EAYW

European Academy on Youth Work

CATCHING-UP WITH EAYW CONTRIBUTORS: "HACKING THE SYSTEM – HOW A GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE CHANGED YOUTH POLICY"

In 2019, the first edition of the European Academy on Youth Work was implemented in Kranjska Gora. The Academy would not be the same without its contributors – and during the first edition we had the opportunity to learn from 36 different contributions dealing with various topics of importance for the European youth work community of practice. Two years have passed since the first event, so we wanted to catch up with its contributors and find out, if they were able to develop their project further or if it led to or stimulated any further initiatives. In this series, we are presenting some of the developments experienced by contributors of the first #EAYW. Welcome to the new EAYW series called "Catching-up with EAYW contributors"!

In our first article, we are happy to introduce Ana Pecarski from Team 42. During the first Academy, Ana held a workshop on how to communicate with young people using memes.

Ana Pecarski

How did Ana and her team use memes to hack the system in the small city of Leskovac in rural Serbia? And how did a group of young people influence youth policy? Read more about this in Ana's article below!

In his cult novel "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy", Douglas Adams cites the number 42 as the final answer to "the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything". As a group of activists and youth workers, who naturally wonder and ask questions, it is with this goal that we came together: to find the answers to all questions, about the essence of life, the universe, everything we know and we do not know. This is how Team 42 was created.
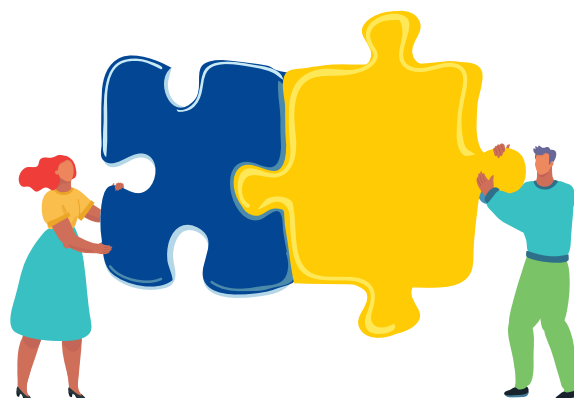
As a part of our youth programme, we co-ordinate with partners the national youth volunteer programme in Serbia, where we annually support over 150 youth volunteer projects and around 30 volunteer camps across the country and organise campaigns that promote youth volunteering and active participation. We explore innovative practices in youth work in the framework of international projects we are involved in, and we have an ongoing local youth work programme in the south Serbia region.

To tell you a bit more about our local initiative this blog is all about, I will take you a bit back in time.

So, to begin our journey, we travel to the city of Leskovac, southern Serbia. It is May 2020, spring time, and the Covid-19 pandemic is a reality across the world. Lockdowns and measures are in place, working from home is still fun and new, schools are mostly online, and we are all sitting at home thinking about summer 2021. When the pandemic will be a thing of the past. Oh, well.

For a bit more context to the story, here is the situation of the city's youth policy in a few lines:

- Local Action Plan for youth (the most important document defining local youth policy, actors and objectives) – expires in 2020. The local municipality hasn't started the process of creating a new policy document.

- The most recent research on the needs of young people in Leskovac was implemented in 2012 – and it is very outdated.

- There is no info-service or data centre on the programmes available for young people in Leskovac by organisations, institutions etc.

- The most recent structured dialogue of young people and decision makers in Leskovac – never happened.

So, not really an ideal starting point. The idea was to tackle all these issues until the end of the year, and we gathered a group of youth workers and young people on this mission.

How did we define innovation?

As the meme from first edition of the EAYW says:

FIRST QUESTION OF THE DAY

DEFINE INNOVATION
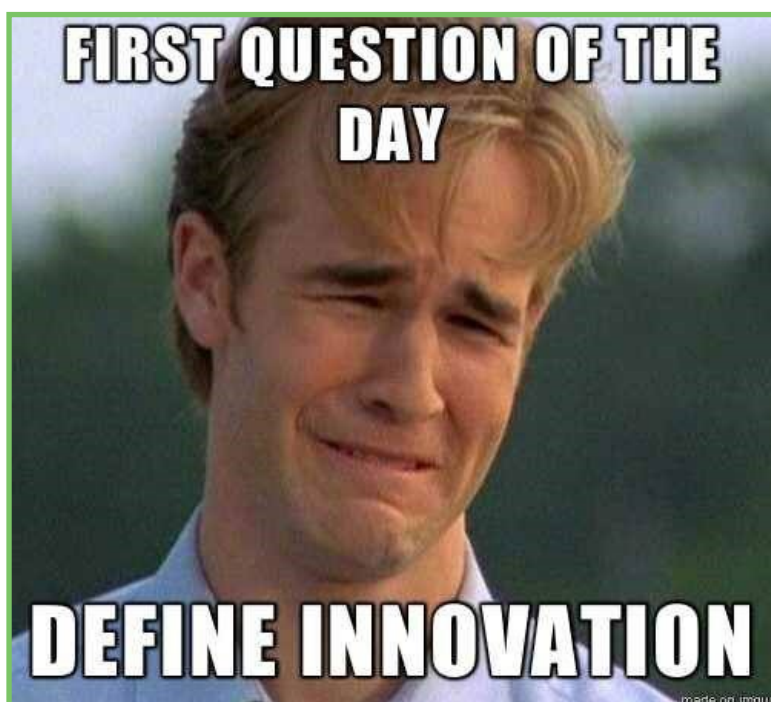
we sat down and asked ourselves this exact same question (not a great idea when you're on a deadline, I agree). At the peak (well, the first of the peaks) of the pandemic, when everything was moved online, we agreed that not everything digital is innovative by itself and that we need an additional step to define a practice as innovative. And, understanding this is a subjective issue, which can be viewed from many different perspectives, the closest we got to defining what innovation means to us as a team was "hacking the system". If we had to put the term in a definition, hacking the system would mean using something (a practice, tool, event, channel… feel free to add) out of the context it was originally created for, redefining its purpose and making something unexpected out of it.

