



Youth Gangs Preventing Gang Membership*

Günter Stummvoll

*Günter Stummvoll is
researcher at the European
Centre for Social Welfare
Policy and Research.
stummvoll@euro.centre.org*

Introduction

This second policy brief in a series of three about youth gangs looks at preventive social policy measures to reduce juvenile delinquency and gang crime. In the first policy brief we have identified different approaches to studying youth gangs in the history of criminology. In the 20th century, youth gangs have been studied either as sub-cultures from an ethnographic point of view, or as counter-cultures in response to social exclusion from a socio-political perspective. Systematic discrimination and marginalisation can lead to status frustration (Cohen, 1955) and to the collective retreat into alternative social environments where personal recognition can be regained. More recently, juvenile delinquency has been studied as a consequence of lacking social control, and various protective factors have been identified that help juveniles to refrain from criminal activities.

**Keywords: social
crime prevention,
peers as role models,
family network
conferences, police
counselling in schools**

This policy brief shall expand on some of these protective factors and look more closely at the role of control agencies such as family, school, and peers in the community. Three examples for prevention strategies will be presented from Austria, the Netherlands and New Zealand. These strategies either address young people in schools (primary prevention), or young people who are at risk of getting involved in youth gangs (secondary prevention), or young people who are facing a conviction in institutions of the criminal justice system (tertiary prevention). Taken together, these strategies make up important corner stones in a social welfare approach to prevent gang crime.

The findings in this policy brief are partly based on a review of several publications that emerged from the so-called "EUROGANG Program of Research", an international network of researchers that was founded by the American gang researcher Malcolm Klein in 1998 and has since been dedicated to study youth

* The results presented here were generated within the project 'Youth Gangs - Preventive social measures to reduce juvenile delinquency and gang crime', implemented for the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. We are grateful for comments received from Rahel Kahlert and Anette Scopetta. We also thank Amália Solymosi for the editing and layouting.



gangs in different European countries. Following the first workshop in 1998 in Schmitten, Germany, 19 workshops for scientific exchange were organised mainly in the United Kingdom, the Scandinavian countries, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA. Findings have been published in several books by the members of the growing consortium (see references).

In search of definition

**A youth gang is
"any durable, street-
oriented youth group
whose involvement in
illegal activity is part of
their group identity"**

One of the most important achievements of the EUROGANG programme has been an agreement on a common definition for the phenomenon of youth gangs: The EUROGANG programme defines a youth gang as "*any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity*"[‡]. This definition implies that crime committed by members of a youth gang is not an isolated outbreak of violence, but a frequent occurrence deeply entrenched in social structures. There are, still, major controversies over the definition of these structures in terms of ethnicity, rivalry, socio-economic strain or political oppression. Also, the definition does not clearly differentiate between a gang and any other form of violent group, subculture, friendship network or organised crime. It seems that all of these elements can be components of the definition depending on local social structures. However, with this definition in mind, researchers in the USA and Europe set out to conduct a variety of studies, collecting data about incidence rates, organisational structures, cultural contexts, and prevention policies.

Despite considerable political distinctions, this inter-continental research programme revealed some cultural differences in youth gang prevention between the USA and Europe. Although the authors recognise an incoherent landscape of intervention strategies in European countries, they found that historically interventions in Europe have been embedded in social welfare policies: "Many of these measures are part of the traditional welfare state response of building up permanent institutions (e.g., youth clubs, sport facilities, the child-care service, street worker units, treatment institutions, and so on)" (Carlsson and Decker, 2005: 261). On the other hand, the United States are known for a vast amount of crime prevention programmes to compensate for the lack of an institutional "social safety net".

However, more recently the change of political governments in European countries has caused confusion to this clear division and has led to a mix of conservative and social-democratic approaches in youth gang prevention. In practice, this means that many US-style 'special' programmes have

[‡] It is unclear at what point in time this definition was first agreed. The chapters in Decker and Weerman (2005) already refer to this definition.



US-style prevention programmes are now merged with European social welfare policies

been imported to the European continent and are now merged with social welfare programmes, particularly in the fields of health promotion, child protection, employment benefits, and the variety in social work services. As a consequence, the response to violence and gang crime has become a mix of universal prevention through social welfare services and case- and place-specific intervention programmes that address individuals with their personal characteristics, relationships between youth and adult caregivers, schools, neighbourhoods or general social norms in the community.

