"We will be the happiest if there is nothing left for us to do." How Experts in Five Countries of Central and Eastern Europe Assess the State of Prevention of Polarisation and Radicalisation among the Youth

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Anti-democratic tendencies are on the rise in many countries across Europe, along with growing levels of polarisation and radicalisation in our societies.[35] While the European Union supports various incentives aiming at the prevention of and intervention against racism and related phenomena, the political contexts in the Member States are very different (for an overview see the paper by Verena Schäfer-Nerlich in this journal issue). This not only affects the level and targets of group-focused enmity and right-wing extremism but also the way in which these problems can be addressed on the ground.

Across Central and Eastern Europe teachers, youth workers, social workers, and many other practitioners encounter different challenges as they contest anti-democratic tendencies, polarisation and radicalisation, in particular among the youth. One important source of support they receive comes from specialist organisations who offer them trainings, workshops, and counselling. Experts at these organisations, thus, have a special meta-perspective of the field. In the present paper, we look at how, through their first-hand experiences, experts at supporting NGOs assess the challenges, needs, structural problems, and the future of the work tackling anti-democratic tendencies, polarisation and radicalisation among the youth in five Central and Eastern European countries: Austria, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. The aim of this paper is to map out the plurality of opinions and experiences across these contexts.

Based on a series of interviews with experts, we explore how NGOs can find their ways to institutions and practitioners, examine the similarities and differences regarding the targets of prejudice, discuss the most typical problems and challenges the NGOs need to provide support for, and look at their visions of the future pointing to the need of closer collaboration and mutual support across Europe. By taking a European perspective and, thus moving beyond the focus on single countries, we can better understand how local contexts shape the possibilities of prevention and intervention. At the same time, this view can also shed light on the similar challenges that organisations face, and for which common, coordinated responses could be possible. Finally, learning from each other across contexts has true benefits and being aware of difficulties in one country can help its early detection and prevention in another.

[35] Our definitions of polarisation and radicalisation are described in detail in the introduction of this journal issue.

Organisations were selected for the interviews based on their expertise and the interviewees were asked to share their own opinion, experiences and knowledge. All of them are distinctively active in their field and recognised in their local contexts.[36] Nevertheless, it needs to be underlined that findings are not generalizable, as they only represent the observations and experiences of the selected experts. Interviews were conducted September and October of 2020.

The specific country contexts of Hungary, Germany, Poland, and Romania regarding the situation of polarisation, radicalisation, right-wing extremism, and public opinion are described in the country profiles in this journal issue. Information about all the participating organisations can be found below.

Germany

CULTURES INTERACTIVE E.V.

Year of foundation: 2005

Place of work: Berlin, Brandenburg, Saxony, Thuringia, Lower Saxony, international level: Ukraine, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, etc.

Main focus and topic of workshops: resilience building, narrative group work in schools and youth facilities, democracy pedagogy, youth-cultural workshops at schools, distancing/exit work, in-depth civic education, youth prison intervention

Number of workshops per year: 8 schools and 40 teachers reached per year in around 30 workshops

Further activities: framework partner of the national prevention program “Live Democracy!”, framework partner of the Federal Agency of Civic Education, qualitative intervention research, numerous EU model projects

Website: cultures-interactive.de/en

[36] Except for the Austrian organisation, all others participated in the EU-funded CHAMPIONS project Cooperative Harmonized Action Model to stop Polarisation in Our Nations, GA Number: 823705. For more information see: www.championsproject.eu.

