



# The YOUTH PARLIAMENT PROJECT

By Marcin Zaleski

## What is the YPP?

**Youth Parliament Project (YPP) is a project supported by European Council and IDEA. It is currently run in four IDEA countries – Bulgaria, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia and the United Kingdom. The main activities under the projects include: establishing and developing youth parliaments (local and national); organization of student debates, forums (also on-line) and conferences; teacher training and curriculum development; trainings for local authorities, NGO personnel, social workers and youth.**

By using an array of innovative approaches and involving different agents in the cooperation, the Youth Parliament Project aims at:

- Increasing young people's participation in the decision-making process at the local and national level by introducing and strengthening representative forms of participation such as youth community councils, children and youth parliaments; open forms of participa-

tion such as children and youth forums; debates (including debates with representatives of governments). The project aims at motivating young people to recognize and take their chances in intervening and participating in the shaping of policies and thus making their voice heard

- Increasing participation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (primarily, children of immigrants, students from ethnic minorities, students with disabilities) by taking concrete steps to introduce various forms of participation to students who have been left out of the participation process and thus addressing the problem of social exclusion among these groups of young people

- Improving the knowledge and awareness of European issues and facilitating cooperation among the participants of the project: from partner countries: students, teachers, youth and social workers, local governments and thus leading to a greater understand-

ing of what role the EU should play in the lives of European citizens (especially young people) and how they can influence the decision making process at the European level

- Developing skills of young people, especially the skills which will enable them to influence the decision making process (advocacy skills) as well as their vocational skills (communication skills, language skills, organizational skills, and cooperation skills) in order to improve their chances of employability and provide a better start to an adult life

The main goal of the project is the development of a replicable model for increasing student participation in partner countries and enhancing long term co-operation between schools, government and the civil society.

The project's outputs will be replicable and constitute models of good practice, to be employed by different categories of users. These categories include: teachers (training and curriculum), youth workers and social workers (training and good practice), local governments (networking and exchange of good practice), NGO personnel (training and networking). Thus, the trainings conducted under the auspices of the YPP include the following:

- Teacher trainings (youth parliamentarism and debate) will be based on project learning approach and deliberative education methodology. The trainings will emphasize a hands-on approach and provide possibility for peer-dialogue.
- Trainings for teachers, youth and social workers working with disabled and disadvantaged students will employ special pedagogies.
- Advocacy trainings for young people will be based on project learning approach and deliberative education.

- International conference will be organized based on project learning, deliberative education and inter-cultural education.

- Two guidebooks (public debate and youth parliamentarism) will employ project learning and debate methodology. They will provide a lot of examples and specific guidelines on how to establish and support youth councils, youth parliaments and organize public debates. These publications will contain full acknowledgement of any funding support forthcoming from the Socrates programme (as will also be the case on the proposed project web-pages).

The target groups that will ultimately benefit from the project are students in five partner- countries (Bulgaria, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia and the UK) aged 13-19. The groups will include students from ethnic minorities, immigrant students and students with disabilities.

The project will reach out to Roma youth in Bulgaria and Romania (it is estimated that it will directly involve 200 Roma students in each country during the 2 years of project's duration).

In all five partner-countries, the project will reach out to disabled students (it is estimated that an average of 100 –200 disabled students will be affected per partner country). According to the estimates by the Essex County Council which has successfully implemented the Youth Parliament project in its own locality and has cooperated with other local authorities in the UK, about 5-10% of each partner country's student population (aged 13-19) should be involved in the project (at different capacity: either through participation in exchanges, online projects, debates and forums, elections, etc.).

