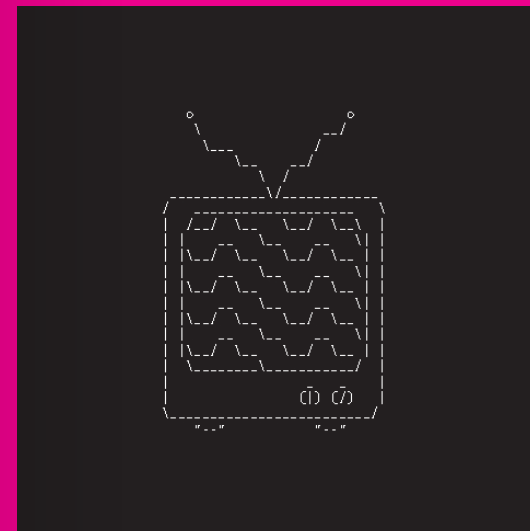




## Chapter 4

# No Youth Without Europe

The Impact  
of European  
Programmes on  
Slovenian Youth



**Maja Drobne**  
**Tomaž Deželan**  
**Karolina Babič**

# European programmes: Key milestones

**1987–1989:** Youth for Europe I

**1990–1994:** Youth for Europe II

**1995–1999:** Youth for Europe III

**1997–1999:** European Voluntary Service (pilot)

**2000–2006:** Youth Community Action Programme

**2001:** Eurodesk (free European Commission information service)

**2002–:** SALTO South East Europe Resource Centre

**2007–2013:** Youth in Action Programme

**2013–2021:** Erasmus+: Youth in Action

**2018–2021, 2021–2027:** European Solidarity Corps<sup>1</sup>

**2021–2027:** Erasmus+: Youth

<sup>1</sup> This text focuses on the 2021–2023 period when discussing the Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes.

## European programmes and the youth field

In common with many fields of work in Slovenia, the youth field is the beneficiary of European funding, which means that it receives funds from European programmes for its operations and development, in addition to those awarded from central government and municipal budgets. The current EU funding programmes, framed by the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 and the NextGenerationEU recovery facility, address the funding of the youth field under Heading 2 ('Cohesion and values', subheading 'Investing in people, social cohesion and values'), with the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programmes acting as the vehicles of delivery. Under that subheading, the youth field is also partly addressed through the European Social Fund+ (ESF+), but this is mainly in relation to those elements relevant to the strengthening of employment opportunities for young people. Erasmus+ is chiefly designed to provide support to the educational, professional and personal development of individuals in education, training, youth and sport, while the ESC is aimed at young people wishing to volunteer to help the disadvantaged, provide humanitarian aid, and contribute to health and environmental action (European Commission, n.d.). Prior to the 2021–2027 period, these elements were covered by other (similar) programmes.

This chapter offers a series of reflections on the key European programmes that have supported (and continue to support) the youth sector in Slovenia. We also assess the consequences that such extensive funding has in comparison with the central government funds available to the sector.

## Genealogy of European youth programmes in Slovenia

Slovenia was relatively late in becoming involved in the EU's Youth for Europe III programme (1995–1999). Preparations had been under way since 1997, but were held up by Italy's refusal to ratify Slovenia's Association Agreement. It eventually joined on 1 May 1999 — the last of the 2004 intake to do so. In 2000 Slovenia joined the Youth Community Action Programme (2000–2006), which merged the Youth for Europe and European Voluntary Service (EVS) programmes. The Youth in Action programme was then introduced in 2007. In that year, MOVIT, the Institute for the Development of Youth Mobility and Slovenia's national agency, allocated funds of EUR 2,744,000 to the delivery of (mainly) international projects. These funds represented the largest single source of public support for the operation and development of youth work in Slovenia (Škulj, 2016). Discussing the differences between programmes (interview, 16 April 2021),<sup>2</sup> Škulj highlighted the fact that 'the Youth for Europe programme gave much greater support to the idea of European integration' and that 'the programmes focused on multilateral projects that had to have four or more partners'. The Youth for Europe programme was, in Škulj's words (ibid.), 'an instrument for achieving the Maastricht Treaty, as the European political arena was aware that it needed people's support — that it was vital to bring the younger generations of France and Germany closer together in order to unite Europe in an emotional sense.'

Slovenia took part in the Youth Community Action Programme between 2000 and 2006, a period marked by the country's entry into the EU. Full membership led to a significant increase in the funds available to it through the programme — indeed, they doubled overnight. This was followed by the Youth in Action programme, which was launched in 2007. In his short review of the seven years of that programme, Janez

<sup>2</sup> Source available from the authors (the same applies to all interviews).

