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THE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH: CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT METHODS THROUGH NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Report on the results of a sociological research

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Through the implementation of “We Care - Mental Health in European Youth Work”, the project team aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To increase the capacity of the involved organizations to provide inclusive and innovative activities for young people from diverse backgrounds. This includes raising awareness about mental health and integrating this topic in youth activities across Europe.
2. To increase the awareness of youth work professionals regarding signs of mental health challenges, by providing coping tools and methods, and working to destigmatize the topic.
3. To build a network for exchanging best practices.
4. To develop a manual that promotes the importance of mental health and offers guidelines for working with affected youth at the local level, and a checklist of tools for implementing high-quality youth work activities related to mental health.
5. To promote and scale the outcomes at both national and European levels.

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Resume

In recent years, Europe and its youth have encountered many unforeseen challenges - the pandemic and then a war on European soil. Young people are highly affected by the causes of uncertainties, lockdowns, and social distancing. This has severe impacts on the lives and development of young people. Several studies have since proven that there is a higher risk of mental health issues (e.g. German youth institute, „Aufwachsen in Deutschland: Alltagswelten“, kurz AID:A 2021). Despite the pressing need to continuously consider mental health in youth work, it is often treated without high priority and still stigmatized. According to the 3rd European Youth Work Convention (Bonn Process), the youth agenda is (still) focused largely on education and employment, and tends to ignore or downplay questions of mental health and wellbeing, however, future initiatives need to include this with a priority higher or on an equal level as the others. Thus, **European youth work must react and redesign activities, structure, and methods accordingly.** Having in mind the goal of delivering quality services, youth workers need to be educated and trained about **how to deal with mental health and get a deeper understanding of mental challenges, their importance and the consequences of being able to provide help to young people, in particular through non-formal educational projects.**

Thus, **the aim of the research** is to identify the challenges to the youth's mental health and potential methods for its support through non-formal education programs. The background of the respondents varies, in particular, in their national origin, which implies a different context of the respondents' stay and can become key to the formation of certain challenges and corresponding needs among young people. Other socio-demographic characteristics are also different, in particular the age and gender distributions. **Our tasks, which we set before ourselves in the process of implementing the research,** were:

- Investigate self-assessment by youth of their mental health.

- Investigate self-assessment by youth of their social relations quality with others.
- Identify problems faced by young people that harm their psychological state.
- Identify causes of the mental health problems among youth.
- Investigate youth experience in non-formal education programs participation.
- Identify current practices of young people to support their mental health.
- Define desirable methods for youth mental health support that can be implemented in non-formal youth education programs.

Research methodology

Given the priorities and goals of the research, **both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were used**. A quantitative survey was conducted to identify key trends and important information on the sensitive topic of mental health. Subsequently, a qualitative study was conducted using the method of focus group discussions for an in-depth study of isolated trends and obtaining new unique results through joint discussion and argumentation. **The interpretation of the research results** was carried out using the condensation and interpretation of meanings based on the conducted focus group discussions and quantitative analysis of the survey results with the output of one-dimensional and two-dimensional tables.

A general questionnaire was developed for the respondents, which was modified depending on the respondent's country of origin, which was important for research and analysis of the obtained results. The target research countries were Germany, France, Spain, Romania, Ukraine, and Lithuania. **Nevertheless, our survey should not be perceived as representative of all young people in each of the target countries.**

CHAPTER 1. MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AND NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Mental health in the lives of young people

To comprehensively understand the topic of mental health, young people were asked about what role mental health plays in the lives of young people, what they associate mental health with, how they understand and define mental health, and what they feel when talking about mental health.

Mental health can be understood by young people in terms of three key milestones. First of all, young people from all the target countries (Germany, France, Spain, Romania, Ukraine, Lithuania) point out that **mental health can be defined in terms of feeling good individually and personal development.** It concerns the basic life elements - the ability to have enough sleep, not to be stressed, not having pressure from different areas in life, the ability and desire to eat healthy and take care of your body, and not be addicted to harmful habits like addiction to alcohol or cigarettes, and having hobbies that make oneself happy. It is the ability to be stable, not desperate in complicated situations in life and desire to work on personal developments. Youngsters of all countries emphasize that mental health is not always about feeling good individually - **it is also important in terms of feeling good in relationships with others.** This is the ability to feel heard, be understood by others and maintain a qualitative connection with one's surroundings. It is important that all young people already have to question their mental health at different points of their lives - in childhood or adolescence. Young people already face and continue facing the problems of maintaining social contact in contrast to online presence, uncertainty about their future and high expectations from others, and difficulties with schools, studies and work. The significant role in affecting young people's mental health is played by **external events, occurring in the world which are out of the control of young people** - climate changes,

extremist political movements, experiencing war and refugee status. All of the above-mentioned phenomena formed certain associations of mental health in young people's minds. On the one hand, mental health is associated with **fluctuation**. Mental health can be described as something that is not fixed and changes all the time. That results in young people's constant search and exploring, trying to find the balance in life and figure out how to sort things out while becoming an adult.

