1. Assessment of government policy for the period of September 2019 - September 2020

In September 2019, youth policy was assigned to the competence of the newly created Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports of Ukraine. For the first time in decades, the structure of the ministry approved by the Government did not provide for a separate youth department or directorate.

The relevant ministry, without consulting with youth organizations and other youth representatives (stakeholders), set a course to establish and, six months later, liquidate the State Agency for Youth Development and Civil Society. The name itself was rather telling: the agency planned to “develop the youth” (while it would be right to rather create opportunities for their self-development). Despite the positive declarations, it posed a real threat of even greater bureaucratization of the already over-regulated youth work in Ukraine.

As a compensation for the young people, a national youth exchange program that allocated approximately UAH 500 million for 2020 has been established. The government prepared and voted for it without the participation of young people (i.e. undemocratically). Youth organizations did not understand why to invest so much in an untested program, although everyone welcomed the initiative.

Similarly, the Government prepared and adopted the Action Program - without consulting the young people on issues that concerned them. The Action Program contained five-year-old concepts that had long since become morally obsolete and needed to be corrected based on the results of the state-public dialogue (which took place, but not on this topic).

At the same time, a big advantage of the Government’s Program was that the overall goal for young people was written in accordance with the expectations of public sector: aiming at the inclusion of 25% of young people in public life. Unfortunately, this goal, as well as the national mobility program in the Action Program of the new Government, have disappeared altogether.

Despite all the perturbations and reorganization, in April 2020 the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine began to be quite active. In particular, it initiated the activities aiming to improve the legal framework for the implementation of projects for youth organizations, namely the introduction of electronic competition, improving the regulation of project costs, providing the explanations on the provision of own contribution in non-monetary form, etc.

In addition, the new composition of the Parliament was very positive about the bill “On the Youth”, which was in the profile committee without consideration for about five years (essentially due to the bias of the actual majority of the previous Parliament; even though it was partially written by the members of the majority, the first author of the bill belonged to the faction that left the majority).

Representatives of the new majority not merely started to hold regular meetings on youth law in the fall of 2019 (as the ministry did), but also carefully listened to the initiatives and proposals.

As a result of combination of different formats and weekly meetings, the preparation of an up-
dated version of the bill, entitled "On the Basic Principles of Youth Policy", began. The work was successful, and on 21 July 2020, the draft law was adopted in the first reading.

At the same time, it is necessary to consider the difficulties faced by the youth sphere during the improvement of the norms of the bill. Discussions took place mainly in the format of explaining to parliamentarians the "new wave" of the general concept of the bill on key critical points (age of youth, youth infrastructure, the importance of institutional support for youth organizations, etc.).

Discussions about other "new" formats of youth work (implemented in Europe in the last century) were not held; they only occasionally appeared and faded. The working group reformulated about 80% of the text of the bill, but there were very few innovations.

It was due to the fact that the bill was written in post-revolutionary 2015, and since the Parliament did not approve it, most of the key initiatives of the bill over the years have long been formalized by the secondary legislation - government decisions and ministerial orders – by the efforts of the youth sector (to substantial extent by the profile group of the RPR).

The current Parliament inherited the Law of Ukraine “On State Recognition and Support of Plast - the National Scout Organization of Ukraine” from the previous convocation, which was vetoed by the new President of Ukraine, (the first such law in continental Europe, although similar laws are the norm in Southeast Asia and North America). The law was finalized and adopted by the constitutional majority of the Parliament.

Locally, many citizens and activists are involved in the implementation of youth policy, which is influenced by both the decentralization reform, the initiative of the united territorial communities, and the initiative of small and medium-sized businesses. Over the last two years, a large number of youth programs which have been approved locally, are being implemented. It is a decisively positive development that is observed for the first time. New affluent communities and local authorities are being created. They stimulate the formation of youth spaces and centres, as well as the creation of youth councils, which work on local policies affecting the youth. In September 2020, the Ukrainian Association of Youth Councils was established and united 38 youth councils from 20 regions of Ukraine. The work of youth councils receives huge support and is gaining the momentum, and young people are increasingly involved in the formation of youth programs and community development.

Furthermore, on the local level, the tools of e-democracy that are actively developing in communities, such as public participation budgets, have a positive impact on youth development. An example of positive changes is the rapid development of e-sports in Ukraine. It was officially recognized as a sport by the government in September 2020. The presentation of the e-sports development strategy prepared by the Ukrainian Professional E-Sports Association and the beginning of cooperation with the UN Children’s Fund in Ukraine were marked as significant events in that area and testified its recognition at the international level.

2. Challenges in the field of youth policy

As before, the adoption of a new law “On the Basic Principles of Youth Policy” (the current legislation on youth, in addition to the law on Plast, was adopted before the birth of most modern youth in the European sense) remains the key challenge. This is the framework for innovation, which is already implemented by the Government and local self-government under the public pressure.

The role of the new law is to strengthen the institutionalization of the youth sector, which could gradually embrace the majority of young people.

Back in 2013, a team of international experts from the Council of Europe in its report “Youth Policy in Ukraine”, pointed out that our country protects only a few percent of gifted youth (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine) and those who can be classified as socially vulnerable (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine). Majority of the young people is essentially outside of the state concern.