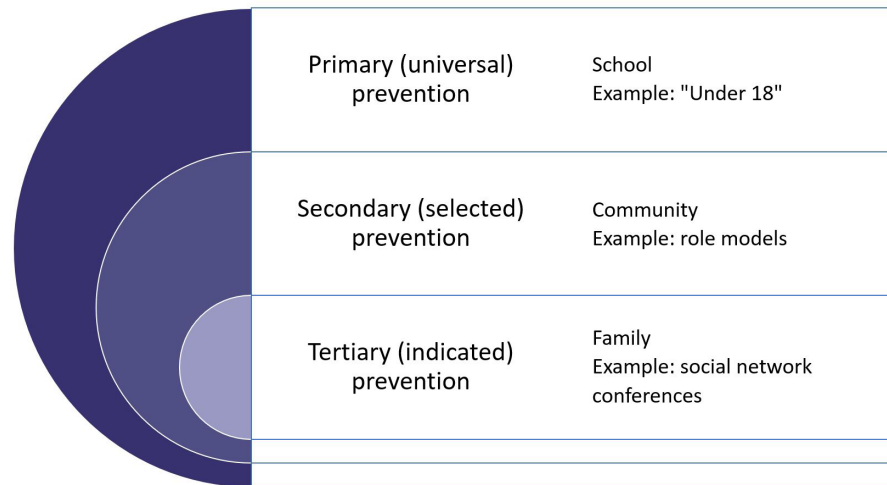
In general, prevention measures can address youth in families, in the community or at school. Also, prevention can address (1) young people in general (universal populations / primary prevention), (2) young people at risk of gang membership (selected populations / secondary prevention), or (3) young people already sanctioned (indicated populations / tertiary prevention). In the following we will present some examples that fit this scheme. The examples emerged from our global literature review and are based on preliminary evidence of effectiveness; they refer to Austria, the Netherlands and New Zealand, but can be found with some variation world-wide.

Three promising examples of youth gang prevention

**Primary prevention,
secondary prevention,
tertiary prevention**

We have already pointed out in policy brief 1 that juvenile delinquency and gang crime are more likely when a number of risk factors such as early childhood neglect, low-income households, broken homes, poor school achievements, school dropout, and unemployment accumulate. Likewise, an effective policy response should be just as comprehensive and offer a network of social services in a variety of social control institutions such as families, schools and the community. The following three examples address different social institutions and represent different levels of prevention. First, "Under 18" is a school-based counselling programme given by prevention officers in the police in Austria. Second, a project in the Netherlands uses ex-gang members as positive "street-oriented role models" in a community. Finally, the "Social Network Conferences" depict a concept in youth justice that originated in New Zealand. "Under 18" addresses all youth in a population regardless of risk (universal, primary prevention); the Dutch "Role Model Experiment" addresses youth at high risk "in the thick" of the problem (selected, secondary prevention); "Social Network Conferences" address youth who are already within the criminal justice system, either in pre-trial detention or in prison (indicated, tertiary prevention).

Graphic 1: Examples of interventions in a prevention system



"Under 18" – Police counselling in schools[§]

Police counselling in schools contribute to universal prevention

"Under 18" is a programme offered by specially trained prevention officers in the police to juveniles at the age of 13-17 years in selected schools in Austria. Usually, schools make a request to the police to receive the programme. The programme, fully established since 2017, integrates prevention of violence and prevention of addiction (substances and behaviours) and is based on psychological and pedagogical expertise to provide skills on the prevention of violence and substance use. Although mainly dedicated to students, also teachers and parents can be involved in the programme that is offered in 12 sessions within one school year. The programme "Under 18" is composed of three modules:

1. *"All Right"* focuses on basics in administrative law, criminal law and civil law as it occurs in various situations of youth in everyday life.
2. *"Click & Check"* focuses on violence in the context of digital media and encourages a sensitive use of the internet. Teachers, parents or legal guardians are called upon to discuss issues of social media in class and at home together with their pupils and children.
3. *"Look@your.Life"* focuses on general challenges in everyday life of young people, in the community and in relation to consumerism and the use of social media. Here, also consumption of psycho-active substances, the social climate at school, a sensible use of smart-phones, behaviour at parties, the creative use of leisure time, and the function of role models in families and communities is discussed.