Škulj, head of MOVIT at the time, argued that the developments of 2007 to 2013 were a natural continuation of the events that had taken place since the founding of MOVIT in 1997 (Škulj, 2014):

*Perhaps the best way to describe the beginnings [of MOVIT] is that we were going around in 1999 asking organisations to meet the challenge of taking part in youth exchanges. Fifteen years on we get so many youth exchange project applications that we are unable to accept more than half of them. International youth work and learning mobility in youth work have now finally acquired a recognised position among those active in the youth work field in Slovenia.*

The Youth in Action programme (2007–2013) continued and built upon previous European Commission youth programmes, with a particular emphasis on encouraging young people to take part in democratic life. Initiatives for young people with fewer opportunities came to the fore for the first time. To be a young person with fewer opportunities is the answer to the question of who, within a specific local environment, has the fewest employment opportunities, who has the fewest opportunities for (political) participation in their communities, and who has the fewest opportunities to acquire experiences elsewhere in Europe. The programme was based on an understanding that the youth population had expanded over the previous ten years, which necessitated a broadening of the range of ages eligible to join the programme (15–28 or, in some cases, 13–30). Based on new findings, the programme planned new actions and expanded those already in place. The clear expectation was that projects that wished to obtain funding had to pursue and meet the programme's objectives. These were defined in a narrower sense than had been the case up to then. The programme sought to increase the effectiveness of projects, which had to be relevant to the environment and capable of being disseminated widely, and raise the number of young people active within the programme (Pečjak, 2006). The programme's aims complemented the purpose and aims that the European Commission wished to achieve in other areas, particularly education, knowledge, vocational training, lifelong learning, culture and sport. The general objectives were: to promote young people's active citizenship in general and their European citizenship in particular; to develop solidarity and promote tolerance among young people, with a focus on fostering social cohesion in the European Union; to nurture mutual understanding between young people in different countries; to help develop the quality of support systems for youth activities and the capabilities of civil society organisations in the youth field; and to promote European cooperation in the youth field. These general objectives were implemented at project level, with due consideration given, as the Youth in Action Programme Guide sets out, to the continuing priorities of European citizenship, participation of young people, cultural diversity and the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities (European Commission, 2008).

The Youth in Action programme took a new approach based on simplicity, clarity, openness, cohesion and flexibility. It enabled the results of the programme to be integrated and monitored in a more user-friendly and efficient way by the European Commission (in collaboration with Member States). It contained five actions: the Youth for Europe action, which was aimed at developing youth mobility, exchanges and initiatives by individuals and groups via projects to promote participation in democratic life; the European Voluntary Service action, which sought to develop solidarity and

tolerance, active citizenship and mutual understanding between people by involving young people volunteers in non-profit, unpaid activities that benefited the wider community in which they lived; the Youth in the World action, which enabled cooperation with neighbouring (partner) countries of the EU and the rest of the world; the Youth Support Systems action, which fostered cooperation between youth organisations at European level, the European Youth Forum and other organisations to in order to stimulate quality and innovation, promote information activities and incorporate regional and local partners, etc.; and the Support for European Cooperation in the Youth Field action, which supported European cooperation in youth policy and activities to bring about better knowledge of the youth field by encouraging the sharing of good practices at all levels and the participation of policymakers, officials and youth organisations, all with the aim of getting to know and understand young people better and based on a Structured Dialogue between policymakers and young people (European Commission, 2017).

Erasmus+: Youth in Action was the youth-centred part of the Erasmus+ programme. Covering education, training, youth and sport for the period between 2014 and 2020, it was designed to strengthen young people's competencies and employability, and modernise and develop education, training and youth work. The Erasmus+ programme encouraged the youth sector to organise international learning mobility for young people aged between 13 and 30 that offered opportunities for non-formal education within the youth work context. It also sought to provide youth workers with the skills that would better equip them to organise non-formal learning in youth work activities, and to include young people in dialogue with those responsible for youth policy at local, national, European or international level. The specific objectives of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme were: to improve the level of key competencies and skills of young people, including those with fewer opportunities, as well as to promote participation in democratic life in Europe and the labour market, active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, social inclusion and solidarity, in particular through increased learning mobility opportunities for young people, those active in youth work or youth organisations and youth leaders, and through strengthened links between the youth field and the labour market; to foster quality improvements in youth work, in particular through enhanced cooperation between organisations in the youth field and/or other stakeholders; to complement policy reforms at local, regional and national level and support the development of knowledge and evidence-based youth policy as well as the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, in particular through enhanced policy cooperation, better use of EU transparency and recognition tools and the dissemination of good practices; and to enhance the international dimension of youth activities and the capacity of youth workers and organisations in their support for young people in complementarity with the EU's external action, in particular through the promotion of mobility and cooperation between stakeholders from Programme and Partner Countries and international organisations (European Commission, 2020).

