

## **PROMISE: Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement: Opportunities and challenges for conflicted young people across Europe.**

### **WP6: From Conflict to Innovation: Ethnographic Case Studies**

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## **Not in our town - NIOT**

### **Slovakia**

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**Executive summary:** This PROMISE case study documents the story of the Not in Our Town (NIOT) grassroots movement in the Slovak city of Banská Bystrica that originated as a protest movement against the results of regional elections in Banská Bystrica self-governing region in 2013 when a Neo-Nazi governor was democratically elected. The development of the movement shows various levels of youth engagement in the period from 2013 to 2017. It demonstrates that civil participation can contribute to breaking civic apathy and motivate the wider local/regional community to engage in resistance activities against fascism, racism, antisemitism, xenophobia and any kind of intolerance. NIOT is a good example of informal grassroots activism strengthening civil society in a postsocialist city. It can serve as an example of civic self-organisation consisting of collective action mobilised without the involvement of a formal organisation and with more individual civil engagement that constitutes one of the common types of activism in Central and Eastern Europe. The study focuses on the analysis of key findings based on face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis of media articles as well as action research carried out by two authors of the case study. The interviews were conducted with young activists who openly presented their negative attitudes against any type of radicalisation and extremism in the society (in this case mainly far right extremism) and actively joined the NIOT movement to combat these societal challenges. The study demonstrates the profile of these young people, their motivations and experience. It also describes activities of the NIOT movement in the 4-year period, which resulted in a positive outcome – the defeat of the Neo-Nazi governor in regional elections in November 2017. The story demonstrates the importance of civic/youth engagement in contemporary society and its potential to achieve social change.

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## 1. Introduction

Numerous scholarly articles and books on youth claim that youth can be seen as a social construct because the ways in which societies divide up the life course vary significantly across different time periods and cultural contexts. Also, within contemporary Western societies, many of the meanings that are associated with youth are undoubtedly changing; and the period that is encompassed by the term youth itself seems to have become ever-more elastic. Thus, on the one hand, it can be argued that childhood seems to be blurring into youth (e.g. see the sexualization of childhood debate, media and popular culture as the destroyers of childrens innocence, childrens growing access to consumer culture, etc. Yet, on the other hand, we also witness an extension of youth, or a blurring of the boundary between youth and adulthood. Youth appears to be lasting much longer and ending much later than it used to do. Young people are leaving the family home at an older age, and settling down in terms of stable jobs and relationships at a later point. Indeed, the lack of stable jobs or affordable independent housing means that settling down is hardly a prospect for many young people. Some psychologists argue that this period of emerging adulthood now continues well into the thirties; while in a different way, sociologists confirm that the transition to adulthood has become a significantly more unstable, precarious process (Buckingham and Kehily, 2014: 5-7).

The fact that young people experience a world that is significantly different from the world their parents knew as young people is even more valid for former communist countries in which the expansion of higher education, fast integration into the global economy and changing possibilities for relationship and family formation create even more rapid changes in the lives of young people than in the lives of their Western counterparts. Although impacts of these changes are not limited only to the young, young people are most affected by labour market changes, and most likely to be experimenting with new ways of living and to be pushing for social change (Woodman and Wyn, 2015: 1).

Slovakia and, previously, Czechoslovakia have had numerous experiences with an active involvement of young generations in movements and events pushing for social change. When The Velvet Revolution of November 1989 ended the 40-years period of communism and brought freedom and independence to Czechoslovakia, it was students, mainly those from universities, who became the key promoters of social change, with the assistance of artists and representatives of civil movements and initiatives. The break-up of Czechoslovakia and three terms of Vladimír Mečiar as Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic (1992-1998) brought difficult times for civil society and its organisations in Slovakia. Before parliamentary elections in 1998, more and more people were aware of the need to change the government and, therefore, extensive pre-election campaigns were launched, with significant participation of young people. Therefore, the 1998 parliamentary elections were marked by extremely high voter participation (the turnout was 84.24%) and the participation of young people and first-time voters was also exceptional. Young generations took these elections as a referendum on the political future of the Slovak Republic. The 1998 elections created the image of a progressive and pro-European young generation in Slovakia whose activities could push the whole society towards 'European values'. Similarly, young people took part in various mobilisation activities before parliamentary elections in 2010 in order to divert the country from the national-populistic course of politics during the government led by Robert Fico as Prime Minister in 2006-2010. And although young people in Slovakia are seen (and also quite often present themselves) as politically apathetic, reluctant to join organised and more permanent structures, these examples show that under some conditions when the country faces undemocratic tendencies, they are willing to organise and take care of public issues. Their political

involvement in such situations has been presented also by unconventional forms – according to Martiniello (2005), who distinguishes between conventional and unconventional forms of political involvement. The latter includes participation in protests, strikes and demonstrations, the power of which, is hugely dependent on collective action, while the former refers to running for election or voting.

Analyses of rich empirical material from representative sociological surveys conducted from 1994 to 2010 in Slovakia demonstrate that active citizenship is more frequent amongst individuals who have a stronger interest in politics, who generally, are more trusting, and who identify more strongly both with the goals of deliberative democracy and the economic and political changes after 1989. Civic participation is more widespread among individuals associated with various types of voluntary organisations (Gyárfášová and Bútorová, 2010: 465-470).

It is the active involvement and civic participation of young people that is under focus in this case study. The main objective of PROMISE is to explore the role of stigmatised young people in shaping society and address their engagement with social, environmental, cultural, and political issues as well as the challenges they face that affect their participation in society. We decided to join the PROMISE project just for the reason that we were aware that in our city Banská Bystrica, there is a civic platform consisting of mainly young people protesting against local self-government authorities and that investigation of its activities can provide opportunities for positive social engagement which is another objective of the PROMISE project.

This case study has been devoted to an urban grassroots movement called Not in Our Town (NIOT) that was born in the city of Banská Bystrica, Central Slovakia, in early 2014. The civic movement has developed as a reaction of local citizens to the results of regional elections – the victory of an extremist Neo-Nazi candidate as governor of the Banská Bystrica Region.<sup>1</sup> The NIOT movement is a civic platform that aims at combating any expressions of extremism, intolerance, fascism, racism, antisemitism or xenophobia. Because the object of the study is primarily connected with a particular city and is publicly recognised and referred to in the media, we decided not to anonymise the name of the city and the movement. Nevertheless, all names of the interviewees have been anonymised.

