

REPORT

Study Visit to Bulgaria¹

“Let’s do it together”

Youth Information and Youth Participation

07/09/08 – 14/09/2008

Prepared and edited by Mariia Matsepa with contributions of the Seminar participants, the ERYICA network and feedback, and of the ERYICA Board Member Mr. Bertels, in Petto, Belgium, who has kindly volunteered to finalise the report.

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¹ Funded by the EU ‘Youth In Action’ Programme



I. Introduction

With the **Study Visit to Bulgaria**², ERYICA aimed to create contacts with the youth information network and grass root youth information workers in Bulgaria, examine the situation (local realities, youth policy), give hints, energy and suggestions, and explore possible future co-operation, as well as get feedback from newbies in the field.

As a result, ERYICA brought together members and youth information workers from three regions: the Western Balkans, Western Europe, and Eastern Europe, uniting partners with completely different backgrounds.

On the one hand, partners with a long tradition and notable experience in youth information work participated in the Study Visit, while on the other hand, newbies from the new EU Member States and non-EU countries, seeking for more experience in youth information and counselling, have come to Bulgaria to network and learn from their more experienced colleagues³.

1.1. Aims and Objectives of the Seminar

1. To learn from each other's work in the field

Specific Objectives

1. To identify best practices and provide mutual feedback
2. To learn about on-going activities and services provided
3. To understand the differences of approaches in youth policy in general and in youth information specifically

² Within the framework of the project "Let's do it together", Youth Information and Youth Participation, funded by the 'Youth in Action' Programme of the European Union, subsequently in the text: Study Visit.

³ The origin of this initiative lies in an earlier Study Visit on youth information and participation to St. Petersburg (april 2006) – organised by In Petto – where ERYICA members got connected with some youth information workers active in Eastern European countries. The Bulgarian participant Ivelina Peeva (who runs the national youth card association "EURO26" in Bulgaria) explained about her attempts to start a generalist youth information network in her country and expressed the wish to get closer contacts with the ERYICA network.



2. To explore networking opportunities

Specific Objectives

1. To strengthen contacts amongst participants and their respective organisations
2. To foster regional cooperation amongst Western Balkans and East European youth information organisations
3. To get more acquainted with the “Youth in Action” Programme and the possibilities for youth information work;
4. To forecast possible common projects in the field of youth information and within the framework of the “Youth in Action” Programme

3. To inform about European priorities in the youth field

Specific Objectives

1. To explore the events and the activities related to “2008 – The European year of intercultural dialogue” and to envisage links with Youth information work
2. To elaborate initiatives and projects in the fields of youth participation, social inclusion, active citizenship, European awareness

II. Participants

The **Study Visit** featured 29 participants from 13 youth information networks all around Europe. The following centres have sent their staff to participate in the event:

1. Centre National d'Information pour Jeunes, Luxembourg
2. Centre for Youth Work, Serbia
3. ERYICA, Luxembourg
4. Forum MNE, Montenegro
5. In Petto, Belgium
6. MISSS, Slovenia
7. National Coordination and Development Centre for Youth and Counselling Services in Finland
8. Office for Substance Abuse and Risky Behaviour Prevention in Kotor
9. ONO, Serbia
10. Province of Pistoia, Italy
11. Udruga za Mlade “Korak Ispred” (UMKI), Croatia



12. Youth Information Centre, Belarus
13. Youth Information Network, Bulgaria

III. Activities

The Study Visit lasted eight days in total and was filled with various activities, ranging from excursions, trainings, conferences to presentations and informal exchanges of practices and views.

