

Strengthening critical thinking and European cooperation through youth work

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For three days in June, Destelheide welcomed 55 youth work professionals, policymakers and representatives from across Europe for the 2026 Quality Label Platform Meeting.

Organised within the framework of the Council of Europe's Quality Label for Youth Centres, the annual meeting provided an opportunity to exchange practices, strengthen partnerships and reflect on the future of youth work.

This year's edition focused on a timely and increasingly urgent topic: promoting critical thinking among young people. Through keynote speeches, workshops, project exchanges and informal discussions, participants explored how youth centres can help young people navigate a world surrounded by misinformation, political polarisation and growing uncertainty.

For Destelheide's director, Guy Uyttebroeck, the discussions reflected the reality youth workers are facing today:

"I think the biggest challenge is the new world. It's a very strange world these days. Democracies are under pressure. I think what we need to do in schools is provide non-formal learning. And talk about children's rights, human rights, and democracy. And I think it's very important to keep the ideas of the Council of Europe alive. To keep them fresh."

Alongside discussions on democratic participation, media literacy and non-formal education, participants shared practical tools and experiences through workshops and the Quality Label Fair, while guided visits to Destelheide and

Hanenbos showed how creativity and learning are included into everyday life at both centres.

That connection between arts and youth work became one of the meeting's strongest messages. Participants highlighted how creative environments encourage dialogue, reflection and participation.

Nadia Tismanaru, member of the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe and representative of the Timișoara Youth Centre, explained that arts and culture have become an essential gateway to engage young people:

"Arts make it easier to address sensitive topics. They are a powerful tool not only for education but also for activism, helping young people express themselves and become involved."

Matjaž Gruden, Director for Democracy at the Council of Europe, described Destelheide as an inspiring example of how artistic practice can strengthen democratic learning:

"Art creates opportunities for reflection, dialogue, creativity and self-discovery, all of which are essential if we want resilient democracies."

Furthermore, concerns were echoed throughout the meeting. Financial sustainability, changing political priorities and the need to constantly adapt to young people's evolving realities emerged as common challenges across Europe.

Speaking from Bosnia and Herzegovina context, Aida Bećirović (director at Schüler Helfen Leben (SHL) Sarajevo) reflected on how today's political climate is forcing youth workers to defend values that once seemed unquestionable:

"Earlier it was easy to explain why democracy and human rights matter. Today it is becoming much harder. We have to stand up again and fight for democracy. Our country's history offers an important reminder of how fragile democratic societies can become and why protecting diversity remains essential."

The international character of the meeting was also reflected in the diversity of centres represented. Hortense Lopes dos Santos, representing the Braga Municipality, highlighted the Braga Youth Centre's role in promoting non-for-

mal education, democratic participation and international cooperation. Through initiatives such as the Youth Participatory Budget and its involvement in the Quality Label network, the centre works closely with the Municipality of Braga to create meaningful opportunities for young people to influence local decision-making while contributing to European youth cooperation.

Despite the concerns mentioned during the discussions, the overall atmosphere remained optimistic. For Nadia Tismanaru, one of the meeting's greatest strengths is the reminder that youth workers are not facing these challenges alone:

"Sometimes it feels like we don't do enough. But when we meet in places and events like these, we realise there are many of us working for the same purpose."

As Matjaž Gruden concluded:

"I remain a worried optimist, but I am still an optimist. The reason is that I believe young people are going to help us get out of it."

The 2026 Quality Label Platform Meeting closed with new ideas and strengthened partnerships. But this year it also marked a special moment for the network, as it was the last edition attended by Destelheide's director, Guy Uyttebroeck, before his retirement.

Having accompanied the development of the Quality Label community since its early years, Uyttebroeck reflected on the evolution of the network and the relationships built over time:

"The highlight is always being together with all the label centres. It is no longer just a group of people sitting together. There is a real sense of community."

After more than three decades leading Destelheide, he expressed confidence in the future of both the centre and the network, emphasising the values that have guided his work teamwork, respect and creating a warm, human-centred organisation:

"You cannot do these things alone. You need a team. Respect is part of our DNA, and that is what allows a community to grow."