[§] The programme was established by the Austrian Police in 2017 <https://www.bundeskriminalamt.at/205/start.aspx>



Box 1: Goals and contents of the programme "Under 18"

Goals:

- Promoting legal awareness
- Developing action strategies for living in the community
- Raising awareness of moral courage
- Strengthening of life skills through cooperation in the class structure and coping with difficult situations
- Enhancing alternative behaviours and conflict resolution skills
- Providing facts about dangers on the Internet
- Promoting responsible use of digital media
- Expanding and internalizing of action strategies in social networks
- Preventing criminal acts in relation to substance use
- Promoting low-risk substance use and growing up without legal problems
- Improving communication skills in interactions between students, teachers, and parents or legal guardians

Contents:

- Understanding terms and conditions in legal regulations in national law
- Explaining juvenile justice regulations in relation to everyday life of youth
- Enhancing awareness of various criminal justice regulations
- Knowing about different forms of violence and skills to prevent violence
- Sensitising for situations of conflict and violence and developing skills in the context of moral courage
- Competence training in empathy, reflexivity, setting limits
- Self-reflection and self-awareness
- Explaining myths about alcohol consumption
- Discovering healthy activities in leisure time
- Supporting cognitive creativity in dealing with conflicts

Source: <https://www.bundeskriminalamt.at/205/start.aspx>

Prevention officers in the Austrian police must take a special training of 22 days on top of the basic course on crime prevention to give this programme in schools. The training includes both e-learning and face-to-face sessions, and a fresh-up course is required every two years.

Similar programmes exist around the world, sometimes supplemented by pre-school programmes, anti-bullying programmes, individual personality training, psychological and mental support, group therapy in class, parent training, and others (Farrington, 2002; Welsh and Farrington, 2012).



Positive Role Models in Youth Gangs

As a member of the EUROGANG research programme, Jan Dirk de Jong reported on a new development in the Netherlands in handling the problem of youth gangs (De Jong, 2016). The idea is using positive role models with local background in the community as an alternative approach to both repressive responses and (primary) prevention services. This approach is not new as many local projects in the United States show. Local outreach workers (Decker et al., 2008), personal mentors (Langhout et al., 2004) and Big Brothers or Sisters (Grossman and Thierney, 1998) are some examples. Interestingly, efforts to work with ex-gang members to help youth at risk to desist from participating in gang membership are presented as an alternative to professional youth work organisations and social services.

Positive role models are key figures to reach out for members of youth gangs

In the Netherlands, the role model project apparently originated from dissatisfaction with conventional social work institutions in their efforts to gain local trust. Without that trust, it is argued, practitioners cannot bridge the gap between conventional civil society and "street cultures" of underprivileged neighbourhoods. For a long time, the positive impact of local key figure has been ignored in formal interventions by municipal governments or accepted only as a by-product in social work. De Jong criticises that an emphasis on scientific outcome assessment in terms of "what works" has often eclipsed the practice of "who works" in terms of personal professional skills combined with individual traits and local social networks (De Jong, 2016: 238):

"(T)he person who was most important and successful in making a difference in the lives of gang members did not always turn out to be the professional. In those cases, the local key figure with influence and informal authority appeared to be the decisive factor, acting as a positive 'role model' in the eyes of the gang members. He or she was the one who reached the 'unreachable' gang youth, involved them in positive and pro-social activities, helped them with difficult personal problems (finding work, housing and professional help), and got them to stop certain delinquent activities" (De Jong, 2016: 238).

In a subsequent research project in the Netherlands these new possibilities were embedded more structurally as a component in a comprehensive approach to gang crime. The fieldwork for this exploratory research took place in Amsterdam, The Hague, Leiden and in Zoetermeer, where role models could be identified. In total, 47 semi-structured interviews were conducted with boys of 12-24 years of age, who collaborated with the researchers. They were asked about their own life, growing up in the neighbourhood, and about activities and their role in the youth gang. Additionally, interviews with non-gang members in the community,



many of them professionals such as shop keepers, sports instructors, teachers, youth workers and counsellors, housing associations, municipal officials, police officers, probation officers were conducted to find solutions to the local gang problem.

