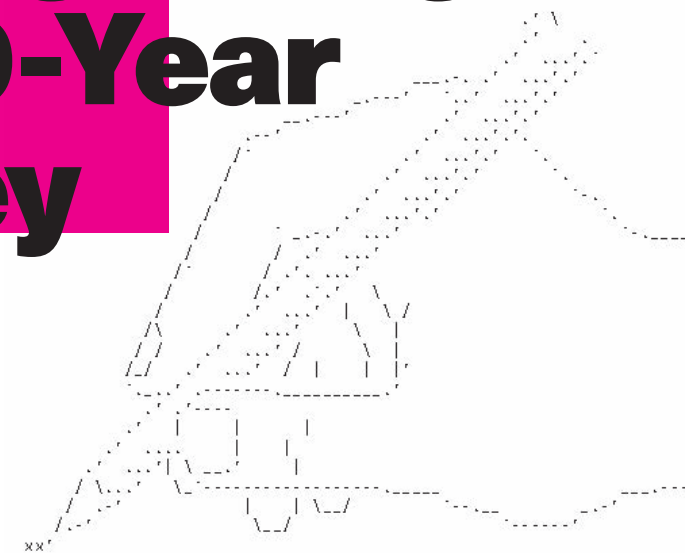


The Beginnings of a 30-Year Journey



This monograph aims to offer an in-depth look at the key shifts that have taken place within the most prominent youth and youth policy dimensions in Slovenia over the last three decades. The list of dimensions is, of course, not exhaustive; there are certainly others that deserve a closer look. Nevertheless, our work should be seen as an authentic attempt to provide a solid overview of over 30 years of effort in this often neglected field.

By tracing the key steps that have been taken in the period since Slovenian independence in 1991, we hope to establish a reference point for a consideration of the relevant development-related issues around the future of the Slovenian youth sector, and to provide key pointers for a wide variety of youth policy stakeholders. It is with this in mind that the topics and chapters have been arranged in roughly the same way throughout: an overview of the main shifts and turning points in the area under discussion, a description of how the area has developed over the last three decades, and finally (albeit to a more limited extent) an evaluation of the progress made. As far as evaluation is concerned, we offer a set of impressions and glimpses into the past, supported by data available from a variety of sources. While it is therefore difficult to refer to this monograph as an 'evaluation study' in any true sense, our assessments do provide a good starting point for a consideration of how the Slovenian youth field might look in the future. This is a common feature of all the chapters and one of the key characteristics of the monograph. The authors (or perhaps more accurately the 'correspondents') have rooted their views on future development mainly in the thoughts and opinions of the key stakeholders who have shaped, and who continue to shape, the youth field in Slovenia. Their accumulated knowledge and experience provide an invaluable source of ideas.

It is important to note, particularly for those coming to this subject for the first time, that regulation of the youth field in Slovenia did not start in 1991. Its early development

can be traced to the years preceding independence, mainly in the work that was done to organise young people and involve them in the political process. If we leave aside the period before 1980 (see e.g. Škulj, 2016), we could say that the youth arena was, prior to 1990, shared by social and political organisations that played a specific role in the system in place at the time, whether as 'sectoral' organisations, as an agreed link between young people and the world beyond, or as institutionalised ideological custodians of the system (Vurnik, 2005).¹ Under the socialist system, social and political organisations were a key form of political association for the population at large. One of most prominent was the Socialist Youth League of Slovenia (Zveza socialistične mladine Slovenije, ZSMS), which was designed to bring young people together, 'activate' them in a social and political sense, prepare them for entry into politics, and instil in them the values of the system. As an institution it was guaranteed delegate positions and, in a more informal sense, enjoyed the status of a 'transmission organisation' within the constellation of social and political organisations, the basic purpose of which was to create cadres who would later enter the social and political life of the country. This began to change at the beginning of the 1980s, when the ZSMS embarked on a process of transforming itself and the role it had been assigned under the system. For the ZSMS, the 1980s saw an abandonment of the values of the post-war era in favour of links with civil society and the gradual assumption of the values that underpinned the various (new) social movements. It therefore became increasingly involved in issues around the peace movement, ecology, spiritual and sexual freedom, and political pluralism and economic liberalism. This mirrored the key concerns of progressive youth in other parts of the world.