Banská Bystrica is a medium-size city of 80,000 inhabitants. According to Pink, studies of urban activism and movements focus on big cities and megacities and very often neglect smaller cities and towns, although it is particularly smaller settlements that offer good data for the analysis of global issues through the study of small places (Pink, 2009: 452). That is one of the reasons why we chose a smaller city as our research setting. The NIOT movement and public engagement of young people who are in conflict with extremism and fascism demonstrates quite a unique case study - at least in the Slovak context. From comparative surveys conducted during the first decade of the new millennium, we know that citizens of postcommunist countries including Slovakia differ from citizens of Western democracies by lower civic and political participation (Vráblíková, 2009). Lower civic participation in Central and Eastern Europe during the first few years following the end of state socialism was, to a great extent, a consequence of strong distrust of the people in public

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<sup>1</sup> The regional self-government as a separate ‘meso level’ of government began to operate in the Slovak Republic after the first regional elections held in 2001, while local self-government was introduced immediately after the change of regime, in 1990. It is one of three key levels (central, regional, local) of public administration with elected bodies in Slovakia. However, regional self-government seems to suffer from various contradictory developments that make it less influential than originally expected, compared for example to local self-government (Buček and Plešivčák, 2017: 601).

institutions and public affairs, and can be considered one of the major legacies of communism. This legacy seems to have a long-term impact on levels of civic engagement and the ways people get involved in public affairs in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Bitušíková, 2015). Even after almost 30 years after the fall of communism, there is still lower civic participation and activism in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe than in older European democracies. NIOT as a civic movement is an exception and worth further research.

## 2. Methods

In the case study, we followed a qualitative research approach with two main methods of data collection: participant observations and face-to-face interviews (structured, semi-structured and informal), which means that we used ethnography as our principal methodological approach. We understand ethnography in line with Brewer's definition:

Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally. (Brewer, 2000: 6).

In addition, both researchers carrying out this case study employed engaged, participatory and activist research. According to Charles Hale:

[...] activist research: a) helps us better to understand the root causes of inequality, oppression, violence, and related conditions of human suffering; b) is carried out, at each phase from conception through dissemination, in direct cooperation with an organized collective of people who themselves are subject to these conditions; and c) is used together with the people in question, to formulate strategies for transforming these conditions and to achieve the power necessary to make these strategies effective. (Hale, 2001: 13)

The authors of this report have been involved in the NIOT movement from its beginnings (2014), first, and primarily, as active citizens, and later, also as researchers-activists. As doing fieldwork in an urban setting is always rather challenging, being part of the core NIOT group helped us to better understand the development of the movement, its problems and challenges, and to build mutual trust.

On the other hand, we have been aware of the risks connected with activist research, especially those related to ethical issues. All key members of the movement (object of the study) were informed about our research in advance.

In the period of 2014-2016 (before the start of the PROMISE project), we were involved in the NIOT movement mainly through common activities such as meetings, educational events, workshops or conferences, being both active participant observers and co-organisers. After the beginning of the PROMISE project, we introduced the project to the core members of the movement (approximately 20-30 members), informed them about the objectives, and asked them for permission to continue being active in the movement and at the same time, conducting participatory and activist research. The NIOT members did not raise any objections to our research outline. After this introduction, we were able to start more focused participant observation including writing field notes, collecting visual material and doing interviews. Over the course of

2016-2018, we participated in 36 meetings and 8 events of the NIOT movement (approximately 95 hours of participant observation) and conducted 19 interviews.

The interviews were conducted in the Slovak language, usually in an environment familiar for the respondent e.g. a workplace or a public space (such as a café or a restaurant). The respondents were young people from 18 to 35 years old. These young people were activists in the core group of NIOT or those closely collaborating with NIOT in some selected activities (such as an antifascist march in October 2017). Other activists involved in NIOT activities during the research period belonged to the age category of between 35 and 60. They were also partly an object of the participant observation because generational transmission and collaboration has been a very important part of the NIOT movement development.

We interviewed 19 respondents – 10 males and 9 females. As previously mentioned, they were aged 18 to 35 years old – of which 3 were in the age category 18-20, 9 were in the age category 21-30 and 7 were in the age category 31-35. 14 respondents have completed their university education, 2 respondents are university students, 1 respondent has reached secondary education and the two youngest respondents are currently studying at grammar school (gymnázium). Of all the interviewed young people, 17 were single and 2 were married (1 male and 1 female).

During the period of writing this report (March 2018), the situation in Slovakia has dramatically changed after the murder of an investigative journalist, and many more young people have started to be engaged in public events organised by NIOT.

All interviews were conducted in one sitting. Where further questions arose, subsequent NIOT events were used as a good opportunity to follow up informal conversations. The interviews usually lasted between one and two hours, with an average length of one hour twenty minutes. We followed a semi-structured interview schedule prepared on the basis of the PROMISE project objectives. However, all interviews were rather informal and open-ended, and allowed the interviewees to express their opinions freely.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and stored according to the PROMISE guidelines and ethical codes (see Introduction to D6.1 for details).

In addition, we collected approximately 25 newsletter articles, press releases, programmes and a large number of visual materials (mainly photos). We also followed social media discourses. For the analysis of the collected data, we used textual analysis and computer-based qualitative analysis, namely NVivo software – a purposely built tool for categorisation, classification and analysis of qualitative and mixed-methods data.

### 3. Key Findings

It was February 2014 when I was invited to a meeting of several active inhabitants (about 15 people) of the Banská Bystrica city who decided to develop community activities against intolerance and extremism as a response to the results of the regional elections (the victory of a Neo-Nazi governor). At the meeting, representatives of the local Centre for Community Organizing introduced the idea of 'Not in Our Town', based on a U.S. model of a grassroots movement. After a passionate discussion, we agreed to form a Slovak version of Not in Our Town (NIOT) in Banská Bystrica. We decided to

build it as a grassroots activity based on positive values such as tolerance, friendship, respect and love, and not as political battle against the new regional governor. Our first activity was formulation of the NIOT key statement called 'Breaking the Silence. (Field diary of A.B., February 2014)

#### The NIOT Statement:

Nie v našom meste (Not In Our Town) is a platform that was established in Banská Bystrica by people who support tolerance in the city. We believe that Banská Bystrica is a place whose inhabitants share and protect values of humanity from violence and hatred. While respecting the diversity of opinions, we support collaboration and community building through strengthening the following values: solidarity, responsibility, loyalty, tolerance, respect, honesty and wisdom...