Austria

EXTREMISM INFORMATION CENTRE

Year of foundation: 2014

Place of work: Vienna

Main focus and topic of workshops: extremism, youth and radicalization, diversity

Number of workshops per year: about 50, reaching around 700 teachers and students

Further activities: helpline and face to face counselling in relation to extremism, long-term support and counselling for organisations such as youth centres, schools, counselling centres etc., workshops for labour market institutions, police, judicial institutions, authorities etc., research in national and international projects

Hungary

POLITICAL CAPITAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Year of foundation: 2001

Place of work: Budapest

Main focus and topic of workshops: fake news and disinformation, radicalisation and extremism

Number of workshops per year: 15-20 workshops, in 5 schools, with 50 teachers

Further activities: research, awareness raising, public advocacy, developing public awareness-raising and education materials

Website: politicalcapital.hu

Budapest Centre for Mass Atrocities Prevention

Year of foundation: 2011

Place of work: Budapest and globally

Main focus: conflict prevention, human rights, international and humanitarian law to implement the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the principle of the Responsibility to Protect.

Further activities: addressing the trends of polarization and radicalization in Central and Eastern

Poland

INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SAFETY

Year of foundation: 2015

Place of work: across Poland, headquarters in Warsaw

Main focus and topic of workshops: radicalization and de-radicalisation, prevention and countering of extremism, safety and security, antiterrorist education

Number of workshops per year: 50 workshops, outreach to approximately 30 schools, and 120 teachers

Further activities: police trainings, building local expert groups on prevention and countering of radicalisation, expert reports on specific topics linked with radicalisation, national expert team on radicalisation, expert court opinions, advising to local authorities, safety trainings, publications, media activities, two blogs about radicalisation and social safety, etc.

Website: fundacjaibs.pl/information-in-english/

Romania

PATRIR – PEACE ACTION, TRAINING AND RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF ROMANIA

Year of foundation: 2001

Place of work: Cluj-Napoca

Main focus and topic of workshops: Teachers: peace education; nonviolent communication; inclusive education; safe schools; child and youth wellbeing and anti-bullying. Youth workers: youth mobilisation and empowerment; community engagement; gender trainings (incl. gender empowerment and stopping gender-based violence); addressing bullying; youth wellbeing – dealing with stress, anxiety, inner peace; peace education; understanding radicalisation; identifying and resisting fake news.

Number of workshops per year: 10 or more workshops, outreach to 6 – 10 schools, 5000+ students, 20 teachers.

Further activities: Community campaigns with youth, engaging youth in the community to address issues – such as campaigning to overcome bullying, address gender-based violence or promote inclusion; youth policy advocacy with local authorities; youth participation in regional and international events (conferences, seminars and trainings)

Website: PATRIR.ro

Findings from the interviews with experts

In the following chapters we present the findings from the interviews, and discuss the similarities and differences between the countries related to various topics.

While organisational representatives in all five countries agree that practitioners working with the youth are very much in need of professional training and support, it is not always easy to get in touch with them. Therefore, the question of how and with how much success organisations can reach out to practitioners directly affects the potential impact they and their trainings might have.

The *Polish* organisation, Institute for Social Safety, needs to work very hard to be able to get into schools, as diversity and the prevention of racism are not topics typically welcome in Polish schools. At the same time, the question of *safety and security* is always of high interest. Therefore, the Polish organisation, Institute for Social Safety, developed a special workshop, cooperating with a security expert who has a military background. This way, they are able to bring the topic of equality and diversity to school staff hand in hand with the question of safety and security. As Jacek Purski, the founder of Institute for Social Safety put it:

"When we go to a school and start talking about safety and security, they think we are going to train them to deal with terrorists, but our activists show them racist stickers photographed in front of the school, and tell them: "You have a different type of safety and security problem here." This is a good place to start a conversation on prevention and intervention. And we start talking to the teachers. We tell them: you are the experts. We just want to give you some special skills that might be useful."