The programme was divided into three key actions: the learning mobility of individuals (Youth Exchanges and Mobility of Youth Workers); cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices (Strategic Partnerships in the field of youth); and support for policy reform (Youth Dialogue). The more prominent features of the programme included the promotion of international cooperation and the learning of foreign languages, equality and social inclusion, and the development of specific





fields through exchange of the good practices, learning materials and methods produced by the projects.

EVS volunteering projects were included in this action until 2018 and are now part of the European Solidarity Corps programme (European Commission, 2020). Both programmes together received a total of 2,442 project applications requesting grants totalling EUR 67,393,275 in 2014–2020. In that period, grants of EUR 22,797,965 were awarded to 1,006 projects (both programmes) via MOVIT. A total of 2,124 projects applied to the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme, with a total grant request of EUR 61,792,480. Forty-three per cent of projects were successful (912 projects, 264 different organisations, 36,913 participants, grants totalling EUR 19,167,134 awarded), 29% of participants (10,830) were young people with fewer opportunities and 3% (930) were young people with special needs. The ESC programme saw 318 applications in 2018–2020 (grants totalling EUR 5,600,795 requested). MOVIT approved 180 projects and awarded them grants totalling EUR 3,630,831 — a success rate of 57%. Funds were received by 94 different organisations and 1,179 participants, 38% (449) of whom were young people with fewer opportunities and 2% (24) young people with special needs (MOVIT, 2021).

Erasmus+: Youth is the most recent programme. As it is still in its early stages, an evaluation has so far been carried out for 2021–2023 only. It shows that KA152 (Youth Exchanges) has received the highest level of interest: 246 applications, 120 approved (49%), which was the highest number of approvals of all actions in this period. The fewest number of applications in this period was received for KA155 (DiscoverEU Inclusion): three applications received and approved, all in 2023. No applications were received in 2022, and the action was not offered in 2021. Forty-six per cent of all applications (305 of 666) were approved in 2020–2023. The lowest success rate, 21%, was in KA210 (Small-Scale Partnerships). Overall, the success rate for applications to KA2 is low, at around a quarter. There was a significant increase in the level of funding in 2021–2023, with the highest amount made available in 2023 (EUR 5,293,205). Lump sums have been introduced into KA2 in the most recent period: EUR 30,000 or 60,000 per small-scale project, and EUR 120,000, 250,000 or 400,000 per large project. A total of 305 projects were approved in 2021–2023 (255 KA1 and 50 KA2), to a total value of EUR 14,516,118 (Deželan, Babič and Vombergar, 2024).

Replacing the EVS programme, the ESC has been in place for the two most recent periods. A total of 361 ESC projects were carried out in Slovenia between 2018 and 2023; funds totalling EUR 470,000 were awarded in the first year of the programme (2018) and EUR 1.68 million in 2023. Competition for funds from this programme has increased sharply as time has gone on. In 2022, for example, even highly rated projects saw a significant reduction in the funds available, which forced them to cut back on project content (Deželan, 2023).

Alongside the Erasmus and ESC programmes, the European Social Fund (ESF) is another mechanism that has created a large number of opportunities and challenges for the youth sector. Where it was more focused on developing human resources and building capacity in the first Financial Perspective 2007–2013, in the second (2014–2020) it steered the sector towards resolving the issue of unemployment — which is hardly the primary task of the youth sector. It has become apparent that some practices remain relevant and have brought added value, while others have created bureaucratic challenges — a situation that has still not fundamentally changed.

## Actions common to all programmes

Youth exchanges and youth worker mobility, as well as support for policy reform, are the main actions common to all programmes. All actions have sought to give effect to the Council Resolution on a Renewed Framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field (2010–2018) (Council of the European Union, 2009) and its previous instruments, such as the European Commission White Paper A New Impetus for European Youth (European Commission, 2001) and the European Youth Pact (2005). All of these are focused on achieving the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs (Zavod MOVIT, 2019; Cink, 2019, 18–22), one of the tools for which is the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme. Structured Dialogue has become a recognised instrument of consultation with young people, and has also fed into the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027), which continues to seek to meet youth policy objectives at Union and Member State level through the new Erasmus+ programme. The only action to have been added to the programme since 2013 is Strategic Partnerships, which sets out to systematically develop and strengthen the competencies of the sector and improve its quality (Zavod MOVIT, 2019).

