

Albania – Map of administrative divisions





Summary

This is the seventeenth in a series of international reviews of national youth policy conducted by the Council of Europe since 1997. The international review team visited Albania twice in 2009 and a national hearing on its conclusions was held in Tirana in February 2010.

The framework of the review was a little different from preceding reviews and can be considered as a “third stage” in an evolving review process. The first stage was somewhat ad hoc until, after seven reviews, a synthesis of the findings to that point was produced, and a framework to guide future reviews was suggested. This framework was broadly followed for the next seven reviews, when a further synthesis added significantly to the framework of issues that any review should be attentive to. However, this created an almost unmanageable task, unless the reviews spread their attention very thinly and failed to offer any real depth to their analyses. Hence the changed approach for the international review of youth policy in Albania. Though it continued to explore briefly the range of policy domains and cross-cutting issues that had been identified for the earlier framework, these were used more to set the scene and context rather than to present an analysis. The analysis was focused much more on three issues identified a priori by the Albanian authorities (suggested during a preliminary visit that took place in January 2009 and following a practice that was first established during the 8th review of Lithuania in 2002) and three issues that were viewed as important priorities by the international review team. This was the significant departure from previous review processes and may be the approach adopted in the future.

A further departure that was not, however, a precedent for future international youth policy reviews was the acceptance that Albania need not produce its own national youth policy report ahead of the visit by the international review team. This had, until this point, always been the practice of all previous international reviews (though some countries produced only draft reports and did not complete their national reports until after the international reports had been submitted, leading to some concerns about inappropriate political tactics). In 2006, Albania had produced a National Youth Strategy for 2007-13 and, given the pressures on the Youth Department within the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports during an election year in 2009, it was felt that the strategy was a sufficient baseline to “anchor” the deliberations of the international review.



The international review itself took place during two week-long visits in September and November 2009. It met with officials from various ministries, the Youth Minister himself, numerous youth NGOs, many projects aimed at young people and young people themselves. The first visit was concentrated on policy and provision within the central administration and in the capital city. The second visit sought to understand the experience of youth practitioners and young people beyond Tirana, in places such as Durrës, Fier, Shkodra and Bushat.

The international report starts with a preface of general observations both about the international youth policy review process and the specific experiences of the international review team in Albania. The first substantive chapter is concerned with providing some contextual information about Albania, the country, and about the National Youth Strategy. Chapter 2 seeks to present some brief understanding of the broad range of issues affecting young people in Albania, across specific policy domains (such as education and health), in relation to particular groups (such as minorities and those with disabilities), in the context of key cross-cutting issues (such as mobility or social inclusion), and on particular issues (such as the environment). This is no more than a cursory journey designed to inform the reader of the general “condition” of young people and youth policy in Albania today.

The key substantive chapters follow. Chapter 3 covers the three key issues that were suggested by the Albanian government as matters of particular concern: the legislative framework, delivery mechanisms and youth participation. Concerns are expressed about the proliferation of legislation yet apparently limited implementation. This was a recurrent criticism and merits serious attention. Delivery mechanisms have yet to be properly established and there is still too much reliance on the ad hoc initiatives of youth NGOs, committed individuals and the interest in youth issues amongst some municipalities. However, developments in youth participation are considered to be the jewel in the crown of Albanian youth policy: only a few years ago, an impressive range of “stepping stones” (children’s governments in schools, youth parliaments in local communities, and student councils) for the expression of young voices and platforms for youth activity were developed almost from scratch.

Chapter 4 discusses the three issues that emerged during the international youth policy review process as being of particular interest to the international review team: youth information, leisure time and youth justice. There is concern that numerous calls for improved information provision, both for youth practitioners and for young people, are insufficiently grounded in clear thinking about the role and purpose of such provision. So, although there is certainly a need for more structured channels of communication and information, sharper preliminary thinking is definitely required. The international review team was also concerned at the absence of what might be called “associational” space for young people. Spaces for young people to gather, converse and have fun, without necessarily having to be part of formal structures or involved in preparing for and executing projects, are important for youth development and for working out (and, where there is tension with other members of local



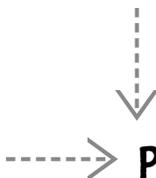
communities, working through) young people's social relationships – between themselves and with others – within their localities. In terms of youth justice, rather like the progress on youth participation outlined above, there have been dramatic developments in recent years, with the establishment of a dedicated youth correctional facility and the emergence of more community-based sentencing of young offenders.