It makes the Polish organisation's work even more difficult that in most cases, it is not the school principals who decide about letting the organisation enter the school, but it is decided by the local authorities. That is why the Institute for Social Safety is now taking a new approach by building local networks involving multiple parties, to have support for their work. But even if they are allowed to enter a school, they still need to face serious challenges:

"Approximately ten per cent of the school staff is already against us before we open our mouth and at the training we provide in school. They are the ones who can potentially do the extreme right-wing propaganda in the school…"

In *Hungary*, the interviewed organisations narrate challenges similar to those faced in Poland. As the whole sphere is highly politicised, schools and teachers are reluctant to openly address topics related

to polarisation and radicalisation, or even related to the broader concept of human rights. Teachers often feel insecure, even when they need to touch upon the topic of migration or the question of ethnic minorities while teaching history or geography, as these are often discussed by members of the government – with great animosity. As explained by Bulcsú Hunyadi from Political Capital, this kind of highly restricted arena of topics directly leads to self-selection bias among teachers:

"*We have a very limited, special group of teachers at our workshops: those who are committed to what we do and who are willing to engage with these topics. We work very hard to find new audiences, but it is nearly impossible to get to teachers from outside this circle."*

Dávid Ferenczy-Nyúl from Political Capital adds:

"*If a teacher decides to address any of these topics, they need to be prepared to be labelled. All of what we try to discuss is owned by politics in Hungary today, and therefore, by discussing these, you are immediately seen to be taking a side. If a teacher talks about tolerance, to some, this will mean liberal propaganda from the West."*

The organisation PATRIR, in Cluj, *Romania,* has a different experience. They are welcome in local schools and have broad support from local authorities According to Kai Brand Jacobsen, president of PATRIR, this is thanks to Cluj's special standing, where many in the city are proud of its multi-ethnic identity, and to the Institute's long-standing good relationship with the local authorities. Cluj-Napoca (in German Klausenburg, in Hungarian Kolozsvár), in the North-West of Romania is the unofficial capital of the historic region of Transylvania (in German Siebensbürgen, in Hungarian Erdély), a medium sized university town with a multi-ethnic population, including a significant Hungarian and Roma minority, and a long history of cohabitation of various ethnic and religious groups.

PATRIR has a well-established strategy for finding participants for their workshops offered to teachers and school staff. They regularly organise community forums on topics that are in the centre of interest, for example about gender-based violence, or diversity. These are events open to the public, and participating teachers may get in touch with the organisation and invite them to their schools to give workshops afterwards, according to Kai Brand Jacobsen.

Neither the Extremism Information Centre in *Austria*, nor Cultures Interactive in *Germany* have difficulties with recruitment comparable to those in Hungary and Poland. The Extremism Information Centre runs a helpline in Vienna related to all kinds of extremisms. Through this, they are visible among teachers and youth workers. Verena Fabris, the Extremism Information Centre's director, explains a typical scenario:

"A teacher calls our helpline and says that there is a WhatsApp group among his students and they call themselves 'the Nazi-class'. He asks us what he should do. On the basis of a first analysis of the situation with the caller we offer a workshop and work with the teachers in order to develop pedagogical strategies. If reasonable we also go on to work with the students afterwards."

The Extremism Information Centre and their work are also actively present in the media and have support from local authorities and political figures in Austria.

Cultures Interactive in *Germany,* also has a good collaboration with schools and youth organisations. They do not feel that finding participants for their workshops is particularly challenging. Some professionals participate in their free time, while others use the opportunity as part of their obligatory professional development training. What is important for Cultures is that

"everyone should participate based on their free will, and that goals for each workshop are set together with the participants."

Based on the experiences of the experts, it is clear that while in Germany and Austria the NGOs do not have difficulties getting in touch with practitioners (teachers, youth workers), this is a central challenge for organisations in Hungary and Poland, where they are often met with animosity and politically motivated suspicion. This can seriously affect the impact the organisations' work can have, as they might not be able to enter the field in places where their work would be needed the most.

Topics and targets

The question of what topics teachers and youth workers want to discuss and would like to have support for clearly indicate the current state of societies and their challenges. While all six organisations in the five selected countries need to work on issues related to group-focused enmity, the specific cases and examples that teachers and youth workers present significant differences.

