

Faces of EGL: Slava Mezhdoyan

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There are youth workers who are also pioneers in their vision, enthusiasm, and grassroots approach to developing local youth work. Slava Mezhdoyan is one of them. The President and Executive Director of Umbrella – a youth organization from Tbilisi, Georgia, works hard to grow the foundations and network for quality development of local youth work in the country. Today, Umbrella is one of the biggest youth organizations in Georgia. It's the persistence and innovative approach of Slava and the team that made it happen. Inspired by the Council of Europe programs for youth workers, Slava decided to bring the ideas and concepts from these programs to his country. In 2016 he founded Umbrella whose main goal was to bring positive changes in youth work on the local level. In 2019 and 2022, they piloted the first youth center which due to a lack of support encountered many challenges. Nevertheless, the pilot gave a very important experience to Slava and his team, to look for more sustainable approaches for it. This pilot inspired others to start with similar initiatives in their communities. Things were changing, so instead of the old-fashioned approach of top-down structure in the youth work organization, the key principle of youth work and youth workers turned to grassroots and competency-based models. This was a revolutionary approach – turning to a bottom-up establishment that meant more inclusivity and participation from the stakeholders.

Slava graduated from three universities. His first degree was in chemical engineering, the second one in Public Administration, and the third one in Human rights and Democracy. Nowadays, there is a university in Georgia offering a degree in youth work, which is a significant development. As Slava remembers, in the previous years there were few resources he could turn to for local youth work development, project writing, search for financial resources, and so on.

Umbrella is a centralized organization with a horizontal structure. This means that their team consists of executives, responsible and engaged people who want to take youth work to a higher level of quality. They are a group of enthusiasts who'd like to see themselves professionally in the field of youth work. They are trainers, project writers, project managers, youth workers, and volunteers. Their skills and aspirations are different. This year Umbrella plans to develop a new strategy for human resources, where each member will need to have a specific role that is sustainable and contributes to the growth of Umbrella of its spin-off youth centers throughout the country.

Besides youth exchange, Slava wants to do much more to develop the local level. There is a big gap between people who've done the youth exchange programs but don't have yet the skills and knowledge at the local level. Another burning issue is not recognizing youth work enough and the efforts that youth workers put into developing local communities. Youth Work Academy program is a big motivation for Umbrella because they learned how to grow recognition of youth work and create it systemically.

When not in Umbrella, Slava is still in the realm of youth. He is a father of three kids. Being a hard worker and a family person is what keeps him busy. He acknowledges that he's a workaholic, but he loves his work and finds it deeply fulfilling. Slava lives by the saying, "If you love your work, you don't see it as work." His primary motivation is witnessing societal changes. For him, it's almost addictive to see people grow and transform and communities thrive.

Slava's older son is 13 and he already plans to send him for a youth exchange. He's already taken part in different grassroots activities and enjoys it. The daughter is 6 years old and the youngest son is 3 years old. It's like having the youth center in your own home. It's an inspiration and drive to make a better world for them as well.

A full interview with Slava about youth organization Umbrella [you can read here](#).

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