The report concludes with a reflective discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary youth policy in Albania. The direction of travel is commendable and the National Youth Strategy says all the right things but, though it is a useful blueprint, the pace of development on different issues has been highly variable, with virtually nothing happening on some fronts and striking progress on others. There is a tentative glance towards the future because it is reassuring that many young Albanians are now reasonably positive about their future and the future of their country – though they would like more investment in their futures. Finally, there is an assertion that – within a country that only a few years ago could hardly have been thinking of “youth policy” at all during a climate of political and economic chaos and where many young people simply wanted to leave – “hope dies last”: the Albanian Youth Council has just been re-established after a hiatus of some four years and there is an inherent optimism that things will steadily get better for a population of young people in one of the youngest countries in Europe.

The recommendations of the review are gathered together at the end of the report.

That over 300 people, of whom well over half were young people, attended the national hearing to debate and comment on the findings of the international review for three hours and more reflects a deep national interest in the prospects for young people in Albania and suggests that there is the energy, understanding and commitment to take things further forward. The media also appears to be interested in youth policy issues and developments. The international review team hopes that stronger collaboration and communication between political structures, the public administration, youth NGOs and young people themselves will bring more concrete action into effect. There is no shortage of ideas and aspirations; the test now is to establish more robust structures and the capacity and competence to turn impressive rhetoric into actuality.





Preface

There seemed no escape from the country's escalating spiral of woes ... The young wanted to get out at any cost and did not mind where. (Vickers 2008, p. 233)

It is little more than 10 years since Albania faced economic and political meltdown following the pyramid selling scandal and a sequence of unstable governments. It is less than 20 years since Albania emerged from 50 years of isolation as a non-revisionist communist system led for most of that time by its brutal yet charismatic leader Enver Hoxha, "whose complex and contradictory personality had forged a unique and lonely path for Albania, and left its imprint on every aspect of Albanian life" (Vickers 2008, p. 209). Albania was the last of the European socialist countries to break with communism (De Waal 2007). Hoxha himself died only a quarter of a century ago – one generation. A decade ago, the solution, if that is the word, to the country's multiple problems seemed to lie in mass emigration, an entrenched poverty for most of those who remained, apart from the relative affluence of a small elite supported by nepotistic networks and fuelled by corruption. Some of this has not changed, but the progressive changes since that time are palpable, bringing a recent British newspaper article to conclude that Albania could, indeed perhaps should, be on the verge of becoming the 28th member of the European Union:

Albania? ... There's an energy and a sense of progress here that catches you by the throat. A small, impoverished country with an improbable Stalinist history is turning its 17 years of freedom into something remarkable ...

Talk to witnesses from round the Balkans and the EU is the first answer on their lips. Make us more secure. Give us a settled fabric for trade and aid. Help us to feel something more than an agglomeration of spare parts stuck on the end of a continent. And let us feel that if we make the progress you require, it will be rewarded ...

A union of 34 countries or more? It's coming, through a veil of sneers. And if you still need a battered vision to cherish, come to Tirana's Skanderbeg Square and find a little hope amongst the potholes. (*Guardian*, 23 November 2009)

European Union accession may still be some way off, but Albania's status as a newly acknowledged candidate country is indeed recognition of its modernisation



in recent years and growing adherence to the rule of law (though we might suggest almost too many laws), human rights (though there remain many questions) and an emergent and recognisable democracy (though it is fragile). These are the central tenets of the work of the Council of Europe, of which Albania has been a member since 1995, and which has been conducting reviews of national youth policies by international review teams since 1997. Albania is the 17th country to volunteer for such a reviewing process.¹

