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NOT IN OUR TOWN – NIOT: A CASE STUDY OF CIVIC/ YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AFTER REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN SLOVAKIA

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Youth – as a social construct

Ways in which societies divide up the life course vary across

1. different time periods
2. different cultural contexts

In contemporary society the term youth is rather „elastic“:

a) childhood seems to be blurring into youth (the sexualization of childhood debate, media and popular culture as the destroyers of children’s innocence, children’s growing access to consumer culture)

b) - an extension of youth, or a blurring of the boundary between youth and adulthood (youth lasting much longer and ending much later, „emerging“ adulthood, transition to adulthood as less stable and more precarious process (Buckingham and Kehily, 2014: 5-7).



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Young people experience a world significantly different from their parents' - even more valid for former communist countries (expansion of higher education, fast integration into global economy, changing opportunities for relationships and family formation). Young people are most affected by labour market changes, most likely to be experimenting with new ways of living, and pushing for social change.

Is the youth the key group that aims at social change?

Active engagement of young people in the process of social change in Czechoslovakia and Slovakia (1989, 1998) / there is generally political apathy among most young people and weak levels of organisation and participation, however, when democracy is endangered we can see ability of young people to mobilise themselves and engage in public affairs.

NIOT – (Not In Our Town) started in 2014 as a reaction to the results of regional elections when a Neo-Nazi was democratically elected as a regional governor. It is a civic grassroots platform/ movement that aims at combating any expressions of extremism, intolerance, fascism, racism, antisemitism and xenophobia. It believes in community building through strengthening values such as solidarity, responsibility, tolerance, respect, honesty and wisdom.



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Field research with NIOT activists:

19 semi-structured interviews (10 M, 9 F),

Age: 18-35 (3: 18-20, 9: 21-30, 7: 31-35), 14 university graduates + 2 university students, 1 secondary school student + 2 grammar school students),

17 single, 2 married,

Average lengths of an interview: 1 h 20 min.,

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded (NVivo programme – a tool for categorisation, classification and analysis mainly qualitative data),

Time of research: August 2017 – January 2018)

In addition – research includes collection of newspaper articles, press releases, visual materials, social media discourses...



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Selected results:

a) Family background

- almost all from middle-class families
- majority spent their childhood with both parents (four experienced parental divorce, one father's death)
- almost all had siblings, five from families with at least three children
- they grew up in urban environment, some mixed urban-rural experience (urban life suited them better)



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Only three respondents – nuclear family as open to discussions about public issues.

Parents not very active in civil society, not interested in politics.

A quarter of interviewed stressed their **grandparents as having 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) 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.



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b) Is it good to be young here and now? – questions aimed at opinions about the current situation and perspectives of young people in Slovakia.

All respondents saw mainly positive aspects of being young – they believe in better opportunities compared to their parents.

From your point of view, is it good to be young in Slovakia nowadays?

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)



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Main motives: study opportunities, freedom to choose study area, freedom to choose place and type of work, freedom of travel/ movement, opportunities to gain experience (study, work) abroad, freedom of speech, opportunities to study foreign languages. Globalisation perceived positively - new options for those who are educated and ready. On the other hand, there is awareness about ambivalent situation of young people:

...young people have big difficulties to find a job..., yes, it is difficult for a young person to get a job. On the other hand, it's very easy to get education, but afterwards it's really tough to get a job... (AT, woman, 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)



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Problems with getting a job produces other consequences – family, friends, 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).

Alternative views:

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)



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Universally shared opinion: the situation of youth nowadays is less certain than it was before.
Also acknowledged: the situation in other countries is very similar.

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)

Problems with intergenerational relations – 3 respondents:

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)



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c) Sources of extremism – manifestations of radicalism, extremism, intolerance as key problems of the Slovak society

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).



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General causes/ reasons of extremism (most respondents): intolerance, strong stereotypes against minorities, corruption, silent acceptance of racist ideas and approaches, lack of critical thinking, frustration of the people living in economically and socially backward and marginalised regions.