Dávid Ferenczy-Nyúl from Political Capital in Hungary, recounts the topics that teachers bring to the workshops:

"We talk about Roma-related issues, from factual questions to racist remarks, about migration, about anti-Semitic utterances, about sexism. Basically, anything that kids hear about on the news and bring it to schools. Teachers have the feeling that they have to deal with these somehow, but often don't yet know how. That is where our job starts."

In Vienna, *Austria*, Dieter Gremel from the Extremism Information Centre explains what topics teachers bring to them through the helpline:

"Looking back at the previous years, we see a clear trend. In the beginning, when we talked about radicalisation, we received many questions about Jihadism. Very often it turned out that it was rather a question of culture or religion or prejudice of the callers. You can project everything on Jihadism from the outside. Nowadays, the focus has shifted to some extent and there are more cases of right-wing extremism. As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy theories are on the rise."

Talking about the most typical targets of prejudice, Dieter Gremel continues, and explains that:

"We have to deal with antisemitism, prejudice against immigrants, sexism and prejudice against sexual minorities. We need to tackle the conspiracy theories, especially in relation to antisemitism and we also need to deal with hidden antisemitic attitudes."

In *Germany*, the topics that first-line practitioners ask to discuss with Cultures Interactive are on a wide spectrum, as Sylvia Weiss explains:

"Right-wing extremism is a growing problem, we see lots of radicalisation in the online sphere and hate speech, also prominently online. There is also a broad range of groups against whom young people have negative views, there is homophobia, sexism, islamophobia, and antisemitism, often linked with conspiracy theories. Nowadays many teachers also report that racism is becoming more and more prevalent among the youth in rural areas and that is where our help is needed the most."

Similarly, in *Poland*, teachers that the Institute for Social Safety works with bring many topics and problems that can be addressed during the workshop:

"When we work with teachers, we have to deal with hate speech in general, and specifically with homophobic and anti-refugee hate speech. Anti-Semitism is also quite prevalent: you get it with the mother's milk here. Current politics are more responsible for homophobic hate speech. This also results in violence against LGBTQ people. By the way, I just saw a guy walking down the street in front of my house in Warsaw with a T-shirt that said: "I am a homophobe". And there is football related extremism: this is what teachers, youth workers, police officers see, but they don't know how to name it and how to react to it – but they see it."

In Romania, the problems that PATRIR supports teachers with are similar to those in the other countries:

"There is hate speech. There is discrimination of Roma. The LGBTQI+ community is also a target, especially of hate speech. One teacher said that she would be afraid to declare her LGBTQI+ belonging in school fearing the reactions from students and parents and colleagues. We also see some incidents against Asian migrants since COVID – mostly in a latent form, not so much violent extremism. The problem here is that too few people know the history. There are many prejudices which have never been addressed. Like co-existence with Roma people or the Romanian-Hungarian dynamic. This has been never openly addressed."

Altogether, it can be seen that teachers and youth workers the expert organisations come into contact with, need to deal with similar topics in the field of polarisation and radicalisation. Hate speech (predominantly online) is present across the region and there is substantial overlap regarding the target groups of enmity: immigrants, members of ethnic and religious minority groups (as Roma, Jews, Muslims), and the members of the LGBTQ community, together with the problems of misogyny and sexism.

Bridging theory and practice – a common point of departure

So where do organisations start when they work with teachers and youth workers? Looking at the point of departure for organisations, it became clear that regardless of the context, there is a similar pattern: practitioners often struggle with bringing together theory and practice – and this is where the expert organisation supporting them can make a real difference.

Dieter Gremel, who works for the Extremism Information Centre in *Austria*, describes the typical scenario, resembling accounts from the other countries:

"What happens is that they [teachers and youth workers] are confronted with a subject they think they don't know: radicalisation. If they see that this is happening to a young person, they become helpless. We help them to gain back the expertise for their daily work – the expertise they actually already have. It is good for them to have someone to talk to and see what the next steps can be. The ideology is not the main focus anymore, but actually it should be the person and their situation."