Following a meeting of participants in some of the recent reviews in The Hague in December 2008, to consider the future development of the review process, it was decided that the youth policy review of Albania should forge a “third” step in the approach. Initially, during the reviews that took place between 1997 and 2001, each review essentially followed its own path, preferences and priorities. A comparative synthesis of these first seven reviews (Williamson 2002) pointed to this diversity but suggested, from the grounded evidence available from the seven national reports as well as the seven international reports, that there was a framework that might be followed to guide the practice of future reviews. In short, this captured some six key “ingredients” of youth policy: concepts (of “youth” and “youth policy”), enabling structures (legislation and budget), delivery mechanisms (including the work of youth organisations), domains of youth policy (such as education and health), cross-cutting issues (such as social inclusion or mobility), and supporting structures (such as youth research and professional training). Following a second synthesis of the next seven international reviews (Williamson 2008), the detail of this framework was further elaborated, to include a range of themes and issues that had not been evident in the earlier reviews: such as the role of the church and military service in “youth policy”, and the negative mobility arising from the trafficking in women and the movement of illegal migrant labour (that usually included significant numbers of young people). However, to expect the next “wave” of international reviews to cover this agenda comprehensively was considered by The Hague meeting to be quite unrealistic; it would spread the focus too thinly. The important point was that the whole of this package was relevant to consideration of youth policy. For Albania, it was felt that the “test-bedding” of a new approach to priorities would be adopted, taking the priorities of the government as a starting point (which had been the practice since 2002 – see below) but permitting the international review team to identify its handful of key themes as well. This approach was duly followed.

Another point of departure from the custom and practice of the review process since its start was the acceptance of no preceding national report. It must be emphasised, however, that this was not a new precedent but simply a pragmatic concession to the very limited human resources of the Youth Department in

1. The other countries to have been subject to Council of Europe international reviews of national youth policy are: Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Romania, Estonia, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Norway, Malta, Slovakia, Cyprus, Armenia, Latvia, Hungary, and Moldova.



Albania, coupled with the fact that the review took place around a national election, when clearly other demands were placed upon the staff of the ministry. Moreover, a comprehensive National Youth Strategy for 2007-13 had been published at the end of 2006 (Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports 2006) and this was considered to be an adequate substitute – as an anchor point of information on Albanian youth policy for the international review team – for a national youth policy report.

Otherwise, the Albania review followed a now established path: a preliminary visit took place in January 2009, confirming governmental youth policy priorities to which the ministry wanted the international review team to give attention and outlining mutual expectations and responsibilities; a week-long first visit in September 2009, consisting mainly of securing an understanding of “top-down” perspectives from the government and national (and international) NGOs; a second visit in November 2009, also for a week, seeking to grasp more “bottom-up” perspectives through visits to projects and organisations both in Tirana and beyond; and scheduled national and international hearings in February and March 2010 respectively, following the production of a draft and then a final international report. It was in between the two visits by the international review team that the team identified its own three priority issues (youth information, leisure time and youth justice) to supplement and complement those already indicated by the Albanian government (legislation, delivery structures and youth participation). Following some general contextual discussion, both of Albania in general and the situation of its young people in particular, this report will focus on these in turn, starting with the government’s agenda and followed by those of particular interest to the international review team.

One of the unplanned but always hoped-for consequences of these youth policy reviews is the recognition and value conveyed by a team of international visitors, from six different countries, endorsed by the Council of Europe, to the hard work and often phenomenal commitment of enthusiastic people, usually volunteers, seeking to effect change and improve the lives of young people and their communities at the very local level. Such individuals and organisations are often working in quite adverse conditions, yet displaying great resourcefulness and resilience despite such circumstances. The international review team was especially conscious of this in Albania.

A more personal effect of being part of an international policy review team is that you become forever fascinated by the country in question; you can never again watch TV, surf the Net, or read a newspaper without being drawn to any coverage, on any matter at all, that relates to that country. The country, in some ways, becomes a surrogate home. So it was perhaps appropriate that the international review team was accommodated, on its second visit, in Hotel California, almost next to the ministry, evoking the lines from The Eagles’ song of the same name: “you can check out any time you want, but you can never leave”! Albania will be “with” each member of the international review team for the rest of our lives.



For some members of any international review team, it is their first visit to the country in focus. This produces a very demanding learning curve, particularly around gaining an understanding of culture, politics and history, and this was an especially acute challenge in the context of Albania. It was therefore extremely valuable for the team to have visited the youth NGO project MOKO (Museum of the Objects of Communism) to gain some sense of Albania’s relatively recent history. The notes of that visit capture our impressions but also convey something of the “education” we received that afternoon.

Visit to youth project MOKO (Museum of the Objects of Communism)

There is a fascinating commitment and aspirations to develop both exhibition and education on the “ordinary” lives of people under the old regime. Many artefacts are being collected. Kerosene cans for cooking in the bathroom. Radios that played illegal music quietly, positioned in the middle of the room so neighbours could not hear. There were few children’s toys, except dolls. There was a mythology of progress through “new inventions”, when in fact items were imported from abroad (Russia and then later China). People collected Coke cans at the tourist seaside, to use as salt dispensers and ornaments. The Best of Deep Purple on what would have been an illegal Sony HF60 cassette tape. Old bicycle pumps.