Brief Overview of Activities

Date	Morning 9.00 – 12.30	Afternoon 14.00 – 18.00	Evening
07/09/08 Sunday	Arrival		Welcome Evening
08/09/08 Monday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Introduction to the Study Visit ➤ Aims and objectives ➤ Expectations ➤ Working methods ➤ Getting to know each other ➤ Presentations of organisations ➤ Team building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Presentation of the Varna Youth Information Centre and organisations active in the field ➤ Meeting the Head of Department "Youth and Sports" in the Municipality of Varna ➤ Open discussion: "What is Common in What We Do and What is Different?" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Evaluation of the day
09/09/08 Tuesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recap of previous day ➤ Visit to Veliko Tarnovo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Presentation of youth work in Bulgaria (Ivelina Peeva) ➤ Social Inclusion: Successful projects and best practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ NGO evening ➤ Evaluation of the day
10/09/08 Wednesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recap of previous day ➤ Discussions 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Evening tea, mid-visit evaluation
11/09/08 Thursday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recap of previous day ➤ Visit to Varna ➤ Visit of Youth house Mladecki dom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Youth Participation: successful projects and best practises fairs, facilitated by Davide Capecchi 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Dinner in Varna ➤ Evaluation of the day
12/09/08 Friday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recap of previous day ➤ Visit to youth information centres in Kavarna ➤ Visit to Cape Kaliakra 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Possibilities of Youth in Action programme for youth information workers and organisations ➤ International Team Tasks: ideas for projects & future co-operation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ International Team Tasks: Youth Participation ➤ Evaluation of the day



13/09/08 Saturday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recap of previous day ➤ Presentation of the results of International Team Tasks ➤ Open space for preparing projects with other partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Evaluation follow-up 	and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Farewell party
14/09/08 Sunday	Departure			

3.1. Sunday, 07/09/2009

The **first day of the event**, Sunday, was not only the day of arrival to the place of the Study Visit, but also featured a **Welcoming Evening** that provided participants with an opportunity of first informal contact and ice-breaking in interpersonal communication.

3.2. Monday 08/09/2008 Varna, Bulgaria

On the **second day** of the Study Trip, the real “getting to know each other” started, when participants were divided in small groups to discuss the realities in different states of Europe in the field of youth information and youth policies.

Each of the participants had a chance to express himself/herself and to be heard, to discover opportunities for exchanging and working with each other.

At first, Davide Capecchi, the ERYICA Director, delivered a short speech, introducing the Study Visit, its aims and objectives.





Then the participants jointly discussed their **expectations from the Study Visit.**

LEARNING
To learn about opportunities for training and other practical information
To refresh the knowledge about youth information work in general
To learn about functioning of information centres in other countries
To see how youth info centres work in practice
To learn more about laws on the rights of young people
To improve the visibility of youth information centres
To learn about the youth policy in Bulgaria
EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCES
To exchange experiences with organisations involved in youth work
To learn and share best practices
To exchange and create ideas for a new Study Visit
CO-OPERATION WITH ERYICA
To explore possibilities of co-operation with ERYICA
To join ERYICA
GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER
To learn more about cultural differences
To get to know each other
To have some free time
To unite resources available
To have fun

After that, Johan Bertels, a member of the ERYICA Governing Board, introduced working methods, and participants presented their respective organisations and shared their experiences briefly.



Successful Projects and Practices

Presentation of VERTTI, Finland, by Annika Sabell

- **VERTTI** - peer to peer youth information initiative in the Turku region, Finland: 13-16-year-olds act as information officers in schools in co-operation with youth services
- Student councils at schools and with the City Council
- Peer-to-peer support: Pupils in schools help and support new pupils
- SPIN – exercise activators: 13-16-year-olds act as motivators and activators for other students at school providing ideas and exercise activities for them
- Peer to peer Settlers: Students act as settlers in bullying and other conflict cases
- Newspaper week every year: Lots of information and media teaching in co-operation with Finnish newspapers
- Over 600 different youth organisations and activity opportunities for young people in the Turku region, Finland
- Very good results with online youth information work and youth work (in Habbo Hotel, IRC Galleria and MSN messenger): Young people are queuing to get to talk with a youth info worker/youth worker

Presentation of FORUM MNE, Montenegro, by Jelena Miljanic

- **What:** FORUMS, open discussions on actual, current social/youth topics, with all the relevant stakeholders; a youth information program, current information with the added value of activism through discussing and actively participating in the solution
- **Result:** Different stakeholders shared their perspectives, recommendations for solution of the problem/issue
- **Where:** Info centres; Youth clubs; Schools; Open space
- **How:** Discussions; debates; workshops; quizzes
- **Why:** Places where young people have a chance to talk about actual problems; One way to step in the community and give information variety of (young) people could be included

Also, team building possibilities were explored.





