

**EFS at IUVENTA's national youth work conference
in Bratislava in June 2016 –
and the subsequent meeting with Slovakia's President Andrej Kiska**

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July 2016

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The IUVENTA youth-work conference

EFS team member Harald Weilnböck (HW) was invited as key note speaker at the youth-work conference “Extremism without Extremes” on 16th-17th June, 2016, in Bratislava organised by IUVENTA, Slovak Institute for Youth, a state funded NGO for issues of youth work in Slovakia. This invitation had emanated from the EFS trainings and roundtables in the country. HW was invited to speak about EFS, methods and lessons learned on the prevention of violent extremism especially with young people – and to take questions from the audience (of nearly 100 participants, representing one third of the demand for participation which could not be catered to due to limitations of the conference venue).

The organizers provided a two and a half hours' time frame for HW's presentation including a Q&A follow-up, as well as 5 appointments with Slovakian media and the local New York Times correspondent.

The President of Slovakia, Mr. Andrej Kiska, supported the conference and arranged a meeting with HW at the presidential premises to discuss the situation and possible avenues of future prevention and intervention work in the country.

The situation in SK is characterized by a great sense of alert about the fact that an overtly neo-Nazi party, Marian Kotleba's “People's Party – Our Slovakia”, has been elected into parliament in spring 2016 (while only ten years ago an overwhelming majority of SK population wanted to see this party be banned according to opinion polls). This party gained 8 percent of the vote and thus sent 14 members into parliament which marks a distinct

change in Slovak politics. Since 2013, the party's leading figure Marian Kotleba had already served as regional governor in the Banská Bystrica region (where EFS also implemented several project activities). Of particular concern is the fact that 70% of the party's electorate consists of young people mostly in the rural and small city areas far from the capital.

The situation of youth work in SK is such that it is administered only as a small department within the Education Ministry, having only four persons staff. The structures of practitioners of social and youth work in the country are equally weak and sometimes even hardly existent.

The conference was opened by a classical music string quartet and singer from Roma community, presenting a mourning song about the Roma fate in Auschwitz. After this a video was shown about a neo-Nazi march in Bratislava, the police and the counter demonstration. The combination of the two inputs had a high emotional impact.

HW's key note dealt with the EFS approach and explained some of basic principles of good practice prevent work – as well as the CoCoRa community based prevention approach. The conference was recorded and live streamed. The questions were taken from the audience and from emails sent onto a screen in the conference hall.

Reflecting some of the issues which are prevalent in the national discussion, the main topics from the Q&A session were:

Q: Are state financed trips to Auschwitz and extra history lessons on the Holocaust and the country's history during the National Socialist reign a good way to go?

A: Such cognitive and historic approach will be largely ineffective and possibly even counter-productive with the target group of vulnerable and hateful young people. Even in a larger educational dimension these history topics have often backfired in creating more cynicism than awareness. Rather, school educational work needs to be refurbished to convey social skills, emotional intelligence and human rights awareness as a priority objective cross all school subjects. Under these circumstances good history lessons might be an important element.

Q: Should the young people be lead to take and support a left wing counter attitude against violent extremist – or are other ways of educational work necessary?

Training young people to take a particular political stance equates to child abuse – it parallels what recruiters of violent extremist organizations do. Hence, the approach must be different, focus on social skills, mediation techniques, emotional intelligence, and self-reflexive capacities - also inform about human rights and values of good governance, the rule of law and democratic procedures of public decision making; and make sure that active participation is possible.

By and large, state authorities should work to establish a de-politicized space for targeted prevent work which is put beyond any party political rhetoric and focuses on youth welfare issues but does effectively confront any anti-democratic and anti-human rights attitudes.

Q: What is the profile of a youth worker which can respond to this situation? Teachers tend to recommend hiring more teachers, community police tends to ask for more police men, ...but nobody seems to know what skills it takes.