Youth exchanges are a tool of non-formal learning in youth work that enables groups of young people from different countries to spend between five and 21 days together exploring topics of mutual interest, develop their skills, become aware of socially relevant topics/thematic areas, discover new cultures, habits and lifestyles through peer-learning, and strengthen values such as solidarity, democracy and friendship. Each group of participants has a group/youth leader who provides assistance and support in project planning and implementation. As these projects require a large number of decisions to be taken, youth exchanges are an opportunity to learn about democratic cooperation and decision-making in society. Because of their relatively short duration, they are highly suitable for young people with fewer opportunities. At the end of the project and after the results have been disseminated, young people are encouraged to talk

to others, and to present their youth exchange achievements, experiences and stories to their local environment and beyond. This also helps to raise the profile of the learning outcomes of the activities, highlight the importance of non-formal learning in youth work in society at large, and increase the visibility of the Erasmus+ programme (Zavod MOVIT, n.d.).

The Mobility of Youth Workers action is aimed at fostering the professional development and consolidating the competencies of youth workers, and at strengthening the capacity of participating organisations to deliver youth work of a high standard. The activities of youth worker mobility projects can take several forms: study visits, on-site educational visits (job-shadowing) at organisations, professional seminars, training courses and so on. Projects should have a clear and demonstrable impact on the participating youth workers' day-to-day work with young people. Activities of this kind enable youth sector entities to create projects, in collaboration with international partners, that employ a range of activities aimed at addressing needs relating to the professional development of the participating organisations' staff. Those organisations are required to further disseminate the learning outcomes, including any materials and innovative methods and tools, in order to improve the quality of youth work and/or foster youth policy development and cooperation in the youth field. Activities must last between two days and two months, and the whole project between three and 24 months. A distinction is made between group activities (e.g. professional seminars on topics connected with youth work or youth policy, youth work training, seminars designed to find partners for project development, study visits), which usually feature a larger number of partners and participants, and individual activities (e.g. job-shadowing at a partner organisation), which generally involve two partners and one or two participants (European Commission, 2020).

Depending on the project objectives and composition, cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices can take the form of strategic partnerships for innovation or for the exchange of good practices. The

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first are aimed at developing innovations; the applicant therefore requests dedicated funds for the creation of intellectual outcomes and multiplier events at which the project outcomes are presented to the wider public. The second are aimed at the exchange and transfer of existing practices. The results of partner cooperation should make an important contribution to strengthening the competencies of youth sector actors, improving the quality of youth work, increasing the participation and active citizenship of young people, and promoting social enterprise among the young. Transnational Youth Initiatives also play an important role in this action. These are projects involving groups of young people that aim to foster and strengthen active citizenship and entrepreneurial spirit, including through social enterprise. One important component of Transnational Youth Initiatives is the pronounced learning dimension of projects involving young people, since they are the main driving force of projects. They achieve the stated learning objectives by following the learning pathways and performing practical tasks within project activities. Organisations may plan different national and international activities within the projects, which may last between six and 36 months (European Commission, 2014).

Support for Policy Reform is an action that promotes the active participation of young people in democratic life, and fosters debate around topics centred on the themes and priorities set by the EU Youth Strategy and its mechanisms of dialogue.<sup>3</sup> These events promote the active participation of young people in democratic life in Europe and their interaction with decision-makers, enabling them to obtain support for the organisation of national and international meetings, consultations, conferences and dialogues between young people and decision-makers locally, nationally and internationally. A concrete result of these events is that young people are able to make their voice heard (through the formulation of positions, proposals and recommendations) on how youth policies should be delivered in their local areas, their country and across Europe. The activities are led by young people themselves. Participants must be actively involved in all the stages of the project, from preparation to follow-up, while project implementation is based on non-formal learning principles and practices throughout. Projects may last between three and 24 months, and include several different national and international activities (European Commission, 2020).

Volunteering projects used to be part of the Erasmus programmes, but were later taken over by their own separate programme: the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). They offer young people the chance to take part in solidarity activities, which must help strengthen community by addressing important societal needs and challenges on the ground. This enables volunteers to acquire skills and competencies for their personal, educational, social, cultural, civic and professional development. Projects may be transnational or national in nature. The latter are aimed primarily at young people with fewer opportunities and must have a clear European dimension. Organisations may also carry out group volunteering projects; these cover a wide range of areas, such as environmental protection, climate change mitigation and greater social inclusion (European Commission, 2021).

Solidarity projects have returned to the programme after a period in which the 'youth initiatives' familiar from the Youth in Action programme had been abolished. A solidarity project is a group of solidarity activities planned, set, developed and carried out by young people themselves, most often in the applicant's local area or

<sup>3</sup> Since the adoption of the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027, Structured Dialogue has been referred to as Youth Dialogue.

region. However, they can also be expanded to national or international level in the case of Transnational Cooperation Activities (TCAs). Depending on the needs and planned objectives of the project, projects can last between two and 12 months. Their basic aim is to provide young people with the chance to express solidarity by taking responsibility and committing themselves to bringing positive change in their local community through the creation of new solutions and approaches to the challenges faced by the society and environment in which they live. A project should involve all members of the group, and address a clearly identified topic translated into concrete activities. Participation in a solidarity project is an important non-formal learning experience through which young people can boost their personal, educational, social and civic development, and improve their employment outcomes. Assistance may be provided by an instructor, chiefly in the learning support and mentoring processes, and is treated as an eligible cost (European Commission, 2021).