We do not agree with silence as a response to the present political and economic situation. We do not agree that extremist opinions should become tolerated and accepted by society. We believe that silence is not the right response to hatred and violence. Sometimes, it is enough to break silence and start talking. We invite everyone to support this initiative.

The initial core group of the NIOT movement consisted of about 15–20 people (NGO activists, academics, artists, religion, church and minority representatives and committed individuals). Within the following few months of 2014, the NIOT expanded and organised several public events (including educational events about the Jewish and Roma Holocaust, multicultural festival Embargo and a conference Human Forum). The NIOT movement continued to grow in the following years although not so much in terms of the number of committed people, but mainly in terms of the quality of its activities (particularly educational activities at primary and secondary schools).

The turning point in the development of the NIOT movement was the election year 2017, when the core group of the movement decided to mobilise inhabitants of the region to participate in the regional elections (November 2017) and not to vote for Neo-Nazi leader Marián Kotleba (or any other member of his Kotleba-ĽSNS party). This more pro-active and mobilising approach attracted new, mainly younger people to the movement. It is particularly these people who we interviewed in the period between August 2017 and January 2018. Most of them were not at the birth of the NIOT movement, but joined mainly in the election year 2017 in order to participate in the mobilisation against the Neo-Nazi regional governor. They brought a new, more open, courageous and 'revolutionary' attitude to the movement. This has become an example of intergenerational conflict – a source of a small tension between the 'older' (in terms of age and 'membership') and new, younger members of the movement. The older members insisted on an 'apolitical' approach to mobilisation. They wanted to build the campaign on emphasising positive values such as tolerance and respect and did not want to express direct support to any candidate.

We are a platform that from the very beginning stands for positive values, 'for' something good, not 'against' something. We should remember our statement. If we start being seen as connected to a particular candidate and openly support him, we might lose our credibility. (C.D., Field diary of A.B., 16 October 2017)

Young members disagreed and wanted to fight openly against the Neo-Nazi governor and to support a democratic candidate with the best chance of being elected (according to opinion polls),

using various strategies (from happenings to social media activities to a public anti-fascist march and a concert). In the end, a compromise was found. Most (not all) of the older members accepted the arguments of the younger ones and agreed to participate in an open campaign supporting a particular democratic candidate. The next month showed the power and courage of the younger generation to change the course of history because in November 2017, the Neo-Nazi governor was roundly defeated in the regional elections. Numerous NIOT activities definitely contributed to this result.

### **3.1 Activists' family background**

When studying people who are in a way 'different', not like 'the others', representing a specific interest group, etc., researchers quite often want to know whether there were any common or significant moments in their past that could contribute to their present opinions, values, lifestyles. Because of the fact that we study young people, we asked them some questions on their family origin, family background or significant childhood experience.

We can say that basically all young NIOT activists come from middle-class families; the majority of them spent their childhood with both parents (only four of them experienced the divorce of parents and one respondent lived from 12 years of age with his mother after his father died). Almost all of them had siblings and five respondents were from families with at least three children: Well, family matters, it has a strong influence, for sure... I had three brothers, I was the oldest, so there are some norms about what is expected from the eldest (R.S., male, 27).

The majority of the interviewed young people grew up in Banská Bystrica or some other middle-sized cities in Slovakia; some of them had experience of living in both urban and rural environments during their childhood, but all respondents with 'mixed' urban-rural experience claimed that urban life suited them better than life in villages.

I really hate village life, I would not live there any more, for sure. Although I grew up in the village, I consider myself to be completely a city person, the village is not for me, really... It is strange mentality there, everybody knows everybody, old ladies from the church are chasing you about whether you said good morning to them. And generally they are stubborn people there, grumbling about everything. I hate every aspect of village life, honestly... (M.D., male, 25)

Three respondents mentioned their nuclear family environment as open to discussions about public issues, but respondents generally did not indicate their parents to be people interested in politics or very active in civil society. However, a quarter of interviewed young people stressed their grandparents had had a formative influence on their personalities and attitudes.

[...] because my grand-grandfather was cooperating with the Czechoslovak resistance in Yugoslavia and gestapo caught him and he ended up in the concentration camp, so my grandfather who died five years ago was always against uniforms, he had bad memories since he was a child. So I am involved in all this also through my family. (O.D., male, 27)

More than half of the respondents (11) said that they had experience of living abroad. Such experience probably helps young people to be more open in their attitudes to political issues, more aware of cultural differences and more sensitive to extremism and radicalism.



I travel a lot in fact, just recently I came back from the US after a four-month working stay there. Some time ago I worked in Sri Lanka as an English teacher. As far as activism is concerned, I was in Madrid at the conference in Madrid organised by the European Commission focused on radicalism prevention, this year we want to repeat this conference in Budapest. (M.D., male, 25)

Well, my parents have been divorced since I was four, I take it as it is... I keep contact with my father, we visit each other, I regularly see him in Cyprus. In fact I am lucky that I can see such different cultures, because his culture is completely different, they did not experience such regime as we did here in Slovakia. (A.T., female, 18)

### ***3.2 Is it good to be young in Slovakia right now?***

In the introductory part, it was mentioned that the contemporary situation of young people is different than in the past; their transition to adulthood is more unstable and precarious and they have to face various labour market changes and experience new ways of living. Having an opportunity to interview young active people involved in public issues, we wanted to know what they think about the situation and perspectives of young people in the country. Do they think that it is good to be young in contemporary Slovakia?

All respondents see mostly positive aspects of being young. They strongly believe that they have better opportunities than previous generations in the country.