Role models develop trust and offer support

The most important finding from this exploratory research revealed the importance of exactly those services that could not be provided in conventional crime prevention programmes: First, getting help with finding suitable work, housing and dealing with all kinds of personal problems. These services are crucial for desisting from criminal activities and gang involvement (De Jong, 2016: 241). Secondly, street-oriented role models are perceived to be more genuine and sincere in their efforts to help than conventional youth workers. De Jong concludes:

"This perception of true commitment, understanding, and involvement appears to be the main added value of the local, street-oriented role model that might potentially fill an important gap in the preventive measures in our Dutch approach to the gang problem" (De Jong, 2016: 241).

Youth Justice Family Group Conferences and Social Network Conferences

Social network conferences are based on family group conferences with Maori people in New Zealand

Youth Justice Family Group Conferences were first introduced in 1989 in New Zealand, where this intervention was first applied as a form of restorative justice for young Maori offenders (MacRae, 2004). Until today, the criminal justice system in New Zealand offers this opportunity to young people of the Maori community (and others) to help vulnerable children and young people to cope with difficult situations in life as an alternative to getting a criminal record.

In *Youth Justice Family Group Conferences*, a youth justice coordinator arranges meetings for the young offender together with his or her *whānau*[¶], victims and professionals from the police and probation officers to make action plans for lasting, positive changes to ensure future wellbeing and a life without offending. There are several steps in "Youth Justice Family Group Conferences":

- Getting the facts: The police reads out the circumstances of the alleged offending.
- Time to talk: Members of the *whānau* and victim(s) will be heard.
- Family time: *Whānau* and the young person will take time out to come up with a clear, realistic plan to take back to others at the family group conference.
- The plan: The plan is then discussed with the wider group, and if everyone can agree, then a legally binding plan is created and must be completed.

¶ *Whānau* is a Maori-language word for extended family.



This will rely on *whānau* and professionals providing ongoing support, working together, and keeping each other informed about progress and problems.

If the conference is unable to agree on a plan, the matter is referred back to the police or the youth court.

**In social network
conferences young
offenders are assisted
to make plans for their
personal future
development**

In Europe, "social network conferences" represent a similar method and activity to support young people who have come in touch with the criminal justice system. The aim of social network conferences is to come together with an offender and his/her social network to develop a realistic and binding plan for the future, which shall support the court in their decision for either conditional dismissal or suspension of executing a prison sentence. The goal of social network conferences is to work towards milder measures for juveniles as alternatives to imprisonment.

For example, in 2011 the Austrian Federal Ministry of Justice started a pilot programme for social network conferences in cooperation with the Austrian Probation Service "Neustart", and a corresponding amendment to the juvenile law entered into force in 2016.**

The main goals of the social network conferences are:

1. Get the client's commitment for change in the near future
2. Involve the client's reference persons, resource persons, and attachment figures in change management
3. Making tangible plans for structuring daily routines in the near future

In practice, coordinators, probation workers, and clients are given particular roles in the procedure. The **coordinators** of the social network conferences must act neutral, their task is simply to organise the conference and guide all participants through the process. **Probation workers** present the case to the coordinators of the social network conference, phrase the particular "care problem" as the basis for the initiation of a social network conference, and finally make decisions on the plan that was elaborated by the client together with his or her social network in the course of the network conferences. The **clients, i.e. the youth**, have an active role in the process; they must understand

** In Austria, the instrument of social network conferences has been evaluated in two separate projects by two different research institutes: The Austrian *Institute for Criminal Justice and Criminology* at the Vienna University conducted an evaluation study on social network conferences with young offenders in 2012/2013 (24 months). The Austrian *Institute for the Sociology of Law and Criminology* conducted an evaluation study in 2015/2016 with a special focus on people in forensic custody. Research reports are available directly at the research institutes.



that they get a chance to benefit from this intervention for their future personal development. This, however, requires personal commitment.

**Clients have to
present their plans
in front of a committee**

The conferences have the character of workshops where social development plans for the client are elaborated on flipcharts in cooperation with the client and his or her social network. The conference examines opportunities that can help easing the particular problem of the young person. Employment opportunities, healthcare opportunities, drug prevention, and housing opportunities have to be found together with professional experts. The core question in the development of a social plan is this: "Who does what with whom in what time, and who monitors the process?" It is important that the client himself/herself has to present the final plan in front of the group during the decision phase of the conference.

