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## Conference publications

# Together. For the Youth.

2 September 2011

Burgas

### Project

Strengthening the Evidence Based Practice of Education Civil Society  
Organizations Initiative

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We would like to give special thanks to Tobias Faltermeier who was the driving force of the whole project.

## **Congratulatory letters**

### **To the participants at the conference “Together. For the youth”**

Burgas

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me greet you sincerely for this extremely important and absolutely topical for our dynamic times Forum!

In the work with the young people in regard of the opportunities for their optimal professional realization it is not only necessary but also mandatory to involve the whole society! In that process the NGOs have a key role, as they have proved that the implementation of original and creative ideas lead to good results!

I wish success to your conference and I believe that the shared experience, knowledge and useful lessons would be a starting point for following the right course on the path which we should go through together for the sake of our better future!

Dimitar Nikolov

Mayor of Burgas Municipality

Dear guests, colleagues, participants at this conference,

It is a great pleasure for me to greet you on the present event, organized by the Association for democratic education - FAR, which is the final step in the project “Strengthening the Evidence Based Practice of Education Civil Society Organizations Initiative”.

As a representative of an institution, implementing the national policy in the field of education, I value all the opportunities of personal development which the non-formal education offers the young people. In the strategic documents of the Ministry of education, youth and science such as the Programme for development of education, science and youth policy (2009-2013) and the National strategy for youth (2010-2020), the non-formal education has its place standing close to the secondary and university education. There they are presented as complementary each other's forms.

In these documents the cooperation between the schools and the other education centers, the cultural clubs and the NGOs is included as a particular objective.

For 15 years the Association for democratic education – FAR has been implementing successfully such an NGO's model of work in the non-formal education, through which it would be possible to achieve the objectives set by our state in the field of the educational and youth policies.

The significant advantage of non-formal education is that it implements models and strategies for learning which are unconventional for the education system, and in addition, they supplement and improve the reach at school and also provide young people with the knowledge and competence to manage their own future.

I wish success to this conference, as I honestly hope that its results would be beneficial to all of us (representatives of different types of institutions and NGOs) in order to be more successful as well as pleased with our work.

Engineer Violeta Ilieva, Director of Regional Inspectorate of Education - Burgas

## **The Non-formal education in Bulgaria and Europe - state of play**

By Alexander Kumanov /GDS Solutions/

### **Introduction**

In today's digitized global world, the way we learn and develop our skills is no longer the same, not a traditional and predictable one. We live in societies which are built on tolerance, diversity, mobility and constant change. The same applies to our education. What we learn in school and even university is no longer sufficient for life, therefore more and more the concept of lifelong learning is becoming popular.

School and university degrees are no longer the sole basis for a successful career. The labor market is changing so fast that a study on his condition today can be completely irrelevant tomorrow.

At the same time, our attitude to learning is changing. In the near past we perceived that when we finish school – this stops our education. But now we take for granted that after University or school the educational process enters a new phase.

Thus led us to the understanding that most of the acquired knowledge and skills are not "happening" just within the formal education system, but rather in a slightly different context (work environment, volunteering, family, friends ...) and therefore these specific ways to gain knowledge and skills are now viewed with increased interest. At the same time young people today (especially those with fewer opportunities) are becoming more practically oriented. They are not interested to learn if they do not see a clear benefit and how far this process will reach. It is not enough to give them vague explanations of what a diploma can "bring" to them. Young people need to receive clear, meaningful and acceptable reasons for their educational process. Therefore we need a different approach to learning. There is a clear need to go beyond the traditional perceptions of diplomas and degrees and move to education that is geared more towards skills training and competence-building.

### **Nature of formal and informal education**

Nonformal education is not regulated by laws, rules, regulations. It can be implemented either institutionalized in schools or outside of them. Nonformal education covers all age groups. Curricula, forms, methods,

educational technology is defined in dialogue between trainer and trainees. By this self-education the learner himself defines the purpose, objectives, content, technology, depending on his/her needs, motives, interests and abilities.

Formally this education ends when he or she has reached the set goal and the education meets needs and interests. This education gives you no right of receiving any document and do not guarantee any rights to the person. In most cases, even if there is some kind of letter of course completion, it is not equivalent at all to documents issued for formal education and its recognition depends on the willingness of the employer. Nonformal education is directed towards the development of intellect, culture, personal qualities and possibilities of human personality. They are tested and proven in life.

For informal (parallel, informal) education people started talking during the seventies with the development of mass media, that are becoming an important source of information and knowledge and in one way or another affect the formation of beliefs and values, depending on the intellect and culture of individuals. This education is organized outside, it has no formal structure, it has its place in everyday life and employment.

### **Key competencies**

The basis of the Non-formal education concept is the word “recognition”. Actually without recognition, or evaluation by somebody of acquired skills and competences, the non-formal education process does not stop, but still there is a big possibility to miss many of its results. And results are usually related to the word competences or the concept of key competences.

Under “competence” we should understand a combination of all of the following elements:

- a) Knowledge - the results of education of the individual;
- b) habits - the results of the work experience and training;
- c) attitudes - value orientations;

There are many different concepts of competences, which may be subject to certification and evaluation, and accordingly be subject to informal education.

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of Europe in 2005. (Scope and content of key competences for lifelong learning), defined the following eight key competences:

- ◆ Communication in mother tongue
- ◆ Communication in foreign languages
- ◆ Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
- ◆ Digital Competencies
- ◆ Learning to learn or ability to learn
- ◆ Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences and civic competence;
- ◆ Entrepreneurial competencies;
- ◆ Expression by means of culture;

### **Informal education in Bulgaria**

The main responsible institutions in Bulgaria are the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Employment Agency, National Agency for vocational education and training. Among them key roles also have the employers' organizations. As it goes about young people – we should not miss the role of the National Youth Council (or perhaps its future role).

I will focus here on two strategic documents that are relevant to non-formal education and young people in Bulgaria.

#### *National Youth Strategy 2010 - 2020.*

In this document, developed by the Ministry of Education and Science, it is for the first time in Bulgaria that somebody mentions and draws attention to informal education. It indicates that in Bulgaria the popularity and recognition of such education are limited. There are undeveloped mechanisms for public support of youth volunteering as an important expression of solidarity and active citizenship and a form of informal learning. The Strategy also points out that one of the main objectives for the period up to 2020. will be to encourage the participation of young people in non-profit organizations as a form of acquiring knowledge and skills.

Unfortunately, on general level this is the only interesting text in this document and we can say that the non-formal education is not a major emphasis in the document.

*Development program of education, science and youth policy in Bulgaria until 2013.*

It states that schools, higher education institutions and NGOs should prepare the workforce for lifelong learning that go beyond the conservative educational system and includes informal and non-formal Learning.

It is also mentioned that the state should create legal incentives for individuals and corporate bodies to promote lifelong learning and put continuous efforts to enhance the knowledge and skills.

The development of system for evaluation and validation of lifelong learning process is seen as main task for the Ministry of Education in this program.

Unfortunately, my personal experience in communicating with experts from this ministry shows that there is not even a small effort to start the work in this direction, although the program states that there should be clear results by 2013.

If we go for a while out of the context “young people”, in Bulgaria there are however attempts to enable the development of informal education by creating a system of recognition. For example, a project of MLSP with France - "Vocational guidance and vocational assessment" has studied the French system of vocational guidance and validation of professional qualifications. Attention has been paid also to the valuable experience of other countries - the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Italy and others. The process of validation of qualifications is associated with the introduction of a complete system, including legislation, institutions, methodology for certifying the knowledge and skills, etc.

Following a project coordinated by the German company GOPA with international experts in March 2009 a model for validation of competences acquired through formal and informal learning has been developed and tested. The model is tested in three professions / professional fields of the following areas: tourism, garments, construction, woodworking and furniture industry. In particular a

framework for validation was developed with its elements and stages of the procedure, criteria for accreditation of organizations that offer validation and development of relevant documentation. The model was also tested but not yet implemented.

### **Informal education in Europe**

One of the main instruments for implementation of the Lisbon targets to make Europe a knowledge and competence based society is the concept of making lifelong learning a reality. The bases of this concept are skills and competences that a European citizen should develop through various forms of education, training and employment.

As a result, by Decision No 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of 15 December 2004. Entered into force on 1 January 2005., a framework was established for reaching better transparency of qualifications and competences - **Europass**.

**The Europass** documents present someone's skills and competencies, describe in detail capabilities of the individual, his personality and how this all has been acquired and developed in order to achieve better social integration and employability.

The documents provide the ability to track individual's competence development throughout life. Knowledge and skills acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning. They show the three aspects of someone's life and cultural, social and human capital are recorded in different Europass documents. The entire kit can provide information on education, training, work experience, the mobility of each individual and thus individualized skills, attitudes and ambitions for the development of every citizen.

Europass facilitates communication between employers, job applicants, educational institutions and students in all European countries.

Europass improves the transparency of qualifications and thus facilitate the mobility of workers in the European labor market.

Use of Europass documents is voluntary and not mandatory.

Dissemination of Europass documents is free.

Europass documents are:

1. Europass CV
2. Europass Language Passport
3. Europass Mobility;
4. Europass Certificate Supplement;
5. Europass Diploma Supplement

All Europass documents carry the official logo of the initiative. At national level coordination of the initiative and dissemination of documents is carried out by the National Europass Centre. In Bulgaria, the National Europass Centre is part of the Human Resource Development Center.

### **Proof of accumulated competencies in youth activities at European level – YOUTHPASS**

There are many ways to use the “competences approach” for assessment of the youth activities’ educational effect on young people, one of them was developed by the Resource Centre SALTO, whose activity is linked to the implementation of the "Youth in Action" Programme. This is YOUTHPASS. According to it young people acquire skills which are subject to certification that goes through several steps / stages. They are:

- help them understand the underlying meaning of the word "competence";
- Helping to understand the competencies they already have;
- Helping to develop their competencies (those who already have and those lacking);
- Support to document their progress in terms of improving their competence and thus the educational process becomes visible;
- Supported and assessed themselves to be seen passing through different phases.

Self-assessment and reflection are the main pillars of this approach to assess the competencies mastered. Although both terms (self-assessment and reflection) require independent action by the young person, it is practically very difficult to happen. Maybe it sounds a little ambiguous, but the process of self-assessment is most successful when

the young person is supported through it. Young people, especially those with limited opportunities, certainly need help to reflect on and evaluate the competencies that are accumulated in the process of in/non-formal education.

In practice, there could be many different approaches in this regard. Depending on how the organization (Youth Center, Volunteer Center and others) orient their approach towards their own target group.

Regardless of form, there are several key elements that should be noted when using an approach based on competences of the young people:

- Participation must be voluntary. Self-evaluation works only if the person wants to do it;

- The young person should not only be a “receiver” in the YOUTHPASS process. This approach is built on the understanding that it is necessary to encourage self-development and this means that the young person must have actively participated in the process where possible. This is not just to participate in discussions and exercises, to do and perform different tasks - it also means that youth should play a role in management and to manage their own learning (as far as possible).

- You must have a clear structure in the approaches. The young man must be aware of what and why he does, how the process works and what does this positively change (and when);

- Should be used as a basis what the youngster has amassed so far as competence. As a rule it is always easier to recognize your weaknesses than strengths, but such an approach should be based on positive thinking much more than negative - otherwise the risk to young people create feelings of inferiority, which in the end You will all lead to withdrawal from the process. The approach should be based on this to remove a definite plan what the young man has in himself now, what skills have to do what he knows and others to build on that. In building the concept of YOUTHPASS creators target youth workers and leaders to organize your workflow as comply with the above rules and recommendations, according to them the basis of a successful educational process is rooted in the following few things:

- Initiation and development of youth work starting from their strengths and skills;

- Giving young people the opportunity to experiment, to be responsible for their actions and to discover things for themselves as far as possible;
- Working with young people should be a pleasure for them, while using different approaches and methods to facilitate the process;
- The approach to young people must be oriented not only to improve their skills for their subsequent work experience, but rather focuses on the individual as a whole;

YOUTHPASS is much more than just listing and assessment of key competencies. It is a process that is designed to support the educational effects of youth activities. If the participant is fully aware what happens to him in terms of acquiring knowledge and skills. Completion of the certificate that gives visibility to the accumulated core competencies is based on the process and therefore it does not happen only at the end of the project activities. The participant receives time and space to reflect upon the things he had passed and therefore what he has learned, what has raised his curiosity, what was not fulfilled in any direction and how this limitation can be overcome by the end of the project. This means that the process is fully self oriented, which largely is actually the basis of formal education as such.

### **Two examples from European countries:**

#### *Denmark*

In the last year, Denmark has taken steps to ensure the voluntary commitment of its young citizens by setting an explicit requirement in education law for a specified number of hours of community service for each student. Proof is completed official application to the Baccalaureate, which has no rating, but it remains valid diploma.

In Denmark the government has made great efforts in this area as of 2001 the reform of adult education "Better Education" was put in place. It includes four ministries - education, culture, economics and business, science, technology and innovation. The procedure involves at least four steps:

1. Consultation and clarification of needs.
2. Documentation of previously acquired knowledge and competencies.

3. Recognition of previously acquired knowledge and skills:
  - Access to education / training;
  - An individual plan for education / training;
  - Training Certificate.

### *Finland*

Finnish National Youth Council, promoted the Finnish Recreational Activity Study Book, designed by the Youth Academy, which is an umbrella organisation that supports youth-led activities and learning through them. The book provides a place to register all learning experiences undertaken outside the formal education, among them the volunteering experiences. It makes the process of learning visible to young people, building up their awareness of their development. It can also be presented to educational institutions and to employers as a supplement to an individual's CV. The book was financed by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, as well as private companies.