It is nice to be young nowadays. We should be thankful for what we have here and for our future prospects. It's much worse in many other countries. Many things must be changed, for sure..., but generally, it's really fine here. (A.C., female, 20)

Generally, respondents highlight opportunities to study and freedom to choose any school and any discipline, opportunities to choose place and type of work, freedom to travel, opportunities to get an experience of some kind abroad (working, studying) and to be mobile, freedom of speech and expression and opportunities to learn languages. Some of them also emphasise unprecedented opportunities to get new information, to communicate on the Internet and via social media, although they admit that it has also some drawbacks. Globalisation is mentioned as a positive phenomenon bringing new opportunities just for the young – at least those who are prepared and educated.

We, young people, have a chance to cross borders without any problems, to travel wherever we wish, we've been learning languages for years so we can go and work abroad, we can study there – so globalisation is really very good for us (E.Š., female, 32).

Nevertheless, our respondents are aware of the ambivalent situation of young people nowadays. Although their possibilities to study are much more extensive than in the past and borders in Europe are open for them, there is not so clear a relationship between obtaining education and having a proper job.

It was never, or at least within the last 50 years, so difficult for young people to find a job. On the other hand, it's very easy to get education, but afterwards it's really tough to get a job. (A.T., female, 18)

One of the main negatives is a long-lived idea that education guarantees you a good life. Our society still makes people believe that it's necessary to study at university or acquire a good education in order to live a decent life, but this doesn't work any more, I think. It happens quite often that education doesn't advance you. There aren't enough opportunities and this is a big problem, really. There is disillusion among many young people whose first steps after graduation lead to the job centre. (R.S., male, 27)

Problems with getting a job produce other consequences that have negative impacts on other spheres of life, for instance, family, friends, intimate relationships: After graduation a young man or a woman believes that s/he will find a job. It doesn't happen, so s/he leaves the country. What happens then? Relationships, friends, family... are only at distance, some partnerships dissolve or a partner has to accept the situation. Basically only negatives come from it (R.S., male, 27).

The above-mentioned opinion is quite widespread among our respondents but there are also alternative views that see the situation in slightly different colours.

Slovakia is a country with high standards of living. I don't understand why people here are so frustrated. To be honest, I don't understand at all if a young person says – I am moving to Western Europe because there is no job here for me, because I don't have a proper salary, because there is not much to do here... When I talk with entrepreneurs or look at our NGO, it is still difficult to find high-quality people. I know from my experience that when I wanted a job, I got it within a month... I believe that young people have wonderful opportunities to create things that are missing here right now. (V.S., female, 31)

Regardless of whether our respondents adopted a more pessimistic or more enthusiastic approach to job prospects in Slovakia, they usually admitted that the situation of youth nowadays is less certain than it was before. On the other hand, they also acknowledged that the situation in other countries is very similar. Even our respondent V.S., criticising widespread frustration of Slovaks in the previous paragraph, at the end claimed:

There are many uncertainties connected with the satisfaction of basic needs such as housing and employment. Well, mortgages is one thing that brings insecurity, jobs is another one because even if you have a job contract it doesn't mean that you will be allowed to work for a long period of time, which is quite different from the situation of previous generations. But I don't think that this is some special Slovak trend. Our job environment is very similar to environments of other countries in the region. (V.S., female, 31)

In a similar way, Z.G. highlighted problems with finding proper housing and more stable work as primary sources of young people's precariousness.

I guess it's mainly insecurity regarding economic and social issues, well, if you travel you see it everywhere... While our parents' generation acquired housing after they finished school and lived on their own, nowadays young people stay much longer with parents. They have just short-term contracts, so they are much less secure socially. As a result they don't get bank credit and mortgages and so on. (Z.G., female, 30)

Three respondents also pointed to problems of intergenerational relations. From their perspective, older colleagues are often afraid of losing their positions and instead of transferring their experience to the younger generation, they are afraid of them, do not allow them to realise their capabilities, and prevent their creativity.

As a society, we don't trust young people, we can hear very often that you are so young, you can't know anything about that, just wait twenty years or so and then, maybe... This is a very negative feature of our society. But why should a young person waiting so long? Very often s/he is much more capable than many of those who are older. If we don't give them a chance, we kill their creativity and other good things in them. (M.L., male, 32)

### **3.3 Sources of extremism**

Because of the fact that our respondents belong to a platform that was born as a reaction to the victory of an extremist Neo-Nazi candidate in regional elections, it is quite understandable that manifestations of radicalism, extremism and intolerance are considered the key problem of Slovak society by young people from the NIOT movement.

I think that it is increasing extremism and radicalisation that is most visible right now. Of course, we have some other big problems like poverty, or quite a lot of people living below or near the poverty line. However, my argument is that poverty doesn't inhibit the others' existence while extremism means that one group believes that the existence of some other group prevents them realising their own life interests. Therefore, they go against such groups (M.Z., male, 35).

People from NIOT offer their explanations on extremism and its sources. They find them in intolerance, widespread stereotypical attitudes to minorities – One respondent, for example, noted that People don't consider as an extremist opinion that Roma people live at the expense of us, the majority, from our money... Such a view is considered as a common standard (V.S., female, 31). Corruption is also blamed: Corruption and unequal treatment are crucial motives of increasing extremism and radicalisation, people are aware of what has been done for them and what hasn't, they blame corruption, they know that it is present at the top levels and they are dissatisfied (Z.S., female, 26). Other cited causes include: greater acceptance of racist attitudes; lack of critical thinking; and frustration of people living in economically and socially disadvantaged regions. Some respondents also stressed apathy and ambivalence to public issues and people's disinterest in what is going on around them.

I think that racism is much more tolerated now than it used to be. People with racist attitudes are not afraid of public denouncement any more. I don't think their numbers have increased, in my view there are more or less the same number of racist... However, what they dare to say loudly, on microphone, on the main square is something everybody would have been ashamed to say 5 years ago, except for some lunatics. (M.D., male, 25)

People are seeking simple solutions, solutions that you can accept without thinking. We don't like some EU regulation, so let's leave the EU, it's just so simple. Traditional political parties would discuss it all endlessly; they would bring many arguments for and against. That's, of course, very democratic, but people don't want to hear it all

anymore. It's quite complex issue, not a simple one. People are tired of traditional political parties, they see corruption everywhere, and Kotleba says that he is not going to steal money and again it is so simple... And this is the problem, people don't want to think nowadays. (A.T., female, 18)

The statements above seek to explain the general sources of extremism in Slovakia. It is well-known that, when in the 2016 Slovak parliamentary elections the far-right political party Kotleba - Peoples Party Our Slovakia led by Marián Kotleba gained 8.04 % of votes and obtained 14 seats in the Slovak Parliament, it gained the biggest support from young people who were first-time voters (22,70%). Therefore, our respondents, young NIOT activists, were also considering reasons why especially young people are so vulnerable to extremism.