There is hope of saving some of slogans that have been layered on the walls throughout Tirana. The intention is to transform two flats into a museum of everyday life, educating children and perhaps attracting older people who lived through those times and triggering their memories, possibly producing the opportunity to record those memories as oral history.

The project is still very much in the development stage, but three very committed individuals are giving their time and resources to the project and hope it will start operating on a reasonably solid basis sometime in the spring of 2010. There does not appear to be a lot of interest or support from the Culture Ministry or the Municipality of Tirana, but it is certainly a very fascinating initiative from the perspective of the international review team.

The team was composed, as usual, of six people. Two were the nominees of the statutory bodies of the Youth Directorate of the Council of Europe (the CDEJ, the European Steering Committee for Youth Co-operation in Europe, representing governments; and the Advisory Council for Youth, representing youth organisations) and another represented the Secretariat. The remaining three members of a team are usually youth researchers but, on this occasion, it proved impossible to find such an individual from the Balkan region (“local” knowledge is deemed to be important) and so eventually a member of a political youth organisation who came from Croatia supplemented the other two youth researchers, one of whom co-ordinated the review and served as rapporteur.

The international review team would like to express and extend its thanks to all those it met during its two visits to Albania. During the preliminary visit – made by the co-ordinator and the Secretariat – we were impressed by the endeavours



to “make youth policy together” and indeed we coined the concept of “ensemble”, given that the Deputy Minister at the time was also the conductor of an orchestra. There are, of course, huge challenges to doing this in every country, but even its expression in Albania – as we note further in our conclusion – is an extremely positive sign both of progress and commitment.

We had a good programme (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2) that served the team well, kept to time and addressed the range of topics in which we were interested. There were some “blips” to the timetable and visits to projects where we had anticipated something different (such as the “community project” that turned out to be a “special school” – a provision for children and young people with special needs – on the last Friday of the second visit), but by and large we maximised our learning opportunities on matters of interest to ourselves and the government. As there is a public holiday at the end of November, there were some difficulties having contact with some groups we would have liked to have talked to (such as another community project to which we had been invited during the first visit and youth researchers – if they really exist in Albania). We also recognise that an international review can provide valuable public relations opportunities for politicians at all levels and, at times, we were not immune to that motive. It was also sometimes rather difficult to discern what was in the past, what currently prevailed and what was in visions and plans. Clearly there are still some powerful legacies of the past – traditions do die hard – that have not yet been completely eradicated or revised (and some, arguably, should not be), there are claims about contemporary provision that rarely seem to stretch beyond either the capital city or at least some of the larger towns and there are numerous commendable aspirations that are yet to see any concrete reality. But, like all international youth policy reviews, we have had to work with what we were told, in the context of wider reading done by members of the team and have had to make our judgments and draw our conclusions accordingly. We have to admit to some disappointment that invitations to follow up by e-mail with more detailed issues raised in face-to-face discussions were not taken up, even when individuals and organisations signalled their intention to write and indeed promised to do so; in our view, this was an opportunity missed for two reasons: first, the international review team has no intention of airing unsubstantiated assertions and allegations on behalf of any group and second, there was a commitment to incorporate any written submissions into the body of this report. If individuals and groups are so vocal and often one-dimensional in their verbal concerns, then some written support is essential to validate their case.

We were fortunate to be in Albania’s capital for the opening day of the Tirana International Film Festival. The Youth Department kindly invited the team to attend the showing of *Honeymoos*, the first film to be supported co-operatively by the Serbian and Albanian governments which, in recent years, were at odds



– almost as ever historically – over Kosovo,² a central sub-theme to the film. For the international review team, however, the film was symbolic in a different way. Though we watched it in the National Theatre, it was still a film and its focus was significantly about the question of access to the European Union. During the international review, the two recurrent themes raised by young people were the “visa problem” and the lack of access to cinemas – and so the film carried, for us, a particular and very contemporary relevance.

Though we have already thanked all of our respondents collectively, the international review team wishes to express its gratitude to both the Youth Department (more correctly, the Directory of Co-ordination of Youth Policies) within the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports, and the Council of Europe Information Office in Tirana. Both interpersonally and logistically, the hospitality extended by their staff and their commitment to the organisation of our visits made the review process both professional and rewarding.

