



# What does youthwork mean in a complex country like Bosnia and Herzegovina?



## A torn country

**For those who don't know. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH) is located in the middle of the Balkans, between Croatia and Serbia. The federation BH has three cantons, namely Croatian, Bosnian and a Serbian canton. Each with its own parliament and ministries. And with a troubled history.**

About thirty years ago there was a bloody war between the Bosnians and the Serbs. The low point is the drama of Srebrenica. Since then, there has been peace under international pressure. Nevertheless, the Serbian part in particular wants to join the country of Serbia.

## Is there youthwork in BH?

I got to spend a week visiting an old friend who had worked for Médecins Sans Frontières during the war.



And I visited Katarina Vuckovic from KULT in Sarajevo.

And I only had one question for her: *“does youth work exist in this country, and how do you do that in such an ethnically torn country?”* The answer was a surprise and at the same time not. Katarina has been working in youth work in Bosnia for about 20 years. Born before the war, she first studied economics, but discovered that she preferred to work with people than with numbers.



The youth work in Bosnia is actually based on the old communist ideas of popular upliftment among the youth with for example holiday camps. After the fall of Yugoslavia under Father Tito, youth work had to find a new way. There is no state youth law and in this country, there are about 13 different ministries that deal with education and youth. For the government, youth work was mainly something of “playing with children and young people”.

So the work is still very much in its infancy. I also discovered something like this when I was on a working visit in Greece.



## Voluntary youth work

Youth work still has little status in BH. Many youth workers work on projects and sometimes voluntarily, in addition to another job or do it temporarily because they cannot get a full-time job in youth work itself.

Municipalities do, for example, give empty buildings to youth work organisations and then say, go ahead and realize youth work yourself, often through sponsorship or subsidy from Europe. I also saw that when I was on a working visit in Palermo, Sicily.

Katarina mainly provides training and support from the Institute for Youth Development KULT to policy officials of municipalities, youth and to youth workers.

They are particularly active in the field of participation and citizenship. The youth is turning away from these ethnic divisions and wanting to look ahead. The Tiktok generation no longer knows the war and wants to move forward. They have little faith in the politics of mature “leaders” and corruption is a persistent phenomenon in BH, especially if you want to achieve something you will have to “pay”. Right-wing radicalization also crops up in BH and a great aversion to current politics. Education in BH does little about that. Subjects such as citizenship and participation are not part of the curriculum.



## Also in BH the well-known Braindrain

**The result of this is that many young people who can study abroad leave the country, the so-called brain drain.**

In accordance to the research done by the Institute for Youth Development KULT: Desire to leave the country is still high, as more than 50% of young people state that they want to leave Bosnia and Herzegovina. The fact that 40% of the young people included in this research stated that a member of their immediate family left Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last 7 years is worrying, and that departures most often take place in non-urban areas. Also, the results show that more than 50% of those surveyed have an interest in leaving our country, while 12.1% of them have already taken concrete steps in that direction. Unemployment in BH among the youth is high, but difficult to grasp because there is a lot of black work.

Students are officially not allowed to work during their studies, but they do so mainly

in the black. I saw that happen a lot in Greece too. Politicians are now slowly starting to see that you can only build a country with well-educated and committed citizens.

BH's youth work is now mainly focused on this and politicians are slowly starting to discover this.

It is a pity that many initiatives are of short duration through project funds and that you cannot therefore build long-term relationships in youth work with the young people themselves.

Politicians would like to profile themselves with young people, but that is more window-dressing during election campaigns than it really helps. *"If you want to make politicians enthusiastic about youth work, you have to make sure that their own children use it or mainly refer to their own youth (in the communist era) and youth work then",* says Katharina.



## For the tiktok generation, the war is long over

Now the policy officials come to them with the question: *“how can we involve young people in our policy, and where can we find them?”*

Different activities have been set up and introduced throughout the country from organisations such as The Institute for Youth Development KULT ([www.mladi.org](http://www.mladi.org)) and also from Proni ([www.proni.ba/about-us](http://www.proni.ba/about-us)) to reach more youth. Not along the ethnic lines, but simply with an open door for all young people who are

interested. You do not lure young people by hanging a problem on the front door, but by starting from the issues that affect them locally, and then you automatically come to the larger themes of corruption and participation. For the Tiktok youth, the war is far away and according to Katarina that gives hope. And from abroad there is also more interest in the youth in BH. Certainly when BH joins the European Union, there will be more initiatives and exchanges. This strengthens youth and youth work in BH.



## Curious about foreign examples

The Dutch ambassador Jan Waltmans in BH is also very enthusiastic about youth work and visited lately young people in Mostar and talked with young people of Sarajevo about corruption.

Katharina would like to know more about youth work in other countries. When I tell her that we have a new competency profile for child and youth work in the Netherlands, she is very enthusiastic.

- Ernst Radius, 2022