"Mental health reminds me of the cave and the miner. It's something you have to explore, not all pretty and rosy, see what's right and what's wrong to sort things out."

On the other hand, for many young people who are currently experiencing hard times, mental health is frequently associated with **negative feelings and phenomena**, like stress, and loss disturbance, while talking about mental health elicits tears and sadness.

It is important that many young people indicate the **interconnectivity of mental and physical health**. Youngsters perceive feeling good both mentally and physically as a joint element, not neglecting mental health and taking care of it the same way as physical health.

"It's like when you take care of your body, you have to do the same with your mind. We want to live as well as possible." "It's important, it's linked to the body. It's reflected in the body."

Finally, it is crucial that young people from all target countries (Germany, France, Spain, Romania, Ukraine, Lithuania) that seem to be geographically scattered, indicate the **significant importance of mental health topics** and most importantly claim that there is **no sufficient coverage on the topic of mental health in their countries**. Young people are very much interested in elaborating on the topic of mental health and are convinced **there is a more and more emerging need for raising the mental health topic and discussing the challenges connected to it**. This problem can be explained by the **enrooted**

and prolonged stigmatizing of the phenomenon of mental health - many societies impose a negative meaning on mental health and make it not an approved topic to discuss openly in society.

Self-assessment of psychological well-being

Regarding the topic of how young people in different countries assess their mental health state, the findings indicate that there is not a big fraction of young people who **assess their current mental health state as positive**. The percentages of young people who assess their mental health as positive are the following:

- Germany (**61,7%**)
- Ukraine (**49,6%**)
- Romania (**46,3%**)
- Lithuania (**46,3%**)
- France (**40,6%**)
- Spain (**37,5%**)

The only country where the slight majority of young people view their mental health as positive, in comparison to other target countries is Germany - **61,7%** of youngsters assess their mental health as positive there.

Among methods on **how young people assess their mental health**, one of the most frequent are online tests - Berns' Test, Anxiety-Stress-Depression Test, tests on depression, level of optimism and emotional empathy. Many young people have therapies with psychologists and psychiatrists with diagnoses such as anxiety or depression, personality disorder, post-war psychological trauma, and neurotic tendencies. It is also frequent for young people to check the information about mental health while reading articles on the Internet or on social media, as well as talking about mental health challenges with friends.

Stress was found to be the most frequent phenomenon among young people of all countries - Germany, France, Spain, Romania, Ukraine, and Lithuania. The percentages of people of different countries who felt stressed recently are the following:

- Germany (**88,2%**)
- France (**78,9%**)
- Lithuania (**76,1%**)
- Romania (**76,1%**)
- Ukraine (**65,9%**)
- Spain (**62,2%**)

Among **other mental states young people from different countries experienced recently**, **56,5%** of Ukrainian youth felt restlessness-anxiety, while **50,4%** experienced psychological pressure. For Germany **55,9%** experiences psychological tension and **52,9%** fear. For Romania, these are the feelings of anxiety and frustration. For French youth, it is anxiety (**55%**), while in third place comes frustration (**46%**). Finally, Spanish youth also experience confusion (**37,5%**) and frustration (**37,5%**).

Regarding **the ability to enjoy life**, young people in most countries are capable of doing that at the moment. The percentages of young people in different countries who are capable or more or less capable of enjoying life now are the following:

- Spain (**75%**)
- Germany (**74,3**)
- Ukraine (**74,3%**)
- Lithuania (**71,6%**)
- Romania (**71,6%**)
- France (**50%**)

Concerning the topic of **having a purpose in life**. the majority of young people in each of the countries have current goals in their lives:

- Spain (**83%**)

- Ukraine (**79,8%**)
- Germany (**77,1%**)
- Romania (**70,4%**)
- Lithuania (**70,4%**)
- France (**62%**)

Most young people from target countries are **optimistic about their future**. The smallest percentages in regard to this question were found among Ukrainian and French youth. The findings of how many young people are optimistic about their future are the following:

- Spain (**80%**)
- Germany (**77,1%**)
- Romania (**71,6%**)
- Lithuania (**70%**)
- Ukraine (**58,9%**)
- France (**43%**)

The majority of young people in all target countries are **satisfied with themselves as personalities**. The only exception is French youth, where only half of young people are currently satisfied with themselves. The percentages of young people who are satisfied with themselves as personalities now are the following:

- Ukraine (**72,1%**)
- Germany (**71,5%**)
- Spain (**60%**)
- Romania (**60%**)
- Lithuania (**60%**)
- France (**48,6%**)

Most of the young people in target countries are **confident about their thoughts and beliefs**. The percentages of young people who are confident in regard to this are the following:

- Ukraine (**86,1%**)

- Spain (67,5%)
- Romania (67,1%)
- Lithuania (67,1%)
- France (64%)
- Germany (60%)

Young people in most countries are **satisfied with what they have already achieved in their lives**. However, the exceptions are Romania and Lithuania youth among whom only half of young people (48,8% and 33,8% accordingly) are satisfied in regard to this. The percentages of young people who are satisfied with their achievements now are the following:

- Spain (77,5%)
- Germany (77,1%)
- France (72%)
- Ukraine (70,6%)
- Romania (48,8%)
- Lithuania (33,8%)

It is important that while the majority of young people in all target countries show positive tendencies in the above-mentioned dimensions, there is still a significantly big fraction of young people who are not satisfied with themselves, with what they achieved, are not confident in their beliefs and thoughts, do not have goals in life, etc. These results must be taken into consideration.

Regarding the **changes in young people's well-being**, a big fraction of youngsters in target countries experience this phenomenon. It is interesting that the **biggest percentage of experience of well-being changes are observed among Ukrainian and French youth (57,5% and 64,5% accordingly) - those groups of youngsters who are the least optimistic about their future among all of the target countries**. The percentage of young people who recently experienced changes in their well-being are the following:

- France (64,5%)

- Ukraine (57,4%)
- Germany (54,3%)
- Romania (51,3%)
- Lithuania (51,3%)
- Spain (46,2%)

Finally, a large fraction of young people also experienced **changes in their way of thinking** recently. The results vary from 77,5% among Spanish young people to 37,2% among German youth. The percentages of youngsters who experienced changes in their way of thinking recently are the following:

- Spain (77,5%)
- France (59,4%)
- Ukraine (57,4%)
- Romania (51,2%)
- Lithuania (51,2%)
- Germany (37,2%)

It is important that **well-being and way of thinking changes are connected both to positive and negative events in young people's lives, but negative experiences prevail as an impetus for well-being and way of thinking changes.** The reasons vary.

First of all, young people face **physical and mental problems** - feelings of weakness, fatigue, stress, depression, self-harm, eating disorders, OCR, PTSD, anxiety disorders, panic attacks, hysterical episodes, loss of sense of fulfillment, self-identity crisis, violence both physical and emotional, bullying, lack of self-acceptance. Young people often tend to have obsessive thoughts about academic success and comparing themselves to other people; youngsters find it difficult to cope with lack of motivation, increasing tension, anxiety, procrastination, unstable financial situation, uncertainty about future goals and lack of motivation, stress related to school and overwhelming workload. The other reason is stepping out of the comfort zone when starting a new activity (new studies, job or moving to a different city or country), which results in

adaptation difficulties. Young people often have little time for personal growth, tension in relationships with others, mood swings, abstract-mindedness, forgetfulness, and feelings of insecurity.

The important dimension here is **relationship with others** - young people often have complicated and imbalanced relations with their close and loved ones, crisis phases, emotional attachment, and lack of moral support. Sometimes young people feel they owe many things to their relatives, which results in increasing pressure and standards of achieving success for these youngsters. The more they grow up, the more responsibilities they take, thus the more stressed they feel.

It is important that some young people in target countries **find it overwhelming living in a world with wars, ongoing conflicts in the world, a pandemic and global climate changes**. These events promote uncertainty, negativity and a lack of motivation for young people. In terms of Ukrainian people, and their direct tangency to the war, they are not able to find joy and happiness in life easily anymore. Because of many bad news and critically unstable situations in the country, young people don't find sense in doing anything or trying to do something grandiose in a day, often lacking regularity and motivation.

Youngsters go through **transitional life stages now, but often there is still space for optimism in their minds**. The reasons for positive changes were indicated to be self-reflection, therapy insights, sports, maintaining a healthy diet, and success in social and professional life. Some young people admit they become more positive, responsible, fearless and mature. They still want to develop personally, learn foreign languages, set new goals and improve personal and professional relationships. Often young people still find the motivation to work, they begin to accept their appearance and start to praise themselves for even minimal achievements, they are aware of their own purpose in life and appreciate what they have. They find it important to embody positive emotions

in life as much as possible. For some young people, tough times become the time of changes, new surroundings, and new acquaintances, which inspires and motivates them to move towards their life goals. Even stressful situations in their life give the impetus to move on. Young people feel better when they contribute - actively volunteer and participate in useful projects, when they travel, meet new people and socialize, when they experience career growth or academic success and finally. They begin to notice the positive things more, criticize themselves and others less, and be grateful for everything. Their thoughts in many ways become more creative, they take more risks and become more free in their views and perspectives. They appreciate people more and try to avoid starting conflicts. **Nevertheless, young people believe careful self-reflection and quality time devoted to it is needed.**