Apart from the local developments of the Youth Parliament Project activities in individual countries, which are shortly described below, the project gave birth to a few useful manuals that are being used to train youth. Marcin Zaleski has developed a Public Speaking Training Module and an Introductory Debate Training Module that has been used by countries participating in the project. You can access the material for both of these trainings by going to <http://www.idebate.org/ypp/teacherresources.asp>





Apart from providing resources for teachers and trainers, a collection of resources for students has been prepared. The material includes IDEA Public Advocacy Training, a description of the Young Essex Assembly, and a resolution on Youth Against Violence and Substance Abuse prepared by the Lithuanian Forum participants. All of these documents can be found at <http://www.idebate.org/ypp/studentresources.asp>

The following are short overviews of the YPP activities in participating countries. You can read about some of these events in more detail in the following articles. If you need updated information on the activities or participants of the Youth Parliament Project, you can always check [www.idebate.org/ypp](http://www.idebate.org/ypp)

## **Youth Parliament Project in Lithuania**

As Lithuania already had existing youth parliaments, the main goal of the project was to improve the skills of youth

parliament members as well as the communication between them and local and national authorities.

Lithuania organized its first Youth Conference in June 21 – 25, 2004 in the Training Centre "Dainava" in Druskininkai. There were 50 participants present at this training. During this training there were several sessions through which students had to acquire different skills and abilities. The sessions included interactive trainings in effective communication, argumentation, the study of the state of youth in Lithuania, and preparation of election speeches for simulated youth parliament elections. The conferences ended with an open discussion between the participants of the conference and the Lithuanian Minister of Health, Juozas Olekas.

In November, a meeting was organized between the youth and the Lithuanian President, Valdas Adamkus in order to improve the communication between youth and political

bodies in Lithuania. The meeting took place in the Center for Professional Development in Panevezys and hosted about 150 participating students, as well as members of the President's office and the local media. The meeting featured a debate on the resolution "Panevezys needs a university" and followed with an open floor discussion amongst the participants and the politicians.

Most recently, under the auspices of the Youth Parliament Project, a National Youth Forum was organized in Kedainiai "Sviesioji" gymnasium. This event hosted 170 participants from all around Lithuania and focused on the topic "Students should have more opportunities in school governance".

## Youth Parliament Project in Slovenia

The Youth Parliament Project in Slovenia is organized as a pilot project held in 4 local communities that are municipalities across the country. The municipalities were carefully selected to represent different kinds of communities – big, small, predominantly rural and predominantly urban - some with many schools and some with few schools and, of course, geographically distributed. No similar structure as the Youth Parliaments existed in any of these municipalities (or for that matter anywhere else in the country).

The chosen municipalities are: Nova Gorica, Zreče, Ormož, Ljutomer.

Each local community has its own local coordination team that is chaired by the local co-coordinator(s). We encouraged bi-coordination, where one co-coordinator is an adult and the other a member of the targeted age group.

The local co-ordination teams deal with promotion, contacts with local governments, election campaigns, promotion, media contacts on the local level, etc. They are assisted by the national coordinator, ZiP. Core and key elements of the project implementation are decided jointly, while some aspects may vary from one local YP to the other.

The Slovenian Youth Parliament Project organizers recently held their first session-seminars for their elected parliaments in all four municipalities. The parliaments have 9, 16, 14 and 13 MPs, so they are quite substantial, considering they are in fairly small communities.

The first sessions of the new Youth Parliaments were organized as orientation seminars for the young MPs, the main objective was to get to know each other, learn about the political and constitutional system in Slovenia (especially on the local level), learn and discuss how YP fits into the municipality as well as to adopt rules of procedure and elect the president and vice-president of the YP.

One first session was held in the town hall (Zreče) with the mayor present. Other sessions were held in schools. It must be emphasized that municipalities are interested in the activities of these newly elected Youth Parliaments. Some of these Parliaments have received direct invitations to establish committees to participate in municipality projects as representatives of local youth.

During the upcoming sessions, yearly work-plans will be adopted and committees formed and from there on it will be the challenge to work towards implementing those plans.

Each local Youth Parliament, that is the elected MPs, will work according to its Rules of Procedure. They will identify core issues in their community to work on (e.g. improving public transportation services for young people, initiating the opening of a youth centre, etc.). They will form decisions, seek the support of local organizations and/or governments and at the end of the term they will present a detailed report of their work, what they managed to accomplish and what still needs to be



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done. The decisions of the YP are not in any way binding for the local governments, but are expected to have a strong informal impact on decision-making process.