One type of explanation points to the situation of those who are, in a sense, disadvantaged, who live in a socially and economically excluded environment. One of our youngest respondents explained why Kotleba's party is so successful in capturing young people:

Because here we have a group of youngsters which has much worse chances, much lower education, they are much more frustrated, they live in bad conditions, they belong to nowhere, and that's why extremists succeed to get part of them, because they gave them a feeling of belonging somewhere, something we can't give them... If there is a group of young people that belong to nowhere and somebody shows them that they could belong, they go there, it's natural, we can't blame them for that. (J.R., male, 19)

Similar views – that extremists can be attractive for youth giving them the feeling that they can be useful – were also shared by four other NIOT respondents. M.Z. highlights sources of motivation, both material and non-material, that make extremists very effective in attracting young people:

Young people are seeking heroes, examples, leaders... And those young people who are stuck in the valleys,<sup>2</sup> with no chances of getting a decent job, try to find somebody who can be blamed for their difficult situation. And when such a group as Kotleba's party appears which gives them some work, a team spirit, ideas, sufficient motivation, that's a way extremist groups are able to find quite substantial support among youth. (M.Z., male, 35)

Another frequent explanation that appeared in interviews was the traditional rebellion of the young (against parents, authorities) intertwined with new phenomena: popularity of anti-system opinions; and conspiracies on the Internet:

It's quite common nowadays that if something appears on the Internet which is 'anti', it has a real success. If somebody says that the system is bad, it's cool. To be against something is always more attractive than to be for something. In fact, the success of radicals in this region is always ensured on topics like problems with the Roma population, measurements against this and against that... there is nothing positive or constructive. Being against, against migration, it's always oriented in an anti-system way, it's something which really attracts youth, even if it's combined with conspiracies and similar 'bestsellers'. (L.D., male, 23)

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<sup>2</sup> The respondent has in mind mainly Horehronie (Upper Hron region) which is an Eastern part of Banská Bystrica self-governing region and Gemer, which is located South-East of Banská Bystrica.

Kotleba is something like a fashion, fashion for rebels. Maybe it's silly, but I feel that it's the fashion for teenagers like long hair or some music bands used to be fashion for kids before. It's cool to be for Kotleba when you are young, it's something with which you piss your parents off, something that the majority is against. (M.D., male, 25)

The third frequent reasoning of young people's inclination to extremism is viewed in a lack of critical thinking and deficiencies of educational system:

Partly [young people's support for Kotleba] it was a bit of fun, but what is more important and dangerous is lack of critical thinking, vulnerability to manipulation and a fact that our society, our education doesn't lead children to the acceptance of difference and diversity. Diversity generally is not tolerated in our society (V.S., female, 31).

The fact that education is viewed as a key problem of contemporary Slovakia will be considered further in Section 3.6. Some respondents connected educational limits also with indifference of young people and a general lack of interest in public issues.

The problem is that young people are not at all value-oriented, they don't follow what is going on in politics, they have absolutely no clue how economics works and all these things because schools don't teach them any of these things. (E.Š., female, 32)

### ***3.4 Beginnings in NIOT – beginnings of activism***

In the interviews with young people involved in activities of the NIOT movement, we were interested in the reasons why these people became activists and got involved in the NIOT movement, and particularly, what the turning point was for getting engaged. For the majority of respondents, it was the result of regional elections or the following events that were a turning point.

For me, the fact that Kotleba won the elections in 2013 meant we had a big problem – not all votes were counted yet, but it was clear he won. So several friends – it was between midnight and early morning – met in a flat of one activist (now a MP) and started to discuss what we were going to do... NIOT was formed a bit later, but its beginnings started that election night. Some people just knew immediately it was a big problem and as time went on, it was clear we needed a long-term strategy how to fight against these things, and NIOT somehow articulated this need. (R.S., male, 27)

In 2013, when Kotleba was elected the governor. I was 15 and started to be slightly interested in politics. And I asked people who they voted for, and many said they voted for Kotleba 'just for fun' – they did not really think he could win. At that time I did not see it as a big problem yet, yes, not good that he was elected in Banská Bystrica, but I thought it was just a mistake. I did not think he could succeed in parliamentary elections – and he did. And then I realised this was a big problem and I do realise it more and more because his preference votes are growing. (A.T., female, 18)

I remember first only some events that were organised by NIOT in 2015-2016 when something happened, then I started to be involved through the Human Forum conference and and some activities - e.g. when Kotleba – the governor stopped performances and funding in several theatres [because they supported multiculturalism or LGBT community] – through these activities I got involved. I was then leading discussions with students organised by the Puppet Theatre – they had a project aimed at education against extremism (a performance ‘Letter to a black son’ and further discussion) – that is how and why I got engaged’ (L.K., female, 35).

Our interviewees talked also about their general attitude to activism and engagement and the reasons why they became activists. There were either some external political or other societal events (such as victory of a Neo-Nazi regional governor and his discriminatory practices or corruption cases that remained unsolved) or influential people (it could be a parent, a teacher, a schoolmate or a friend) that inspired and motivated them to become more interested in public affairs and engaged in public events.

For me, it was quite natural to be active through the topics such as discrimination and social injustice... I was at a bilingual secondary school with a British approach, it was amazing and quite liberal. They led us to free critical thinking, invited various interesting personalities to school, I grew up in this freedom... and maybe also the fact I belong to the LGBT community contributed to my activism, but I really started to be fully engaged only when I came to Banska Bystrica and started to create a cultural centre. (M.Z., male, 35)

If I have to identify who had the key influence on me, it was definitely my history teacher. Then my grandmother, grandfather, and then during my first activities a lot of other people, for instance a doctor from Bangladesh who has been living in Slovakia... We met in Amnesty International – an amazingly inspiring man, despite his demanding profession he is all the time active and engaged... (R.S., male, 27)

For some (at least two people from our research sample), the main reason for becoming active was personal transformation from being a Neo-Nazi supporter to a fighter against fascism and Neo-Nazism.