A European commission survey showed that some countries (BE, UK, AU, DK, MT, BE) developed or tried to develop recognition schemes. In most of the Member States, recognition is based on certificates produced individually by organisations receiving volunteers and depends on employers' or educational institutions' goodwill in recognising them.

It was observed that some NGOs or youth councils appear to be reluctant towards introducing formal recognition schemes, as they do not want youth participation to be seen merely in the context of employment opportunities. It was underlined that the mere process of collecting entries is of major importance. It was concluded that recognition needs to be promoted.

## **Youth Activity in the Region of Burgas**

Elka Dolapchieva, FAR Association for democratic education

### **I. Background information, goal and objective**

FAR is an association for democratic education set up in 1995, working predominantly with and for the young people who live in the region of Burgas, organizing seminars, trainings, and national and international exchange programmes. In 2001 FAR started organizing education programmes for adults too – pedagogues, teachers and school principals mostly – teaching them the methods of the non-formal education.

Today FAR offers non-formal citizenship education for young people and adults, and its main goal is to encourage and support people from different generations to participate actively in the social and political life of the country.

From the beginning of January 2011 to September 2011 the FAR Association implemented a project called ‘Strengthening the Evidence Based Practice of Education Civil Society Organizations Initiative’, funded by the Open Society Institute in Budapest. The project aimed to encourage non-governmental and civil society organizations to adopt comprehensive data gathering protocols and strategies to systematically collect data emerging from their service work which once collected and analyzed can serve for enhancing the quality of the services provided by them.

Within the framework of this project FAR conducted a study of the young people living in the region of Burgas on the topic ‘*The impact of non-*

*formal political education on the active citizenship of 14 to 19 year old students in the region of Burgas’.*

The main activity and the main goal of our association prompted us to choose this topic for our study. After 15 years of work it was time to analyse and determine the impact and the results from these educational interventions, to search for new impulses and directions for our work.

For a long time now FAR has wanted to study young people in a more profound way. However, there has always been a reason – lack of time, limited capacity of the team, funds, etc. – which pushed this idea into the background. This project would have never been implemented, or it would have been implemented at a much later stage, if our young colleague from Bavaria, Tobias Faltermeier, had not joined our team. He took the lead for the application for this project and introduced many innovative ideas in the development of the strategy and the methodology, and in the analysis and assessment of the project. The work and commitment of Mr. Faltermeier to the goals and interests of our association helped the young people living in the region of Burgas make their voice heard.

## **II. Methods and organization**

The purpose of our team was not to collect data from reports generated by governments, institutions, or NGOs, but to collect information directly from the young people. The study involved young people living in the region of Burgas who were between 14 and 19 years of age, because this is also the main target group of our association in general.

It was really important for us to ask for and hear the opinion of the young individual because, as a 17-year student from the High School of Romance Languages in Burgas shared in one of his open questions:

*'...nobody is interested in our opinion though we are the future of this country'.*

The study involved 157 young students from comprehensive schools, language schools and technical schools.

105 of the young people who participated in the study are from Burgas, and 52 are from the smaller municipal towns in the region of Burgas – Aytos, Malko Tarnovo, Pomorie, Sredets, Tsarevo. According to the National Statistical Institute the students from 14 to 19 years of age in these municipal towns are two times fewer /4 192 in total/ than those in Burgas /10 177 in total/ and when the number of participants in the study was established this ratio was taken into consideration /[www.nsi.bg/](http://www.nsi.bg/).

The students from Burgas who participated in the study were from the schools *Cyril and Methodius* Comprehensive High School, *Ivan Vazov* Comprehensive High School, *Dimcho Debelyanov* Comprehensive High School, German Language High Schools, English Language High Schools, Foreign Language High Schools and Romance Language High Schools, a Commercial High School, a Technical High School of Electronics and Electrical Engineering, a Technical High School of Mechanical Electrical Engineering and Electronics.

The young people from the smaller municipal towns were students from *St. Cyril and Methodius* Comprehensive High School, Sredets, *N. Y. Vaptsarov* Comprehensive High School, Tsarevo, *V. Levski* Comprehensive High School M. Tarnovo, *Hristo Botev* Comprehensive High School, Aytos, *Technical High School of Agriculture and Farming*,

*Aytos, Technical High School of Mechanization of Agriculture and Farming and Electronics, Sredets, Technical High School of Tourism, Pomorie.*

The methods we employed in our study included a quantitative and a qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis used a questionnaire for the active participation of the young people developed by the FAR team. It consisted of 41 questions: 8 of which were open, and the rest were multiple choice questions. The qualitative analysis involved observation and monitoring of the conception and implementation of youth projects and initiatives. To that end we organized a round table discussion of the problems experienced by young people. Special questionnaires were developed for conducting structured interviews with the students during the whole process of the organization and carrying out the projects/ initiatives.

The collected information was processed manually and electronically with the SPSS programme for statistical data processing. Our project consultant working on the issues of how the questionnaire should be structured, and how the information should be processed and analyzed electronically, was Mrs. Svetla Hadzhieva, an expert from the Education Quality Department of Burgas Free University.

### **III. Analysis of findings**

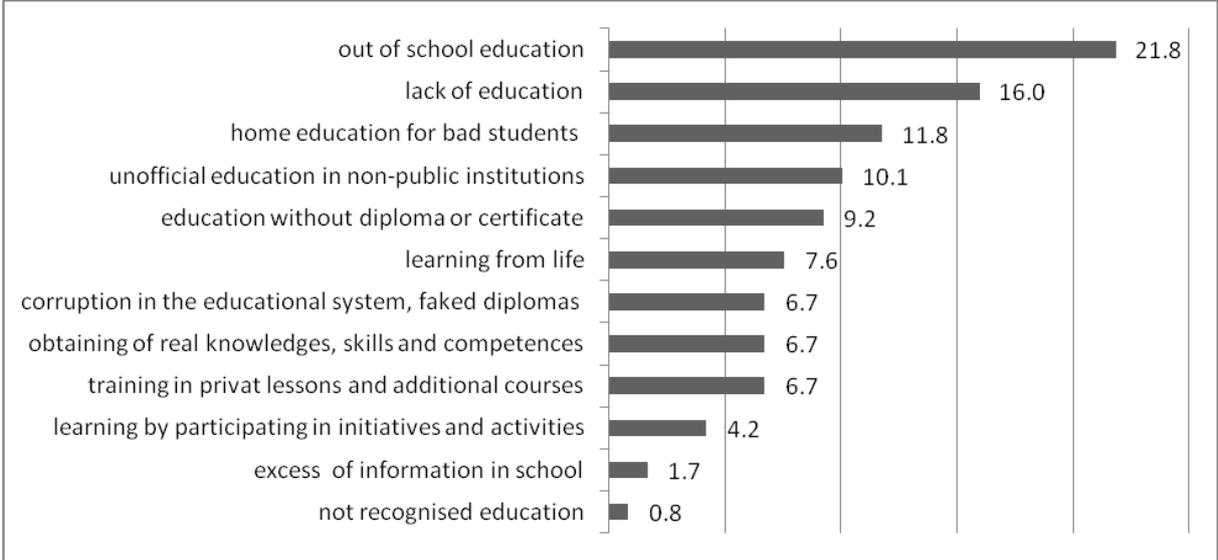
During the development of the strategy and methodology of our study we had to answer the question what non-formal education really is. We could not find a clear-cut definition of this concept which was uniform for all institutions. The different documents and sources provided different definitions, some more synthesized, others quite lengthy. What was

common in all of them, however, was the assertion that non-formal education is education provided outside the school, for which students do not get a diploma or certificate.

Studying the impact of non-formal education on the active citizenship of the young people we had to ask them if they had heard the term ‘non-formal education’ and what they thought it meant. This question was answered by nearly 119 young people or 75.8 % of all respondents. The question was open but we have summarized the answers in the following table /Fig. 1/.

**Fig. 1. What does non-formal education mean for you?**

*/The data is presented as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as percentage of the total number of respondents for this question. As the participants gave more than one answer, the aggregate of the percentage values exceeds one hundred/*



The largest percentage of the respondents to this question, 21.8 %, answered that non-formal education is education outside the school; 16 % of the students – which form a significant part too – answered that non-formal education is a lack of education.

A total of 32.3% of all the answers to this question differ significantly from the meaning of the term 'non-formal education', such as - 'apprenticeship', 'anarchy', 'inexistent education', 'incomprehensible education, aggressive teachers', 'organized by a superficial person'.

A total of 57.7 % of all the answers to this question approximate or fully correspond to some of the existing definitions of non-formal education. Here are some of these definitions:

*'education related to human qualities and values, which is a type of education that students cannot get at school'* /Technical School–Burgas, age – 17-19 years/

*'outside the school setting, driven by individual interests and strife for development'* /Technical School – Burgas, age – 17-19 years/

*'training, seminars and any other out-of-school activities which teach you things that you are not taught at school'* /Language School – Burgas, age 17-19 years/

*'acquisition of knowledge and skills which can be applied in real life'* / Technical School – Burgas, age 17-19 years/

In the definitions given by the respondents, it is often said that non-formal education teaches you something which is not taught at school. The respondents point out that non-formal education is complementary to the formal education, rather than being its alternative or competition:

*'...it takes place out of school and only contributes for acquiring better skills and knowledge'* /Comprehensive High School – Sredets, age 17-19 years/

All additional skills and knowledge that the young people are taught help them adapt to the world of adults and participate successfully in the social life.

The role of citizenship education in the process of growing into an active citizen was highlighted in the final report from a study conducted in all European countries in 2005:

*'...in order to participate, citizens have to acquire knowledge, attitudes, values and skills. These preconditions for active citizenship are ideally the result – or output – of citizenship education.'* /"Indicators for monitoring active citizenship and citizenship education", REGIOPLAN, 2005/

Non-formal education, which is offered mostly by non-governmental or civil society organizations and informal groups, provides opportunities for development of key competences and practical skills, and thus forms prerequisites for active citizenship.

However, in order to measure the impact of non-formal education on the participation of young people, it is necessary to answer the question what in fact is active citizenship, can it be measured at all, and what are the indicators for that.

The aforementioned final report of REGIOPLAN 2005, combining the indicators of the questionnaires developed for 5 different studies conducted in 2005 in all European countries /"Indicators for monitoring active citizenship and citizenship education", REGIOPLAN 2005/, offers the following indicators for active citizenship:

- Voluntary work in organizations and networks
- Organizing activities for the community
- Voting in elections

- Participation in political parties
- Participation in interest groups
- Participation in forms of peaceful protests
- Participation in public debate

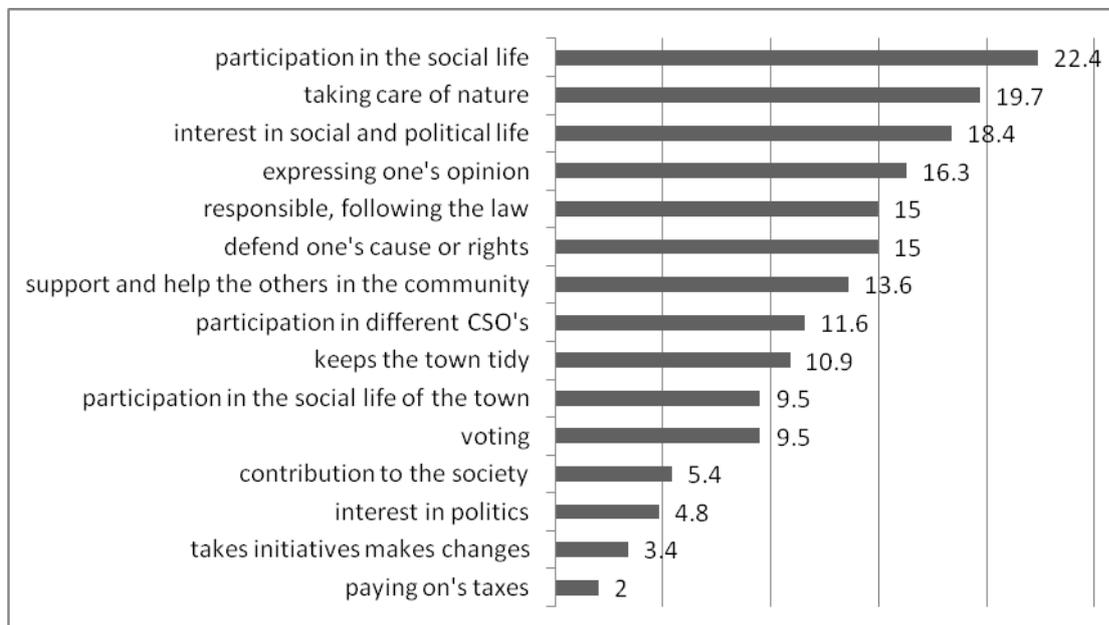
Using our long experience in the sphere of citizenship education and in the work with young people, we chose, for the purposes of our study, the following indicators for active citizenship of young people:

- Interest and awareness of social-political life
- Participation in the social-political life /clubs, organizations, initiatives/
- Forms of expression of opinion
- Voting
- Voluntary commitment to activities which are beneficial to others

Before we subjected the indicators for active citizenship to analyses, we asked the respondents what their idea of an active citizen was. Answer to this question was given by 147 young people or 93.6% of the respondents. The question was open, but we have summarized the answers into the following fifteen definitions /Fig. 2/.