Following the national hearing, which was held at the beginning of February 2010 with well over 300 participants (including a significant proportion of young people) in attendance, the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports re-affirmed to the international review team his deep commitment – as a parliamentarian and citizen, as well as a minister – to Albania’s youth policy agenda. He welcomed the critical observations (as well as the positive commendations!) made verbally during the presentation of the review to the national hearing. In order to strengthen the instruments to “move things forward”, he informed the international review team that he had elevated the former Youth Director to the position of Director-General for Youth and Sports (thus embedding the profile of “youth” more deeply within the ministry), appointed a Director for Youth Policy, and added two more specialists to the youth team within the ministry. He hoped this would speed up the establishment of a National Centre for Youth (referred to in this review as the National Youth Centre), bring about some significant “quick wins” in the implementation of youth policy, and improve co-ordination across ministries and between the government and the regions – in his view, the most central challenge for improving both the structures and the delivery of youth policy in Albania.

2. All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text, shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.





1. introduction – Albania and the National Youth Strategy

“A country full of surprises and of the unexpected”

One member of the international review team, also from a country with a state socialist past, expressed admiration of Albania for the way it had slowly been able to rid itself of “the communist heritage inflicted on the souls of the people”. There has been a continuing evolution of the legislative and civil society environment which, though far from ideal, is a far cry from the system that prevailed less than 20 years ago. During the period of the international review Albania became a candidate country for the European Union, the National Youth Council was in the process of being resurrected, and a National Youth Agency/Centre was being planned by the ministry. This reflects the character of a country constantly trying to deal with relationships between traditions and change. Two cameos highlighted this point: the frequent references to changing the mentality of Albanian youth (towards a more independent and “entrepreneurial” future), and the farmer in Bushat who talked about the contemporary importance of economic collectives in rural areas, a difficult concept given the specificities of Albania’s relatively recent past. There is a need both to move forward and to reclaim elements of the past. One problem is the kinds of role models that now prevail in Albanian society. We heard from an international NGO that, before the 1990s, teachers used to be thought of as “second mothers” who were highly respected: “after the changes, they became poor public employees and are despised”. There was now no possibility in Albania for moral authority to be divorced from economic power; the two allegedly went hand in hand! Celebrity culture had been imported from neighbouring countries. One respondent said that capitalism should be defined in terms of respect for the law and making money, but “the former is often lost” (see Chapter 3). A student with an Audi A4 has no respect for a professor with an old car: “the professor no longer has any moral authority”. An activist within a youth NGO observed that young people’s aspirations “are usually just related to jobs that pay very good money”. The moral compass in Albania is therefore still very narrowly conceived. Even in relation to the overarching goals of European integration – and in the context of



Albania's very youthful society – the Ministry of Integration was rather dismissive of a youth agenda: “Youth is not a priority in the *acquis communautaire*”. And so it was unimportant! The narrow mind-set sometimes attributed to young people is certainly not exclusive to them.

In the late 20th century there was a palpable failure amongst many foreigners to “distinguish between Albania's economic level – on a par with that of some third world countries – and the educational and cultural (music, art, literature, theatre) standard which was as good or better than that of a number of the first world countries” (De Waal 2007, p. 2). This is the paradox of Albania and one which, as a result, produces a country full of surprises.

The Republic of Albania is a parliamentary democracy established under a constitution that was renewed in 1998. Its geographical neighbours are Italy (a short distance across the sea), Montenegro, Kosovo, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Greece. It has a population of some 3.6 million people. Of these, some 600 000 live in the capital Tirana (though some sources put this figure at 800 000 and others at 350 000!). Albania became an independent country in 1912, following 500 years of Ottoman domination. For over 40 years Albania's territorial integrity was preserved by the communist regime, though at a terrible cost to the population, which was subjected to purges, shortages, repression of civil and political rights, a total ban on religious observance, and increasing isolation. The Euro-Atlantic integration of Albania – to improve economic conditions and bring about basic democratic reforms, including a multi-party system – has been the ultimate goal of the post-communist governments. As the economy develops migration has slowed, though the country remains relatively poor by European standards (per capita income was about US\$3 500 in 2008, an average salary around €300 a month, and almost 20% of the population live below the poverty line, according to the World Bank, while unemployment, almost certainly underestimated, is usually put at around 15%). As a result, many Albanians continue to migrate to Greece, Italy, Germany, other parts of Europe and to North America. Economic progress is hampered by a large informal economy (estimated by some to be as large as 50% of official GDP) and an inadequate energy and transportation infrastructure. The economy is, however, bolstered by annual remittances from abroad, estimated to be in the region of US\$600-800 million. Agriculture, which accounts for more than one fifth of GDP, is held back because of a lack of modern equipment, unclear property rights and the prevalence of small, inefficient plots of land. Energy shortages and antiquated and inadequate infrastructure contribute to Albania's poor business environment, which makes it difficult to attract and sustain foreign investment.