It is crucial that young people often consider **participation in non-formal education projects** abroad as catalysts for positive changes in their well-being. They discover feelings of security and protection while participating in projects abroad. Communicating with different people, and exploring other cultures, and opinions inspires them to work on themselves and improve their knowledge. In addition, while facing different cultures and contexts, young people tend to see more advantages of their own country, their mentality which promotes the feeling of self-worth. It gives the impetus to put even more effort into the development of the country. Participation in such projects gives many insights and emotions for self-development. Local public projects and communication with new people inside the country give many of these advantages too.

Self-evaluation of relationships with others

The majority of young people in the target countries **feel happy or more or less happy with their friends and personal relationships.** The percentages of youngsters who feel happy or more or less happy are the following:

- Germany (**88,6%**)
- Lithuania (**77,2%**)
- Romania (**77,2%**)
- Ukraine (**74,5%**)
- Spain (**72,5%**)
- France (**72,5%**)

Most young people in target countries **feel comfortable about how they treat and communicate with others**. The percentages are the following:

- Germany (**77,2%**)
- Ukraine (**75,9%**)
- Lithuania (**70,7%**)
- Romania (**70,7%**)
- France (**65,9%**)
- Spain (**65,9%**)

A fraction of young people in target countries who **feel comfortable with how other people treat and communicate** with them varies from the vast majority (**85,7%**) among German youth to about half (**56,9%**) in Romania and Lithuania. The percentages of youngsters who feel comfortable with how other people treat and communicate with them are the following:

- Germany (**85,7%**)
- Ukraine (**70,6%**)
- France (**63,7%**)
- Spain (**63,7%**)
- Lithuania (**56,9%**)
- Romania (**56,9%**)

A similar situation is in regard to young people who are able to **freely express emotions in their surroundings**. The results vary from the majority (**73,6%**) in Ukraine to less than half (**42%**) in Spain and France. All the percentages of youngsters who are able to freely express emotions in their surroundings are the following:

- Ukraine (**73,6%**)
- Germany (**65,7%**)
- Romania (**56,1%**)
- Lithuania (**55,1%**)
- France (**42%**)
- Spain (**42%**)

More negative situations can be observed concerning **active participation in the life of their society** among young people. The results vary from the slight majority in Ukraine (**66,7%**) to less than half in Spain (**42,1%**). All the percentages of youngsters who believe they can take an active part in the life of society are the following:

- Ukraine (**66,7%**)
- Lithuania (**66,6%**)
- Germany (**60%**)
- Romania (**51,2%**)
- France (**50%**)
- Spain (**42,1%**)

In regard to **seeking psychological help**, the results vary from **53,6%** of young people in France who already sought this kind of help to **15,4%** in Romania. These are mostly psychological consultations and training, psychiatrist therapies, cognitive behavioral therapies, meditations, self-help literature, school counselors, coach's assistance, university psychological service, and rehabilitations. Some young people had already longer follow-up with a stay in a psychiatric hospital. Some of them had tried alternative medicine, such as hypnotherapy, sophrology, active listening, online training or consultation and guidance counseling. All the percentages of young people who already sought psychological help are the following:

- France (**53,6%**)
- Ukraine (**46,5%**)
- Germany (**34,3%**)

- Spain (**30,8%**)
- Lithuania (**15,5%**)
- Romania (**15,4%**)

It is interesting, however, that there is quite a big fraction of young people who **still would like to seek psychological help** but haven't done that by now. More than a third of young people in Ukraine (**36,2%**), and every fourth person in Spain and Lithuania (**26,9% and 25% respectively**) still want to seek this kind of help. The main types of psychological help that are being requested are psychological consultations, training and psychotherapies. The percentages of young people who would like to seek psychological assistance are the following:

- Ukraine (**36,2%**)
- Spain (**26,9%**)
- Lithuania (**25%**)
- Germany (**17,4%**)
- Romania (**14,4%**)
- France (**7,8%**)

