One of the primary institutional forms of open work is the so-called **open youth centre**. The latter is:

- an institution that performs open work with youth, established by municipalities, non-governmental organisations, local or religious communities (individually or jointly);
- functions in a particular social environment and seeks to provide young people living in that environment and territory with a place to spend their leisure time and to encourage them to come to the centre;
- enables young people to meet and socialize with friends, play games, listen to the music, or just spend time together, does not demand regular visits or any other kind of obligation, except compliance with regulations that are mandatory for all visitors;
- welcomes, but does not require, young people to attend various clubs that suit the needs of the young people themselves (computer, DJ'ing, breakdance, etc.), as well as projects and campaigns;
- employs skilled youth workers who are ready to speak to youths about their problems, provide counselling if there is a need for more substantial assistance, as well as orientation and mediation. The same employees assist young people with formulating their ideas, encourage to and help implement the latter, and facilitate discussion of the acquired experience;
- keeps in touch and cooperates with youth affairs-related institutions operating in the particular residential territory, such as: schools, parishes, police, youth organisations, elderships or communities, libraries, etc. Also seeks to communicate with the families of young people: sends information, organises campaigns and festivals;
- Finances its activities from the funds of local government institutions, target programs and sponsors, as well as its own funds.

While implementing youth policy, local authorities should seek to develop and maintain a network of open work with youth (youth centres and spaces) that would be evenly developed in individual residential areas and social environments, instead of being concentrated in the centre of a city or district, i. e. to ensure that this form of work with youth is accessible to young people in their living environment.

Open youth centres follow certain principles in carrying out their activities. As the forms of open work with youth may vary and change constantly, it is important to understand the key principles of such activities (institutions) and seek to implement them in practice.

- Encouragement of “spontaneous” social relations and informal social networks (establishing and maintaining relationships based on mutual trust, focus on “gangs” and social environment).

- Involvement in young people's world (in order to become experts on youths and their life situation, help solve peer conflicts, and adopt a critically motivational stance).
- Adaptation of available premises and use of available resources.
- Promotion of flexible work forms (mobile work, etc.).
- Equal cooperation with other institutions, especially those dealing with the same youths.
- Inter-institutional cooperation without competing by offering the same activities
- Simplification of organisation and administration of activities and the payment system.

Several youth centres embracing the principles of open work with youth have already been established in Lithuania, yet they are not enough. This is why the Department of Youth Affairs has identified the advantages of such centres:

- Special attention paid to young individuals with relatively limited opportunities for self-expression and involvement in social life (those with fewer opportunities as well as those belonging to more vulnerable social groups).
- Provision of the possibility of involvement to a wide circle of young people, particularly those who have a hard time finding their place in the activities organised by schools or youth organisations and services (e. g. through pricing or provision of necessary means).
- Focus on the young individual as a subject and special emphasis on mutual trust. No commercial sector competitor can afford this. This is also difficult to achieve in the spheres where the implementation of programmes is enforced at any cost.
- Promotion of social networks and connections between young people (and their groups).
- A chance for young people to restore a "tolerable" relationship with the residential environment where particular youth groups are considered to be "troublemakers" and are unwelcome.
- Conflict management focused on the welfare of the community (neighborhood) that the young person belongs to. Consulting the conflict parties, maintaining dialogue, and offering assistance in the search for solutions.
- Facilities that are relatively not overloaded with rules and suitable for various types of activities, safe atmosphere.

With the aim of developing open work with youth, around 15 different centres for non-motivated youths, established and supported by municipal and non-governmental organisations and embracing the principles and methodology of open work with youth, have begun to operate in the recent several years in various Lithuanian municipalities. The Department of Youth Affairs has lent

these centres the equipment necessary for the organisation of youth leisure activities and the operations of the centre, and provides them with all kinds of support (methodological, information, etc.).

Leaving youth policy aside, it must be noted that community and communal environment act as the prerequisite for social self-expression of youth and the regulative factor for solution of young people's problems. Youth can be identified as a separate social group and a special segment of the society that has its own specific problems, values, features and interests, and needs the attention of the state and other institutions of the society. The distinctness of youth itself is associated with the stage of human life when the individual is integrating into the society, matures, becomes independent, seeks to find his niche in the job market, creates a family and pursues material well-being.

An overview of the strategy and priorities of Lithuanian youth policy allows to conclude that the effectiveness of the latter and its correspondence with the expectations of young people is a result of its general implementation principle, based on the need to pay attention to an existing problem. Also important are the later aspects of youth policy implementation: the objectives of accommodation of different interests and needs, implementation of measures that stimulate positive developments, and effective presentation of results to the beneficiaries of youth policy – young people of Lithuania.