Many things happened in my life that have changed me, it was mainly travelling and meeting people who were of different sexual orientation - I found out these were people like any others. I was always interested in public affairs, even when I was 15–16 and defined myself as a fascist – I could explain fascist ideology from an economic point of view because I had read many books about it... And now when I have more life experiences, I can see that I was wrong in many things. And I try to be active and engaged maybe also because I feel remorse for being the idiot I used to be. (M.D., male, 25)

Political activism can also be a route towards civic activism (although they are closely connected). Some respondents started first working with political parties and this experience brought them also to civic activities.

I first co-organised a protest against the government with a political party, then I started to cooperate with (politically) independent members of the City Council and

with the anti-extremist group of people, and then I got closer to the NIOT during the election year 2017 – and together we developed the idea and the project ‘Spolu je nás viac’ (Together we are stronger) – a campaign [to mobilise people to take part in the elections]. (J.R., male, 19)

For at least four respondents, the involvement in NIOT was a step towards a more focused approach to activities aimed at deradicalisation and even to international activities and engagement:

NIOT was also an impulse, a motivation for me to start to be more active, and through NIOT I got to an international group Radicalisation Awareness Network and its programme RAN YOUNG, which wants to create a platform, to share information among young people from Europe that relates to fighting against extremism and deradicalisation. It is based on the peer to peer principle – the young ones to the young ones. The voice of the young ones is relevant in these processes – it is different if it is a peer who discusses problems with me or an authority from a different generation. (L. D., male, 23)

As previously mentioned, most of the interviewees (11) had some international experience before (they had either studied or worked abroad for some time), which also had an impact on their attitude to be more active and involved.

For me (after living abroad some time) it was obvious, it was a must to start doing some public activities and lead an active life in the society in order to help to form and change it. (V.S., female, 31)

### ***3.5 NIOT activities: Prevention against radicalisation***

A set of questions in the interviews was devoted to youth activism – activities that aimed at the prevention of radicalisation and extremism typical for voters of the far-right Neo-Nazi governor and his party in the region and in Slovakia. The party rhetoric has been based on hatred to ‘any others’ (mostly the Roma, the Jews, Muslims and LGBT), denying the Holocaust, anti-EU and anti-NATO and often pro-Russia. According to an opinion poll from 2017 organised by the Institute for Public Affairs, about 69% of young people (18 to 39) consider the growth of extremism a serious problem in society. On the other hand, more than one third of young people in Slovakia sympathises with opinions and activities of the Neo-Nazi party (Kotleba-ĽSNS) and many of them would vote for them in the elections. The highest support comes from the group of young people between the ages of 18-29; it is higher among men, people with lower education and who come from smaller places (Veľšic, 2017: 8-14).

Respondents in our interviews considered lack of education to be the biggest problem and reason for the growth of extremism; mainly lack of education about modern history and prevailing teaching methods based on memorising information that do not lead to critical thinking. For this reason, most activities developed within the NIOT movement were focused on education, using various forms from the systematic educational work at schools (informal teaching), cultural events and festivals, community work and an annual conference Human Forum. The NIOT activities could be organised at a professional level, not only thanks to many volunteers, but also because of an umbrella non-governmental organisation Centre for Community Organising (CCO) that could devote part of their staff work time to the NIOT.

Of all the activities undertaken, at least two long-term activities might be mentioned: Schools for Democracy; and Human Forum. Schools for Democracy is a programme initiated by the NIOT and run by the CCO and a number of NIOT volunteers. Fifteen schools (primary and secondary) in the region of Banská Bystrica are now involved in the programme, although it was difficult to start cooperation with them during the tenure of the Neo-Nazi governor as all secondary schools operate within the purview of the regional government and most schoolmasters were afraid of organising any anti-extremism education. The programme includes critical thinking workshops, a pilot project on values (measuring values before and after educational activities) and 'living libraries'. Living libraries is the most successful form of informal education when a NIOT volunteer from a marginalised group (a Jew, a Roma, a LGBT representative, a former Neo-Nazi, etc.) visits a class and tells the students his/her own life story. This proved to be a very effective way of changing opinions and attitudes of children and young people towards 'any others'.

We try to organise educational workshops at primary and secondary schools, aimed at the development of critical thinking, reading with understanding, media literacy education – how to read the text or the pictures... And then living libraries – meeting the people whom students have never seen – such as a real Muslim, or a Jewish woman whose parents survived the Holocaust, or a person who used to be a drug addict, or a Roma woman or Roma man who are employed, or a young man who used to be a fascist - we want the students to meet a person about whom they have never heard anything nice, and suddenly they see a 'normal' person like them... (Z.S., female, 26)

I am part of the Living libraries project. I visit classes and tell them my story – as an idiot, a former Nazi supporter who used to fight against anyone; who went through various stages and now has completely different ideals. I must say, I had excellent feedback from the children I talked to. We were in a class in Brezno, I think they were in the last year of a primary school or first year of a secondary... The majority of them were total fans of Kotleba (Neo-Nazi governor at the time), and I told them my story that I did know Kotleba, he was my teacher, I used to go out with him... I could see that my personal story, my transformation had some impact on these young people. I really like this. (L.D., male, 23)

Human Forum (see Plate 1 logo) is another important NIOT educational and public event – it is an annual conference organised since 2014 at the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica by the NIOT volunteers in close co-operation with the University and the municipality. The event is open to the public for free and aims at connecting all sectors of the society. It usually attracts about 150 to 200 participants. Primarily, it wants to attract teachers who can learn about human rights education from different perspectives; however, this seems to be the most challenging task. Only a small number of teachers take part in the conference despite a massive promotion and an attractive thematic programme. The excuse is lack of time, or schoolmasters who do not allow the teachers to participate.



