



Comparative Analyses on Youth Care in Hungary and Serbia

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Introduction

Last two decades there has been an increase in research area about youth leaving care. Until last decade of XX Century there has only been research on small scale samples describing needs and life of youth leaving care. After 1990 research which used different research technique and design start to appear in analyzes of the process of youth leaving care. This article provides a comparative overview of policies and practices regarding the transition from youth to independence and perceived differences in defining concepts, laws and outcomes of alternative care in Serbia and Hungary. In general, studies have shown that young people leaving alternative care face the risk of social exclusion and marginalization and a lack of political action directed at them as vulnerable group. Youth on care belong to unprivileged group because there is a high probability that they will become beneficiaries of the social protection system, become socially excluded but also dependent on social welfare services as adults.

Although in European countries there is a similarity in terms of care for young people who leave care, the differences in terms of economic, social, cultural and political context probably influence the different approaches regarding the measures taken to ensure the well-being of young people.

The strengthen of comparing different context lies in a better understanding of alternative frameworks and different perspective on solutions for a successful transition to independence of young people in alternative care.

An important role in the comparative analysis has determined conceptual apparatus. Key terms to be defined are: youth in alternative care, young people leaving alternative care and youth in need of protection. In addition, essential to analyze are the laws that define this group of young people, support availability to young people in the transition to independence, as well as research findings about children and young people who are in alternative care or leaving alternative care.

Comparative analysis aims to analyze challenges and outcomes for young people leaving alternative care, as well as to explore the social, political and legal structures that encourage or prevent the transition.



Legal framework of Youth in Care

In Hungary The Act 31 of 1997 on the protection of children and guardianship defines conditions and methods, age limits, possible locations, professional rules and the required professional field of activity in care provision and care service for young adults with public care background, as well as after care provision. In Serbia there is no Law about child protection, all child rights are determined in Social Welfare Act, Family Act and strategy for youth, as well as national strategy for youth.

Since the Act was passed in Hungary, the operation of child protection was county-level duties, but 2012 and 2013 brought significant changes since the centralization has started, in which certain tasks including the whole system of child protection were placed at state level. The state became the maintainer, financier and operator of child protection institutes. The involvement of church has been strengthened in recent years; however, there are still a few civil organizations in long-term care.

Young people who do not live with their parents due to various circumstances and are placed in foster, kinship or residential care in Serbia, are called youth in alternative care. Referring to the Guidelines for the alternative care of children (UN, 2010), as an international instrument which is closer to the interpretation of the provisions of the Convention on alternative care and “preferred orientation for policy and practice”, it comes to significant reforms in the field of social welfare in Serbia and the region. The processes of deinstitutionalization of children and youth without parental care are carried out since 2002 in the Republic of Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina and intensified since 2006 (Žegarac, 2014). It created a number of new mechanisms, standards and instruments to bring the significant changes in the practice of protection of children, paying special attention to children in alternative care.

There is ambiguity and disagreement over the use of the term youth to alternative care in Serbia. As previously mentioned, despite introduced the system of child care, until recently used the term “children in the system of social protection.” This term included the young people who live in extra familial environment, as well as young people who use social services due to behavioral problems or mental health, or due to poverty, where their parent families occurs as a recipient of financial assistance. Particular confusion in comparative research creates the term social protection because although all mentioned groups of young people are being encompassed in Serbia, the global context usually refers to young people who use specialized social services. The third obstacle is the semantic nature. Although trends in helping Professions in the world promote proactive work with young people on their strengths, advantages and potentials, the term “protection” implies their inactivity and narrows the contexts of action that is not related to prevention, development and improvement of functioning, living conditions and position in society.

Family Law of the Republic of Serbia provides a much wider definition of a child without parental care compared to other countries, and is particularly confusing in this part of the guidelines given in the law that are governing foster care (PZ 2005 ar.113). This definition is much broader than the definition of the United Nations which defines children without parental care, and includes children without parental care directly (eg. A child whose parents have not yet



acquired the capacity to take care of their children and the child about whom the parents care is being assessed as inadequate).