Mental health support needs

In regard to the **current unmet urgent needs of young people**, results vary. French and German youth emphasized quite similar elements - living in a house, having enough to eat, good health and hygiene, clean clothes and qualitative education, having people they love and care about (friends and family), being healthy, having values like love, tolerance and respect. Romanian youth consider as the minimum expectations that are not met at the moment as daily motivation, desiring self-compassion, managing time and emotions to avoid conflicts at home, professional diagnosis, understanding, and acceptance from parents, and effective communication with friends and family. For Ukrainian youth the most important current unmet need is security. Ukrainian

people believe security absence becomes the catalyst of mental and physical problems in the life of young people, it is the fundamental factor that creates experiences of stress, loneliness, uncertainty, and fear which promote further serious health problems. In addition, young people in Ukraine believe the atmosphere of mutual understanding is crucial - it creates a favorable space for overcoming the trauma and stress they experienced at home. **It is interesting that the elements young people emphasize are the essentials that can be found in Maslow's pyramid.**

Concerning the **current expectations of young people, namely needs they would like to see met**, the situation is quite similar. French and German youth recognize the need for social and romantic relationships, as well as sexual relations, as well as hobbies and good communication. Young people of these countries also mentioned material things like improved living conditions, having a stable financial situation, money or a job that pays well. It is also important to have to be aware of one's mental health, and internal state, to know how to listen to yourself and your intuition, to know how one's emotions work - how to stand back, to move forward. The significantly important element among these needs was traveling. Many young people are convinced that discovering other cultures allows them also to discover themselves, to ask questions, to grow, become more autonomous, which considerably improves their mental well-being. For Romanian youth, the crucial elements are completing education, achieving recognition, being patient, overcoming negative feelings, gaining acceptance and understanding from others, seeking professional help, and discovering new passions and friendships to enhance life and emotional well-being.

Regarding **current expectations which are unmet needs but which would considerably improve the situation**, French youth believe improving employment situation and free psychological support would make a significant difference. It is important that regularity with an employment situation can be

confirmed by the questionnaire. Employment can be a source of stress and pressure on young people's mental health since they face unstable financial situations or are worried they are not able to find a fulfilling job for them. Free psychological support is important since access to it is significantly limited.

For Romanian youth, the current expectations and needs which would considerably improve the situation are urgency for professional counseling, early diagnosis, and accessible assistance for those with mental health issues. Other aspirations included efficient expression of emotions, destigmatization of mental health, counseling for parents and teachers, fostering friendships with parents, promoting the understanding that life is not always rosy, and advocating for a better life, academic fairness, and improved family understanding.

Among **unrealistic needs, which seem currently impossible to achieve** for young people, French youth indicates a better relationship with money and a stable financial situation, an ideal social relationship where there is no discrimination, and people are able to ask for help and actually get it. The final element is the construction of a better world without wars, aggression, pain and unhappiness. For Romanian youth, the needs that are currently impossible to achieve are collectively dealing with mental health, overall awareness about mental health, accessibility to different facilities, an open-minded education system, happiness, improved communication skills, support from surroundings and family, personal growth, and the enhancement of one's life and others, including the adoption of healthy behaviors, coping mechanisms, and a sense of purpose in life. Finally, for German youth the unrealistic needs are technical or luxury products.

In general, the current needs of young people are **improving mental health**, in particular the feeling that people understand them, a feeling of empathy, trust, happiness, joy and internal peace. Young people need to be able to express themselves, have effective communication with family and friends, feel respect from others, feel recognition when they achieve goals and have the

ability to learn and grow personally. The important dimension is the destigmatization of mental health, bigger coverage in schools, as well as professional counseling, counseling for parents and teachers, and accessible assistance for those with mental health issues.

Despite the crucial importance of mental health and well-being, **youngsters are currently approaching it from a personal rather than a collective point of view.** They manage as best they can with the tools they have learned, which creates an inequality between young people who have internal resources and external support (family, friends, etc.) and young people who are further away from this support and are therefore more isolated. Many of the young people admit they would like to be able to talk about this issue in common spaces and to have more practical tools for achieving and maintaining well-being.

CHAPTER 2. METHODS OF MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT THROUGH NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Non-formal education experience

The fraction of young people in target countries who **participated in non-formal education projects** varied from **90,7%** in Ukraine to **51,3%** in Spain. The percentages of youngsters who participated in non-formal education projects are the following:

- Ukraine (**90,7%**)
- Lithuania (**63,5%**)
- Romania (**62,5%**)
- Germany (**60%**)
- France (**52,2%**)
- Spain (**51,3%**)

It is important, however, that the majority of young people in target countries believe **non-formal education activities contributed to their**

self-development. The results vary from the vast majority (**96,6%**) in Ukraine to slight majorities in Lithuania and Romania (**63,7%**). The percentages of youngsters who believe non-formal education activities contributed to their self-development are the following:

- Ukraine (**96,6%**)
- Spain (**95,3%**)
- France (**83,4%**)
- Germany (**76,2%**)
- Romania (**63,7%**)
- Lithuania (**63,7%**)