Such youth workers need to have good mentoring skills, be courageous, respectful, curious, patient and ready to engage on a personal level, also ready to confront attitudes in suitable ways and insist on commitment to the intervention. These colleagues may come from all sorts of professions, depending their motivation and base skills – social workers, soccer coaches, ex police men, dedicated entrepreneurs; many such colleagues have been active in this area in EU member states.

Q: As a street worker close to young people in trouble I am often in the position to practice advocacy for them – and then I am accused to find excuses for their ill behavior.

This youth work and youth advocacy work is most important. Extremism by and large is the symptom of societies which don't sufficiently take care of their young people. The public needs to understand this – as well as it needs to understand the difference between excusing something on the one hand and engaging in a pedagogic relationship of mentorship in order to foster change and development (and raise awareness about the root causes of a certain problem). Advocacy for young people does not excuse any personal wrongdoing of them. Hence, if youth shows signs of engaging in subcultures of group hatred, a particular set of methods and approaches is required on the field level of street work – which doesn't interfere with the advocacy work on the level of public discourse.

Q: Should we have good examples of young people's engagement as "counter stories" in the media?

Counter narratives don't work with the target group (see publications <http://cultures-interactive.de/en/articles.html>). Prevent and disengagement work needs to be done offline in direct relationship based work of mentorship, one on one and/or in groups, accompanied by certain skill training exercises. Having said this, there is no problem with having some good videos done by journalists (but not financed by PVE funds!) for purposes of public discourse (which can also be used as a tool among others in any pedagogical setting as has always been done with media in education).

Q: What needs to be done most urgently right now on the level of state responsibilities?

There are three key needs for policy making and implementation of reform: (i) youth work, (ii) schools, (iii) youth and family welfare. A long term perspective and an inter-agency approach is essential in this area of societal prevention and resilience building with the young

people in particular (cf. the text “Some thoughts and recommendations for a Presidential Initiative of Preventing Violent Extremism and Group Hatred in Slovakia among the country’s youth.”, further beneath).

Another key activity is the engagement in and support of EU practitioner exchange and of specialized consultancy about strategies and good practices of national prevent work – as EU projects and the RAN network can provide and facilitate it.

Q: How should the refugee issue been handled in the light of violent extremism and prevent work?

Given, that SK is one of the countries which engages in massive anxiety and populism about the supposed threats of refugees and foreigners, while not having any substantial numbers of refugees in the country, it seems highly advisable to invite a fair number of refugees – preferably from Moslem background – into the country. For these refugees could be very helpful for providing the ground for an effective diversity education which allows the country’s youth to get over their anxieties about foreigners, open up to inter-cultural encounter and thus become ready to operate in modern societies and be successful in their work place.

The meeting with the president of Slovakia, Mr. Andrej Kiska

The president was recently – and quite surprisingly – elected. Mr. Kiska has never been in office before and did not have any state affiliation before or after 1989; rather he is a business man who had lived abroad for some time. Moreover, Mr. Kiska had taken a clear political stance regarding both the refugee and the right-wing extremism issue. He welcomes refugees in Slovakia and had expressly disinvited the representatives of the extremist Peoples’ Party for the presidential reception.

The exchange with the president concluded with three overarching recommendations:

- 1) Given the fact, that the national initiatives to counter the rise of right-wing extremism lead to some very ad hoc suggestions among civil society and government, some of which seemed ready to repeat beginners mistakes which had been made already several times in other EU member states long time ago (like only investing in field trips to Auschwitz for school students or investing in government-led counter-messaging in the internet), the first conclusion was to further support and engage in EU exchange of experiences and good practices in order to discuss on lessons learned and good practices to transfer. This includes building a RAN national group which identifies and summons the good practice approaches which are already in place as national resources but are not yet acknowledged as such even by national experts.