From then to now

With its broad organisational footing, the ZSMS in some sense provided the template for the structures that followed it. It operated in schools and universities, and in companies in which there were at least five active individuals aged 27 or under. The basic organisations came together in municipal organisations, with their leading members taking part in municipal conferences. Students and young university staff were organised within two university organisations, in Ljubljana and Maribor, and their leadership took part in university conferences. Apart from the republic (i.e. national) conference, these were the only social and political organisations that participated in high-level politics, on occasions as a kind of opposition to the republic conference. As the umbrella organisation that encompassed all lower forms of organisation, social organisations and youth societies/associations, the ZSMS was governed, in any period between two congresses, by the republic conference and its leadership bodies, including in individual areas of public policy. In addition to participating in formal structures, young people within the ZSMS were engaged in a variety of forms and methods of work: conferences organised to address specific issues, commissions, coordinating committees and centres, councils, student clubs, clubs for scholarship-holders, associations of young cooperative members, inter-municipal councils, territorial defence organisations, Model UN clubs and so on.

Although its status was that of a transmission organisation, by formal definition instrumentalised for the recruitment of future political cadres, the ZSMS began to shape itself into an independent organisation at the beginning of the 1980s. Working

¹ I am indebted to Blaž Vurnik's work on the ZSMS for much of the historical information in this introduction.

from within youth organisations, young people were, by this point, actively addressing political, social, economic and other major concerns. Their overarching demand was that young people be involved in the political system — a system that was denying them the political participation to which, in theory and principle, they were entitled. This shift was already becoming evident with the issue of 'guided education',² which gradually shaped the ZSMS into an organisation that sought to defend the interests of young people. Over time this graduated to a critique of the social, economic and political situation and to the idea of a 'front' organisation, which would eventually lead to the inclusion of new social movements. This was a highly resonant issue at several levels: first, it raised the question of competition within the political system; second, the ZSMS became a link between all forms of youth association and organisation. In turn this enabled a certain pluralism of interests to arise, along with the possibility of the membership throwing serious weight behind its support for the organisation. As new social movements emerged, the ZSMS slowly began to make political interventions of its own and to step up its activism. Issues concerning the social and economic position of young people came to the fore, particularly housing, scholarship policy, education and employment.

Nevertheless, the general direction of travel was towards the transformation of the ZSMS into a political party. Its statutes were amended to abolish automatic membership and divide the organisation into two parts: a political party and a student organisation. By becoming a political party, the ZSMS renounced its position as the umbrella youth organisation, which paved the way for the establishment of the National Youth Council of Slovenia, a non-political organisation designed to bring together all youth organisations and represent their interests. The ZSMS welcomed this initiative and conceived the role of the council as the 'other half of the so-called ministry of youth',³ or as an institutional space in which its members could meet on a continuous basis and carry out projects in the interests of young people. However, this did not stop the National Youth Council setting up its own organisations of interest on 25 April 1990. Initiatives to establish a youth council came from all sides, and were also presented to the Slovenian parliament as a 'general call to all social and state institutions to support this form of participation by youth organisations'.⁴

The opening-up of the space to new ideas and organisational structures that took place in the 1980s brought the issue of the position of young people into political discourse and the arena of political ideas. It also meant that the 'youth dimension' became bound up with the independence process, in terms of the substance of that dimension and the broader issue of youth organisation, although the topic of youth was all but ignored at the first elections (Deželan and Matjašič, 2020). It was therefore clear that, for young people, political pluralism would bring with it the many pitfalls inherent in liberal democracy, one of the most important being the young population's numerical disadvantage in comparison with others (pensioners, for example). This continues to result in a lack of political interest in the problems that young people face.