What made our initiative innovative? And what was especially important to make it successful?

We agreed that in this case we want to use some "good old" methods, and some new ones, but combine them in an innovative way in order to get the results we set at the beginning. The baseline for all that will happen is that we want young people to be actively involved in everything we do throughout the process.

In this context, I can pretty much relate the communication plan we used to the practice presented at the first edition of the EAYW. The idea was to involve as many young people as possible, and in the peak of the pandemic and lockdown, we had to go digital. I believe we can agree that a standard call to action, emphasizing the importance of youth-centered strategies and inviting people to spend 20+ minutes filling out a research survey on the position and needs of young people (sounds boring even here, and imagine how it would sound on Instagram) would not really work. So, we carefully planned our communication strategy and motivated young people to spend these 20+ minutes of their time using Instagram language: memes, reels, even meme stories. And it worked.

So, the first step was research. Using different research tools, we conducted two research projects in the following months: one on the position and needs of young people in Leskovac, and one on the available programmes for youth (covering all institutions, organisations, events etc.). We cross-matched the research results in a publication, with the idea to define the gap between young people's needs on the local level, and the programmes available for them, so we could construct further programmes to map this gap. And there were some really interesting results.

For example, many cultural and youth organisations invite young people to be the audience, to take part in the programmes and activities the institution organises for them, but feel young people are not really interested. On the other hand, most of the young people emphasized that they don't want to be passive users, but that they need support to be actively involved in creating and implementing programmes, that they need space to implement their ideas. And cross-matching these results, we could recognize that it is possible to create a win-win situation for both: young people can be actively involved in creating programmes, and in this way institutions can be more youth-friendly and more visited. We mapped all the conclusions like this one, and they were now a baseline for advocacy in the process of making the new youth strategy.

During the research, we also asked young people from Leskovac, if they would be interested to participate in dialogue with the decision makers on the local level. The results were amazing: almost one third of the participants responded positively and shared their contact details in the form. So, we focused more on making structured dialogue happen.

Turning challenges into changes...
The next step was a preparatory training (online, as everything else in 2020) with young people. We talked about levels of participation, youth policy and actors, with a special focus on the local level, and prepared thematic areas for the dialogue according to young people's inputs. During this process, the young people also defined who were the decision makers they wanted to talk to and we started planning the event.

Now, this is when it got tricky. At that moment, due to Covid19 restrictions, it was possible to have a maximum of five persons in the same room at the same time. And there was a choice to be made, with the following options: postpone the dialogue to some future point in time, or think of a way to make it happen in these conditions. And all of the young people involved felt that postponing it would be a bad option, since the momentum was there, the energy was there, and there was no way to predict what the future months would look like (talking about the pointlessness of these "where do you see yourself in 5 years" interview questions).

Live streamed structured dialogue in Leskovac, Serbia (photo provided by A. Pecarski)

In the end, the limitation of not being able to have some 30 young people in the same room with the decision makers actively discussing youth issues led us to a solution where we made it possible to have all the interested young people from Leskovac actively involved (remember hacking the system?). We gathered some questions according to the thematic areas in advance, and organised a live streamed structured dialogue. A member of the City Council and the Youth Office coordinator commented on the research results and answered the young people's questions, and all the young people following the live stream could also participate, comment and ask questions.

This (forced) online format turned out to be a huge success: a lot of young people took part (many more than in the originally planned format), and all local and regional media followed the event and reported about it.

…with great results

Suddenly, youth policy was the main topic in Leskovac, and the young people's position and needs were put into focus more than ever before. Finally, the young people's initiative was recognised by the officials, and our independent research results and the outcomes of the structured dialogue have been officially included as a baseline in the consultation process for the new City of Leskovac Youth Strategy 2021-2025.

So this is where the story ends and dialogue can begin

Back to this moment of sharing the space of this article with you, and I thank you for taking this travel through time with me. I guess, after the story, some conclusions and advice are expected. (To be honest, I never really was a fan of those, since I believe open questions leave much more possibility to reflect and take something out of what we read.)

Now, when it comes to closing this article, I guess it is decision time, or in the terms of the first EAYW workshop:

So, how do you "hack the system" in terms of your youth work practice? Honestly curious to find out.