A similar situation is with beliefs that **non-formal education projects were beneficial for the psychological state** of young people. The results vary from the vast majority (**95%**) in Spain to a slight majority in Romania (**57,6%**). The percentages of youngsters who believe non-formal education projects are beneficial for their psychological state are the following:

- Spain (**95%**)
- Ukraine (**82,8%**)
- Germany (**76,2%**)
- France (**72,2%**)
- Lithuania (**57,8%**)
- Romania (**57,6%**)

The complete majority of young people in target countries believe they **felt integrated or more or less integrated into the non-formal education project community.** The percentage results are the following:

- Germany (**95,2%**)
- Ukraine (**94%**)
- Spain (**90,5%**)
- France (**87,5%**)
- Lithuania (**75%**)
- Romania (**72,2%**)

Considering different activities on non-formal education projects and their usefulness for young people in target countries, **team-building activities were considered the most useful activities in terms of non-formal education.** The percentage of youngsters who believe team building activities are the most beneficial in terms of non-formal education are the following:

- Ukraine (87,2%)
- Spain (84,2%)
- Germany (76,2%)
- Romania (59,6%)
- Lithuania (59,6%)
- France (56,9%)

The only exception is French youth, who consider discussion and debate slightly more beneficial than team-building activities (68,1% to 56,9% accordingly).

The second most beneficial type of activities for young people in target countries are discussions and debates. The percentage of youngsters who believe discussions and debates are the most useful activities in terms of non-formal education are the following:

- Germany (71,4%)
- France (68,1%)
- Ukraine (63,2%)
- Spain (52,6%)
- Romania (37,7%)
- Lithuania (37,4%)

The only exception in this case is Romanian and Lithuanian youth, who consider individual tasks slightly more beneficial than discussion and debate (46,4% to 37,7%, 46,7% to 37,4% accordingly).

In regard to other activities, Ukrainian, German and Lithuanian youth found **role-playing games and simulations** to be the next most useful activities in terms of non-formal education. The percentage of youngsters who believe

role-playing games and simulations are the most useful activities in terms of non-formal education are the following:

- Ukraine (**59,8%**)
- Germany (**47,6%**)
- Lithuania (**34,1%**)
- Romania (**33,9%**)
- Spain (**31,6%**)
- France (**29,2%**)

In contrast, Lithuanian, French, Spanish, and Romanian youth consider **individual tasks** more beneficial than role-playing games and simulations in terms of non-formal education. The percentage of youngsters who believe individual tasks are the most useful activities in terms of non-formal education are the following:

- Lithuania (**46,7%**)
- Romania (**46,4%**)
- France (**40,3%**)
- Germany(**38,1%**)
- Spain (**36,8%**)
- Ukraine (**35%**)

Tools to support young people's mental health

Concerning the topic of overcoming negative emotions, it is interesting that young people of almost all target countries believe **it is easier to deal with negative emotions in the community and surrounded by others**. The only exception is the Romanian youth who consider being alone as a slightly better way to overcome negative emotions than being surrounded by others. (**42,6%** to **39,8%**). The percentage of youngsters who believe it is easier to deal with negative emotions in a community and surrounded by others are the following:

- Germany (**65,7%**)
- Spain (**60%**)

- Ukraine (**51,9%**)
- France (**47,8%**)
- Lithuania (**40,1%**)
- Romania (**39,8%**)

In contrast, less than half of the absolute minority of young people, as in the case of German youth (**8,6%**) believe **it is easier to overcome negative emotions alone**. The percentages are the following:

- Ukraine (**49,6%**)
- Romania (**42,6%**)
- Lithuania (**42,6%**)
- Spain (**30%**)
- France (**20,2%**)
- Germany (**8,6%**)

Finally, the majority of young people in target countries believe **mental and physical health are inextricably linked**. The results vary from the absolute majority among young people in Ukraine (**96,1%**) to more than half of young people in France (**54,4%**). The percentage of youngsters who consider mental and physical health as inextricably linked are the following:

- Ukraine (**96,1%**)
- Germany (**85,7%**)
- Romania (**74,6%**)
- Lithuania (**74,6%**)
- Spain (**64,1%**)
- France (**54,4%**)

Environment to overcome negative emotions

Nature, sea, ocean, lakes, forests, fresh air, light colours, lots of sunlight, painting, places distanced from city noise, natural environment, and music are regarded as elements for young people that can help to improve their mental health and overcome negative emotions. These can be spending time with animals, yoga and meditation practices, practicing sports,

disconnecting from the routine, sometimes places without Internet connection, and reconnection with nature, countryside, and mountains. This space is described by many young people as “safe”. It is important that for some young people, it is better to have a calm and relaxing stay, and reconnection with oneself while for others more beneficial is communication with like-minded people, and more active activities like dancing, singing or hiking experience. In the third case, the preferred places mentioned are the private places, the bedroom and the house. This is understandable since the same dichotomy is observed between those who need to open up to others and those who need to stay alone and engage in more individual activities to overcome negativity. The interesting thing is that some young people believe the place is not important, whereas it is crucial to learn how to overcome negative emotions in any environment.