## Fig. 2. What is your idea of an active citizen?

*/The data is presented as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as percentage of the total number of respondents for this question. As the participants gave more than one answer, the aggregate of the percentage values exceeds one hundred/*



The largest percentage of the respondents, who answered this question, 22.4%, believe that the active citizen is someone who 'participates in social life'.

Here are some of the definitions given by the respondents:

*'to really care about the future and to try to improve the social and economic situation in all their aspects' /Technical School, Burgas, age 17-19 years/*

*'to be interested in what happens in my home town, to participate in seminars, youth initiatives, projects and anything accessible to us, the citizens' /Technical School, Aytos, age 17-19 years/*

*'to take interest in the social issues and to help find solutions for them' /Technical School, Burgas, age 17-19 years/*

*'citizens who can express their opinion on a certain issue, who stand their ground and are not indifferent to what is happening around them'* /Language School, Burgas, age 14-16 years/

*'to participate in organizations which help people, to help poor people, to clean the place I live in'* /Comprehensive High School, Malko Tarnovo, age 14-16 years/

An interesting fact is that second with 19.7% comes the answer 'one who protects nature'. This answer was given by 27.7% and 16% of the respondents to this question in the small towns and in Burgas respectively. According to them the active citizen should:

*'work for and take care of the environment – at least throw their garbage away in the designated places; take interest or participate in the development of their town'* /Technical High School, Sredets, age 17-19 years/

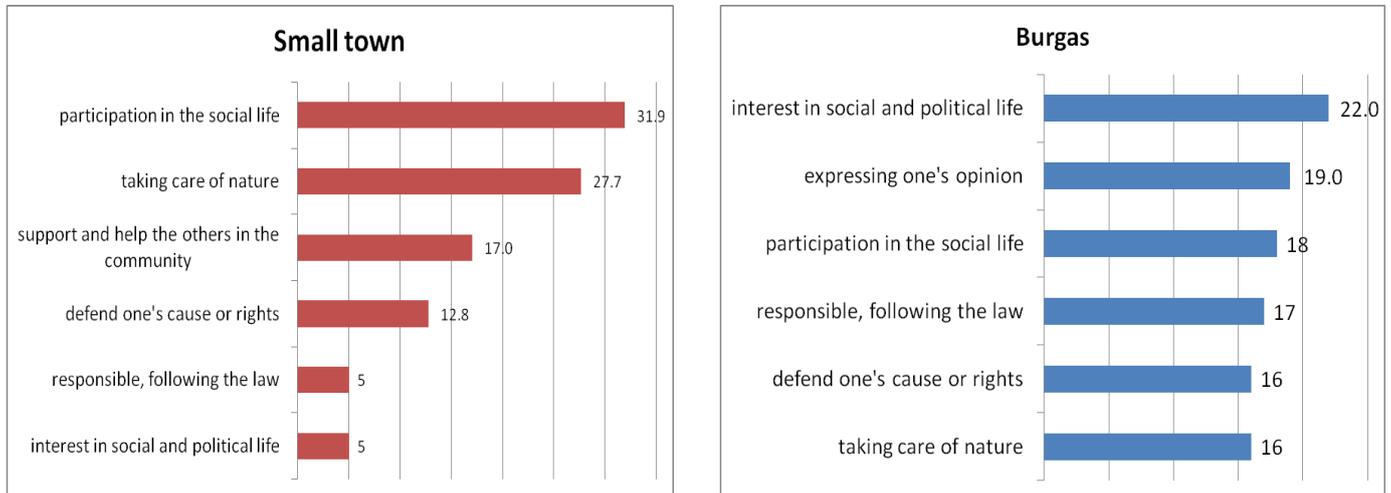
These answers reveal that the students are really interested in this issue and made us consider the option of introducing more activities and topics related to the environment.

We should compare the results from the question 'What is your idea of an active citizen?', for the different type of towns, as there are some significant differences between the idea of an active citizen of the young people from the small towns and from the larger city.

This question was answered by 90.4% of the respondents from the small towns and by 95.2% of the respondents from Burgas.

**Fig. 3. What is your idea of an active citizen? /comparison between the small municipal towns and Burgas/**

*/The data is presented as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as percentage of the total number of respondents for this question. As the participants gave more than one answer, the aggregate of the percentage values exceeds one hundred/*



It may be noted that the experience and notions of the young people from the small towns present the active citizen as a person of action, whereas the young people from the large city see him/her more as a person of words. 31.9% of the young people from the small towns define the active citizen as a person participating in the social life, 27.7% as someone who works to protect the environment and 17% as someone who supports and helps others. The active citizen in Burgas is interested in the social – political life - 22%, is able to express his/her opinion - 19% and only in the third place with 18% the active citizen participates in the social life.

It is worth mentioning that while in the small towns as few as 5% of the respondents believed that the active citizen is interested in the social and

political life, in Burgas this is the leading answer with 22% /Fig. 3/. The total percentage for all respondents is 18.4% /Fig. 2/.

Comparing this percentage with the results from the answers to the question ‘Are you generally interested in the social - political life of Bulgaria and worldwide?’ /Fig. 4/, we can see that 89.8% of the young people demonstrate various degrees of interest; almost half of them respond that they are only slightly interested, and around 36 % that they are interested.

**Fig.4. Are you generally interested in social – political life in Bulgaria and worldwide?**

*/The data is presented as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as percentage of the total number of respondents for this question./*

very interested	5.7
interested	36.3
little bit interested	47.8
not interested	10.2

Therefore, we can make a conclusion that according to this indicator for active citizenship young people are predominantly moderately active.

Also, 43.6% of the respondents claim that they seek information systematically and purposefully on what is happening in Bulgaria and around the world. The preferred and most commonly used sources for that are television 40%, the Internet 26% and conversations with members of the family or friends 19.5% /Fig. 5/.

**Fig. 5. How do you inform yourself?**

*/The data is presented as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as percentage of the total number of respondents for this question. As the participants gave more than one answer, the aggregate of the percentage values exceeds one hundred/*

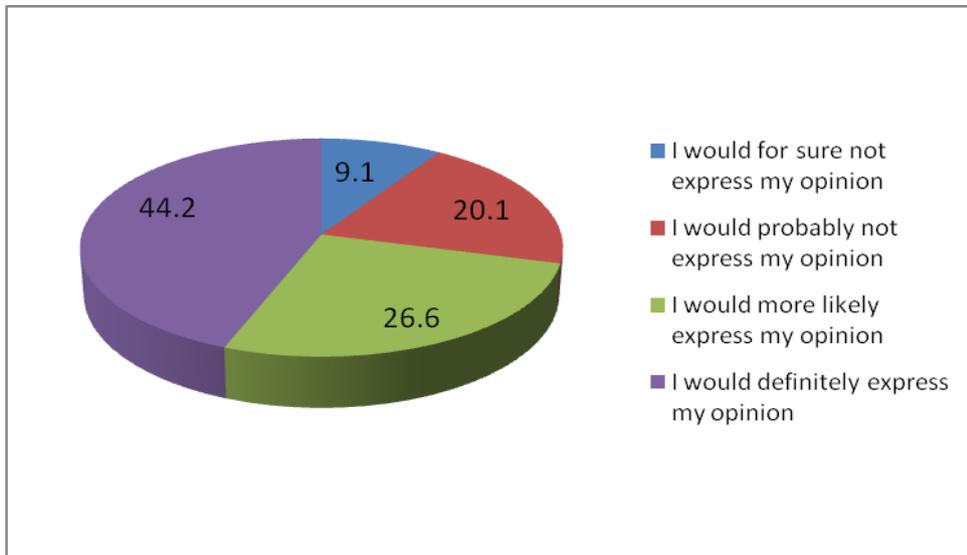
Television	40
Online	26
Comments from family and friends	19.5
Daily newspaper	5.8
Radio	3.9
Weekly newspaper	2.6
Other	1.9

Another indicator for active citizenship which we chose to include in our study and which the young people ranked fourth with 16.3% in their definitions is ‘expressing one’s opinion’.

155 of the 157 participants answered the question whether they would express their opinion publicly. The results show that a little more than 70% of the young people would definitely or would more likely express their opinion. Less than 30% are those who would not or would probably not do that /Fig. 6/.

**Fig. 6. Would you express your opinion in public?**

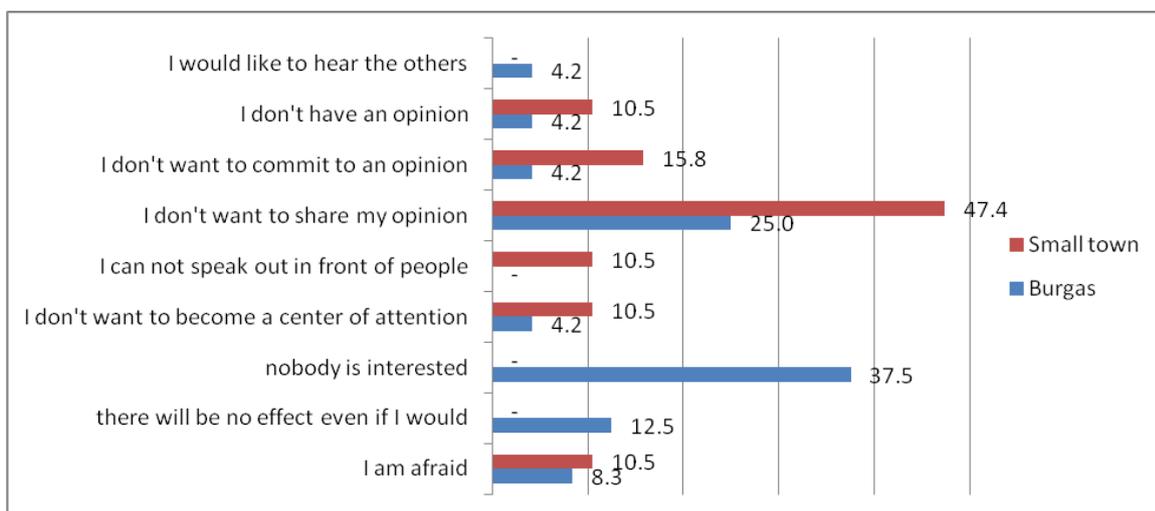
*/The data is presented as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as percentage of the total number of respondents for this question./*



We asked the young people who would not or would probably not express their opinion to share in brief their reasons for that. The first reason was that they did not want to share their opinion; the second that nobody was interested, that they did not want to commit to an opinion, that they were afraid, that they did not have an opinion, that they did not want to become the centre of attention, and that there would be no effect even if they did. /Fig. 7/.

**Fig.7.What are the reasons for not expressing your opinion in public? /relationship small municipal towns – Burgas/**

*/The data is presented as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as percentage of the total number of respondents for this question./*



The table shows that there are large differences between the answers given in Burgas and those given in the smaller towns. In Burgas most of the young people who wouldn't express their opinion explain it with the fact that nobody would want to hear it and that there would be no effect even if they did express it; in the smaller municipal towns most of the young people say that they do not want to share their opinions or to commit to an opinion. It must be noted that only in the small municipal towns there is an answer saying 'I cannot speak out in front of people'. This and some of the other reasons given – I have no opinion, I am afraid, I want to hear what the others have to say – may be effectively influenced and changed through participation in various forms of non-formal education which provide the opportunity for acquiring presentation skills and competences, debating and forming an opinion.

The question 'What forms have you already used to express your opinion?' was answered by 43.3% of the participants, i.e. 43.3% have already expressed their opinion in some way. Comparing this result with the percentage of young people who would definitely express their opinion – 44.2% /Fig. 6/, we can see that the results coincide. There is an almost complete correspondence between the willingness to express one's opinion and having actually expressed one's opinion /Fig. 8/.

**Fig. 8. Relationship between willingness to express an opinion and having actually expressed an opinion**

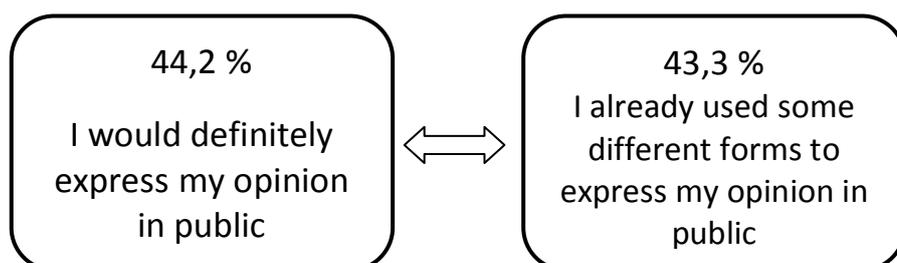
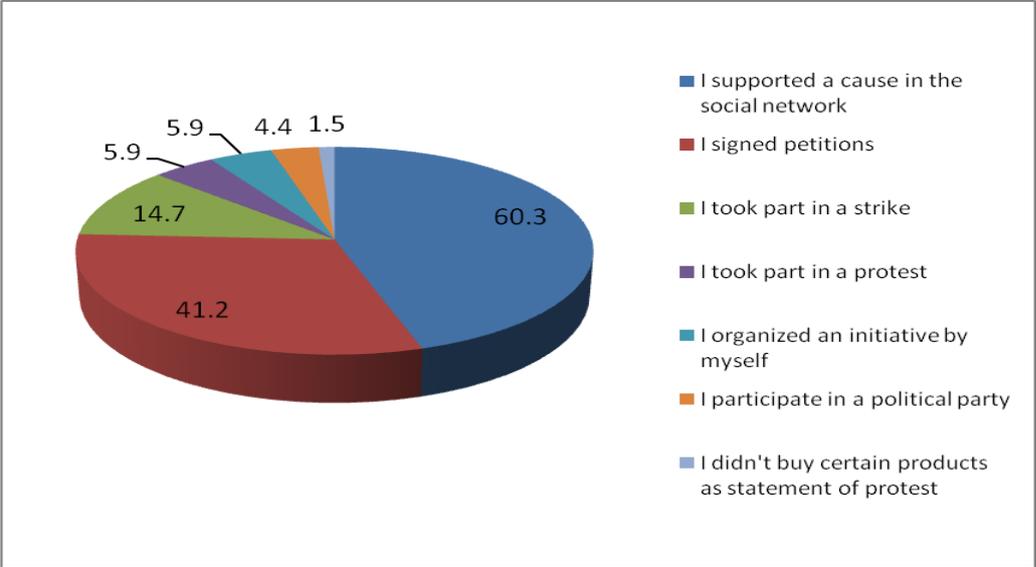


Figure 9 presents the actual participation of young people in the different forms of expressing opinion. More than half of the young people who already expressed their opinion in some way – 60.3 %, have supported a cause in a social network. This is one of the most accessible forms for them considering their presence online /30.6% of the participants claimed that they spend 3 to 5 hours a day online, and 24.2% are online 5 to 7 hours a day/. Supporting causes in social networks and signing petitions are the most common forms of expressing an opinion and they demonstrate a form of a passive activity. The next two preferred forms – participation in strikes and protests show activity concealed in the comfort of the masses. Only 5.9% have organized an initiative on their own, and 4.4% participate in a political party. It must be noted that the participants in political parties are respondents from the smaller towns. This probably results from the easier dissemination of information about opportunities for such participation in the smaller towns and communities, and also to the more limited opportunities for participation in the social – political life there.