At Cultures Interactive in *Germany*, Sylvia Weiss says that they also see helplessness among teachers and this is what they try to turn around:

"They [teachers] don't really know where to start when they see these problems [right-wing radicalisation, extremism]. There are many projects but it is hard to know where to turn regarding a specific case. What we can do with them is empowerment, exchange with others with similar experiences. We give them knowledge, how to prevent it, how to deal with it. They get exercises. All very practical."

In Poland, Romania, and Hungary, experts also talked about similar experiences and similar strategies of bridging theory and practice. In *Poland*, the Institute for Social Safety has the "guided tour" approach, helping school teachers identify signs of radicalisation:

"We introduce them [school staff] to the path of radicalisation. We explain that there are different components and no single approach can help with solving radicalisation."

In *Hungary*, both organisations see the same gap between theory and practice. As György Tatár, from the *Hungarian* organisation, Budapest Centre for Mass Atrocities Prevention explained, these phenomena are not what teachers can relate to.

"When we say the words polarisation and radicalisation, teachers, most probably, would respond that they have heard about these. Many of them will say that they know the theory. At the same time, when they face such incidents, as for example online bullying or racist remarks in the classroom, they can hardly make the link to the theories."

Bulcsú Hunyadi, from Political Capitals adds:

"Our first task is always to break down these abstract, theoretical concepts into everyday events. Things that teachers know very well from their everyday work. Together, we look at specific examples, at their own challenges, and see how these are actually parts of larger concepts. This way, we can find common ground, and start working on solutions. When it comes to polarisation, it is a bit different. In this case, we also see a lack of conceptual knowledge, but teachers have a strong sense for the problem itself. For example, they clearly see that basically all public discussions are polarised, that there are always two opposing sides which clearly correspond to political frontiers. You simply cannot discuss these questions without making a clear political stand. And it is also true for the students. This makes teachers reluctant to talk about and to deal with all of this."

In Cluj, *Romania,* experts at PATRIR said that teachers and youth workers have specific questions to them and clearly ask for practical guidance. For example, there was demand to find ways to prevent sexual violence or to deal with delinquency among the youth. PATRIR, together with first-line

practitioners at partner organisations in Cluj, work out the best ways to tackle these issues. For certain issues it is important to have this multi-agency collaboration with local institutions. In others, teachers ask the organisation to also do workshops with pupils.

Bridging theory and practice and supporting practitioners in relying on their existing skills is common among all the NGOs. All of these examples the NGOs gave, show that the support they provide is very much on the practical level, and it is an important component that while offering hands-on solutions, first-line practitioners themselves are involved in the process and thus, empowered.

Empowering practitioners in diverse institutional contexts

Having mapped the topics that need to be addressed in the field, and the ways in which expert organisations approach them, it is important to map the systems in which first-line practitioners and the organisations supporting them need to do their work. Responses from the expert organisations show a very strong demand among first-line practitioners for empowerment, psychological support, and professional supervision, things that are not provided in any of the countries though the institutional contexts show great variation.

In *Poland*, Jacek Purski from Institute for Social Safety explains:

"*Teachers are under so much psychological pressure that they need support, they need empowerment.*"

Dieter Gremel and Verena Fabris from the Extremism Information Centre in *Austria* continue:

"Psychological support is something they [teachers and youth workers] need very much. Neither teachers, nor youth workers have formal professional supervision. Sometimes, our workshops resemble group therapy sessions. They need this to gain back their confidence. Sometimes, due to the loss of confidence in the face of radicalisation, teachers forget about their skills. We need to help them to realise that they are actually able to handle this."

Just as in *Germany*, as Sylvia Weiss from Cultures Interactive explains:

"Teachers feel that they are left alone with a huge problem. They see how much young people radicalise and are suddenly completely insecure: "will I know to do the right thing?" It is similar for youth workers. They ask us: "If a student starts to say radical things in the youth club, should I intervene and risk losing that student or should I keep him/her in the group risking that the whole group will get radicalised?" There is no easy answer to

this, but we can help practitioners by empowering them to employ what we call the no-and-yes approach, i.e. reconfirm the rules of the club and then show interest in the experiences and stories that offending young people can share and which are behind their provocations. The group dynamic is also very important. Being among people who face the same problems and feel the same way – it helps tremendously."