Types of youth Care in Hungary and Serbia

The care for child removed from her/his family in Hungary can be done in the following forms: 1) children's home, 2) foster care. There are 5 types of children's home: *Traditional institutions* provide care for quite a big number of children in smaller living quarters for 12-48 children. *Apartment-homes* provide care for a maximum of 12 children in an apartment or family house. *Special children's homes* provide place for those children with special needs who have psychological problems, drug problems or suffer from behavioral or learning difficulties. In such homes, there are maximum 40 places. There are also a few separate *homes for disabled children*, for children who are disabled or have special needs because of their age (under 3 years) with maximum 40 places. The *after-care homes* provide care for those young adults who are entitled to leave care (age 18) but cannot lead an independent life.

The system of foster care went through significant changes in 2014, so the separation of traditional and professional categories was eliminated; currently, being a foster parent means employment and it is clearly the preferred form of care in the case of children under 12. There are some exemptions: if the child is severely disabled, it is impossible to place siblings together, institutional placement is needed due to other reasons or when the parent requires institutional care. The placements are done gradually. In 2014, a new legal institution was established, the child protection guardianship that aims the representation of the children's interest regardless of the place of care, promotion of the exercise of their rights, learning their views and informing place of care and relevant authority about children's view. It is an important requirement to provide stability even if the place of care is changed; basically child protection guardian is responsible for life path. 30 children can belong to a professional. The professional work based on personalized case work.

The legislative framework on alternative care in Serbia and the region in particular has developed in the last fifteen years. The forms of alternative care (residential, foster and kinship) and other solutions are provided for children who for various reasons either temporarily or over a longer period of time, cannot live with their parents and for children without parents. The goal of care is to ensure continuity and stability in a safe and stimulating environment and permanency for the child. Adoption of the Guidelines on alternative care (UN, 2010) in Serbia and the region has contributed that special attentions provided to the concept of alternative care.

One of the objectives of the Guidelines is to provide de-institutionalization as much as possible. The first social welfare reforms that are aimed at the development of community services and the involvement of non-governmental sector in the provision of services in Serbia started in 2000. A comprehensive plan for the transformation of residential social care institutions for children 2009–2013 (the so-called. Master Plan) has been developed by the Ministry of Labor



and Social Policy with the support of UNICEF to achieve strategic objectives, which are then incorporated in the Law on Social Protection (Žegarac, 2014).

In addition to establishing policies and procedures for recruitment, evaluation, training, support, monitoring and funding of kinship and foster families. *Measures to avoid irregularities* were developed in 2006 in order to provide shorter placement for children and youth in residential care (Official Gazette 560-03-619 / 2006-14). The document obliges each CSW to obtain prior opinion of the Ministry for every placement of the child under the age of 18 years, as well as to periodically examine the need for further living in institutions. The measures define deadlines, and the review should be reported to the Ministry and the Institute for Social Protection (MLSP, 2006). Avoidance of irregularities was significant for the process of deinstitutionalization in Serbia.

Statistical data on Children and Youth in Care in Serbia and Hungary

In Hungary, the number of vulnerable children is approximately 200 000 per year, this is the 10% of children. Less than 1% of the children live in long-term care (Papházi, 2014). According to the data of KSH (Hungarian Central Statistical Office), 18674 children and young adults were raised in child protection long-term care in 2013, 63.8% of them (11918 people) was placed in foster care. The number of young adults receiving after-care provision is 2954 (KSH, 2014).

In relation to the changes in the number of care recipients, the number of children decreased and the number of young adults increased between 2000 and 2008. From 2011, the number of children began to increase and exceeded 18 000 while as for the number of young adults, a reduction of 700 can be observed from 2010. Regarding the changed role of the two greatest category, it can be told that the institutional care dominated between 1997 and 2001, between 2001 and 2003 the same proportion of children were placed in institutional care and in foster care (50%-50%); in 2004, the shift towards foster care has begun, but significant change could be seen only in 2010. In 2013, 5753 foster parents worked in Hungary (the professional staff was 5% before the unification of foster parenting). Nearly 45% of the foster parents raise two or three children; the proportion of those who raise one child is 21.2% while 22% of the foster parents raise four or more children. Free capacity is indicated by the fact that 12.2% of the foster parents did not take care of any child in 2013 (KSH, 2014).