**Fig. 9. What forms have you already used to express your opinion?**

*/The data is presented as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as percentage of the total number of respondents, who already expressed their opinion in some way./*



In order to study the willingness of young people to express their opinion, we asked them what form of expressing their opinion they would choose, if they wanted to have their say on a topic which is important for them and thus to influence a social or political decision. The different ways of expressing an opinion and the probability for each of them to be chosen are presented in Figure 10. The coloured responses are those with the highest percentage for each form of expressing an opinion.

**Fig. 10. If you want to express your opinion on a, for you important topic, or you want to influence a socio – political decision via expressing your position which of the following statements would you choose?**

*/The data is presented in percentage. The relative shares are calculated as percentage of the total number of respondents for this question. The highest numbers on each line are in colour./*

	Definitely	Maybe	Probably not	Under no circumstance
I would support the cause in the social network.	46.1	43.4	6.6	3.9
I would sign a petition	27.9	49.4	19.5	3.2
I would participate in a demonstration or a strike	17.1	33.6	37.5	11.8
I would stop consuming and buying certain products as a sign of protest	7.8	20.9	41.2	30.1
I would participate in a civil initiative, civil organisation	12.6	35.1	42.4	9.9
I would participate and work actively in a political movement / political party	7.2	13.7	48.4	30.7
I would organize an initiative by myself	4.6	22.4	53.9	19.1

We can see clearly here again that both the actual activity and the willingness for activity are rather passive: through signing petitions or supporting causes in social networks.

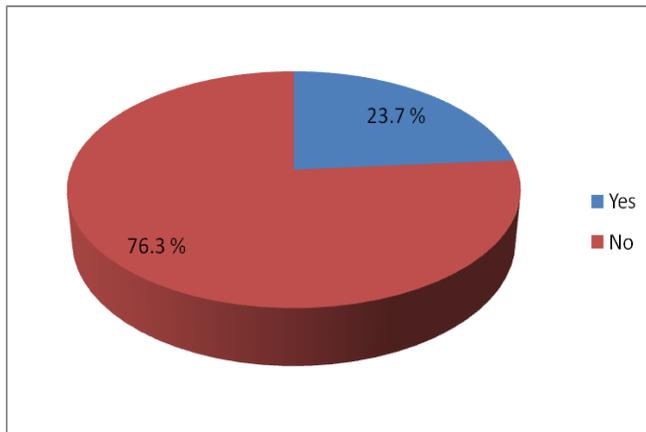
The willingness to express one's opinion through the format 'I'd stop consuming and buying certain products as a sign of protest' is low – only 28.7% would definitely or probably use it, which we assign to its low general popularity in our country.

It is also clear that the least desirable form of expressing one's opinion is participation in a political party. This may be the result of a number of reasons. In general, politics is not very popular with young people not only in Bulgaria, but in all parts of Europe too. Proving this points is the fact that only 2% of the young people in Germany are willing to participate in a political party. /16.Shell Jugendstudie, Jugend 2010/

Hesitation can be noticed in the responses for 'I'd participate in a demonstration or a strike' and 'I'd participate in a civil initiative, civil organisation'. On the first claim 50.7% give positive responses in different degrees, and 49.3% give negative responses in different degrees. On the second claim the positive responses are 47.7%, and the negative are 52.3%. The percentage of those who would participate in a association or a civil society organization is lower than that of the young people who would participate in an already organized event. After all, this hesitation signals the need for further study into the reasons for the low percentage of willingness for participation in civil initiatives and organizations, and for making the necessary interventions to alter this indicator of active citizenship.

The next figure illustrates the information about young people who actually participate in a club or an organization.

**Fig. 11. Are you a member of a club or association?**



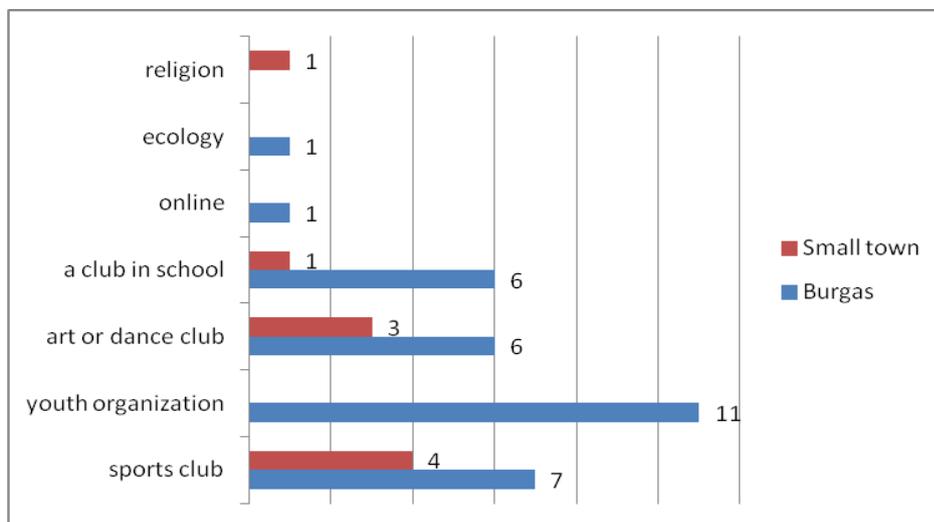
The percentage of young people who would probably participate in organizations or associations, 47.7% /Fig. 10/ is higher than the percentage of young people who actually participate in such organizations, 23.7% /Fig.11/.

The percentage of the participants who are members of clubs and organizations in the smaller towns and in Burgas are 17.4% and 23.8% respectively.

Out of the 36 students who are members of a club or an organization, 34 students /25 from Burgas and 9 from a smaller town/ named the organizations they are members of; some provided more than one answer.

**Fig. 12. Relationship between the membership in different type of clubs and the locality**

*/The data is presented in number/*



The largest part of students - 11 participate in sports clubs and youth organizations. The participation in sports clubs is not surprising considering the popularity of this type of youth activities on a municipal level in Youth Cultural Centres and in various sports centres affiliated to schools. Participation in youth organizations is present in the responses only of people living in Burgas, and 81.8% of the answers are of students from foreign language high schools. The following youth organizations were mentioned: *Bulgarian Youth Red Cross, Astika Foundation, FAR, Rotary Club, Mladezhki Glas.*

The absence of participation in youth organizations, and the lower levels of participation in other clubs, in the smaller towns is most likely due to the lack of such clubs or the limited access to such organizations. There are 290 organizations registered in Burgas District and only 17 organization which state that they work with young people [/www.ngobg.info/](http://www.ngobg.info/), but it is very difficult to determine how many of those are actually functioning and how active they really are. Our professional

experience shows that there are about 10 active organizations in Burgas which systematically provide various activities for young people. Taking into consideration that the students from grades 9 to 12 in Burgas are 10 177, each organization gets an average of 1000 young people.

If we go back to the willingness to express one's opinion /Fig. 10/, we will see that 47.7% of the respondents claimed that they would definitely or probably choose to express their opinion by participating in a civil organization or initiative. This percentage is 58,3% in the smaller municipal towns and 42,7% in Burgas. This once again illustrates the necessity of more youth organizations and youth activities in the smaller towns and the remote regions. This is a niche that is yet to be filled.

The encouragement and creation of a favourable environment for establishing youth organizations both in the large cities and in the smaller towns and villages would stimulate the participation of young people in them, and as a result would raise the active citizenship indicator 'participation in organizations and clubs'.

The analysis of the willingness to express an opinion by different means shows that 27% of the young people claim that they would definitely or more likely, organize an initiative on their own /Fig. 10/.

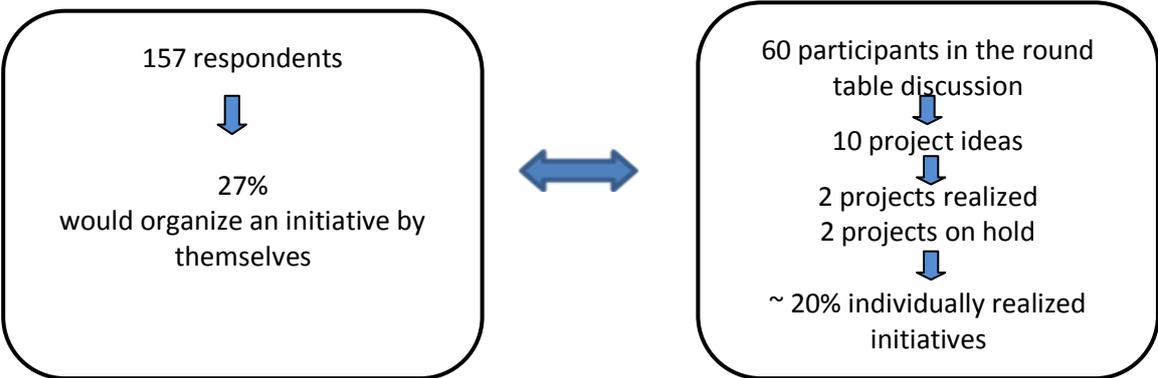
*'to me being an active citizen means to rely not only on the municipal authorities because they sometimes cannot perform their duties. That's why when somebody wants to do something, he/she has to do it on their own or to gather other people who think the same way' /Comprehensive High School, Burgas, age 17-19 years/.*

Driven by the idea to analyse to what extent and under what circumstances young people are likely to organize and conduct initiatives on their own, at the beginning of our study we organized a round table

discussion on the issues concerning young people in order to collect ideas for finding solution to these problems. The 60 participants who were present gave proposals which could be grouped into 10 potential solutions.

Only 2 youth projects were actually implemented – a youth seminar on the various forms of government ‘Do it yourself: A State of your own’ and an initiative - ‘Ecocamp’ in Sredets. Another two projects – interactive presentations for the possibilities for participation in various youth organizations in Burgas ‘Think out of the box’ and ‘It’s up to us’ for creating an eco path to the area ‘Royashko Plateau’ in the Municipality of Dalgopol – are currently put on hold until certain things occur, so that they may be implemented successfully. To sum up, we can say that about 20% of the participants managed to implement their initiatives, i.e. this corresponds to the relationship between willingness to organize initiatives and actually organized initiatives /Fig. 13/.

**Fig. 13. Relationship between the willingness to organize an initiative individually and the actually organized individual initiatives**



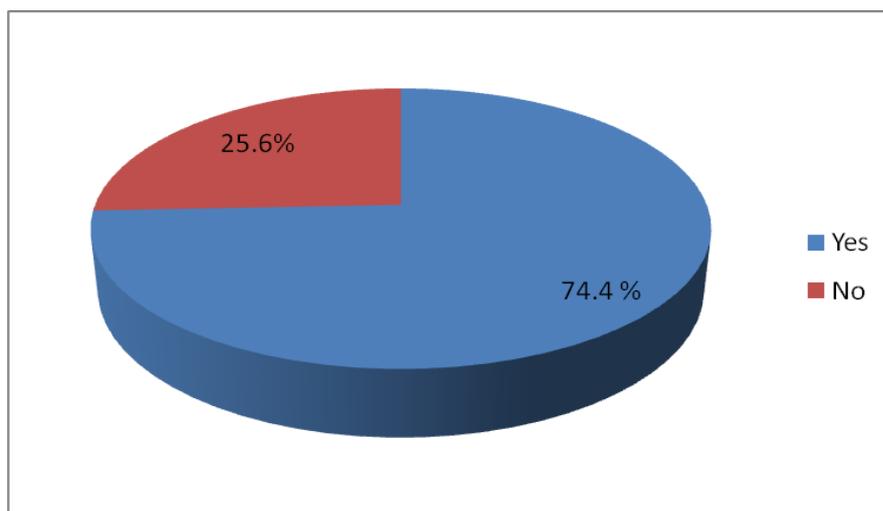
For FAR it is very important to not only collect data but also analyse the reasons and relationships which lead to it. The interviews conducted with the young people during the whole period from the conception of the idea

to its implementation highlighted some of the reasons for the failure of the initiatives: lack of time; inconsistency between ideas, motivation and reality; inadequate communication; transfer of responsibility. /See 'Our experience in the youth initiative 'Eco-camp Sredets' by Lilyana Uzunova for more details on the challenges of conducting youth initiatives/.