Following the end of communism, the democratically elected government, which won the elections in 1992, embarked on a radical and ambitious economic reform programme. This included a comprehensive package of structural reforms including privatisation, enterprise, financial sector reform and the creation of the legal framework for a market economy and private sector activity. Successive governments have had to try to deal with high unemployment, widespread corruption, a dilapidated physical infrastructure, powerful organised crime



networks and usually combative political opponents. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement of 2006 supported the pursuance of wider reforms, including the freedom of the press, property rights, institution building, respecting ethnic minorities and observing international standards in municipal elections. There have been recent improvements in the country's infrastructure and communications networks.

The average age of the Albanian population is around 32 years. Albania is a largely ethnically homogeneous country (some 95% are ethnic Albanians) with only small minorities, who include Greeks, Aromanians (Vlachs), Torbesh, Gorani, Macedonians, Roma, Montenegrins, Bulgarians, Balkan Egyptians and Jews.

An independent Albania has never had an official state religion; all regimes since 1912 have followed a systematic policy of separating religion from official functions and cultural life. During the communist period, the state policy was to obliterate all religion completely, through suppressing religious observance and institutions. Albania was declared to be the world's first atheist state. Religious freedom returned in 1992 and most Albanians are Muslim (approximately 70%), though there are some Orthodox Christians (approximately 20%) in the south-east of the country and Roman Catholics (approximately 10%) in the extreme north. Religious extremism and discrimination are very rare.

Albania is divided into 12 administrative divisions or regions/counties, officially known as qarkut, though these are often also known as prefektura. There are 36 districts and 351 municipalities. Each region has a regional council and is composed of a number of municipalities and "communes" (or komuna), which are the first level of local governance responsible for local needs and law enforcement.

Two of Albania's greatest achievements have been its provision of education and health services, where there is a literacy rate of around 90% (though this conceals significant gender differences) and a life expectancy approaching 80 years. Two of its major concerns are the trafficking in persons (for the purposes of prostitution, forced labour and begging), of whom about half the victims are under the age of 18, and Albania's place as a trans-shipment point for illegal drugs and the money laundering associated with these practices.³

The National Youth Strategy

The long transition in Albania altered with deep political and socio-economic crisis in the last 15 years brought dramatic changes: immediate opening of the country, clashing values and beliefs, deterioration of educational and social services, increasing unemployment and poverty; all these put the Albanian society and Albanian youth in particular to new and complex challenges. (Albanian Association of Psychologists 2008)

3. Sources: Albania – Wikipedia (2009); The World Factbook (2009); U.S. Department of State (2008); Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2009); BBC (2009); Facts about Albania (2009).



Albania has one of the highest birth rates and is the second youngest country in Europe (after Kosovo) and its youth population is close to 70% of the total but, despite this proportion and the predictable rhetoric of many of those we spoke to, young people were often considered to be “not a priority” amongst the country’s current challenges and issues. In some pivotal sectors of government, this position took us completely by surprise! But clearly, despite the truism, Albania’s future lies in the hands of its young people, and its National Youth Strategy (Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports 2006, p. 7) proclaims

the need to delineate a strategic platform for the sustainable development of youth that is consistent with the priorities of the new government and resonant with the socio-economic and cultural transformations that have taken place during the last few years. At the heart of this initiative lies the idea that younger generations in Albania represent key agents for positive change towards the consolidation of democratic governance and the process of European integration.