Plate 1. Logo of the Human Forum



For me the most questionable challenge (of the Human Forum) is the totally passive attitude of teachers and schoolmasters, I cannot understand it... If we cannot get teachers to a workshop on how to teach critical thinking, I do not know how much more we can do... We do not need to persuade ourselves.... I do not think it is fear that stops them coming. It is more unwillingness to do something extra, something more, I don't know. (Z.G., female, 30)

The most important NIOT action in 2017 was the election campaign, noted above, with a number of activities, which attracted new young members to the movement. NIOT got fully involved in the 2017 regional election campaign under the slogan '*Spolu je nás viac*' (Together we are stronger, see Plate 2). The campaign started in spring 2017. A number of activities were organised during the campaign, starting with the formulation of a manifesto in spring 2017:

Hatred makes headlines. But people in this region make a different story. Common people make stories full of positive activities that stand against intolerance or corruption.

We want to live in our region and to enjoy it. To have a good job, a happy family and space for personal development. We do not want to silently tolerate any iniquity that some people living here have to face. We believe that no person is alone, but part of a community that cares about him/her and about the whole region. We do not need to have same opinions, but we are unified in the statement that no one can be persecuted.

We believe that change can be done where people of the region live. Together with you we want to stop hatred, the growth of radical opinions, discrimination and corruption and to create a safe and open place for living.

Regional elections are the moment when we make the future of our region. We decide about who (and how) will govern schools, hospitals, culture and roads, and work on a good and safe life for the people in the region.

You are the ones who can make a difference. Vote for change. Together we are stronger.



Plate 2. Logo of the campaign Together we are stronger

An important part of the campaign was to mobilise voters from small villages and towns of the region. Two volunteers – 'A Little Cynic' and a cameraman made a journey of more than a month across the region called (Ne)tárajštreka and created 13 videos from various, often the most marginalised, parts of the region, which were made public on the campaign website ([www.spolujenasviac.sk](http://www.spolujenasviac.sk)).

The campaign culminated with an anti-fascist march on 10 October 2017, prior to the November regional elections (See Plate 3 and Plate 4).



Plate 3: Picture from an anti-fascism march, October 2017. Photo: Alexandra Bitusikova



Plate 4: Picture from an anti-fascism march, October 2017. Photo: Alexandra Bitusikova

Its motto was: 'Let us show together that fascism does not have any place here!' and symbols used in the campaign clearly labelled its agenda as anti-Nazi (see Plate 5).



Plate 5: An anti-fascism sign used in the campaign

The regional elections on 4 November 2017 brought victory of a democratic candidate and caused a total defeat of the Neo-Nazi governor (although he is still a MP). Respondents felt that the actions of NIOT had been important in bring this about:

I think that NIOT did excellent work in the mobilisation campaign before the elections – I think it was one of the main reasons why so many people came to vote... At the start of NIOT I had a feeling that it was just activities for us, we met with friends and talked about what we knew, but now I can see that the community of the people more or less involved is growing and is very diverse... (Z.G., female, 30)

### **3.6 Conflicts: barriers to activism**

The interviews carried out with young people also revealed some barriers that might prevent young people from becoming interested and active in public affairs. Two main reasons were usually mentioned: a general lack of interest among the public and deep distrust in formal institutions (including lack of interest within the family); and education.

I would say that the main barrier to activism is lack of engagement. Oeople are losing hope. They say nothing will change. They do not trust anyone in politics, in media. And if I address someone – 'come and help', the answer is 'why should I?' (A.T., female, 18)

I think the vast majority of people do not care, they are totally indifferent. They show some interest before the elections and they make decisions (who to vote for) following their emotions, but not rational facts. And that's it. (M.D., male, 25)

Some respondents stressed an intergenerational conflict and claimed that lack of interest among young people comes from the family and home. They pointed out apathy especially in the age category of their parents and grandparents which may be explained as the legacy of communism ('why should we be active? Nothing will change anyway').

I think apathy comes from home... and then young people have many other opportunities for spending their leisure time today...People are not interested in

politics, it is their last preference, they would rather do something else, more entertaining. (A.T., female, 18)

The generation of my parents... they usually want to have 'peace', they experienced various coups, went through it themselves and now if they want to talk about it (extremism), let us discuss it in a pub, but otherwise leave me alone... (M.C., male, 31)

I think older people do not trust anyone and have given up on social change. As they grew up during the former regime, they are conformists, they were used to speaking differently at home and in public..., it is a sort of hypocrisy which still exists here. (M.Z., male, 35)

Education or problems in education were identified as the most important challenge in combating extremism, radicalisation, racism, antisemitism, xenophobia or intolerance by the vast majority of respondents. Several points of criticism were mentioned frequently: lack of critical thinking and an old fashioned way of teaching, based on memorising; unpreparedness of teachers to reflect on the realities of today (including poor understanding of social media); or history education that stops in the period of the WW2.

I see the biggest problem in the area of critical thinking. Students – including university students - accept the first information they read as the only one and the true one. (L.K., female, 35)

Young people are used just to taking what is offered to them by school. They are taught how to learn, but not how to think – education and critical thinking go in totally different directions... (D.I., female, 20).

I think education is a problem. I do not remember having any lessons on the history of the last 50 years, which is a big mistake. Why should I know about every day of Lenin's life or Hitler's if I do not know at all what was happening in the 1990s, all those awful things during the Mečiar's government... I have to study about it myself, but not everyone wants to do it... (D.I., female, 20)

## 4. Conclusions

The story of the 2013 regional elections in the Banská Bystrica region show that long term unresolved socio-economic problems specific for a region can contribute to social tensions. Consequent frustration of the public also expressed in electoral apathy gives opportunities for the success of radical right-wing political parties (Buček and Plešivčák, 2017: 627). Moreover, according to the index DEREK (Demand For Right-Wing Extremism) constructed by the think-tank Political Capital Institute and based on the international comparative European Social Survey in 2013, 13% of Slovak respondents could be considered as potential supporters of right-wing extremist parties. This number was the highest from neighbouring Visegrad countries (it was 12% in Hungary and 8% in both Poland and the Czech Republic in 2013); the same index for Austria and France in 2015 was 5% and for Germany only 2%. Slovakia belongs to those European countries in which the demand for right-wing extremist politics seems to be an important factor in political arena (Veštic, 2017: 5-6).

