

Covid-19: Narratives and policies of the populist and radical right and implications for youth work

Roundtable Briefing, 27 October 2020

Political Capital organised an online roundtable for first-line practitioners (FLPs) working with young people vulnerable to radicalisation in the Visegrad Group (V4) countries on 27 October 2020. Based on the findings of our research on the narratives about COVID-19 in the V4 countries, we discussed regional developments, national peculiarities and what can be done against harmful narratives regarding young people. The aim of the event was to strengthen regional cooperation, exchange experiences and good practices, as well as to find joint solutions. The roundtable took place within the framework of the project *“Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the far right and the populist radical right in the V4 region”*, which was supported by the [Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom](#).

Participants

Together with the representatives of the national project partners, 15 participants attended the event out of the 16 who had registered. The composition of attendees was as follows:

- from the Czech Republic: a project manager of Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, a teacher of Gymnázium Na Zatlance, a former colleague of Zvol si info, an analyst of STEM, and a representative of the national project partner, the Institute for Politics and Society;
- from Hungary: a representative of UNITED for Intercultural Action, a representative of the Network of Human Rights Educators (EJHA), a youth advocate and environmental expert from the Association for Sustainable Democracies, and two representatives of Political Capital;
- from Poland: two representatives of the national project partner, the Institute of Social Safety;
- from Slovakia: a researcher from the Youth Council of Slovakia, an information security expert of the Open Society Foundation Bratislava, and a representative of the national project partner, the Institute for Public Affairs.

Summary of the discussion

In Hungary, young people in general are more concerned about the economic crisis, while the older generation is more occupied with the topic of COVID-19 itself. During the discussion, one opinion emerged, according to which young people are less threatened by the coronavirus and more prone to not taking the restrictions seriously. In addition, many of them feel that they are not included in public life and not treated equally, giving them another reason to be demotivated. At the same time, some participants said that during the first wave of the

pandemic, most of the young people seemed to be concerned about and frightened of COVID-19, and, hence, respected restrictions and behaved nothing less responsibly than the elderly. Amongst football ultras, a COVID-19 fatigue and a level of ignorance can be observed as the government provides completely confusing statements regarding the pandemic. Besides, a visible generational conflict is also present. Older people are convinced that the youth is spreading the virus while enjoying their lives and not complying with the restrictions. In contrast, youngsters believe that despite all of their efforts to protect the vulnerable elderly, they are the ones who do not care about the virus at all.

In the Czech Republic, narratives are not typically targeting the youth, they are spreading better amongst older people. Students attending non-elite schools are more likely to support radical and populist politics than the ones in elite schools. A theory exists, according to which the younger generation is more attracted to fun and interesting information, but they don't really care much about the content. Hence, although they are sharing different narratives, these have a smaller impact on their behaviour in general. The topic of young people and responsibility is widely debated in the country. Young people going from Prague to the countryside were accused of spreading the virus in the country. Some cases, for instance, when 100 people got infected at a party, have strengthened the belief about the irresponsible behaviour of young people and especially about those from Prague.

In terms of Slovakia, a survey conducted in April showed that young Slovaks feel that they are neither being cared about nor are the target group of any kind of official communications platforms. Hence, they feel they have to cope with everything alone (digital schooling, internet, relations, and education problems). In the spring, a wave of solidarity was observed as a large number of young people started volunteering. This has been the highest level of voluntary work amongst young people since 2016. As they were really missing social contacts, a large percent (more than 20%) started to meet with their peers and have broken social distancing rules. The pandemic has further decreased young people's trust towards political institutions, which has been a serious problem in the country for a while anyway. Young influencers can have a big effect on young people and they are present on both sides – among those helping the fight against the coronavirus, and those hindering it by spreading sceptical narratives.

Regarding Poland, recent protests against the government's anti-abortion policies have changed the picture. Young people play a key role in the marches and they comply with the anti-pandemic regulations (e.g., they wear masks). Although, for young people, it is really important to stand up against the illiberal government that is violating human rights by the abortion law, many people believe that the protests can easily become a ticking bomb in terms of spreading the coronavirus.

Solution proposals and ideas

In Hungary, straight communications from the government targeted explicitly at the youth does not really exist. Official media channels have a bigger impact on the older generation. As younger generations are gathering information for themselves from other sources, for instance, from popular influencers, that could be a good platform for reaching them.

In the Czech Republic, youtubers and influencers are key channels in reaching young people, while emotional messages can have a bigger effect on them. Another issue in the country is the lack of information about protection and prevention against the virus even though the media is overwhelmed with news coverage about the pandemic.

According to Slovak participants, if the mainstream media, politicians, and influencers promoted positive stories about young people who are helping, showing solidarity, taking part in community life and helping older people, it could have a big positive effect on the younger generation. However, the fact that some 7-10% of school teachers believe in extreme right ideologies, complicates the situation.

Conclusions

Representatives of all four countries agreed that official media channels do not really reach the younger generations, also because they do not target them as an audience group. This results in young people trying to gather information for themselves, usually from the different influencers they follow. As influencers are nowadays the most effective channels for reaching young people in every country, they would be key in providing useful and important information for the youth in the Visegrad countries.