These are in fact difficulties that are encountered in every project, regardless of whether it is a youth project or not. The monitoring of the projects by FAR revealed that there is not enough know-how in the field of project management, and that it is necessary to provide training for youth workers and youth leaders.

Another indicator of active citizenship is voting. The question whether they would vote on the following elections was posed only to the participants who will have turned 18 years of age by October 2011. Of all 157 participants there were 39 people who met this criterion, or in other words 24.8% of them. 74.4% of these respondents answered in the affirmative /Fig. 14/.

**Fig. 14. Would you vote in the next elections?**



The relative share of the respondents who gave a positive answer presents a quite optimistic forecast for the young Bulgarian voters, but here we should not overlook the fact that this enthusiasm may be related to these students' exercising their voting right for the first time. Yet, this percentage illustrating the willingness of young people to vote is consistent with the percentage of young Bulgarian people, 82%, who voted on various elections over the past three years according to the Flash Eurobarometer - Survey among young people aged between 15-30 in the European Union /[http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/).

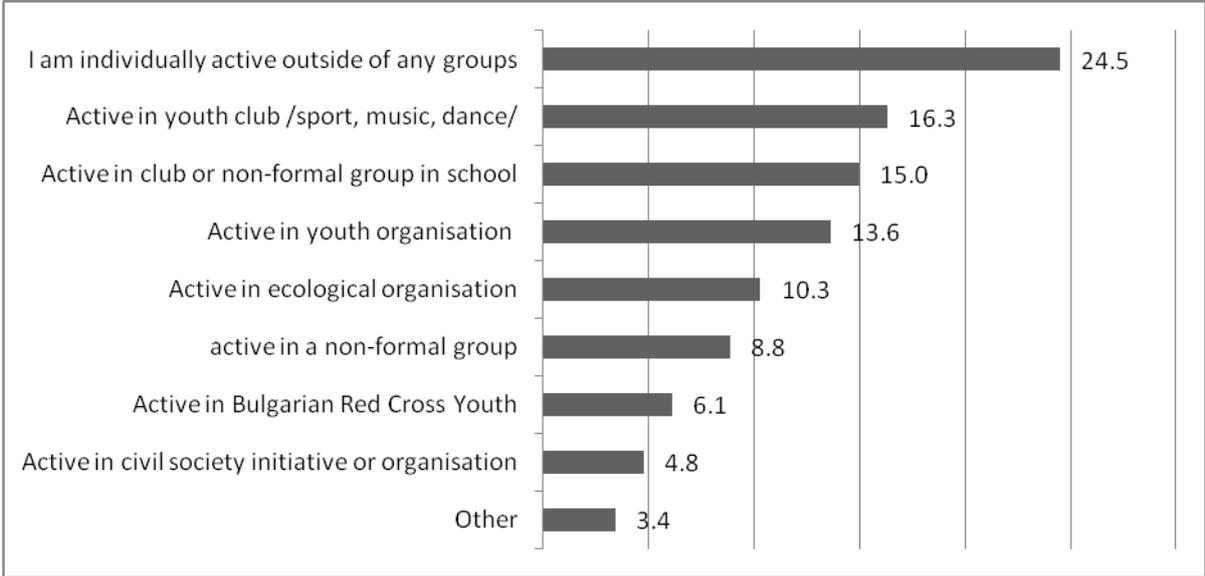
Not last comes the indicator for active citizenship 'voluntary commitment to activities which are beneficial to others'. It is worth mentioning that the question 'Do you take active participation in your free time to help social groups of people or individuals who need support?' was given a positive answer by 68.8% of the young people. The percentages in the smaller municipal towns and in Burgas are close to each other, and yet a little higher in the small towns – 71.1% and 67.6% respectively.

The high percentage of positive answers demonstrate a serious commitment by young people to voluntary work, but after we made some checks as to how and where these young people undertake such commitments, we reached the conclusion that this high percentage could to some extent be the result of the varying comprehension of the meaning of the word 'commitment' in Bulgarian – which is taken to mean 'engagement', 'responsibilities', 'unpleasant tasks'. Such comprehension of the meaning of the word can often be noticed during discussions at seminars organized by FAR. Some of the participants shared that they are committed to finding solutions to everyday tasks and problems of their friends and parents. Here we would like to point out the need, both in non-formal and in formal education, of clear explanation of the terms

used in the field of citizenship education. A great part of them are borrowings from foreign languages and, unfortunately, Bulgarian does not yet have a uniform terminology and official translation for many of them, which leads to misunderstandings and confusion.

The largest part of respondents who answered that they commit themselves in their free time to activities which are beneficial to other people, i.e. 24.5%, perform their commitments on their own /Fig.15/. This percentage is similar to the percentage of young people, 27%, who are willing to express their opinion by organizing independent initiatives. /Fig. 10/.

**Fig. 15. Where and how do you fulfil your commitments?**  
*/The data below is calculated as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as a percentage of the respondents who gave the answer 'yes' to the question. As the participants gave more than one answer, the aggregate of the percentage values exceeds one hundred/*



In the small municipal towns 44.4% of the young people say that they are individually active. This probably results from the presence of fewer clubs and organizations there. Considering the meaning of ‘commitment’ specified above, we can assume, that this type of voluntary commitment is largely unstructured and is expressed in a socially desirable behaviour. Interesting are also the answers to the question to what groups of people the respondents usually commit themselves /Fig. 16/.

**Fig. 16. In your free time are you active for the benefit of others in your community?**

*/The data below is calculated as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as a percentage of the respondents who gave the answer ‘yes’ to the question. As the participants gave more than one answer, the aggregate of the percentage values exceeds one hundred/*

I am active towards...:	
Improvement of the living condition in my community	48.1 %
Preserving the culture and traditions in Bulgaria	34.3 %
Elder people in need	33.3%
The interests of young people	32.4 %
Improving the situation of disabled people or people with special needs	20.4%
Improving the situation of social and economically disadvantaged people	13.0 %
Improving the conditions of addicted people	12.0 %
Others	9.3 %
Improving the situation of minorities in Bulgaria	8.3 %

Almost 50% answer that they commit themselves to the improvement of the living conditions in the place where they live. Comparing these results with the results from the previous question /Fig. 15/ we can conclude that the majority of young people undertake independent initiatives for the improvement of the living conditions in the place where

they live. And comparing this with the demonstrated interest towards ecology reflected in the definition of the active citizen /Fig. 2 and Fig. 3/, we can assume that these are mostly activities related to the cleaning and protection of the environment.

The high percentage of young people, who are committed to the protection of Bulgarian culture and traditions, 34.3%, is also consistent with the statement ranked second /Fig.15/, according to which the activity of young people is demonstrated in a sports or music club.

It must be noted that there are few young people who are committed to the general improvement of the status of the poor and of people with addictions, and only a group of 8.3% at the bottom of the table are devoted to activities which are beneficial to the minorities. We can assume that this is due to the lack of interest or awareness of the need of such interventions, the lack of confidence that such activities would affect the situation, or the notion that the circumstances in which these people live in Bulgaria are relatively good. It is interesting to note that young people, though it is with a very small difference in percentage, prefer to commit to activities which are beneficial to the elderly people instead of activities which protect their own interests. This percentage is particularly high in smaller towns 43.2%, versus 28.2% in Burgas. In comparison, we have an inverse relationship, though with a small difference, for commitments to activities protecting one's own interests – to this are committed 35.2% of the young people in Burgas and only 27% of the young people in the smaller towns.

22.2% of the young people identify their families as the ones who give them directions, but most of the respondents say they make their choices on the basis of their own interests; a large percentage, 39% and 30.6%,

choose their commitments with the help of friends or simply try new things /Fig.17/.

**Fig. 17. How do you choose what to commit to?**

*/The data below is calculated as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as a percentage of the respondents who answered the question. The highest values on each line are in colour/*

	Yes	No	Sometimes
I am influenced by my interests	80	15.2	4.8
With the help of my friends	39	54	7
I am trying different things	30.6	43.9	25.5
My family is giving me directions	22.2	45.5	32.3
Information of the media	19.2	38.4	42.4
Influenced by internet	17.8	40.6	41.6
Through advertisements, flyers and brochures	15.3	34.7	50
The teachers help me to orientate myself	12.2	47	40.8

The lowest percentage of young people, 12.2% state that their teachers give them direction for their decisions. There is a very high percentage of hesitant answers, 40.8%, by students who gave the answer ‘sometimes’, which shows willingness to accept advice from their teachers and reveals a possibility for collaboration of formal and informal education.

The reasons young people give for voluntary commitment are in the first place the feeling of being useful 26.2%, and gratification 23.5% /Fig. 18/. These voluntary commitments also give opportunity for expressing one’s opinion, demonstrating one’s skills and for establishing social contacts.

**Fig. 18. What is your reason to commit for the benefit of others?**

*/The data below is calculated as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as a percentage of the respondents who gave the answer 'yes' to the question. As the participants gave more than one answer, the aggregate of the percentage values exceeds one hundred/*

I feel useful	26.2
I feel good to help others	23.5
I get new knowledge and competences	16.1
So I can express my opinion	9.4
So I can prove my capabilities	7.7
Because of the social contacts	6.7
Because of the recommendation for University	1.3
To get free time from my parents	1.3
Other	1.0
Because of the certificate	0.7

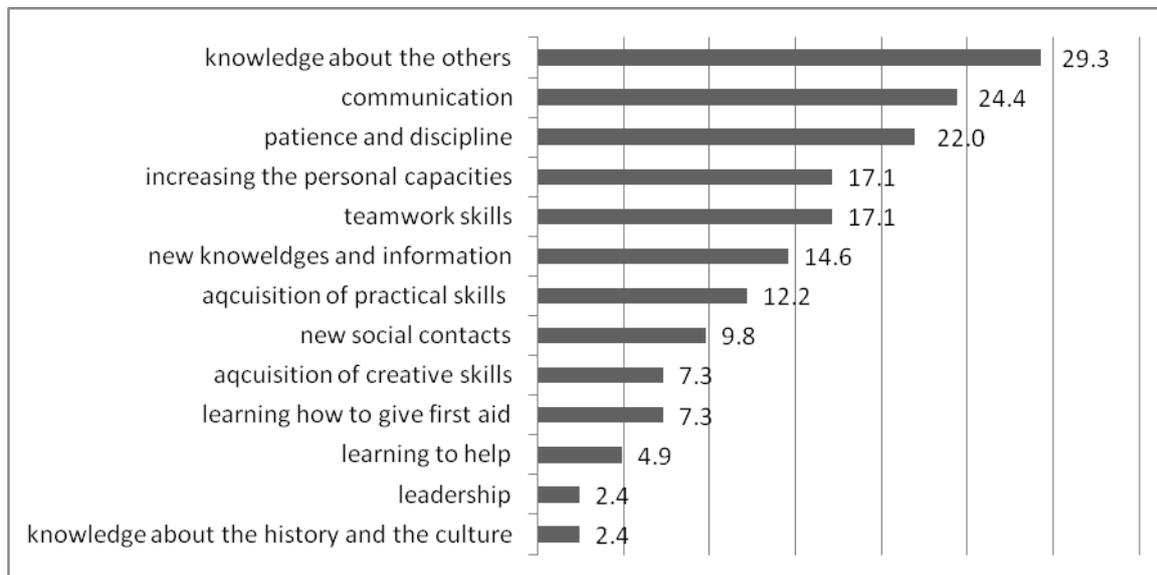
The general opinion that young people participate and commit mostly in order to obtain a certificate or a letter of reference is rebutted here: only 0.7% and 1.3% respectively identified the above as their reason to do it. This shows once again that voluntariness is a philosophy and a way of life, and one's motivation is not necessarily provoked by the anticipation of obtaining a diploma or a certificate.

16.1% of the respondents to this question answered that they acquire new skills, knowledge and competences when they do volunteer work.

There was an open question which required from the young people to specify what new knowledge and skills they acquire from their participation and volunteering in activities which are beneficial to others. We have summarized the information from their answers in Figure 19. Forty-one young people answered this question, or 26.1% of all respondents.

**Fig.19. Which competences and knowledge did you exactly acquire from your participation?**

*/The data below is calculated as percentage. The relative shares are calculated as a percentage of the total number of respondents for this question/*



First place in the answers of young people takes the statement that they get to know new things about other people and acquire communication skills:

*'to try to understand how others feel – not all people have an easy life', /Technical School, Burgas, age 17-19 years/*

*'I learn how to behave properly and how to feel sympathy for other people' /Comprehensive School, Tsarevo, age 14-16 years/*

*'I get to know people and gain experience which may be useful for me in the future; I learn about other people's problems' /Language School, Burgas, age 17-19 years/*

17.1% of the young people answer that they develop various skills such as teamwork competences and many personal qualities among which are: *initiative, expression of one's opinion, responsibility, goodness, sympathy*. 22% of the respondents say they have learnt how to be patient and disciplined.

Also young people claim that they acquire new knowledge and learn useful information, and obtain practical and creative skills.