Social network conferences are offered to clients in pre-trial detention to assist court decisions, as victim-offender mediation, and as prison-release conferences in order to prepare the client for a successful (re-)integration into society.^{††}

A welfare approach to intervention

**There are two
pitfalls in social
crime prevention:
over-reaction
and denial**

The controversies over the gang concept and social structures do not make the decision on appropriate strategies to thwart the gang problem any easier, even more so when repression and sanctioning fade into the background and give way to welfare measures of problem solving. A welfare approach to the gang problem has to balance measures of intervention and prevention. *Intervention* may come too late at a time when gang fights are in full motion; *prevention* measures targeting the general population may be experienced as excessive social control that is incompatible with current liberal policies. In other words, there are two pitfalls in social policy response to the gang problem: *over-reaction* and *denial*. First, the risk of over-reaction may be associated with over-protection of children and youth. For example, intervention in families due to some suspicion of risk factors for developing a criminal career in early childhood may be considered as moral panic. Also, developmental prevention measures may be stigmatising, and labelling can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy which prompts juveniles to act out stereotypes attributed to them.

The second pitfall, denial, bears the risk to ignore latent problems and to miss the point of time when conflicts escalate. Then, interventions are likely to tip into "tough" reactions, including criminal justice interventions like surveillance, arrests, and imprisonment. This, in turn, further intensifies the conflict and

^{††} For research on social network conferences in restorative justice see Hagemann (2016) and Vitalyevich et al. (2021).



leads to violent confrontations between law enforcement agencies and youth gangs. In an escalating spiral, more and more young people may be recruited to join violent groups as social cohesion in gangs increases.

Conclusion

In response to these pitfalls, the three cases presented above are successful examples for integrating specific programmes in institutional welfare regimes to address the problem of youth gangs. In sum, social prevention shall include preventive efforts on all systematic levels of prevention (primary/universal, secondary/selected, tertiary/indicated prevention) and cover all social levels of the 'social ecology' (individual level, relationship level, community level, societal level). In that way, social policies can be instrumental to mitigate poverty and social marginalisation and at the same time prevent the formation of youth gangs.

This short review already showed that collaboration between police, criminal justice institutions and civil society is absolutely vital in social approaches to mitigate the problem of youth gangs. This also entails a convergence of policy fields such as health policies, labour market policies, migration policies, education and criminal justice policies. The final policy brief in this series will look more closely on crime prevention partnerships, multi-agency approaches in public safety and respective concepts of collaboration between different institutions of social work and social control.

References from the EUROGANG Programme

- Carlsson, Y. and Decker, S.H. (2005). Gang and Youth Violence Prevention and Intervention: Contrasting the Experience of the Scandinavian Welfare State with the United States. In: Decker and Weerman (Eds.): *European Street Gangs and Troublesome Youth Groups*. Lanham: Alta Mira Press.
- Decker S.H. & F. Weerman (Eds). (2005). *European Street Gangs and Troublesome Youth Groups*. Lanham: Alta Mira Press.
- Decker, S.H.; Bynum, T.S.; McDevitt, J.; Farrell, A. and Varano, S. (2008). Street outreach workers: best practices and lessons learned: Innovative practices from the Charles E. Shannon Jr. Community Safety Initiative Series. Institute on Race and Justice Publications. Paper 15.
- De Jong, J.D. (2016). The Real Deal: On Positive Street-Oriented Role Models in Response to Dutch Gangs and Youth at Risk. In: Maxson and Esbensen: *Gang Transitions and Transformations in an International Context*. New York: Springer.
- Esbensen, F-A. and Maxson, C. (Eds.). (2012). *Youth Gangs in International Perspective*. New York: Springer.
- Klein, M.; Kerner, H.; Maxson, C. and Weitekamp, E. (Eds.) (2001). *The Eurogang Paradox: Street Gangs and Youth Groups in the U.S. and Europe*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.



Maxson, C. and Esbensen, F.-A. (Eds.) (2016). *Gang Transitions and Transformations in an International Context*. New York: Springer.