As for the young adults in Hungary, 55% of them stay at foster parents after coming to the age, 18% of them receive care in traditional children's home. Unfortunately, the number of places that were established especially for young adults coming to the age is very small (after-care home, after-care apartment home, outer place (mostly lodgings)) and 72% of the capacity is filled up. Three-quarter of the young people get after care provision because of their studies (KSH, 2014).

There is no statistical data of youth who are preparing for leaving care in Serbia, which may imply the way of (expectance) planning the service for care leavers.

There were significant improvements in terms of de-institutionalization in Serbia. In the period from 2000 (when first reform projects started) by 2011, the total number of children and



youth in social care institutions decreased by 48% from 3554 to 1854), and the total number of children and youth with disabilities is reduced 36% ARCHIVE (from 2.020 to 1280) (MLSP and UNICEF to Žegarac, 2014). However, when it comes to individual plans for children, research (Žegarac et al., 2014) showed that a large number of plans were out of time frame, the individual plans were based on the “one size fit all” so the user needs and the level of their involvement in planning was invisible and insignificant. After an evaluation or re-assessment the way of organizing further work with users, still remained vague. The evaluation of their situation didn’t contribute to precise the further social work.

According to the Regulations, the initial work plan should be done in 15 days after the first meeting with the child and family, and it previously defines directions provides an initial package of measures and services. (Official Gazette of RS, Nos. 59/08, 37/10, 39/11 and 1/12, Article 69). Next, not later than 60 days after the first contact, the permanency plan of services and measures for a family and the child should be delivered (Family Service Plan), whenever there is a need for further provision of services and measures. There are situations in which the child is separated from parental care and sent to alternative care. The plan should seek to ensure continuity for the child, and define actions to help the child to return to the family or to take reasonable efforts in terms of engaging resources in family and the community in order to prevent separation of the child from family. Permanency plan for the child is part of the Family Service Plan (Official Gazette No. 59/08, 37/10, 39/11 and 1/12, Article 71) and means to determine the goals of permanence and procedures necessary to achieve these goals. Plan permanence determines the date (month and year) when you will reach one of the following objectives of permanence, in accordance with the best interests of the child:

- Keep children with parents (one or both); return of the child to the family of the parents; Placement of a child in a relative, foster or guardian (which means that a relative or foster parent undertake a guardian’s duty and lifelong commitment to the child, and not simply an accommodation in these environments); adoption of a child; another permanent living arrangement young people through independence.
- The Plan defines terms for leaving care and emancipation (Official Gazette of RS, no. 59/08, 37/10, 39/11 and 1/12, Article 75) which determines the necessary support for emancipation. This plan needs to be delivered not later than the age of 14 years for all young people who are alternative care whether at relatives or in foster and residential accommodation.

According to the latest research in Serbia (Žegarac et al, 2014) the largest number of children who entered care in the period from 2006 to 2011 has been referred on placement in foster families, (88.7%), the other children sent to residential care (residential accommodation). The share of children in kinship foster care is extremely low – at the base of Ministry-there is evidence that only 12.3% of children are in a kinship care, considerably less than in many other countries. Thus, the expansion of family based care primarily relates to professional (non-kinship) foster care, where 76.4% of children directed to (Žegarac et al, 2014).

When looking at the data in terms of the age of the child, the highest ratio is for the 0 to 2 age-group representing one quarter of total number of children removed from their families.



Children that are 15 or over are least likely to be placed into care. The number of children in public care has continually increased. The trend can be the consequence of increased sensitization for abuse and neglect, but can also point to a lack of other family-preservation and family-support services. The high ratio of infants – this is largely in line with figures from other countries – can be explained by the fact that abandonment and relinquishment are more likely to take place soon after birth, before a child-parent bonding process has taken place.