The fact that the young people conclude on their own that their participation in various events and extracurricular activities helps them acquire new skills, knowledge, and competences, show that by being active and participating in organizations and other events young people obtain new key competences on the one hand, and have the possibility to rationalize their newly gained knowledge through the methods of non-formal education used in these events, on the other hand. Thus each new instance of participation on their part will be conscious, targeted and backed by personal motivation.

#### **IV. Summary**

The analysis of the results of our study can be summarized in the following conclusions about the active citizenship of young people:

The indicator 'interest towards the social and political life' enjoys a high level of activity, where 89.8% of the respondents are interested to different degrees and only 10.2% are not interested at all in what is happening in society.

The indicator 'exercising one's right to vote' is formed by the respondents who have turned 18 years of age and have the right to vote on the next elections /in October 2011/. They demonstrate a high level of activity – 74.4% of them express their willingness to vote.

The indicator 'expressing one's opinion' is marked with moderate activity – 43.3% of the respondents have expressed their opinion publicly, and 46.7% hesitate whether to do it or not. The activity of young people here

is passive as the most widely used forms of support of causes by young people are the social networks, 60.3%, and petitions, 41.2%.

The indicator 'participation in the social and political life' through participation in clubs, organizations and youth initiatives shows a low level of activity: 23.7% of the respondents are members of organizations or clubs and 10.3% participate in their free time in projects or initiatives.

The indicator 'voluntary commitment to activities which are beneficial to others' has above average activity, 68.8% of the respondents answer that in their free time they participate in activities for groups of people or individuals who need support. Taking into consideration the varying comprehension of the meaning of the word 'commitment' and the results from the analysis showing that 24.5% of the young people are individually active, it can be assumed that in this case these voluntary commitments are in their larger part unstructured, unorganized by the structures of non-formal education and expressed in a socially desirable behaviour.

The indicator 'participation in the social and political life' and more specifically 'an independent organization and implementation of a youth initiative' reveals that young people demonstrate low activity – only 20% of the youth initiatives were implemented. One of the major reasons for that is the flawed education system which is still teaching mostly theoretical knowledge and very few practical skills.

Only 16.1% of the volunteering young people have realized the significance of informal education as an important factor for acquiring new and diverse skills, knowledge and key competences.

From these conclusions we can say that the young people in the region of Burgas demonstrate a high level of willingness to be active, but the level of their actual activity is relatively low.

## **V. Recommendations**

Based on the analysis of the information from the conducted study, our team outlined the following recommendations for development in the sphere of *working with young people*:

- In order to encourage the civil participation and activity of young people – provision of more services and activities corresponding to the interests of young people and on issues which are topical and problematic for them. Some of these were found to be the protection and preservation of the environment, shifting values, employment, poverty and economic crisis;
- In order to integrate socially the young people from the remote regions of the country, and to develop and make more attractive the places they live in – encouragement of the organization of youth activities and provision of such services in the smaller towns, such as: international volunteer camps, national and regional youth campaigns
- Considering the significant number of young people stating their willingness and demonstrating their independent activity – encouragement of individual activity through motivation for participation in voluntary programmes and initiatives conceived to foster individual interests and needs for development such as: European Voluntary Service, International Award for Young People

- In order to assist the processes of realization and reflection on the skills acquired within the framework of non-formal education – pedagogical support before, during and after the learning process
- In order to provide qualified pedagogical support – development of a system of methods and tools for reflection and self-reflection /such as questionnaires, structured interviews, volunteer diary/; training programmes for young employees on how to use these methods and tools and how to work with target groups

To provide prerequisites for implementation of the recommendations for work with young people, the team of FAR gives recommendations for work and cooperation between non-governmental organizations and other institutions and organizations:

- Acknowledgement of the work and the contribution of NGOs to the acquisition of key competences through the methods of the non-formal education – identification of good practices and accomplishments of organizations, creation of databases with recognized organizations
- Enhanced cooperation between formal and non-formal education aiming to keep up with the new educational needs of young people
  - Provoking interest towards activity through presentations of the work of youth organizations at schools, aiming to provide greater awareness of the opportunities for participation in the different forms of non-formal education
  - Joint projects for extracurricular activities in view of the low budgets of the educational institutions on the one hand and the

competences of the NGOs in applying for projects and managing projects, on the other hand

- Training and professional qualification of teachers and principals of schools, which although considered a priority by formal education, cannot cover the qualification requirements for all teachers. One part of the qualifications related to the extracurricular activities may be taken up by NGOs
- Encouragement of the collaboration of the nongovernmental sector and the businesses through investments and funding of projects, initiatives, internships and training programmes for enhancing the capacity of the human resources
- Acknowledgement of the role of NGOs in the process or professional orientation of young people thanks to the opportunities for internships, voluntary programmes and exchange programmes provided by the youth organizations
- Acknowledgement of the work of NGOs as a connecting unit between the educational institutions and employers along the road of the professional development of young people, by teaching them practical skills and competences which are necessary for finding a suitable job.

## **Conclusion**

Thanks to the results gained from the project and our collaboration with different structures of the formal and non-formal education systems, and thanks to the contacts with the various target groups, we now hope that we will be able to plan in a better way future joint projects for enhancing the activity of young people and for

improvement of the provision of services by NGOs. The team of FAR has outlined the new priorities in the work of our organization:

- Development of a plan for regular joint presentations with other youth organizations in educational institutions providing formal education, in order to popularize the structures of the non-formal education and boost the active participation of young people
- Development of a programme for training of youth workers and youth leaders
- Development of a uniform system for processing and management of information from all events related to the current projects, and generation of regular reports on the advancement and changes that take place.

The FAR team sincerely hopes that the above analysis will be a good base for more profound and systematic studies, and on a much larger scale, on young people and their needs, current situation and future development. In this sense we believe that this study will call for a future collaboration of all actors in the sphere of youth.

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## **Our experience in the youth initiative ‘Eco-camp Sredets’**

Lilyana Uzunova, student at Mathematical school, Burgas

### **About the project**

In the busy daily routine we usually forget who we are, forget what really matters, forget our origins, and that’s why it is necessary for us to return to the beginning, to nature!

Our project is connected with the organization of an eco-camp in the region of the town of Sredets, with the participation of young people from Burgas. The camp took place in the beginning of May 2011.

### **About the idea**

We came up with the idea for this initiative while the round table called “For you. For us. Together”, arranged by FAR, was holding in February this year. Our idea was through a series of actions and campaigns against the environmental pollution to deal with the indifference of the young people towards nature.

The topic of the project is to represent the relation ‘human-nature’ and voluntary actions in nature. Though increasing the knowledge of eco-culture and exploring nature as well, the camp is aimed at changing the young people’s attitude to the protection of the environment.

### **About the preparation, the difficulties and the aid**

The organizers of the camp are Liliana Uzunova, Zlatitsa Dimitrova and Elitsa Hadzhieva, all students at Mathematical school, Burgas.

The participants are students of different ages in Burgas, coming from Mathematical school and Professional high school of electrical engineering.

In the process of preparation the initial idea was changed a couple of times. There were different ideas about the place of the camp: Smolianski lakes and cleaning of eco-paths within the region, Gudevitsa and the voluntary work at the community centre “Future now”, but the distance from Burgas turned out to be a significant problem for us.

Another major problem appeared to be the recruitment of the participants. After the initial burst of enthusiasm about the idea, it turned out at some later point that both parents and young people were quite prejudiced about the whole event. They didn't believe that 3 girls would be able to arrange such an event and therefore they refused to have trust in us. Only when had we told them about FAR's full support for our initiative the situation started to improve.

Eli and Ivaylo from FAR used to help us, support us, advise us, and put our ideas into realistic boundaries for the duration of our project. We also received assistance by the Municipality of Sredets, which provided us with a professional guide as well as materials for doing the cleaning.

### **About the camp**

During the camp we had a specific approach of working, as we combined theory and practice. The aim of the theoretical part was to turn the participants' attention to the environmental problems on the one hand and to make them take different roles and also rethink their own roles in the fight against the pollution, on the other hand. The main topics discussed during the camp included the pollution of the sea, eco-tourism, the issue of plastic bags, as well as ways of reducing the consumption of energy and natural resources, and the rights of animals as well.

The practical part included cleaning the road from Sredets to the place called Bozhura in a period of 3 days.

### **Participants' impressions and our self-reflection on the camp**

The involvement of representatives of different schools in the camp was valued by the participants as very useful, because the young people had the opportunity to do networking and hear various points of view on the discussed topics as well.

The majority of the participants share that they feel a positive change in the way of perceiving nature now, and they would make some improvements in their daily routine in order to conserve the environment and in addition, they would participate in other similar initiatives. This willingness is a clear indicator of the necessity of projects From and For the young people in Bulgaria. It was regarded as a good practice that

there was a well structured camp programme involving discussions and practical work at the same time, which met all the participants' requirements.

About us the work on the project was a way of personal development. Having the chance to put our ideas into practice we actually managed to learn the essential steps in the organization of a project. The preparation for the camp increased our motivation, and helped us broaden our knowledge and improve our skills in team working and communicating with people around us as well.

We think that the participation of young people in voluntary initiatives in the public interest is very important because the effect of their involvement in such activities makes easier the distribution of useful information and fresh ideas, and in addition, it boosts their own motivation for active participation.

## **The modern community center or Future Now for the community centers, tradition, innovation and future practices in non-formal education**

Teodor Vasilev, NC 'Future Now'2006

I do not know why, but whenever we talk about why we set up a community center, we always return to the enthusiasm and energy for positive change, for freedom and independence, for responsibility...

The motto of our community center, regenerated in 2006, in brief is "free and responsible" or "free in our decisions and responsible in our choices." Our dream is to make the world a more colorful, more sunny, and more harmonious place. Our mission is to create a community of people that create with a smile...

We love what we do, we find meaning and we try to be professionalists in every detail, despite all difficulties we sometimes face because of a lack of funding.

Does this sound utopian? Or somehow distant? Reminds you of passionate words of Levski and Botev in a new context. In a world that is globalized in a manner unknown until now, where almost every month a new profession appears, where every 10 seconds someone dies of hunger, the same world in which glaciers are melting and people create alternatives to the skyscrapers and office buildings in New York to the villages of Afghanistan and India.

This is the emotional presentation of a Bulgarian community center - it's called Future Now 2006. Me - Teodor Vassilev, Chairman of the Board or any of his colleagues - Milena Leneva (currently in the Together Foundation in class), Ogi Gadularov (professional trainer), Denitsa Velcheva (Mobiltel), Rostislav Kandilarov (University of Rousse "Angel Kanchev"), Bozidar Lambov (Teacher of Biology and Geography, artist), Maria Georgieva (math teacher), Galina Slavova (Architect), Kiril Apostolov (Civil Engineer), Ilian Milinov (designer) and many other designers, sociologists, ethnologists, academics, farmers, or simply retired, have never doubted that what we are doing is what we actually want to do. And this is a community center (educational activities).

Over the past five years we have worked on regional projects, national initiatives and campaigns, European projects and international initiatives and activities. We are members of several international, national and European networks in education, social inclusion, sustainable development and biodiversity conservation. We are co-founders of the National Youth Forum (and the only community center among the members), winners of AGORA Platform civil community center initiative in 2010 called "The community center of the youth". AGORA platform Award is one of the biggest achievements for the team. It is given each year. In 2010 NC Future Now 2006 won the award for the organization of TEDxYouth @ Sofia. Independently organized youth TED event in Bulgaria, which is a part of a global platform and conferences TED - the benchmark for innovation, progression, inspiration and ideas that are worth to be shared with the world. The list can be very long. Where does this enthusiasm come from, with what energy and emotion ... Why?

For money? Because we cannot do anything else - we have failed in business, NGOs, education; we have been abroad and been returned to Bulgaria, we have nothing else to do ...?

I am not afraid of answering to these provocative questions and I will tell you the story of establishment of our community center.

I left for America in 2003, used to work two jobs there and came back with spare money. Just a year earlier I had visited a place which had changed my life – the village of Gudevits –today inhabited by 16 people, disappearing neighborhood on the edge of the border, near Greece. What is there in this village - an old school and a community center - crumbling building. In 2003 I devoted all my energy as well as spending all my financial resources to save the building. Initially, the answer was: that one could buy just the half of the building. In our opinion, you cannot divide something which is inseparable, even it was built in different times. Then, the building must be converted into a hotel for guests, according to a businessman who plans to transform completely the place. Finally I managed to write a project for its conservation, which was approved by the community and the building was saved.

Well now where ...? - In 2006 I met Milena Leneva, an expert in education with extensive experience in distance learning programmes, working on educational projects for universities in Israel.

We decided to create a community center, to revive the old organization founded in 1931 and stopped existing in 1985. We started to renovate the building, to clean the desks, where Valya Balkanska was sitting. At this school she took her first lessons in music.

The building is a symbol of the unity of culture and education, the bridge between school and community center. That's why one of the major architectural changes that we plan for the building is connecting the two parts.

This is what has happened in the work of our organization since 2006. Among our 53 members there are local people, experts on various fields, young enthusiasts. The building is the heart of the organization, her beautiful home.

We started working with the local children from the village of Arda, Smilyan and Smolyan. Our projects were about environmental education, cleaning, planting and "Celebration of Nature". At first we planned to work with about 30 children, but we actually included 120 children. We developed a methodology that we still apply and develop today. Then we invited our first groups of children to the community centre in the village of Gudevitsa.