On Monday afternoon, participants of the Study Visit had a chance to listen to the **Presentation of the Varna Youth Information Centre** and organisations active in the field in Bulgaria. Then, a meeting with the Head of Department "Youth and Sports" in the Municipality of Varna, **Mrs. Kalina Popstafanova**, took place, after which participants engaged into an open discussion **“What is Common and What is Different in What We Do?”**.

3.3. Tuesday, 09/09/08

3.3.1 Visiting Youth Information Centres in Veliko Tarnovo



The Youth Centre, situated in the heart of the city of Veliko Tarnovo, is run and financed by the local Municipality. Participants have found it full of cultural activities: Music school for children, youth chamber orchestra, vocal groups for youngsters, classes of ceramics, art classes, a theatre studio, ballet groups, a break dance group, language and computer schools, spiritual culture classes, sports and tourist activities, health problem centre,

reproductive health programmes and programmes for prevention of smoking, alcohol, drugs and aids.

Moreover, a youth worker and an expert jointly run a student's employment office. There is even an element of supporting families of youngsters, coming to the Centre: When children come to dance lessons, for instance, parents can have computer skills lessons while waiting! Youth Parliament method is explored, and the staff of the Centre is looking into training more young people to launch peer-to-peer actions.

The staff of the Youth Centre provided participants with a tour in Youth Houses (three floors) and explained what kind of services these Youth Houses have. The Centre uses local radio and distributes brochures in schools as advertisement.



One room is allocated to youth information work; it is run by one worker. Unfortunately, the youth information worker was on holidays and it was impossible to have more detailed information upon how the office is run.

➤ Financing

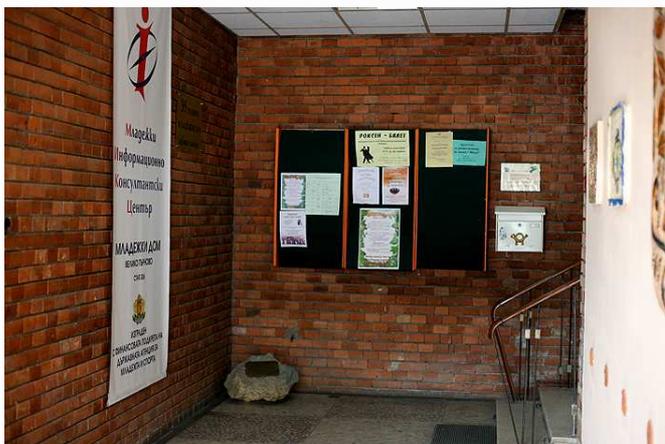
Youth information is by Bulgarian government and its projects. Youth organisations can apply for support, asking for money, equipment and similar needs. Thanks to this support, the Youth Centre runs, for instance, projects of social support for disability groups by methods of art and theatre.

Unfortunately, because there is no lift in building, it is not possible to have all disability groups coming to the Centre.

The Centre can also hire experts for particular projects. For instance, a school psychologist works part-time in the Youth Centre. Experts get few days' training provided by the National Agency of Bulgaria.

Address of the Youth Centre:

- Hristo Botev 15a, POB 162, 5000 Veliko Tarnovo, email: rppdir@abv.bg



Links:

- The Bulgarian National Centre "European Youth Programmes and Initiatives"
<http://www.youthbg.info/en/>
- Youth Centre's group "Singing Bells"
<http://bells.mladejki-dom.com>

On Friday afternoon, there was a guided tour in the ancient town of Veliko Tarnovo.





3.4. Wednesday, 10/09/08

On Wednesday, participants discussed the National youth policy in Bulgaria with their Bulgarian compatriots in informal atmosphere and networked with each other.

3.5. Thursday, 11/09/08

On Thursday, participants visited youth information centres in Varna.

3.5.1. Visit to City Administration

Firstly, participants visited the City Administration of Varna, Bulgaria. Mrs. Vesela Vasileva, the Head of the "Youth" department in SAYS – Sofia, did a presentation on the **youth policy in Bulgaria**, and participants had a chance to discuss it comparing Bulgarian instance with youth policies of participants' countries.

3.5.2. Visit to Mladezhki Dom

Mladezhki Dom, or the Youth House of the Municipality of Varna, is located in the city center, though not in the official building, which makes the accessibility for youngsters both higher and less formal. At first, Mrs. Popstafanova, the Head of Department "Youth and Sports" in the Municipality of Varna, provided participants with a guided tour of Mladezhki Dom's premises.