The second challenge is the fact that in 2020 the State Targeted Social Program “Youth of Ukraine”, which has been operating since 2016, will expire. This means that this year, the government must firstly adopt the concept [the ministry...
has already started the public discussion], and then a new state program for the next five years must be written on that basis.

The third challenge is the cross-sectoral and intersectoral cooperation in finalizing and adopting the government’s Civic Education Strategy (at the last meeting, the Government of Volodymyr Groysman did not approve this document, and the Government decided to send it for revision after a short period of time). The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine should prepare this Strategy by October 2020.

The Civic Education Strategy should implement not only the relevant part of Article 5 on civic education in the Law of Ukraine “On Education”, but also the governmental Concept of Civic Education adopted in 2018 (which “expands” the relevant provisions of the Law of Ukraine “On Education”). This concept is an interesting and worthy consequence/result of the Revolution of Dignity, a consensus between two predominantly antagonistic groups of advocates – for human rights and for national-patriotic education.

The fourth challenge is to build a capable infrastructure to support the development of the youth sector. It is very important to do this on the basis of the Ukrainian Youth Fund [as a recipient of budget funds], which shall be created based on a draft Law of Ukraine “On Basic Principles of Youth Policy”. At the same time, it is important to consider the possibility of providing funds for youth and children’s organizations without the involvement of budgetary bodies. In addition, it is necessary to pay attention to a better expertise of the tender commission, as well as to introduce real mechanisms for monitoring projects that are implemented at the expense of the budget by youth and children’s organizations.

3. Recommendations to the authorities on priority changes for 2020-2021

1. To approve the draft Law of Ukraine “On the Basic Principles of Youth Policy”, finalizing it for the second reading with the participation of experts.

2. To provide funding opportunities through amendments to the Budget Code of Ukraine to create the Ukrainian Youth Fund by 2021, and ensure its independence and transparency, as well as the independence of its supervisory board.

3. To analyze the success of the current state program while preparing the concept, and the state social target program. While developing a new program, to ensure that it meets the real needs of young people and local communities (rather than repeating the provisions of similar programs from the previous years). This means that the documents should include the following structure for the youth work and funding for the next five years:

   A) Training of youth workers, Plast educators, etc. In Ukraine, only 1-2% of young people are included in democratic social life. This is a national catastrophe. Whole generations of young people grow up without any experience of social activity and civic responsibility.

   An invasive approach to the training of youth activists requires the annual training of tens of thousands of activists instead of hundreds [as Plast and the Youth Worker Program do]. In France, for example, the state takes care of the annual training of about 50,000 such workers [in Ukraine, if to count all members of youth organizations that pay real contributions, only a third of that number might be recruited].

   B) Youth centers as training hubs and spaces for youth self-development. It is necessary to create a Supervisory (Expert) Council of the All-Ukrainian Youth Center so that it can systematically support the development of the areas listed here. At least 10 regional youth training centers should be established. Currently, there is only one in the whole country — Plast Training Center in Kyiv region.

   Such youth centers will train youth workers, educators, etc. on a permanent basis (they should also include youth hostels). The new law shall also help ensure that each community has at least one free space for young people, if not for one in 1,000 young people, as it is in Estonia, then at least for one in 10,000.

   C) Youth councils in each community as the foundational center for youth. Government regulations for the establishment and operation of such councils have been in place for two years now. However, this direction needs to be strengthened through the law (the relevant norms are generally prescribed), as well as systematically, i.e. to annually train the members of such councils, at the very least, as is done in Lithuania.
It is necessary to build a training network that can provide at least 100 trainings per year (for comparison, Plast has doubled the number of trainings for its educators to 70-80 trainings per year in the last five years; the Youth Worker Program conducts about 50 trainings per year). Youth councils are not merely the fastest way to create youth community initiatives on the ground. They will oblige local governments (community resources) to get involved in the development of life of youth.

D) Student government as a practical school of civic engagement. In almost 30 years of independence, the state has done very little to create, ensure independence, and provide real opportunities for the development of student communities in universities. Similarly to the youth councils, it is necessary to train activists in this sphere (at least 1,000 per year) in order to grow capable and influential student communities in at least 150 largest universities.

Students who can be locked up in a dormitory by a rector, vice-rector or commandant are unlikely to be able to build an economically successful state. In the whole country, there are only a few hundred enterprising and responsible citizens in this environment, and in addition, the rotation of staff is quite high. It is necessary to comprehensively — first of all institutionally — promote not only the scaling of their number, but also networking.

E) Institutional support of youth organizations. The biggest challenge for the development of youth and children’s organizations is the introduction of a competition to provide institutional support to ensure their development and improve the internal structure (procedures) of the organization, including improving the professional capacity of employees.

The All-Ukrainian Youth Center, which can achieve the desired and long-awaited public partnership to support youth development in Ukraine, may provide the institutional support, in particular for student government, the network of youth centers and youth councils.

F) Simplification of procedures for financing youth projects. It is important to ensure the maximal simplification of funding procedures (following the example of those in the European Union, where the youth itself rather than the treasury, is interested in maximal project effectiveness), expansion of the eligible costs within projects, introducing the electronic tenders, creating real monitoring and reporting procedures.

In general, the funds allocated by the state for youth policy are sufficient today. Hence, it is necessary to precisely and efficiently invest them.