Specific aspects of the National Youth Strategy, those most pertinent to the issues under discussion, will be identified below. Suffice it to note here some of the overarching elements of the strategy. Its contents (with most sections divided into four: a situation analysis; vision, priorities and strategic goals; policies; and resources and indicators) cover the following areas:

- inter-sectorial co-ordination and collective involvement;
- representation and participation of young people;
- youth and economy;
- health and social protection;
- recreation and free time;
- Albanian youth: future European citizens;
- priority programmes for National Youth Strategy;
- National Youth Action Plan.

The key cross-cutting messages that thread through many of the areas outlined above and emerge from the strategy are as follows:

- collaboration and co-operation (between ministries and NGOs);
- participation, democracy and empowerment;
- information and research;
- exchange and internationalism;
- the sustainability and strength of NGOs;
- prevention, protection, promotion.

This is an impressive strategic framework for youth policy, but recurrent concerns were expressed about its realism and its prospects for serious follow-up and



implementation. Indeed, some respondents were eager to inform the international review team that, although in the recent elections (in the summer of 2009) youth issues were reasonably prominent – particularly education and employment – there was hardly a mention of the National Youth Strategy. Like too many government strategies, there were serious doubts expressed by many respondents that the strategy would forge a path towards practical action and implementation.⁴

According to the Youth Department, responsibility for the implementation of programmes linked to the National Youth Strategy is distributed across different ministries, with an employment project being led by the Ministry of Labour and various school-based initiatives being co-ordinated by the Ministry of Education. It is, however, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports that carries the responsibility for revising and developing the biennial updating of the National Action Plan – the operational dimension of the strategy – and, to that end, it requires other collaborating ministries to provide reports on operational progress. There was at least strong rhetorical belief in the effectiveness of this cross-governmental collaboration (“if it is written in Albania, it will have to work”, said one official with a surprising level of conviction), even if there was more reticence about the capacity of NGOs to contribute reliably to the active development and progress of the strategy, largely because of their funding uncertainties (see below).⁵

Despite the many challenges and obstacles that lie in the way of making the commendable aspirations of the National Youth Strategy some kind of reality for the majority of young people in Albania, the international review team was struck almost immediately by the liberal mind-set that seems to prevail, almost irrespective of some of the more entrenched political positions. This open-mindedness on social questions was confirmed by subsequent experience. Unlike other countries, Albania does not face the barriers that are so often erected by the church on

4. The ministry wished to record that immediately after the elaboration of the National Youth Strategy a donors’ conference had been organised to explore how the strategy could be supported. Reference was made to stronger guidelines for providing financial support to youth NGOs. The ministry also drew attention to the “many studies” that have been undertaken to support the objectives and implementation of the National Youth Strategy. Examples provided were studies of health behaviour among school children, risk behaviour among 18-year-olds, and substance abuse. The international review team had not been notified of these studies during the review process.

5. The ministry wanted to stress that in order to strengthen support for youth NGOs, the Albanian government had established the Agency for Civil Society to enable NGOs to be more active and to have fewer funding uncertainties. At the time of writing (February 2010) the international review team was informed that the agency was in the process of recruiting staff and its board was already in place. With regard to cross-government co-operation, the ministry also wished to emphasise that significant progress had been made in the past year (2009), especially after new structures had been established. In order to meet the obligations foreseen within a range of strategies, inter-ministerial groups had been created and there had been an increase in human resources “for the well-functioning of cross-governmental co-operation”.



matters such as sexual health education. There is a willingness to think flexibly and responsively to “old” issues such as the blood-feuds in the north and to “new” issues such as intravenous drug use. It may be no surprise that faith groups in Albania wield relatively limited influence since, under Hoxha, it was a coerced atheist state and 60% of the population remain self-declared atheists. But there is also an apparent lack of moral or religious opposition from parents or other institutions to issues such as addressing sexual reproductive health in schools, which elsewhere have been a matter of significant controversy.

This commendation of the scope for ‘sensible thinking’ is, of course, subject to numerous caveats. Resources remain very thin and the political wind shifts frequently, changing priorities and the allocation of resources that are available. Perhaps of greater importance for youth policy, the centre-periphery or urban-rural divide is massive. Tirana is Tirana, and elsewhere is elsewhere. It is a world-over truth that rural areas are always more conservative, but the division in Albania is striking. Even in the Durrës region, adjacent to Tirana, the Youth Parliament spoke of the difficulties of engaging with parents from outside the conurbation of Durrës itself. Rolling out youth policy beyond the capital city and winning the hearts and minds of those with more traditional perspectives will remain a huge challenge for the foreseeable future.