Towards the end of the term in office, the representatives of all YP in Slovenia will meet for a joint conference to discuss issues that concern them all. A follow-up to the national conference will be the international event with MPs from Bulgaria, Romania, UK, Lithuania and Slovenia.

## Youth Parliament Project in Bulgaria

Bulgarian Youth Parliament Project has been busy with training teachers, youth workers and youth. Similarly to Slovenia, they have organized elections for local Youth Parliaments and established relationships between them and local political and educational institutions.

## Youth Parliament Project Travels to Africa

### Civic Education through Youth Participation in Rwanda

On the 15th -16th December, IDEA was invited to Rwanda by its partner Norwegian People's Aid to conduct trainings for civil society organizations that are interested in increasing the participation of young people in their activities. The idea for the training was born during one of the previous visits of IDEA trainers to Rwanda (February and May 2004) when they had a chance to present debate education and advocacy as well as projects focusing on youth participation. The Youth Parliament Project was met with a lot of interest among many stake-holders, especially because youth participation is perceived as one of the priorities by many international NGOs and local civil society organizations. With over 55% of Rwanda's population being under 18 years of age, youth policies constitute one of the government's priorities as well.

Presenting the model of youth participation developed under the Youth Parliament project is a challenge in a country like Rwanda. This is mostly because the situation of young people living in Rwanda is so different from the experiences of young people participating in the Project in Europe. Most of the young people in Rwanda live in the countryside and very few have the opportunity to continue their education beyond primary school. From the earliest years of their lives children and young people are involved in daily work on farms or in their house, helping their parents sustain their families. Opportunities for leisure and extra-curricular youth activities, the way these are known to their European counterparts, are nonexistent or limited at best.

Many of the young people in Rwanda also have another barrier to cross- before they can fully participate in the life of their society. This is the trauma and memories of the genocide which happened in 1994 and is still part of the lives of young people who witnessed the most horrifying atrocities as children.

Rwandan government and civil society organizations put a lot of effort into mobilizing young people and ensuring that they fully participate in the life of their communities. Unfortunately one of the problems faced by the organizations working with young people is a low level of motivation - the result of both the external circumstances confronted by young people (e.g. poverty and lack of perspectives) as well as the youth organizing approach employed by the youth organizations themselves. Many of the organizations use a tokenistic, top-down approach to involving young people, which is far from genuine participation and youth initiative. As a result many of the youth projects which are initiated "successfully" (with a big turnout of young people at the first meeting) cease to exist after a couple of weeks, since there is no follow up and initial groups of interested youth trickle



down to the few who hold positions of power in a youth club or a youth group (this usually being determined at a first meeting).

The seminar conducted by IDEA in Kibuye (in western Rwanda on the lake Kivu) in December aimed at achieving 2 objectives: providing the participants with some practical tools of how to approach young people and work with youth groups (e.g. through debates, discussions, team building activities) and providing them with an opportunity to reflect on their current work in the field of youth action and future strategies. The seminar brought together over 30 participants from 9 civil society organizations which have been working with young people or would like to involve young people in their activities.

The seminar began with a series of exercises exploring different group working techniques – which also allowed the participants to get to know each other and share ideas about youth participation as well as exchange information about the activities of their respective organizations. On the same

day, the participants also worked in groups (members of the same organization working together) on developing maps for their organizations: identifying the main stakeholders and their interests, and identifying the main message that each organization would like to present to different stakeholders. The seminar finished with a role-play exercise during which participants could practice the skills developed during the previous sessions and offer each other feedback on their performance.

Although 2 days of training are not enough to cover all the complex issues related to youth participation, the seminar delivered by IDEA was a good start. In addition to the practical information and knowledge and skills acquired by the participants, one of the most valuable outcomes of the seminar was the sharing of ideas and reflection on the past, current and future activities of the participants' organizations. There was also another important product – a shared feeling that none of the participants is left alone in implementing their organizations' mission and objectives and that networking and exchanging of ideas is crucial to achieving success in civil society.

IDEA would like to thank the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) of Rwanda for their support in the organization of the seminar in Kibuye.