This case study documents the story of the NIOT platform in the city of Banská Bystrica that originated as a protest movement against the result of regional elections in the Banská Bystrica self-governing region in 2013. The story of NIOT from its inception at the beginning of 2014 until subsequent regional elections in 2017 show that civic participation can contribute to breaking civic apathy and motivate the wider community to engage in resistance activities against intolerance and public silence. NIOT can serve as an example of informal grassroots activism strengthening civil society in a postsocialist city, and as an example of civic self-organisation consisting of collective action mobilised without the involvement of a formal organisation and with more individual civil engagement that constitutes one of the common types of activism in Central and Eastern Europe (Bitušíková, 2015: 127).

In our case study, we concentrated on young people involved in the NIOT platform. These people are very active and aware of the importance of civic and political engagement. We are aware that they are not representative of all young people in the country or in the region, and their interests in and engagement with public issues are not common for majority of citizens including young people. In the 1990s, Lijphardt pointed out that although political equality and political participation belong to basic democratic ideals, political participation in reality is very unequal which, consequently, leads to unequal influence of social actors and an erosion of participatory democracy (Lijphardt, 1997: 1). From various theoretical and empirical studies, we know that unequal distribution of civic participation has negative consequences for politics and reproduction of social inequalities. Gyárfášová and Bútorová stress that the problem of Slovak democracy is not only unequal involvement of citizens in public issues but also negative trends in civic participation. Based on data from representative surveys from the years 1994, 2004 and 2008, they claim that over this period, the circle of active citizens actually narrowed and, by the end of this period respondents declared less aspiration to participate in public issues than at its start (Gyárfášová and Bútorová, 2010: 484).

However, the short history of NIOT from 2014, the defeat of right-wing extremist Marian Kotleba in regional elections in the Banská Bystrica self-governing region in November 2017, but also successful civil movements, pre-election campaigns and various mobilisation activities prior to parliamentary elections in both 1998 and 2010, demonstrate changing forms of civic participation. Although young people in Slovakia (and citizens generally) are reluctant to join political parties and more permanent structures, when the country faces undemocratic tendencies, they are willing to organise and engage in public issues, albeit preferring to do so through unconventional forms (participation in protest, strikes and demonstrations, activism via the Internet). This proposition is being tested in reality right now; in the course of writing this report (March-April 2018) many thousands of Slovaks were marching across the country 'for a decent Slovakia'. The protests were prompted by the murders of a journalist Jan Kuciak, and his fiancée, Martina Kusnirova, both 27. Ján Kuciak investigated ties between top politicians in Slovakia and Italy's Ndrangheta organised crime group. The demonstrations rapidly swelled into mass protests against the corruption and arrogance of the government ('Young Slovaks Show Extremism in Europe Can Be Defied') and forced the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico and Minister of Interior Robert Kaliňák.

The examples of civic and political participation discussed above and its shift towards unconventional forms also demonstrate the fact that civic participation is, to a large extent, situationally conditioned. It is probably the price we are paying in the situation when competition between ideas and solutions have practically disappeared from political life.

## 5. Future analysis

We identified a few themes encountered during our analysis of the NIOT movement that could be of interest to some other case studies within PROMISE WP6 clusters. These are mainly topics of education and low-quality of education, educational programmes emphasising positive values, tolerance, diversity, respect and preventing extremism and intolerance, civic activities, intergenerational relations and conflicts, sources of extremism, activities against radicalism and extremism, youth mobilisation (also mobilisation through social media), youth identity, critical thinking, cultural differences, intercultural experience and living abroad, impacts of globalisation, job perspectives, problems with corruption, etc.

Regarding the analysis of quantitative data sets, for our case study, we found as very useful, a substantial proportion of the variables for country reports based on Eurobarometer, specifically the variables from the Perception of opportunity/constraints part including: satisfaction with democracy satisfaction; expectations regarding the economic situation, employment situation, marginalisation of youth due to crisis, education system and its adaptation to labour, directions things are going in the country and EU, perspectives for the next generation, variables on personal situation like life satisfaction, personal expectations regarding life in general, job situation, financial situation, confidence in future). All the variables describing trust in institutions, and also variables mapping civic engagement (memberships), formal political participation including electoral participation, and activism in non-formal political activities were also useful and merit further attention in conjunction with findings from the qualitative reports.

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## Appendix: table of respondents' socio-demographic data

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity (self declared)	Educational status	Employment status	Family status	Place of residence
1.	A.C.	F	22	Slovak	Secondary (grammar school)	Freelance photographer	Single	Bratislava
2.	L.K.	F	35	Slovak	University (PhD)	University teacher	Single	Banská Bystrica
3.	J.S.	M	31	Slovak	University	IT sector	Single	Banská Bystrica
4.	Z.S.	F	26	Slovak	University	NGO	Single	Banská Bystrica
5.	M.C.	M	31	Slovak	University	NGO	Single	Banská Bystrica
6.	M.Z.	M	35	Slovak	University	Self-employed	Single	Banská Bystrica
7.	A.T.	F	18	Slovak	Elementary	Student (grammar school)	Single	Banská Bystrica
8.	R.S.	M	27	Slovak	University (Bc.)	Self-employed	Single	Banská Bystrica
9.	O.D.	M	27	Slovak	University	PhD student	Single	Banská Bystrica
10	E.Š.	F	32	Slovak	University (PhD)	Self-employed	Single	Banská Bystrica
11	A.M.	F	22	Slovak	Secondary (grammar school)	University student	Single	Banská Bystrica
12	J.R.	M	19	Slovak	Elementary	Student (grammar school)	Single	Brezno
13	V.S.	F	31	Slovak	University (PhD)	NGO	Single	Banská Bystrica
14	L.D.	M	23	Slovak	University	Unemployed	Single	Banská Bystrica
15	M.L.	M	32	Slovak	University (PhD)	University teacher	Married	Banská Bystrica
16.	M.D.	M	25	Slovak	University	Banking sector	Single	Budapest
17.	M.B.	M	27	Slovak	University	Graphic designer	Single	Banská Bystrica
18.	D.I.	F	20	Slovak	Secondary (grammar school)	University student	Single	Revúca
19.	Z.G.	F	30	Slovak	Completed university	City council	Married	Banská Bystrica