

National



POLICYBRIEF



PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: SLOVAKIA (1 OF 2)

Case Study: NIOT (Not in Our Town)

October 2018

INTRODUCTION

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. In Slovakia there are existing civic platforms consisting of mainly young people involved in various issues of public interest. Investigation of their activities can provide opportunities for positive social engagement – a key objective of the PROMISE project.

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.

This policy brief is concerned with recommendations that focus mainly on tools helping to support young activists in their activities combating expressions of radicalisation and extremism in the Slovak society. Second, our recommendations are also directed to schools and the sphere of education that is highly criticised in Slovakia for deficiencies of the educational system, outdated methods of teaching and a general dissatisfaction with educational achievements that are also objectivised by international studies of student assessments, e.g. PISA programme.

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Support young activists combating any expressions of radicalisation and extremism, etc.

One of the key findings of our case study is the idea that manifestations of radicalism, extremism and intolerance are considered a key problem of Slovak society by young people from the NIOT movement. They see increasing extremism and radicalisation as particular, visible problems right now. As one of them stated, although the country has some other big problems like poverty, or quite a lot of people living below or near the poverty line, 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.

Young activists that do voluntary work or work in various non-governmental organisations are good examples and proper tools for combating radicalistic and extremist tendencies among young Slovaks. However, quite often they have to cope with a lack of financial resources needed for their activities and with the underestimation of their needs by authorities who believe that to overcome extremism and radicalism is possible without substantial financial support, only by 'a good example'. Young people in Slovakia need more activities, such as the *True story of the American skinhead* (supported by Open Society Foundation) that promote discussions at youth clubs, centres, and schools presenting the life of a former leader of a Skinhead movement in the US. Personal stories and confessions are combined with a discussion in the Slovak context – the rise of support for the far right. The panellists included Christian Picciolini (previously a far-right follower, founder of the first American exit programme in Chicago, USA) and Radovan Bránik (expert on the far right in Slovakia).

Therefore we suggest:

- To support young activists and social innovators to ensure that they have sufficient resources for their activities in the forms of grants, financial tools or mentoring.
- To guarantee grants for lecturing and promoting activities at schools.
- On a governmental level (including local, regional and national) to use existing financial mechanisms supporting the development of civic society
- To financially support NGOs, youth organizations and public organizations

Introduce innovations in elementary schools and high schools focused on the values of democracy, multiculturalism, critical thinking and citizenship, fighting stereotypes and reducing prejudices.

Another key finding of the NIOT case study is the idea of connecting young people's inclination to extremism with a lack of critical thinking, the vulnerability to manipulation and the fact that the educational system in Slovakia does not teach children the acceptance of difference and diversity.

'Diversity generally is not tolerated in our society' (V.S., female, 31).

Some respondents also connected educational limits with indifference of young people and a general lack of interest in public issues. They view it as a problem that young people in Slovakia are not value-oriented, they do not seem to follow what is going on in politics, they are ill-informed about how economics work because schools do not teach them any of these things.

Therefore we suggest developments the educational system and innovations supporting civic and value-oriented education in both, formal and informal education. There are already some positive examples. For instance, the foundation of Milan Šimečka runs the programme **Diverse Schools** aimed at teachers of elementary schools who are interested in innovative forms of intercultural education. It offers trainings, methodology and mentoring of skills in the sphere of intercultural education.

Our suggestions include:

- Install courses for teachers (not necessarily subject-oriented, but running through curricula) supporting civic and value-oriented education
- Support an open and democratic school climate, involvement of children and young people in decision-making processes
- Open schools for children and students after their formal education. For example, this could include opening schools for wider community learning and accessible for children and youth for extra-curricular activities, offering informal activities and enhancing positive peer relationships
- Support (also from public resources) more projects such as i.e. **Socrates Institute** – education for talented and motivated university students – the building of informal communities of young people who become leaders in education to critical thinking, democratic values, creation of new projects and Startups.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Our findings are based on 19 individual in-depth conversations that focused on respondent's activities in the NIOT movement. The interviews were conducted by means of a semi-structured interview, 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.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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FURTHER READING	