In addition to funds for allocation to approved projects (for which applicants running the types of projects listed above may apply), funds are made available to all national agencies to enable them to organise their own support activities: training courses, seminars, study visits, conferences, etc. These are predominantly international (TCAs), aimed at applicants and beneficiaries, and designed to enhance the quality of programme implementation and enable the priorities and objectives of the programme to be achieved. TCAs in the youth field provide support for the high-quality delivery of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme and the mobilisation of as many target organisations and individuals as possible. They provide strategic support to the development of youth work in accordance with the specific youth-centred objectives of Erasmus+, and encourage organisations active in the youth field to work together at international level. As co-organisers, national agencies host or send interested participants to these activities (European Commission, 2020).

## How have European funding mechanisms changed organisations?

European programmes have had a considerable impact on organisations by providing funds and strengthening human resources. This is also evident from the development of the sector, the increase in the number of youth centres, youth organisations and other organisations for young people, the greater support for the youth sector at local level, the rise in quality, and the increase in the monitoring of the impact of activities, such as the introduction of the Logbook system, the Mladim website and other similar mechanisms.

Katarina Nučič, former director of Trbovlje youth centre, believes that the programmes have:

*[moved] towards professionalism, strategic thinking and a development-focused mindset. These programmes are what they are and, to be competitive in these things, you have to take a very close look at where you are in the local environment, what your organisation needs in that environment, the target groups, and where you want to be heading in the future. The definite upside to all this is that you are no longer doing things in a totally ad hoc way (interview, 15 April 2021).*



She recalls how things were at the very beginning:

*Everything was very different in 2005, when we had our first European experience. Looking back, when we were doing one exchange a year, our approach was different to what it was subsequently, when we were doing five a year. We did not get to those numbers because the organisation wanted to have that many exchanges but because word of these opportunities spread so quickly among young people that they wanted to get involved, not only as participants in specific activities but in the whole process. After that, it became possible to do it. Our team of three was unable to manage that many exchanges alongside the other programmes. This means that you have to do things by the book: young people come with an idea, you offer them support to realise that idea and write an application, which again has a particular impact. With support they can grasp these things and argue for them. We perhaps did not properly grasp the concept of active participation as well at the beginning as we did subsequently. Other organisations probably went through the same. Things change when you are in that environment, working with other organisations and starting to understand things differently. The change came about mainly in terms of active participation on the part of young people.*

Janez Škulj, founder of MOVIT, believes that:

*European programmes have done most to change the sector. From the outset, one of the important elements was the programme guide, where the methods, approaches and the things that every youth exchange was expected to achieve were written in Slovenian for the first time. It was very important at the beginning to develop a terminology. I see the biggest achievement as being that some youth work entities have incorporated international cooperation into all their operations, not just the occasional activity. This has transformed how their organisations work (interview, 16 April 2021).*

Sašo Kronegger refers to the environments and regions in which he sees most progress having been made (interview, 15 April 2021):

*Zasavje, Krško and Brežice have developed the most. The establishment of youth centres has meant that a certain group have remained there and found their first jobs. The peers of those who found work and who worked on programmes have also stayed.*

Uroš Skrinar adds the aspect of professionalisation (interview, 7 May 2021):

*Regardless of everything [...], a partial professionalisation of the youth sector has also taken place. Whatever form this takes, there are quite a few actors in the sector, organisations as well as individuals, who we know to be actors in the youth sector. These actors have also acquired the knowledge they have through investment, for example, in the pool of trainers that has developed in the last few years. These trainers are highly regarded and very welcome on the wider European scene.*

The evaluation of the 2017–2023 period conducted by Deželan, Babič and Vombregar (2024) also highlights the impact on organisations, chiefly those relating to process (networking, strengthening of staff competencies, links with other organisations, exchange of practices and tools, etc.).