- The **ground floor** of the building incorporates a large theatre with a stage, backstage and a sloping floor. Also, there is the Youth Information Centre of the Municipality on the ground floor.
- There is a dance hall with mirrors on the walls and bars (for ballet lessons) and an "Internet Centre" in which officials have a desk on the **first floor**.



However, there seems to be no possibility for youth to use computers or the Internet for information gathering (or at the moment of the Visit it was not opened to visitors: That is not clear).

- On the **second floor**, there is a meeting room, in which participants had a meeting with Mrs. Popstafanova, who introduced them to the youth policy in the Municipality. According to her, the Municipality of Varna is very important for youth information in Bulgaria. Usually, it is not typical for a City Administration to spend a lot of attention and means for youth information, but in Varna this is the case, and a considerable percentage of the budget goes to the youth policy.

This policy choice of Varna has the following reasons:

- After the “opening” of the society (after communism) many negative effects of the opening were felt in the society of Bulgaria. This is because there was no freedom during the totalitarian regime: **When there is freedom, one has to make one’s own choice, but the youth was not used to and prepared to make its own choice.** Also, youngsters aren’t used to take initiative as of now.
- Youth is the future of Bulgaria, the city is developing fast – it is worth the effort to invest in the youth.

Youth information as such is not an issue of concern in Bulgaria: There is information; there are media which can be used to spread the information. Yet, it is still very difficult to motivate youngsters to use the information and to do something with it.

According to Mrs. Popstofanova, the tasks of the youth policy in Varna are twofold:

- Firstly, to inform, communicate and to train youngsters in youth information in those fields where there are needs. In order to do so, a needs’ survey was held to search where the needs of youngsters are, especially because a lot of youngsters weren’t conscious of their own needs.

The result of the research is used to encourage youngsters to be conscious of their needs, for instance the benefits they can obtain by an increased mobility in Europe.



- Case: Currently, sixteen to eighteen year olds are still influenced by their parents in Bulgaria (in general, parents are not very fond of their kids travelling). In such a case, the Centre undertakes **work with parents** explaining them the benefits their kids could get from travelling.
- Case: There are **needs, not yet recognised** by youth. For instance, youngsters have little experience of working with projects, because they are used to be treated as actors, not as inventors of processes.

In order to transform youngsters from recipients of projects into their creators, two information centres in Varna are working on this, providing the youth with relevant information and consultation.

- Secondly, to organise the **Youth Stage**, during which youngsters, active in sports, arts, NGOs, can introduce themselves. There are about 100 organisations in the Municipality working with or for youngsters that have their own structure, **the Youth Forum**.

Youth Forum

The Youth Forum an umbrella organisation in Bulgaria, uniting in itself over 100 organisations active in the youth field. It is divided into 8 sections and is specialised in different kinds of activities and social work. A number of organisations join the Youth Forum on a voluntary basis.

There is a section for student organisations (there are 5 universities in Varna), one of which is dedicated to the representation of school students. By the means of the Youth Forum, all organisations can promote themselves: 30 representatives from the Youth Forum are chosen to form an Advisory Council.

Not only youth-related topics are handled in the Council, but also topics, related to issues of contemporary society in Bulgaria (transport, safety *inter alia*) that youngsters discuss and propose their solutions. In this way, youngsters have an opportunity to participate in the process of policy formulation: The mayor is therefore incited to justify his decisions.

As the tradition of expressing one's opinion to the policy makers hasn't yet been steadily anchored among youngsters, this is a slow process.



Also, the Municipality of Varna provides money and training to organisations. In cooperation with the Youth **Forum**, the Municipality organises an **annual Youth Expo**, an information fair covering all of Bulgaria.

Both the Youth Forum and the Municipality aim at promoting the **Youth Expo** to an international level.

Questions & Answers Session

(Within the framework of the Visit of Mladezhki Dom, 11/09/08)

Q: Rotterdam is the European Capital of Youth in 2009. Would you consider applying for this title in 2010?

A: We could consider this.

Q: How is the local action plan implemented on the national level?

A: There is no national policy, it works bottom-up: As there are no national funds, national organisations apply for the funds of the Municipality. Ideally there is a national policy on the top of the local one, but Bulgaria is not yet that far on the national level.