The experiences of young people who leave care are not independent from other policy segments such as social security, education, home, health, juvenile justice system, and because of that fact, they significantly vary from country to country. This leads us to the conclusion that comparative studies on the outcomes of alternative care should take into consideration the impacts of wider political shifts, and not just to focus on the child protection system.

Available supports for youth leaving care

Although most of the countries are showing concern for young people leaving alternative care, there are large disparities in the quantity and quality of data related to the subject. In most countries, including Serbia, systematic collection of specific quantitative data is not available.

In Hungary, after-care and after-care service are forms of provision based on voluntary choice and the cooperation between the young adult and the service provider set in contractual form; however the receiving and termination are bound to a resolution by the guardianship. There are two types of support. 1) After reaching the age of majority the young person has the opportunity to stay in *after care provision*. Those engaged in studies may avail of this provision up to the age of 24, with the exception of those studying full time in higher education, for whom the upper age limit is 25 years. (The provisions effective as of 1 January 2010 have significantly transformed the after-care provision system. Those unable to care themselves (either working or unemployed) may stay in the system up to 21 years of age; earlier it was possible to receive benefits until the age of 24.) After-care provision may mean even full provision, including the costs of accommodation and food. However, the after-care can assist in the preparation for an independent life, with the help of professionals. 2) *After care service* covers life management advice and help to integrate into the society, young adults can get it up to 30 years of age, if they manage an independent life.

In Hungary, 27% of young people in after-care provision spent 1-5 years in care and 25% of them spent 10-17 years in care. 60% of young people who are placed in foster care spent more than 10 years in care; from the other side, foster parents receive children for long-term care. 27% of young people who were in institutional care spent more than 10 years in care (KSH, 2014).

Data on the number of young people who have grown out of the system of alternative care in Serbia are not available. There are no ways of recording, and it doesn't exist a continuous monitoring of these young people. The only data that has been collected is about the number of youth in care in two age groups: 15-17 years, (26,7%) and 18 to 25 years (9,8%) in 2013. If we compare it within last five years we can see that catego-



ry of youth (15–17) has been increased 2008. – 7.123, in 2009. – 7.315, in 2010. – 8.432, 2011. – 9.318 and 2012. – 9.038 youth Category of youth (15–17) has been on second place on representation (26,7%), and youth from this group are mainly placed on foster care. Youth Support Service during the preparation process and after its independence are based on local services that are unevenly available to young people from different territory. Services of financial support and career planning are between institutions such as Centers for social welfares, centers for adoption and family placement and centers for residential placement of children and youth fund its cooperation with NGOs and Foundations providing support.

On the territory of Serbia following services are recorded: supportive (“halfway house”), youth centers (or clubs), youth counseling, permanent financial support after leaving care, services advisor for independence. These services are not developed in all municipalities, and young people in alternative care can receive different support for independence or no support at all, depending on the place of residence. The lack of an organized system of care for young people means that the equal access to services for all clients can’t be ensured.

According to research results in Hungary, supporting young adults who became major is problematic at child protection level since after-care provision does not prepare young adults for independent life; school attainment, family relationships and social skills of these young adults are very poor. We have few data about educational participation. In 2011 56.3% of the individuals leaving the system had secondary level of education, 40% of them had primary level of education, and only 3.2% of them acquired a degree. A total of 30.1% of the ones who had left has a job (KSH, 2012: 12). The labour market value of the acquired professionals and the nature of their work are unknown. Due to their low educational level, employment and housing are very difficult to solve. Estimated data suggest that 40% of young people who received after-care provision become criminal, unemployed, homeless, prostitute or their children will grow up in child protection system as well. Rácz’s research (2012) calls the attention to that the young adults have very critical view about the support-system and the professionals’ attitude: the success of provision is highly dependent on the attitude of the supporting professional, that is, the system is incapable of providing help on system level. As the international YIPPEE research confirms the view of young adults’, in after care, mainly personal ambition, perseverance and willingness are needed for gaining proper school attainment, which is essential for successful social integration. It is a problem that there is not such a strategic plan in the institutions of child protection’s long-term care to motivate young adults to do their studies (Rácz – Korintus, 2013).