Then followed the annual summer children's camps, ekoacademies and also the 'Playing and working with children' courses for instructors and teachers. In 2008, we won our first major projects - "What is to be a citizen of Bulgaria", financed by Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe; and the "Ambassadors of nature" financed by the OP "Human Resources" to the Ministry (then) and the European Social Fund. These projects were executed at national level with the partnership of high schools in Smilyan, Smolyan and Sofia. In 2009 and 2010 we became part of the few organizations at that time whose projects had been approved by the NGO Fund in Bulgaria. Our project "Future friendly - Third-generation human rights, a new generation of citizens," brought together over 150 young people from all over Bulgaria in workshops for ideas where their ideas and projects received support and

understanding. Young people became engines of positive change in the society and their own development as well.

Over the years the community centre has not stopped to test educational models and to adapt internally recognized educational and training programs. For five years the course of game and work with children was taken by more than 70 participants. In addition, we trained over 50 teachers, working with public and private schools throughout Bulgaria.

Between 2009 and 2011 we were adapting and testing in Bulgaria 'The International award for young people' - the largest program of informal education in the world operating in 132 countries with more than 7 million young people passed through it, between 14 and 25. In the beginning of 2011 the program was officially opened by the British Ambassador Hon. Steve Williams in Bulgaria and Sergei Ignatov, the Minister of Education and Science.

Today we are part of the Network Eco centres "Living Places"; the Beglika Fest, the Center for non-formal activities in the village of Baikal, the 'Sofia breathe' initiative, Europa Secura, EVS Volunteering by the Youth in Action programme, the National debate in Varna. We also train young people in Sofia, Smolyan, Varna and Dobrich Kazanlak and other towns, we support young farmers and direct marketing of agricultural products as well as the biodiversity.

In 2011 we implemented two projects for social integration of young people financed by the European programme "Youth in Action". In the first project international trainers from Austria trained supported by us 40 specialists, social workers, youth leaders and youth to work with disadvantaged young people according to the Ruckenwind methodology. In the second project 10 young people from 6 European countries arrived in the village of Arda and the village of Gudevitsa to take part in a short term EVS project. They were living in the community, repaired the library building, helped with farm activities and made some documentaries. This was not the first time when volunteers from different countries were working in that area. For two years, between 2007 and 2009, Christina Suisher, a volunteer from the Peace Corps in Bulgaria, had been working in the region of Gorna Arda River. She taught English, social skills and entrepreneurship to local children and adults. In 2009, during a Brigade

movement in the Rhodopes there had been more foreigners than Bulgarians, volunteering - they ashamed us.

Since 2010 we have been working actively with "Youth in Action" programme. We are about to become members of one of the largest international training networks for young people 'Youth International for Exchange and Understanding'.

With a lot of enthusiasm and energy we act on all fronts. Our funding is primarily from projects and in 2010 we had sponsorship for various events. Because we are not a traditional community center with traditional activities and because we do not have local community in the village of Gudevitsa there is no funding for our community centre from the commission of the town of Smolyan.

'Are you serious? You really?', they always ask us...

'Yes' – we answer and we continue with our hard work.

And what is the allocation of funds for community centers?

Well, each year there is a commission (in law it consists of representatives from all community centers) including the big centers and Culture Department in the municipality of Smolyan - in close circle. For us it is very difficult to get information, e-mail is not used, only paper. Then the distribution is just presented to everyone and it has to be approved by voting. Most of those present, if they take the courage to speak publicly, offer some changes in the distribution, usually for 200 to 500 lv, which the big community centers could decide to give to them or not. Every year they distribute more than 300 000 leva, from which more than 150 000 leva go to three community centers in the municipality of Smolyan.

Until 10 November we have to send our activity programme for the next year - a cultural calendar. We send via e-mail suggestions for specific activities and projects to the Mayor of Smolyan. Funding is not enough. Only in the Smolyan municipality there are 39 existing community centers. There is also no feedback for the distribution of the funds, even after the changes in the law on the community centers in 2010.

But why do we continue to delude ourselves that with 500/1000 or 2,000 leva we can achieve something? They are insufficient for paying electricity bills, salaries, maintaining a library, etc. However, I do not want to keep the truth in secrecy, the truth that many community centers benefit from rent, providing rooms for dancing classes which they present publicly as their own activities, cede their lands and forests or use them directly. In addition, the government subsidies are not distributed according to the set activities and projects, but for salaries which are insufficient and in fact they do not motivate enough the employees...

We have a lot of questions for debate - Why don't we protect our activities and work with projects that can receive real funding? Why should I hide behind ridiculous statements and seek funding for projects to continue to exist? What are traditional activities in the community centre in the 21st century? How do youth centers work in Finland, for example, and why can't our community centers convert into preferable meeting places for youth in each town?

And let's stop to fool ourselves, the community centers are unique Bulgarian institutions. If you do not believe, ask Nadezhda Savova, which maintains a network of over 150 community centers around the world. Even if we were the first who invented the community center, now we are quite far from the idea of being the real engine of our community. Because in the world we live, the concept of community is a broad term, etc.etc.

Our activities in the field of non-formal education have brought us to a new stage on which, in first place, we plan to create an independent research center in education and in second place, to create alternative models for primary and secondary education and then to spread them within Bulgaria and worldwide as well. Therefore all organizations working in the field of non-formal and formal education, as well as all institutions responsible for policy-making in that field should develop efficient communication with each other.

At the second conference "Together.For the Youth" in Burgas was demonstrated the visionary meeting which we usually conduct in Bulgaria with parents, students, teachers, school directors, educational

experts, owners and employees in business organizations, NGOs, institutions and all stakeholders who have a role in education in Bulgaria.

The participants' visions for their personal, their social and the global development were generalized accordingly in the following three key words: freedom, understanding and love!

## **National programme for youth (2011 – 2015)**

Petyo Kanev, Youth department, Ministry of education, youth and science

The vision of the Programme is to improve the quality of life and the realization of young people through sustainable mechanisms for investment in youth as significant social capital that contributes to the adequate socio-economic development of Bulgaria as a member of the EU. The main principles of Programme implementation include:

- Legality;
- Non-discrimination, social solidarity and tolerance;
- Effectiveness and efficiency of projects;
- Equal access;
- Innovativeness;
- Professionalism;
- Efficiency, transparency and economy of funds assimilation, etc.

The Programme is aimed at the following target groups:

- Young people at the age 15-29 and
- Youth workers and other specialists, who are directly engaged with providing services, or with other activities in support of youth development.

Territorial scope of the Programme: the Programme is realized on the territory of the whole country.

The Programme has the following strategic priorities:

- Promoting the personal development and economic activity of young people and improving access to information and quality services;
- Increasing civic activity of young people;

- Preventing social exclusion of young people with fewer opportunities;
- Developing youth volunteering;
- Personal and professional development of young people in small towns and rural areas;
- Development of intercultural and international dialogue among young people;
- Improving youth work;

The respective operational objectives include:

1. Provision of information, training and consultancy services and promotion of varying activities and initiatives corresponding to young people's needs.
2. Facilitating access to services for young people in small towns, as well as young people at risk.
3. Providing support for the realization of national youth initiatives and campaigns promoting citizen participation and education through a multi-sectoral approach.
4. Promoting the values of volunteering and improving the practices of exerting and managing voluntary labour in Bulgaria.
5. Providing the envisaged services through securing the work of the Youth information-consultancy centers, and support for youth projects.
6. Recognizing and increasing the quality of youth work and supporting the exchange of experience and networking of youth workers.

The Programme is implemented through three sub-programmes, each of which has specific scope and objectives.

## SUB-PROGRAMME 1: Developing the network of Youth information-consultancy centers YICC (2011 – 2015)

### Specific objectives:

- Launching a package of services provided by all Youth information-consultancy centers within the Programme, aiming at personal development and professional realization of young people;
- Launching and implementation of mechanisms for monitoring (internal and external) aiming at guaranteeing the quality and effectiveness of the services provided;
- Setting and implementing a feedback mechanism with the consumers of the services provided by YICCs;
- Wide promotion and active distribution of the services provided in order to widen the circle of young people, youth groups and organizations covered;
- Support for activities, initiated by young people in accordance with their needs for organizing their free time and encouraging a healthy lifestyle;
- Providing continuous support for youth workers and other specialists who work with various groups of young people within periodic trainings, consultations, opportunities for exchange of experience and good practice.

## SUB-PROGRAMME 2: National youth initiatives and campaigns

### Specific objectives:

- Support for activities initiated by young people – organizing and conducting initiatives and campaigns at municipal, district and national level on important topics related to the priorities of the National Strategy for Youth (2010 – 2020) and the policies of the EU, Council of Europe and UN, related to young people in the sphere of civic participation and education;

- Support for activities and initiatives of young people, related to the pressing needs of the youth communities and with innovative and creative methods for realization, which lead to long-term effects.

### SUB-PROGRAMME 3: Youth volunteering and participation in volunteering initiatives

#### Specific objectives:

- Using all forms of non-formal education for acquiring knowledge, skills and experience by young people in the sphere of volunteering;
- Initiating campaigns for recruiting volunteers with a view to realizing youth activities and initiatives;
- Supporting activities, related to celebrating the European Year of Volunteering (2011) and to promoting volunteering for the whole period of the Programme.
- Realizing exchange of volunteers in Bulgaria;
- Motivating various local organizations and institutions to provide opportunities for volunteer work to young people;
- Promoting the opportunities for voluntary work in Bulgaria and in Europe;
- Developing and implementing training programmes for working with young volunteers;

### SUB-PROGRAMME 4: Development and recognition of youth work

#### Specific objectives:

- Increasing the capacity of youth workers;
- Promoting the adoption and implementation of appropriate approaches and methods in youth work;
- Initiation, creation and development of a network for exchange of experience and good practice of youth workers;

- Encourage the draft of an ethical code in youth work and its implementation by youth workers;
- Promoting youth work;

### *Control, monitoring and evaluation of the Programme*

Control over the national programme for youth 2011-2015 is implemented by the Minister of education, youth and science. Interim and final evaluation is envisaged for the programme in order to establish the conformity, effectiveness, efficacy and sustainability of its implementation.

With regards to programme supervision, the programme envisages monitoring of the ongoing implementation of the approved activities of the projects funded and verification of the results achieved. These are executed by the National Center European Youth Programmes and Initiatives. Monitoring of ongoing activities and projects is implemented by DG “Youth” in accordance to its functions, described in the Statutory Rules of the Ministry of education, youth and culture.

## **Cooking the Soup or a Good Practice in the Making: Funcity Youth Festival of Varna 2011**

Maria Badjakova, Amorpha Youth Group (Varna, Bulgaria)

A huge challenge to framing youth policies at the European or local level is how to stay conscious of the dynamic interests, abilities and needs of young people. Furthermore, once we seek to join efforts with representatives of the various stakeholders in this area, the difficulties – from ideational, through rivalry-driven, to technical – confront communication and decision making at each stage. The result can be a centrifugal movement away from the shared attempt in multiple directions or a centripetal determination resulting in one coordinated product or action embodying the diverse resources around the common subject of young people.

To create a festival which provides a stage to young people with different interests and skills by involving youth groups and organisations, public bodies and local institutions can go either of the above ways. It is a good practice in the making, yet too many decision makers and their own tastes and conceptual flavours may much more easily spoil this complicated dish. Fortunately, a youth festival simultaneously featuring various subcultures is a format which has a tradition in Varna. And this know-how as contributed by groups, organisations and institutions in the festival is the sound basis around which all decisions can be organised to avoid greater disparity.

There are several reasons for each party to desire this tricky collaboration. For civic society this is the temptation to acquire greater visibility and legitimacy of some sorts by associating the activity with the local administration. Moreover, both funding and logistics are a key factor to any such activity and the municipal budget allocated to youth work is certainly seen by them as the most suitable and logical source. The opportunity – or challenge, as it may turn out – to meet and collaborate with other civic organisations in the sector, on the other hand, becomes a further incentive in searching for new ideas, approaches, partners as well as audiences. Indeed, institutional participation, too, may require such engagement with visibility by the responsible administration that the

scale of the initiative may grow to become a metropolitan event that benefits all.

At the same time, local government institutions – in particular the municipal youth and education department – is not only obliged to create conditions for strengthening the capacity of youth formations and to seek practical collaboration with civic actors, but also highly interested in locating young people and organisations who are motivated to participate implementing the multiple activities targeting young people and in a language they are comfortable to communicate. And what is perhaps even more important and an indicator of flexibility – these civic partners can further contribute with fresh ideas, approaches and actions which are what young people are practically interested in and need in their continuous development.

Finally, the successful completion of the event will help draw observations and conclusions to be used as a check on the adequacy of the existing youth policy, be it local, national or European. This, naturally, can also happen if the event is not successful, thus an indicator of either what is failing to work for young people or what is not a productive collaboration method among the stakeholders involved.

***Funcity*** is a youth festival in Varna whose first edition took place in June-July 2011. It was initiated as an attempt to achieve many of the above objectives in a local context where in any public sphere a big city festival is a frequently preferred format. The focus was on venues located in the central part of the city so as to attract more easily people from various neighbourhoods. The decision-making process was intended as civic society driven and balanced against the experience of the municipal body in the area. The input of participant youth organisations, groups and other young people or people working with youth had to be part of the programme of the festival as an event aimed at promoting the capacity, skills and interests of young people and youth organisations and groups. Whereas these were predominantly based in Varna, many of whom not only participated with a product or an activity during the festival but where directly involved in its organisation, there was an open call for proposals open to applicants nationwide. Logically, the concept was to present local actors, action and resources, while

keeping an open stage to ensure greater diversity and new ideas as well as to foster further collaboration at the national level.