## **Impact of programmes on the Slovenian youth sector and the local (national) reality**

The impacts of European programmes on the youth sector in Slovenia are many and varied, as Uroš Skrinar, current MOVIT director, confirmed in an interview on 7 May 2021:

*The [impacts] that we noted in the RAY network and that have occurred with the help of the University of Ljubljana are now proven – for the individual. Mainly from the aspect of interculturality, teamwork skills and an awareness of the importance of non-formal education, right up to the organisational development of organisations. Because they have had to establish systems and structures in response to project implementation requirements, these organisations have set up internal systems and structures. There are a lot of them. I believe that the impact on the individual is clear.*

Barbara Zupan (interview, 21 April 2021) believes that:

*... the most obvious impacts are produced by international youth work. Programmes have resulted in new opportunities, with youth exchanges and voluntary work having the greatest effect. That is where the impact on individuals and organisations is more evident, and it has been really considerable on organisations. I see the second major impact on the development of non-formal education in Slovenia. In local communities, non-formal education has been equated almost entirely with youth work, in other communities a little less so. Strong players logically means greater development.*

However, in the same interview she concludes that:

*The impact is weakest at the Office for Youth [...]. Organisations have not developed to the extent that we would wish for. This is probably also due to a lack of funding aimed directly at supporting youth work. Funds (mainly cohesion funds) have also been allocated indirectly to the development of youth work, but in the first instance to increasing young people's ability to enhance their employment prospects. Consequently, you then also see how youth work has managed to develop, as this issue is being addressed using youth work methods. The sector also often addresses other areas and numerous other topics using those methods. The sector is very often the first to address some of the broader problems facing society. With the methods employed, you can address a great many problems and reach other age groups more easily.*

The interim evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme drawn up by Tomaž Deželan in 2017 also contains a wealth of interesting data at several levels. Of the topics addressed in the projects, non-formal and informal education/learning came top with 66.1%, followed by cultural diversity (56.7%), young people and youth work (53.3%), personal development (50.6%), and education, training and learning (42.2%). The topics that drew the least interest within projects were youth policy development

(6.7%), EU policies or structures (11.1%) and youth policy (11.7%). The topic most commonly addressed in Youth Exchange (Key Action 1) projects in 2016 was creativity and culture (68%), followed by participation of young people and youth work (49%), inclusion and equity (45%) and EU citizenship (39%). Participation, youth work, and creativity and culture were also the most common topics addressed in EVS (Key Action 1) projects, while participation and youth work (16%) and international cooperation, international relations and development cooperation (8%) were the two most popular topics in Mobility of Youth Workers (Key Action 1) projects (Deželan, 2017).

Just under three-quarters (74.7%) of organisations believe that Erasmus+: Youth in Action and its predecessor programmes have made a considerable or very considerable contribution to improving the quality of youth work (31.5% very considerable, 43.2 considerable); only 0.5% felt that Erasmus+: Youth in Action and its predecessor programmes had made only a very limited contribution (Deželan, 2017). The evaluation of the Erasmus+: Youth 2017–2023 programme (Deželan, Babič and Vombergar, 2024) also looks at the parameters of the impact of the programme on individuals, organisations and the community, and finds that the impact on project participants is greatest when participants are actively involved in all phases of a project and a project employs non-formal methods of work tailored to young people. The evaluation also shows that young people gain lifelong learning skills during projects, while the effects on organisations are predominantly process-related (networking, strengthening of staff competencies, links with other organisations, exchange of practices, etc.). Indeed, it is more difficult to secure a concrete, long-term impact on organisations, as this would require a higher level of permanent resources to ensure that the project results are sustained over the longer term. As far as community impact is concerned, local communities welcome projects and their international dimensions, and are interested in similar projects in the future. The evaluation of the ESC 2018–2023 (Deželan, 2023) identifies similar effects on the part of the solidarity and volunteering programme, finding that the programme has a tangible impact at the individual, organisational and community levels, and is a manifestation of the European Youth Goals. The programme has had a major impact on organisational changes and on the entire ecosystem in the fields of youth, volunteering, welfare and education. The impacts can also be felt locally, particularly in smaller and more remote communities.

### Impact of projects financed by the European Social Fund

The final report evaluating the success of measures for the permanent inclusion of young people in the labour market (Deloitte Slovenija, 2019) also addresses the impact on the youth sector of the Operational Programme for the Implementation of European Cohesion Policy 2014–2020. With the aim of reducing youth unemployment, Slovenia allocated a portion of ESF resources within the Operational Programme to operations under Priority Axis 8 (Promoting employment and supporting transnational labour mobility), Priority Investment 8.2 (Sustainable integration of young people into the labour market, especially those who are not employed and are not educated or trained, including young people exposed to social exclusion and young people from marginalised communities, including through the implementation of the Youth Guarantee), and Specific Objective 8.2.1 (Reduction of youth unemployment).

The aim of the operations was to put cooperation and employment mechanisms in place to enable young people aged between 15 and 29 to undertake practical work experience and work-based training at educational institutions and youth sector

organisations, when such work experience was a mandatory part of a professional qualification. The operations also fostered the development of active citizenship among young people through the delivery of innovative projects that enhanced their employment prospects and helped them develop the appropriate skills (target group: young first-time jobseekers and young unemployed people aged between 15 and 29). In addition to increasing employment opportunities for young people, the measure also aimed to introduce a more varied set of approaches to youth employment via youth work, and to strengthen the youth sector generally by training organisations to address and resolve the issue of youth unemployment. The young people involved also had the opportunity to obtain the experience necessary for obtaining the youth worker national vocational qualification, and to acquire civic and life skills.