Housing support services

The program “Housing support” is for young people who are in the process of transition to independence, and is being implemented in 11 cities in Serbia, with the support of the Center for Social Welfare. Condition to receive this that youth are determined in their pathway plan and leaving Care plan that this is best solution, that they cannot join their biological family or



otherwise find placement; that they have finished schooling and took measures for vocational training. Service user have used a financial support as well and counseling support.

The objective of this program is that young people leaving alternative care who have not the ability to return to their biological families or otherwise solve their housing problem, have the possibility to prepare for independent life outside the home. This kind of help is very important because it provides support to young people during the transition period, where they are able to acquire the necessary skills of taking care of themselves as they still have support of the social protection system. Young people are provided with an apartment, if they are unemployed and tangible benefits, and they should participate in paying the bills with minimal noise and make them self-look after the household and providing food for them self. During this period available to them an Adviser (case manager) who is there to support them and to direct when necessary. The role of these experts is to give them help with housekeeping, seeking employment, further education. The modalities of this program are different depending on which municipality or city are realized. Units of local self-government entrusted with the implementation of this program and therefore regulate the conditions under which this right can be exercised. However, what is common to all municipalities is that the program is implemented under the auspices of the Center for Social Welfare and institutions for children without parental care. One of the conditions that users must meet is the fact that they came out of school and that they took measures for vocational training. Time to use the flats is also different. The shortest period is one year of use.

So far 33 youth used this service, and their experience indicate that there is a small number of youth who was not participated in preparation for transition (n=3) and a number that is not satisfied with this service (n=5). Positive experiences are located in following domains: service allows young people to complete independence process after 2 years when they become more experienced; youth acquire more practical skills, have a job and experience in the working environment, changes in the sense that they have learned to do what they have failed during placement (example food, shopping, washing clothes, cooking, paying bills). Youth said that they are least satisfied or not satisfied at all with the support of peers, psychological support and skills for independent living (CSW, 2013).

In 2012, in Hungary, 698 young adults got after-care service because of housing support; the support was an average of 1.1 million HUF (circa 3580 Euro) (Papházi, 2014: 214). In 2011, every fifth young adult had left for their own apartment, one quarter of them had returned to their birth family, 12% went to acquaintances and 6% had gone to residential social institutions, 25% of them went to other places and 6 of them had ended up in homeless shelters (KSH, 2012: 11–12).

Conclusion

Very few studies in Serbia and in Hungary included this population in terms of their needs and challenges faced by young people become independent. The challenges have been identified in areas such as the continuation of education, employment and housing solutions. The differen-



ces between the needs and challenges of young people in relation to the type of their earlier placement (foster care, kinship or residential) have not been analyzed.

The young people leaving alternative care are sensitive in all areas of their lives: education, professional training, life skills, social networks, connections and relationships and identity. This sensitivity is the consequence of a certain trauma that they have experienced f.e. violence, the impact of social protection system on their lives; but also reflects the impact of the context of the transition from youth to adulthood such as family life, education, training, employment, tangible benefits and housekeeping.

The challenge lies in reducing the proportion of young people leaving alternative care with the experience of social exclusion as a consequence of independence. Innovative policy could prevent the stigmatization of young people leaving alternative care because of their dependence on the state. This raises the whole set of issues related to providing help and support to young people leaving alternative care: for example whether the required support to all young people leaving education in the social care system? Is it necessary and justified to provide the same support for young people who enter the system of alternative care immediately prior to completion of their education? What kind of support is appropriate for young people who enter the system just before the coming of age? What kind of support is needed for young people leaving alternative care in various forms of accommodation? How to determine what kind of support should be provided by the state, and when it youth could do families or relatives? The findings indicate that young people after leaving alternative care go to live with their parents to make a short (Skuse and Ward, 2003), which raises the question of how to provide them support in the transition to independence? The manner in which the answer to these questions depends on how it understands the balance between the state, the family and the individual.

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