Q: Can you tell us more about meetings between the Mayor and the representatives of the Youth Forum? How often do they take place, how does it work?

A: In the statutes, it is noted: “Meetings take place once per month; in the alternative, they take place if there is an issue/a problem to be settled”. Recently, because the mayor has a busy schedule, new criteria were added for meetings to be held.

Now, questions about a single topic are brought together. There are also mid-meetings: Representatives gather information about a problem, send it to experts, who develop solutions and discuss them with the mayor.

For instance, there was a mobility problem for students, the Forum reported it to experts in the Municipality, who, respectively, scheduled a meeting with the Mayor and other stakeholders (public transport sector, etc.). The meeting resulted in a creation of a new transport line.

Q: Since how long did the Municipality decide to make “youth” a priority and what were the first steps?

A: The political youth was active since 2001, raising different youth-related discussions and arguments for solving them. Now, there is a tendency in Bulgaria not to support religious and political organisations, but to support those, dealing with social problems, art, etc. In 2005, the Municipality decided to set up a forum, the **Youth Forum**. From 2006, the Youth Forum as described already is operative.



Questions & Answers Session (continued from p. 14)
(Within the framework of the Visit of Mladezhki Dom, 11/09/08)

Q: Does the Municipality also provide job counselling or training in specific skills in order to obtain a job?

A: The Municipality finances education, but doesn't want to tell youngsters what they have to do. The youth must formulate projects themselves; consequently, those projects can be funded by the Municipality.

Of course, there is information available on "how to find a job" in the **youth information centres**. Also, there are consultants to whom youngsters can talk and get a personal advice.

Q: How is the communication and promotion of services for youngsters managed?

A: Indeed, this is a weak spot: Traditional media are used. There are some folders in youth information centres available, there is also a website <http://www.varnanamladite.com/>.

Also, the Municipality has a weekly press conference every Tuesday with the Mayor of Varna. There is a good relationship with the media; media pays particular attention to this press conference. The Municipality starts to encourage contacts between the media and NGOs.

Q: Do companies invest?

A: During the last years, there is more interest of companies to invest in youth. Just as Bulgarians, Bulgarian companies were used to get money from the state. Now, they are realising that this is no longer the case: They have to invest themselves, understanding that youth can be an interesting target group.

After the Q&A Session, the ERYICA network proceeded to the ground floor, on which a Youth Information Centre is situated. The volunteer of the Centre showed the visitors around and explained how the Centre works. Besides regular activities of providing information, the Centre does outreach work in schools by going on the ground and doing presentations on opportunities for youngsters, the main topic for the moment being the "European Year of Diversity".

Most of the materials available in the Centre were related to health prevention and Europe (Eurodesk). There seems to be a lack of brochures and other materials on other topics.



The Centre works with methods following “All Different, All Equal” Campaign and the T-kids. The aforementioned training on methods has been provided by the National Agency of Bulgaria from Sofia.

3.5.3. Visit of the “Art Centre Varna” NGO

After the Mladezhki Dom, participants went to the “Art Centre Varna”. In the Centre, children (5 years old approximately) were drawing. A range of creative products of children were exposed in the Centre.

3.5.4. Visit of “NGO Inclusive” Café

The Café “**NGO Inclusive**” is a meeting point for all kind of artists, the goal of which is to promote integration of handicapped people/people with other needs. All kinds of social activities take place in the Café.

When participants were visiting the Café, it featured an exhibition of a Bulgarian painter. All of a sudden, a theatre group with young actors came there to rehearse. The Director of the group is a professional actor, who explained the plot of the play.

The play is about a bunch of people who are in the waiting room to see the psychiatrist. Because psychiatrist is very late, they start to talk to each other about themselves and their problems. In the end, because of the good talk they have had with each other, they don't need a psychiatrist anymore. Even the psychiatrist herself, who was secretly listening all the time, solves the problem she has with her daughter.

After participants heard the plot of the play, the actors started to rehearse.

Quotes: *“It is a very cosy and modern Café”.*

Later on, an NGO evening took place where the participating organisations could present themselves to each other and start thinking about possible partnerships.

3.6. Friday, 12/09/08

On the fourth day, the group visited 2 youth centres in Kavarna and Cape Kaliakra.