- 2) In reference to the specific fields of activity which most urgently require taking action at this point in time, it was concluded that good practices and strategies should be identified and implemented in three fields in particular:
- the area of youth work, in the sense of street work or targeted youth work in remote rural areas of Slovakia, with particular attention to the fact that such youth work hardly exists in the country and requires structural funding from the state.
 - in schools, to the effect that schools make it their first priority to build students' social skills and emotional intelligence in view of resilience against any form of group hatred, bullying and anti-social and (self-destructive) behavior – group hatred, being understood as a form of social addiction and addictive behavior along self-destructive and antisocial patterns. In this respect it is key to work with what the hidden curriculum of the school is which unofficially reigns the students' in-school social life and experience.
 - family welfare and family assistance in view of productively handling family issues in the widest sense.
- 3) In reference to what the president could do as head of state, two ideas were developed, in consideration that the president had outspokenly disinvited the extremist party leaders from an official gathering of party leaders. As a reaction, the leaders of the "People's Party – Our Slovakia" left parliament when the president was to address it (at the day of the youth work conference):
- One idea was to make a move towards those who voted for the extremists' party, especially the young people. This could be done by an invitation of a wide array of young people from all areas of the country – but especially from those areas which voted extremist – to partake in Presidential Youth Roundtables on the presidential premises, while making sure that the facilitators of these roundtables are trained to provide an integrative and deescalating setting (working with exercises and a time out team).
Such Presidential Youth Roundtables could be conceptualized as pilot project to develop a new form of national youth conferencing under the umbrella of a leading state figure. It would be made transparent to the public as much as Chatham House rules would allow for.
 - The second idea pertained to the national media (and was inspired by many complaints about problematic issues of journalism, radicalising websites by extremists, the general polarisation of political discourse, and also by HW's experience that the two leading newspapers competed about having an exclusive interview with him which lead to the fact that only one of them actually got the chance to engage in the issue with regard to this youth work conference). The idea is to launch a presidentially lead cross-media initiative to provide and

administer a website space for reporting about social cohesion issues while developing new and specifically ethical forms of journalism about such issue which would have to be defined and developed during the build-up of the website.

One additional recommendation was to generally avoid an all too strong emphasis on moralistic reproaches against violent extremists as being inhumane, criminal and violating human rights – and also avoid an all too pervasive rhetoric of “fighting against”. Rather in addition to such ethical assessment it could be made more visible how much damage violent extremist movements cause,

- firstly, in the long range in that it costs immense amounts of money to cover social and health expenditures to have substantial parts of one’s youth enter life styles of group hatred, understood as a form of social addiction, i.e. addictive behavior along self-destructive and antisocial lines of action.
- secondly, in the middle range in that the presence of group hatred and violent extremism deter foreign investment and also hamper the desirable up-skilling of young people to enter teamwork environments in the work place – and intercultural teamwork environments in particular

On the basis of these points, a presidential consultancy initiative was launched in which the president was provided with suggestions as to how he could sustainably support the prevention of right-wing extremism and group hatred in the country, especially among young people. The liaison with the president’s office was further entertained also in view of inaugurating a national RAN group.

The benefits of the conference and the presidential visit for the EFS project and added value for European prevention of violent extremism

On a practical level, it is most noteworthy that the roughly 250 registered persons attending the conference provided a mailing list of key persons interested and engaged in the issue of preventing violent extremism and group hatred. EFS partner REACH is in partnership with IUVENTA and will have access to the mailing list. In particular, there were many first-line practitioners of youth work (from school psychology to street work) which the EFS project in Slovakia has had trouble addressing and engaging in greater numbers during the initial project phase.

In terms of dissemination it may well be reckoned that further interest especially in the LocalDerad and Fair Skills train-the-trainer workshops will increase so that a continuation of the EFS agenda after the life of the project seems quite likely.

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Both the conference and the meeting with the president of SK will be helpful in instigating some initiative of structural change in a top-down dimension, in view of how schools operate in terms of human rights and social skills education and how youth work may be enhanced across the country and in hot spot areas in particular.