Methods for mental health support that young people practice at home

Young people shared that for their mental health, they currently do meditation, yoga, jogging, sports, reflections, reading books, walking and hiking, having pets at home, distancing from social media, journaling, breathing practices to reduce stress, musical instruments and listening to music, eating healthy, quality sleep, dancing and singing to release dancing and live through emotions they feel, painting, nature, having quality me-time, religion and personal development. The important elements are having a nice net of people around whom they can trust, spending time with loved ones, meeting with friends, having deep talks with friends and families, and sharing their worries. Some young people rely on psychological support and medications prescribed.

Topics that are not discussed enough in young people’s local communities

At the same time, young people are convinced that there is a row of topics that are not discussed enough in their environment. Among them are the topics of mental health in general, **depression, panic attacks, anxiety, stress, suicide, attention disorders, envy, feelings of shame, bullying at school, psychological violence in the family, psychological traumas from the past, dysmorphophobia**. Youngsters believe there is a need to talk more about the **ability to freely express emotions, non-violent communication, and emotional intelligence**.

The essential topics for young people are **stages of mental development, the influence of childhood or adolescent trauma on the behavior of an adult, topics of social pressure on women and men, male emotional closure and the stigmatization of emotionally sensitive men, tolerance and inclusion**. An important dimension is understanding the **youth crisis** - a period of life, where there are many desires and high demands on oneself, but no financial opportunities to implement them or vice versa - **uncertainty, finding purpose in life and accepting yourself while being young**. It is important to hear that prolonged depression is not okay, there are probably many aspects that influence and all of them need to be taken into consideration and analyzed, psychological health is not fiction or even worse - taboo.

Topics which were found to be beneficial for elaborating more on non-formal education projects

In regard to this, young people identified a row of topics. Young people consider crucially **important topics of different mental states, harmful practices, disorders and destigmatizing mental health topics in general**:

- topics of anxiety and loneliness, stress, depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity and post-traumatic stress disorder, overthinking, eating disorders, attempted suicide, fighting worries and fears, prevention of HIV, AIDS, STDs, prevention of alcohol

and drug addiction, burnout, overcoming trauma, procrastination and teenagers and young adults problems, how to deal with harmful methods of dealing with stress, like overeating.

- normalizing care for one's mental health, providing information to dispel the prejudices that may exist about mental disability, promoting better knowledge of psychological disorders and psychological follow-up - what they are, what they refer to, types of support, especially those disorders that are misunderstood and stereotyped, little known and lack recognition.

"We need to deconstruct certain stigmas with them, particularly about the role of a psychologist or psychiatrist, or about taking medication. [...] To raise awareness of how to help a relative in difficulty, whose mental health is at risk.

The second category of topics which young people consider important for non-formal education projects is **relationship with oneself**:

- topics of developing confidence and self-development, positive thinking, expression of emotions - how to understand how you feel and build personal boundaries, communicating your feelings, finding your own self, setting goals in life and searching for meaning, self-acceptance and value, respect for yourself and others, the balance between "giving" and "taking", how not to defocus on too many activities, how to deal with conflicts, and the importance of being aware of things inside and around you, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health.

"Everyone, to start with, learn how to communicate and share your feelings, whether they are big or small, every emotion, every problem, so that you can free yourself and offer advice or ideas".

The third category of topics which young people consider the need for non-formal education projects to spread is the **relationship with oneself environment**:

- topics of relations with parents, separation from family, partner issues, human rights, bullying at school, psychological violence in the family, school pressure, how to deal with conflicts
- topics connected to gender discrimination and imposter syndrome, migration and refugee syndrome, homophobia and racism, harassment, consent and sexual assault isolation and promoting inclusivity and mutual understanding
- topics on connection with oneself origin (origin from a small town, destruction of old Soviet stereotypes, etc.)
- the healthy climate at work, the feeling of failure and adaptation at work, administrative paperwork involved in becoming an adult (filling in a tax form, applying for a loan at the bank)

The final category of topics which young people consider significantly important for non-formal education projects is a **healthy and balanced life**:

- topics of the role of plant food, how to make your food healthy and easy to prepare, overeating

The methods young people would like to try on non-formal education projects

In regard to this, meditation and yoga were frequently mentioned. Besides them, the desired activities are art therapies, watching movies on the topic, walks, campings, dance and theater classes, creating music, cooking, learning new languages, mindfulness, interaction with animals, working with clay, hiking, kayaking, painting, singing, self-expression through body movements, trying a new kind of sport, acting training with tactile contacts, connecting to nature and relaxation.