References on Family Group Conferences and Social Network Conferences

Burford, G. (2000). *Family Group Conferencing: New Directions in Community-Centered Child and Family Practice (Modern Applications of Social Work)*. Routledge.

Fox, D. (2019). *Family Group Conferencing with Children and Young People: Advocacy Approaches, Variations and Impacts*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hagemann, O. (2016). Gemeinschaftskonferenzen und andere Restorative Conferencing Verfahren. In: Ochmann, N.; Schmidt-Semisch, H.; Temme, G.: *Healthy Justice – Überlegungen zu einem gesundheitsförderlichen Rechtswesen*. Wiesbaden: Springer. Pp. 229-261.

Jackson, S.E. (1998). Family Justice?: An Evaluation of the Hampshire Youth Justice Family Group Conference Pilot Project. University of Southampton Library.

MacRae, A. (2004). *Little Book of Family Group Conferences New Zealand Style: A Hopeful Approach When Youth Cause Harm* (Little Books of Justice & Peacebuilding). Good Books.

Vitalyevich, K.; Zlokazov, S.; Dzakhotovna G.; and Takeyasu, K. (2021). Systems of social networks of delinquent young people. SHS Web of Conferences 108, IX Baltic Legal Forum 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202110805012>

Other References

Cohen, Albert (1955). *Delinquent Boys – The Culture of the Gang*. The Free Press. Glencoe, IL.

Duxbury, L. and Bennell, C. (2017). *Police in Schools: An Evidence-based Look at the Use of School Resource Officers*. Routledge.

Farrington, D.P. (2002). Developmental Criminology and Risk-Focused Prevention. In: Maguire, M; Morgan, R. and Reiner R. (Eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*. 3rd Ed. Oxford.

Grossman, J. and Thierney, J. (1998). Does mentoring work? An impact study of the Big Brothers and Big Sisters program. *Evaluation Review*, 22(3), 403-426.

Langhout, R.; Rhodes, J. and Osborne, L. (2004). An exploratory study on youth mentoring in an urban context: Adolescents' perceptions of relationship styles. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 33(4), 293-306.

Van Gemert F., Peterson D. & I-L. Lien (Eds.) (2008). *Street Gangs, Migration and Ethnicity*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

Welsh, B.C. and Farrington, D.P. (2012). *The Oxford Handbook of Crime Prevention*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Internet Sources

<https://www.bundeskriminalamt.at/205/start.aspx>

<https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/youth-justice/family-group-conferences/>

(last accessed: 30. June 2021)

About the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research

The Policy Briefs series
of the European Centre
is edited by Sonila Danaj
and Rahel Kahlert

The European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research is an intergovernmental organisation affiliated to the United Nations. Its purpose is to foster the collaboration between governments, research and other stakeholders in the field of social welfare.

Core Functions

- Providing applied social science and comparative empirical research on social policy in the UN-European Region
- Forging the evidence-base for social policy making and mutual learning on social welfare issues
- Initiating future-oriented public policy debates on social welfare issues by networking across the UN-European Region

Research Focus

The European Centre provides expertise in the fields of welfare and social policy development in a broad sense – in particular in areas where multi- or interdisciplinary approaches, integrated policies and inter-sectoral action are called for.

European Centre expertise includes issues of demographic development, work and employment, incomes, poverty and social exclusion, social security, migration and social integration, human security, care, health and well-being through the provision of public goods and personal services. The focus is on the interplay of socio-economic developments with institutions, public policies, monetary transfers and in-kind benefits, population needs and the balance of rights and obligations of all stakeholders involved.

European Centre Publications

- ‘Policy Briefs’ contain recent research and policy advice results
- ‘European Centre Reports’ expose results of studies or research carried out in the context of national or international projects
- ‘European Centre Working Papers’ comprise preliminary findings or innovative ideas to be shared with a wider public
- The European Centre Newsletter is published in English on a monthly basis and synthesizes the news published regularly on our website

Furthermore, scientific staff of the European Centre regularly publish books, peer-reviewed articles or contributions to books.

Please contact us (solymosi@euro.centre.org) if you want to get informed on a regular basis about our activities and publications.

Contact

Berggasse 17
A – 1090 Vienna
Tel: +43/1/319 45 05 -0
Email: ec@euro.centre.org

More information:

<http://www.euro.centre.org>