I think racism is much more tolerated now than in the past. Racists also do not feel fear as they did in the past. I do not say their numbers are growing. I think the numbers are more or less the same, however, what a person can say loudly in the square today, 5 years ago anyone would be ashamed to say it. Or only a few madmen. (MD, male, 25)

General causes/ reasons of extremism (part of respondents): apathy, non-engagement, disinterest of the people in public affairs, inability to think in contexts, insufficient education about modern history.

Simple solutions, very simple solutions, we do not need to think too much about it, we do not like what happens in Brussels and the EU so let us exit it, no problem, it is so easy. At the same time traditional political parties will discuss it and negotiate how it can be, which is democracy, but a citizen does not want to hear it, s/he wants simple solutions. Solutions when one does not need to think or/ and there is a fatigue of the people from traditional political parties, people see corruption and Kotleba (Neo-Nazi governor) says he will not cheat – and again, it is an easy solution for the people to follow... People do not want to think today, and that is a problem. (AT woman, 18)



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Reasons why young people are open to follow extremist opinions:

1. Situation of young people coming from disadvantaged environment:

Why do you think they are 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)



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2. Rebellion of the young (against parents and other/ any authorities) linked with new phenomena such as popularity of anti-system ideas, conspiracy theories, fake news...:

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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3. Lack of critical thinking, openness towards manipulation, deficiencies of educational system:

Schools do not lead children to acceptance of diversity. Diversity of any kind is not tolerated in our society (VS, female, 31).

4. Disinterest in public affairs (also a consequence of the failure of educational system)

Young people generally have different interests, they want to be in discos, some do not think of their future, they are not so value-oriented, they do not follow politics, they have absolutely no clue how economy works and all these things because schools don't teach them any of these things (EŠ, female, 32).



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Prevention of extremism and radicalisation: NIOT activities in the region (educational and cultural)

- Schools for democracy (15 schools involved during the research, 28 now) – volunteers and lecturers from Faculty of education involved
- Human Forum – a „bottom-up“ conference organised annually from 2014 – open to the public, Human Forum Award
- Regional election campaign in 2017 to stop a Neo-Nazi party/ governor in the second election period



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Prevention of extremism and radicalisation: NIOT activities in the region: educational and cultural

- 1. Schools for democracy** (15 schools involved during the research, 28 now)
 - volunteers and lecturers from Faculty of education involved

I am part of the programme – part of Living Libraries project. I visit classes and tell them my story – as an idiot, a former Nazi supporter who used to fight against anyone...I had excellent feedbacks from the children I talked to... We were in a class in B. – the majority of them were total fans of Kotleba (the Neo-Nazi governor), 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).



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Prevention of extremism and radicalisation: NIOT activities in the region

2. Human Forum – a „bottom-up“ conference organised annually on the day (or around) of the Human Rights Day from 2014 – open to the public and mainly aimed at teachers of primary and secondary schools (prominent speakers incl. the President of the Slovak Republic, human rights activists, international participation), various sessions, workshops, exhibitions, movie productions etc.

Human Forum Award – given every year to a person who contributed significantly to the protection of human rights



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Prevention of extremism and radicalisation: NIOT activities in the region

3. Regional election campaign in 2017 to stop a Neo-Nazi party/ governor in the second election period:

- The campaign attracted a lot of new young people to the movement (dynamic)
- The campaign co-ordinated by the NGO Centre for Community Organising and run with young volunteers, the motto and logo of the campaign: Together we are stronger. The campaign started with a public manifesto (stopping hatred), a journey of volunteers across the region (video shots) and culminated with an Anti-Fascist march in October 2017).
- Yes, the Neo-Nazi governor is out (but only out of the region).



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Prevention of extremism and radicalisation: NIOT activities in the region

Continuity and impact:

- After the success of the NIOT activism in the regional elections in 2017, the engagement of young people involved has been growing.
- In February 2018, Slovakia witnessed a shocking murder of a journalist and his fiancée. This led to a creation of a new Slovak movement „For a Decent Slovakia“.
- NIOT was one of main organisers of numerous demonstrations across the country (which led to the resignation of the Prime Minister and Minister of Interior)
- 10 November 2018: local elections (many of volunteers entering local





DNES

**NÁMESTIE SNP
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