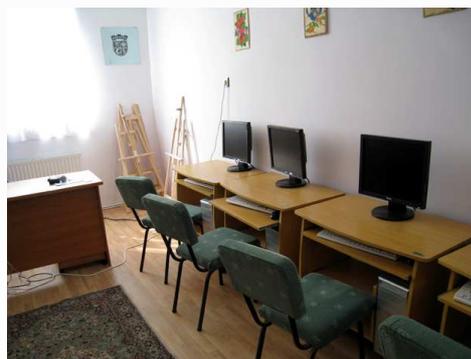


3.6.1. Visiting the Youth Information Centre in Kavarna

Young people coming to the Centre are all under 19 years old: almost all of them leave Kavarna to study in the university and other further education institutions in different towns of Bulgaria.

In the Centre, young people can use computers and free Internet connection for information search, school work, and editing CV's. Counselling and help are also provided.

As most young people have computers and Internet connection at home, the temptation to do something not allowed in the Centre's computers is not high.



Also, there are many opportunities to participate in various artistic activities in the Centre.



Quotes:

- *“Kavarna Youth Information Centre was a delight to visit - light, airy, well organised and active”*
- *“It was surprising to find out how actively young people participate in the Centre's activities”*



Beautiful ceramic works and all kinds of handicrafts young people made were displayed in the Centre.

There's also a dance hall and a room for clothes' design and production.



3.7. Saturday, 13/09/08

On Saturday, the last day of the Study Visit before the day of departure, an open space for preparing projects with other partners and a Farewell party took place. Also, the International Team Tasks Group did a presentation highlighting results of their work.

3.8. Sunday, 14/09/08

Sunday, the last day of the Study Visit, was a day of departure for everyone.

IV. Final Evaluation

Besides daily evaluations, the last event of the Visit was dedicated to the final evaluation, organised on the spot with all the participants.

Methodology: All of the participants were asked to take a position in a circle and listen to the questions, asked by Johan Bertels, In Petto, Belgium, the person in charge for implementation of the evaluation. On each question, participants were asked to think and choose the position according to their feelings in that particular moment.

The ones that chose position more to the middle of the circle, presented the ones with higher satisfaction, while participants that chose position more to the outside of the circle presented those with less satisfaction.

This kind of evaluation was an excellent opportunity to see feelings of the whole group, as well as to see diversity in satisfaction. After taking positions, Mr. Bertels asked for an explanation, especially those that took extreme centre or outside position. By having the individual explanations, participants could recall specific activities, as well as compare their satisfaction with individuals that provided explanation.

V. Potential Impact

In addition to enhancement of the effectiveness of the work of youth information professionals coming from different countries, the event has contributed to creation and consolidation of structural contacts.

Through the Study Visit and activities undertaken, participants have learnt



- To compare youth information work realities and methodology in different countries via visits, presentations, round tables and non-formal learning tools;
- To bring participation of young people in the reality of youth information activities by fostering group discussion as well as follow-up sharing of activities;
- Good practice of inclusion;
- About existing possibilities for international co-operation through the presentation of the 'Youth in Action' Programme and by linking it with youth information work;
- How and for what purposes one can develop a network that would facilitate international exchanges;
- About training and support possibilities offered by the participation and the membership in the ERYICA network;
- On the development of youth information services as a long, demanding process made of professionalism, like it was in those Western European countries that have first started a systematic policy development in youth information.

Also, thanks to the Study Visit, concrete actions and initiatives have already taken place:

- Preparation of the Seminar in Tivat & Kotor, December 2008, Montenegro;



- Better refining, in the regional cooperation perspective, of the GA in Kotor including the opening conference;

- ERYICA has grown:

Zajednica ICM from Croatia has applied for membership in ERYICA and has become the ERYICA Affiliated Member, GSM Youth Services Centre from Turkey and ONO from Serbia have become Agency's new Co-operating Organisations;

- A "Training for Trainers" lead by ERYICA team took place in Croatia;



- The MBTC training in Serbia was applied for, and hopefully, will be approved for September 2009;
- A Study Visit to Flanders, Belgium has been scheduled for October 19 – 24, 2009 if approved by the 'Youth in Action' Programme of the European Union;
- Representatives of FORUM MNE have become involved in the Training Task Force.