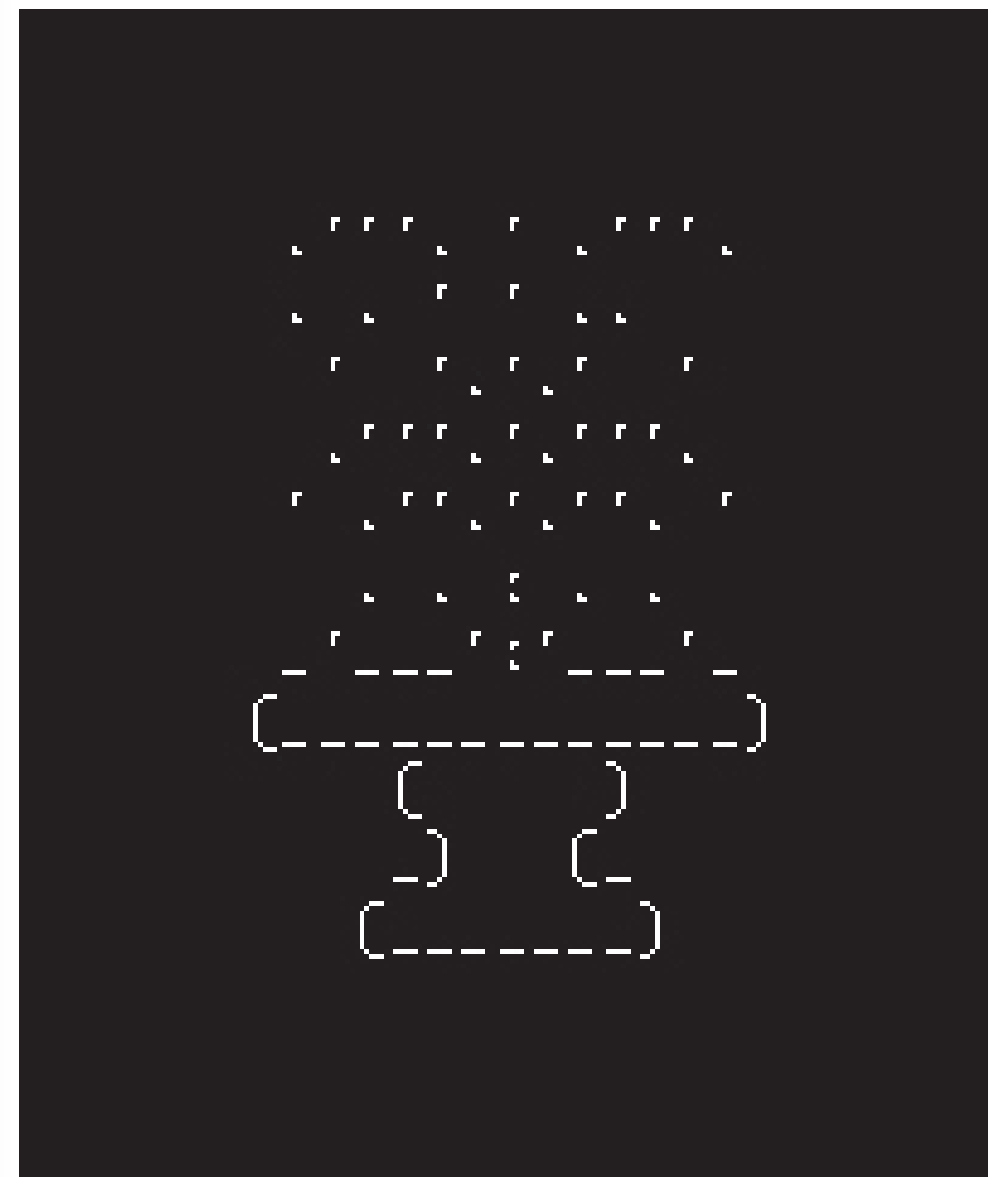
² Guided education (*usmerjeno izobraževanje*) was the system introduced into schools in Yugoslavia to address the perceived inequalities of the academic grammar school system.

³ Informacija RK ZSMS No 38, 20 October 1989, 'K zasnovi nacionalnega združevanja organizirane mladine, Mladinski svet' (Youth Council: Towards a national association of organised youth, see Vurnik, 2005).

⁴ AS1115, no 1440, initiative of Tone Pavček, 7 March 1990 (see Vurnik, 2005).

Structure of the monograph

We start with a discussion of the three decades of development of youth policy in Slovenia, with Tin Kampl and Tomaž Deželan addressing the distance that has arisen over the years between what the regulations require and what actually happens on the ground. This is followed by a chapter on the Office for Youth, or the national authority as it is often referred to in the European Union and its programmes, by Andraž Zgonc Tin Kampl and Tomaž Deželan. The role and activities of the Office for Youth are further evidence of the strange gap between theory and practice in the youth field in Slovenia. There is then a discussion of the development of the youth sector as a whole (Tin Kampl and Tomaž Deželan), which highlights its diversity by examining all its prevailing forms. This repertoire of key youth-related areas is rounded off by Nina Vombergar and Tomaž Deželan in a discussion of youth work in Slovenia. Particular focus is placed on the factors that have led to its recognition and consolidation over the last few decades. We close with two important aspects of support for the youth sector: the creation of adequate financial and data-based foundations for the operation of the sector generally. Maja Drobne, Karolina Babič and Tomaž Deželan analyse the financial aspect with particular reference to the importance of European youth development programmes, while Tomaž Deželan, Katja Nacevski and Marko Majce address the data- or research-related aspect by examining the history of youth-centred research in Slovenia, the reference studies produced and the most important findings of those studies in terms of their significance for the youth field. In place of a conclusion, each chapter offers points for further consideration. These are designed to point the way forward towards well-informed, evidence-based action by the key stakeholders in the youth sector.



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