As a youth group, that is a non-registered entity, through our participation we have been trying to further promote the practice of non-formal teams of young people gathering to make happen their own youth activity that is immediately related to their own interests and skills. This format, we have tried to convince our new partners, is essential to youth-led youth work and policy in that it allows people of no administrative or organisational experience and who are often underage to take hold of the whole process and make it happen for themselves. Therefore, we argued, youth groups had to be represented at the festival – both in decision making and through participation in the programme.

We also insisted on creating a wider forum of organisations, groups and individuals in youth work to participate in shaping the festival concept and distributing the tasks in the course of its implementation. This, however, would have required more time to come up with carefully designed criteria according to which decision-making could be more equally shared by greater numbers while ensuring that the soup would still be boiling. The lack of sufficient time automatically narrowed the forum so as to make sure that the (fewer) conceptual flavours would more easily match and form a coherent taste.

The coordination of divergent interests and methods of work, including sometimes different objectives, remains one of the biggest challenges to a festival intended as a civic society led initiative. The price is high but that is surely the only way to have the community shape its own youth policy and young people design their own activities. The contribution of the municipal administration working in this area is, nonetheless, essential to engaging directly in an activity where they are not the sole decision maker and policy implementer, nor are they bound to the top-down approach that threatens to leave some of their project activities and priorities inadequate to the very dynamic and quite divergent interests, skills and needs of young people in the community. At the same time, this is both an ideational and a financial commitment which shows, to some extent at least, that tax-payers' money is spent on their children through up-to-date initiatives in which the young people can be directly involved.

It also remains a serious challenge to the municipal department to abstain from taking over this initiative, tempted by available resources and the acquired know-how and contacts in relation to the activity. An event dominated by the administration would return youth organisations to the status of participants or providers of services and young people to volunteers and audience. This will deprive all stakeholders of the challenge to test their viewpoints and methods and of the opportunity to learn to see their area of work in a broader and definitely more diverse perspective than is seen from their own standing point. Civic society actors, on the other hand, will have to learn to work together and coordinate their sometimes contradictory interests, and, which is more, learn how to negotiate and withstand their ideas when they come in direct contact with the responsible institution and how to use the existing tools to influence policies in the area by means of a bottom-up approach based on their direct experience with young people.

Drawing on former experience, the second edition of the festival will seek to develop further as well as work to expand its network of sponsors so as to ensure wider engagement by the business sector of the community whose young people it targets. This will naturally broaden the opportunities for the festival to support more ideas and young people and organisations. The festival also works to promote itself as a good practice in the making that can be borrowed for the purposes of fostering youth participation in the life of the community throughout the country.

## **My experience as an EVS volunteer**

Evgeniya Meserdzhieva, Former EVS volunteer

My motivation to become a volunteer through the Youth in Action Programme, Action 2 - European Voluntary Service (EVS) was tightly connected with my previous experience in various voluntary programs and activities, all organized by The Association for democratic education FAR. First at high school, then at university, I had the opportunity to take part in many FAR seminars on different topics, which actually helped me acquire key competences and learn a lot of new things, things quite different from what I learned in the formal educational system. During these years I participated in numerous seminars both local and international. Being involved with so many FAR initiatives I learned a lot about the organization itself as well as its activities. I speak fluent French as I graduated a French language school a couple of years ago. I suppose that all these factors led to the point when in July 2010 FAR offered me to become the leader of the Bulgarian youth group during an international seminar in Carcassonne, France. To be perfectly honest, this was a real challenge for me. I felt obliged to do my best in the execution of the responsible task. In spite of the fact that this was not my first visit abroad, this time everything was much more different. After this conference I felt strongly motivated to stay in France for a longer period of time and to gain deep knowledge of French language, culture and traditions as well.

When I started to consider the options of staying in a foreign country for a couple of months' time, I remembered in the first place all former EVS volunteers at FAR – Geza Roemer, Astrid Oelpenich, Rebekka Hoelzle. My participation in FAR activities gave me the chance to meet these people and mostly to communicate actively with each of them. In addition, I was the mentor of Rebekka during her EVS project in Bulgaria. As a matter of fact she was the person who told me in details about EVS, as she also introduced me to other EVS volunteers in Bulgaria at that time. All these young people shared their own experience and impressions of EVS with me. Their enthusiasm was infectious and I made the decision to take the opportunity of being an EVS volunteer. I started to search actively for an appropriate organization for me in France. The whole process wasn't easy at all.

After a long period of searching, during which I had been sending letters and emails every day, I finally managed to contact with a coordination organization called i.PEICC, which actually offered me an EVS project that I liked a lot and which met all my requirements. It was a great honour for me to be the first EVS volunteer sent by FAR. At the same time I considered it as a great responsibility, because I realized that all impressions of the coordination organization of me and my work would influence on the future cooperation between i.PEICC and FAR.

So on the 1 of March 2011 I arrived in a small town situated in the South of France. This small town is Ganges. It has about 4000 inhabitants. Ganges is 45 kilometers away from Montpellier, another French town, in which students constitute an essential part of its population. In the whole region there were three EVS volunteers, including me. The other two volunteers were Alexandra from Spain, who was my roommate in Ganges and Beray, a Turkish young man with Bulgarian origins, who unfortunately didn't speak Bulgarian. We were the first volunteers at our French hosting organizations. At that time local people were not familiar with European Voluntary Service at all. They did not know why we were there and why we had chosen these organizations. They thought that we were trainees or something like that.

My host organization was the cultural centre 'Agantic'. There are 9 people who work full-time for the cultural centre. All other people are hired for different duration depending on the particular job. The organization offers various types of activities to people of all ages.

For example, there is so-called Amusement Centre designed for children. This centre is 6 kilometers away from Ganges. It is located in an encircled place in the mountain. Children between the ages of 3 and 13 visit the centre every Wednesday and during the holidays as well. At the centre children are divided into groups as the number of youth workers depends on the number of the children present. Sometimes there are some organized activities outside the centre such as going to the theatre, trips to other towns, walks at zoo, sunbathing. My work at this centre was to assist youth workers in their activities with the children. I also accompanied them in cases when there were arranged activities outside the centre. During my stay at Agantic I learned to work and communicate effectively with children. The children were very interested

in my origin. They often asked me where I came from, what my native language was, why I had come to France, and even they were curious to know some words in Bulgarian. Metaphorically speaking, I would say that I explored France and France explored Bulgaria.

Agantic also has study-rooms in which the children do their homework with the aid of volunteers in the role of teachers. But whereas in Bulgaria these study-rooms are at school, in France they are situated at the social center. Study-rooms are open every day from 18 to 19.30 h. For the students from upper grades it has been adopted an individual approach, as one volunteer work with one student. Sometimes I took part in these activities, but bearing in mind that I am not a native speaker in French, I helped only the little children with their reading and writing tasks.

Once a week Agantic offers language workshops on English, German and Spanish. In these workshops all teachers are volunteers. I often attended the English workshop, as my role was to speak with the youngsters and through our conversations to express the idea of the necessity of learning foreign languages in order to be able to communicate easily with people coming from different countries and to be able to explore new cultures as well.

Every month the young people from the local high school, supervised by a trainer from our organization, took part in a radio program called "Health". They chose the radio topics by themselves, as usually it took them about a month's time to prepare the whole program. We only assisted them in choosing the appropriate materials for the topic which then they recorded for the radio program.

Agantic also offers a lot of other leisure activities for children and young people such as theatre workshops, hip hop dances, even a circus for the kids. I tried to participate in every workshop. In addition to my improved communicational skills with children, I acquired many other skills: preparing and organizing workshops, managing of groups with children, as well as a lot of new practical skills.

Agantic offers many activities to adults. These activities were scheduled in the evenings beyond the working time. They included classes on yoga, relaxation techniques, belly dances, weaving carpets, as well as

activities such as botanic walks and a course in French language for women. I took part mostly in the last activity, because this course took place twice a week and it was visited by women from Arabic origins who had not received any primary education in their countries of origin. They have been living in France for many years, but they do not speak French very well and this language barrier actually prevents them from integrating themselves into the society and therefore they have difficulty finding jobs. During the course in French, on which all teachers were volunteers, my work was to help the women to understand the French grammar. My work with these women gave me the opportunity to learn how to communicate properly with people from other cultures, different from the French one; people who have been emigrants in one country for so long but still have difficulty expressing themselves clearly in the native language of that country.

In addition to all these activities with children and adults, the organization helps people addicted to alcohol and drugs, as well as people who have difficulty finding jobs.

Agantic also arranges different events (concerts) in the town. During our stay in Ganges, my roommate and I took the task to prepare and distribute informational materials about the up-coming events. This was the time when I realized that organization of such an event was much more difficult than I had expected, and by participating in the whole process I learned a lot about the essential steps in the preparation of a public event of such a large scale.

When I went to Ganges for the first time, I hadn't been familiar with the town before, and I hadn't met anyone from the local people as well. In spite of that fact, during my short stay there I managed to find real friends, to improve my knowledge of French and to learn how to work in an international team. I also learned how to live with people from other nationalities, people who are actually quite different from me. All that certainly helped me to become, on one hand, more independent and on the other hand, more adaptive in a new, unfamiliar environment.

Based on my EVS work the organizations involved in the execution of the project expressed the idea of developing their mutual cooperation in the foreseeable future. At the moment the hosting organization Agantic,

the sending organization FAR and the coordination organization i.PEICC are going to manage a project funded by the Youth in Action Programme in particular Action 1.3 – Youth Democracy Project. The project “Double face” gives the participants (young people and representatives of organizations and public institutions working with young people from France and Bulgaria) the opportunity to explore the structures of working with young people in both countries and as a result participants could develop common projects in the future. I am taking part in this project as a translator and assistant. In that regard my EVS work was not for certain something like “spending some good time somewhere abroad”, but it was a stepping stone for my career. I am very glad of the chance to participate in the project “Double Face” because it will bring me back there, in the small town, where I left a lot of good friends and great memories.

I would like to tell the local NGOs: Take more volunteers in our town! This is invaluable experience for both the organizations and the young people, as well as for everyone who communicate with the volunteer!

And you, young people, take the challenge to work as volunteers, take the opportunity to develop yourself in an environment different from the familiar one at school or university!

## **National Youth Forum and the Structural Dialogue with the young people in Bulgaria**

Liliya Elenkova, Vice-president of National Youth Forum

At the conference “Together. For the youth.” I gave a presentation on the topic “National Youth Forum and the Structural Dialogue with the young people in Bulgaria”. The presentation contained a couple of slides, which covered the following subtopics:

1. The concept of the National Youth Forum, its strategic priorities, mission and objectives. Since the foundation of the National Youth Forum (NYF) it has been set the primary role of the development of a dialog between institutions and young people. The NYF supports its members and lobbies for the better development of the youth movement in Bulgaria. Another role of the NYF is to improve the communication between the youth organizations, as well as the exchange of information and best practices.
2. What does the Structural Dialogue mean? Definition of the term: a tool for communication between the governments and administrations, including the EU institutions and the young people, as the aim is to reach unanimous decisions between the people responsible for the youth policies and those who apply these policies in practice, the young people.
3. What was the result of the first round of the Structural Dialogue? The main recommendations, coming from all interested parties, include the topic of promotion of the educational mobility, development of the key for the young people competencies in entrepreneurship, development of career orientation and consultation, as well as the creation of a Frame for the quality of the traineeships.
4. What is coming in the second round of the Structural Dialogue? The main topic is the participation of the young people. Each chairmanship has its own subtopic: Poland – youth and the world, Denmark – creativity and innovation, Cyprus – participation and social inclusion. During each chairmanship there is going to be national consultations, aiming at collecting young people’s expectations and opinions in order to set the schedules of the youth conferences of every chairmanship. The youth

conferences, organized by each chairmanship, are an important phase in the execution of the structural dialogue and should lead to concrete and well-defined results, which would provide a solid base for the creation of resolutions for each chairmanship.

The National Youth Forum has participated and will continue to participate in the national working group with its representatives, consulting with its members and all organizations which have expressed or will express a desire for that. Each organization can receive and give information, as it does not matter if it is a member of the NYF or not.

The discussion during my presentation at the FAR conference also focused on that topic, but it was much more interesting to observe the participants' level of competence within the scope of the Structural dialogue. The general idea of the majority of the participants was that the Structural Dialog was a process, which took place mostly at European and national levels. Taking more precise point of view, and as it was clarified during the discussion, the Structural Dialogue is a process which started at European level with the direct participation of the national working groups, but in practice nowadays the Structural Dialogue has been developing mostly at local level. The Structural Dialogue is a dialogue in a particular situation, which includes points of view expressed by all participants interested in the development of the particular activity, policy, etc.

In addition, bearing in mind the participation of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science at the FAR conference, there were questions about the institutional support provided by the Ministry in the whole process. In direct dialogue it was clarified that in Bulgaria the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science has the key role in the national working group, but with the participation of various interested parties such as youth organizations, other ministries and agencies. Another question was raised about the support from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science for the NYF in the process of the initial development of the new national youth organization. The Ministry assisted the organization of series of NYF events such as the Constituent Assembly, the General Assembly in Stara Zagora, as well as the meeting for setting up the initiative committee in Hisar. All meetings were co-organized by and under the supervision of the European Youth Forum, a key factor in the

development of the Structural Dialogue and in the participation of the young people in youth policy at European level.

The most impressive moment at the FAR conference was the participation of young people between the ages of 16 and 20, who gave constructive feedback in regard to their previous experience in other conferences on youth topics. The principal thing, which I could also use as a conclusion here, is that conferences like “Together. For the Youth” provide the young people with new opportunities for development through presenting to them the youth organizations’ best practices.

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