"An activity based around the body. The expression of the body as a whole.

The other interesting techniques young people suggested were neurographics, sophrology, esotericism the game "On emotions", and the game "Understand the other" (in pairs everyone tells what kind of problem they have, and the other tries to understand and give advice or say how he or she would act in this situation). Young people also mentioned group methods presented in Raphaëlle Giordano's book, training on the topic of "motivation, mutual support", drawing a painting "Me" (everyone depicts their personality and problems and personal challenges on the canvas and explains afterwards what each element of this drawing means).

"These are full of little exercises that force you to take action rather than just think about it. You have to learn to think differently, communicate differently and take action to get out of a negative spiral."

Not less important strategies are peer-to-group therapies, reflections, emotion journals, games, circle discussions, online platforms for interactive engagement, peer learning to work on the same level; role plays – to experience the situation from different perspectives; using stories and creative writing; check-ins before every meeting were also mentioned as important.

"To be together, to talk about our failures, our mistakes, our needs, for those who want to, in order to understand people in difficulty and to know more or less what to do".

The ideal imaginary project would include discussions on fostering joy, exploring new experiences, facilitating participant interactions, introducing mental health techniques, incorporating games, and encouraging open dialogue about individual passions.

CONCLUSION

Even though the context of target countries - Germany, France, Spain, Romania, Ukraine, and Lithuania can differ, there are still many tangent points across all of them. This study shed light on the mental health scene among youth of several European countries.

First of all, **mental health seems to be an increasingly important issue for young people in all the target countries.** Young people are motivated to talk about it, but still consider it as a topic that is not present and stigmatized in formal environments and in their surroundings, it is not a topic widely discussed in high schools and other educational facilities.

Nowadays reality - wars, a pandemic, global climate changes and the approaching of adult life for young people caused complex emotions and states in young people of target countries and forced youngsters to grow up quickly. They greatly experience changes in their well-being, thinking and behavior, in the vast majority these changes are not positive. Poor mental well-being harms every dimension of young people's lives - family relationships, studies, work, inspirations and goals. Not all young people are optimistic about their future, they are facing everyday stress both personal and professional, about both things they can and cannot control. Some young people already see psychologists but there is still a lack of support from the professional and also from asking for help from their side for young people. **The study gives an understanding that young people face many challenges and are in need of approaching it not only from a personal perspective but collective point of view and activities.**

Since the topic of mental health still remains stigmatized in many environments, **non-formal education can be a game-changer for young people who struggle with mental health challenges.** For the vast majority of young people in target countries non-formal education projects became an eye-opening experience. They made it possible to look at things from a different

angle and move away from a stereotyped system of thinking, gain valuable skills and knowledge, and feel a charge of energy and motivation. On non-formal education projects, young people are able to discover themselves, step out of their comfort zone, find goals, overcome fears, and become more adaptive and motivated to move on. Non-formal education projects are a strong impetus to the development of interpersonal relationships and self-understanding, finding a way out of difficult situations, development of cooperation skills and reducing mental stress. It's a chance to restart, reevaluate oneself as an individual, and find different perspectives and solutions to standard problems. After participating, youngsters feel they can change themselves and everything around them for the better. While travelling and discovering other cultures they grow and discover themselves, which results in mental well-being improvement.

Since young people believe that non-formal education programs can serve as an effective tool for mental health support, reducing anxiety and facilitating the sharing of experiences, **there is a range of topics and methodics young people find useful for elaborating on non-formal education projects.** Youngsters reckon a row of mental and physical health problems should be elaborated on non-formal projects. In addition, many personal challenges merit more thorough consideration - problems of self-development and self-realization, self-confidence improvement, struggle with internal blocks and fears, self-esteem, self-acceptance, etc. Finally, the youth reckon **there are many methodics they want to try on non-formal education projects to improve their mental health.** These are meditations, yoga, art therapies to express emotions through creativity, a series of games for a better understanding of one's challenges and desires, joint leisure activities, activities that facilitate the exchange of experiences and support, etc. **Normalizing the topic of mental health, providing knowledge of mental health and promoting effective tools of support will facilitate preventing**

potential disorders among young people and assist in overcoming that already occurred. Thus, mental health should be a top priority in non-formal education youth programs for a better and healthier tomorrow for young people.