Among other things, participation in the action has enabled organisations to employ people who were previously involved as volunteers. There are positive effects as well in the reduction in other employees' workload and better organisation of work. Beneficiary organisations have, in the main, promoted innovative forms of youth work mainly by employing innovative approaches to young people, innovative content and new methods of work. Organisations have identified the swifter and easier employment of young people as the main impact of innovative forms of youth work.

Participants have increased their self-confidence and communicational skills, and are engaging in more direct and personal contact with employers. Organisations have developed a large number of innovative products, such as new training models at youth centres, handbooks for young jobseekers and enterprise promotion. Forty per cent of organisations in the study believed that participation in the project had enabled them to gain the necessary knowledge and experience to address and resolve the issue of youth unemployment, highlighting a better understanding of young people and their position on the labour market and the use of new forms of knowledge transfer, which include innovative approaches and intergenerational cooperation (Deloitte Slovenija, 2019).

However, it is important to note that the situation is not without its drawbacks. Maja Hostnik, director of the MaMa Network, had this to say about the ESF projects that MaMa had carried out (interview, 19 May 2021):





*European programmes are very bureaucratic and restrictive. This means that project managers and assistants are hampered when trying to deal with the content they should be dealing with because there's so much administration behind it. So I believe that things are not moving in the right direction and that there is a lack of coherence overall. Yes, it's nice to hear that 350 young people were involved in a project and 5,000 across the youth sector as a whole. But the problem with European projects, as well as with the organisations that take part in them, is that they are forced into new topics and do not actually address young people who are in the youth sector and have an affinity with it but, rather, young people who are unfamiliar with the sector. The problem arises because European Social Fund programmes have changed their focus significantly. It's no longer about developing the youth sector but merely about finding young people and chasing numbers.*

## **Developmental opportunities of programmes and their future impact**

The Erasmus+ programme has more or less retained its previous structure in the new financial perspective, with the exception of the shifting of Key Action 3 to Key Action 1 and the renaming of the action, from Support for Policy Reform to Youth Participation Activities.<sup>4</sup> Some new elements have been introduced into the Erasmus+ priorities. Inclusion and diversity remains the most important one, followed by digital transition (a particular consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic), while active participation and participation in democratic life also retain their importance. The environment and the fight against climate change have been added as an important horizontal priority (Zavod MOVIT, 2021). In the national context, MOVIT prioritises social inclusion and active European citizenship, with a particular focus on the active participation of young people. It also focuses on those policy priorities that link the implementation of EU programmes with the EU Youth Strategy (EUYS) and the European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA). The quality of youth work remains a priority and an objective pursued by the national agency in projects.

In the last 30 years or so, youth programmes have significantly changed the arena in which young people are able to acquire skills and experience. However, it remains the case that the amount of funding available for the youth field in the overall central government budget is not sufficient to support the programmes that young people need for their development, particularly when it comes to youth organisations and organisations for young people. Slovenia's membership of the EU has led to considerable changes to the opportunities enjoyed by the youth sector. It has created a space not just for greater funding opportunities, but also and above all for capacity-building and new methodologies. This expansion of opportunity has enhanced the quality of youth work. Young people have been able to gain experience abroad and acquire skills that are difficult to acquire solely in the local and national context, particularly linguistic and intercultural competencies, and the ability to work in groups and think critically.

While the youth sector has developed predominantly with the help of European funds, the disproportionately strong financing of the youth sector by the EU compared to the financing available from domestic sources means a greater emphasis on EU priorities at the expense of national youth development priorities. We have seen how

<sup>4</sup> While KA3 remains in place at EU level, some of the content of the action has been transferred to KA1 (Youth Participation Activities) at national level. Slovenia is not implementing the other content of KA3 in the new 2021–2027 programme.

the emphases and priorities introduced by Erasmus youth programmes and the ESF have changed over the years. The Slovenian youth sector has been obliged to follow these changes even when the national and/or local needs have differed, as has been the case at certain times. An example of this is the 2014–2020 financing period, which was planned in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and encouraged the youth sector to focus on youth employment. This distracted many youth organisations from their primary missions, transforming them into a sort of employment support service for young people.

In the initial period there was a requirement to pursue the priorities of the Youth for Europe programme, which focused chiefly on European integration and the creation of an emotional community built on the idea of EU identity. The programme that followed, Erasmus+: Youth in Action, was already more focused, in operational terms, on project effectiveness and on more specific objectives in the fields of education, vocational training, lifelong learning, and efforts to promote active citizenship in general (and European citizenship in particular) among the young. Since the elements of the 2014–2020 programme were planned in response to the financial crisis, they focused on strengthening young people's competencies and employment prospects, and on modernising and developing education, training and youth work. Similarly, the ESF priorities in 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 focused on strengthening skills to improve employment outcomes and help young people develop an entrepreneurial mindset. Strategic Partnerships, which set out to systematically develop and strengthen the competencies of the sector and improve its quality, are perhaps the most important new component to have been added to the programme since 2013. The current European framework is heavily invested in the priorities of the green and digital transitions.

The Slovenian youth sector has therefore had the opportunity to access considerable funds for development, but in the context of changing priorities, which shifted from European cohesion and the consolidation of young people's civic and life skills to youth employment outcomes and enterprise, before finally coming to rest on the current focus on digital transformation and sustainable development. While these common European priorities present a reasonable set of strategic starting points, they can also be a limiting factor, mainly because of an absence of clear national and local priorities. They compel the Slovenian youth sector to move hither and thither in response to new European priorities and funding conditions as they arise.

The evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme carried out by Deželan, Babič and Vombergar in 2024 points out that the success in addressing the horizontal priorities has been higher in relation to inclusion and diversity and participation in democratic life than in priorities linked to the green and digital transitions. It also highlights the fact that the programme is achieving high participation rates among young people with fewer opportunities, although the definition of that group in the programme depends very much on context. It shows that the distribution of funds changes significantly from action to action over time, but that these changes are not steered by strategy (and especially not when it comes to national priorities), and that while total funding has grown since 2020, it is difficult to assess whether this has had a correspondingly significant impact. Along with this, there are too few funds for and an insufficient focus on mentoring for young people. Mentoring and guidance are becoming increasingly important for young people, particularly given the rise in mental health, psychological and personal problems among this age group. Put simply, the resources available for coordinators and mentors within organisations, as well as for external providers, are

too low. There is a disproportionate ratio between the funds managed by the Office for Youth and Erasmus+ funds managed by the national agency; as a result, Erasmus+ explicitly determines public policy in the youth field instead of complementing it, while national priorities are not adequately inserted into the project application conditions, even though the Erasmus+ programme allows them to be so. This means that a certain set of new organisations ('newcomers') are lost to the application process, as is content specifically relevant to local and national contexts. As a consequence, the national agency's impact on public youth policy exceeds that of its powers – it is, after all, a private implementing organisation and not a central government authority with powers to develop youth policy.

Another of the evaluation's more significant findings is that organisations frequently create a core activity via Erasmus+ projects alone. Seldom are they sufficiently independent, in terms of funding from other sources, to use Erasmus+ to upgrade that core activity. Tomaž Deželan's evaluation of the ESC programme (2023) also finds that while the ESC has led to positive changes at organisational, personal and local community levels, it has an insufficiently strong connection with national volunteering and youth priorities, and the funds available for organisations and participants are so low as to jeopardise project delivery.

### Looking towards the future

In line with the key findings of the evaluations of the Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps and European Social Fund programmes, we give a few recommendations and guidelines aimed at enhancing the deployment of European funds for the development of the youth sector in Slovenia.

The use of European funds must be aligned in a more logical and comprehensive way with the national priorities set out in the national youth strategy. New youth-centred strategies and programmes should set out national priorities, dictated by the needs of end-users, that adequately complement European programmes. In the absence of this, European horizontal priorities can act as a disincentive.

The term 'innovation', which frequently appears as a precondition in project application calls, must be defined more clearly so as to cover not merely new content, but the upgrading (in quality terms) and/or ongoing delivery of successful older programmes. This will prevent applicants from abandoning their strategic focus in favour of meeting the requirements of project calls.

Attention and resources must be focused on systematic, high-quality mentoring and expert advice to the young people involved, particularly those suffering from mental health difficulties or personal and psychological distress.

As far as the impact of European funds on organisations themselves is concerned, there needs to be a better understanding of the links between the areas of operation of organisations based on the needs of direct users and the broader horizontal priorities of the programmes. The programmes themselves also need to be steered in this direction.

It is vitally important that the volume and continuity of funding of the day-to-day operations of youth organisations be increased and stabilised so that those organisations can develop their core activities independently of project-funding sources. Those activities should then be upgraded and supplemented in line with European priorities and objectives with the help of European funds. Of course, this is not the task of European programmes (or not the only one); but it is important for those

programmes to understand and adequately address this national gap.

All the positive and negative effects of European programmes on the youth field need to be monitored, independently and at a healthy distance. Only in this way, without excessive cheerleading or criticism, can we properly identify and build upon all the positive achievements of programmes – and remove the weaknesses, which certainly do exist, effectively and transparently.



No Youth Without Europe

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