This phenomenon, that practitioners can gain strength and mutual support from each other was a prominent experience of all organisations. In *Hungary, Poland, and Romania,* where practitioners rarely get institutional support and in Hungary and Poland the political climate also makes their work difficult, these "islands of community" play a very strong role. Political Capital's experience in Hungary is that:

"Simply to meet like-minded practitioners who face similar challenges and have a similar moral drive to tackle these can have a transformative effect."

Similarly, experts at PATRIR in Romania also see that:

"First-line practitioners are motivated to work together for common goals, want to see themselves as a community working for shared values. This is something we can help them with, simply by bringing them together. If they see that there are others out there who work for the same goals, they feel empowered and have new ideas for collaboration."

Having seen that this type of work puts a great psychological burden on first-line practitioners across the region, it is important to map the contexts in which they need to do their jobs. Contrary to the previous question, here the experiences of the organisations in the five countries were more varied. While there are many similarities among the feelings and reactions of first-line practitioners who work with youths at the risk of radicalisation and polarisation, when it comes to the question of how and to what extent institutions support this type of work, it is clear that the differences between the countries are substantial.

Members of the two organisations in Germany and Austria had a very clear response to this question: in their experience, institutions in which first-line practitioners work (schools, youth centres, etc.) mostly support prevention and intervention against polarisation, radicalisation, and prejudice, in general. Expert organisations, as Cultures Interactive and the Extremism Information Centre are also usually welcome in these institutions. Based on their work with teachers and youth workers, members

of the two organisations made it clear that first-line practitioners rarely come to them because they lack institutional support. It is more for expert knowledge and practical advice.

Talking to organisations from the former socialist countries *Poland and Hungary,* the picture is very different: there, teachers who come into contact with the expert organisations are often threatened by their colleagues and the school principles. They are cautious about inviting prevention programs and workshops offered by the organisations to their schools as they might risk being ostracised for their "liberal, cosmopolitan, anti-nationalist" values, and even risk losing their jobs. In *Hungary*, Political Capital heard of accounts of reprimand after a teacher's Facebook post that was critical towards the government's actions. Bulcsú Hunyadi and Dávid Ferenczy-Nyúl (Hungary) explained how this kind of atomisation can be a reason for the very high fluctuation and drop-out rate among teachers.

"We often see that teachers sense a clear risk in inviting us to their schools and recount their frustration over the fact that oftentimes they lack the support of their colleagues and of the school leadership. It is often discussed in our workshops how teachers feel completely alone in a hostile environment and ask us and themselves if the work they try to do can make any difference if there is nobody else."

György Tatár, from the Budapest Centre for Mass Atrocities Prevention adds:

"That is why community development and building a network of like-minded and committed practitioners is of great importance."

The need for psychological support and empowerment for first-line practitioners working with youth at risk of radicalisation and polarisation is something that experts in all five countries identified to be of great importance. It is also clear that the outcome of the work and its effect on the individual practitioners can be very different based on the level of institutional support they receive. This is especially problematic in Hungary and Poland, where the supporting organisations are often met with hostility both from national and local authorities and from the institutions (schools) themselves. This systematic antagonism can have a severe impact on the quality of work of the practitioners and can also hinder support from expert organisations in areas and communities where this would be needed the most.

Broadening the perspective: a shared, European future

Organisations supporting first-line practitioners who work with youths at the risk of radicalisation and polarisation across Europe all showed a mix of concern and optimism when asked about what the future holds for them. Members of all five organisations made it clear that financial sustainability lies at the core of their concerns. All experts, in a very similar manner, explained, how the project-based financing only allows a short-term timespan when it comes to planning. Sylvia Weiss, from the *German* organisation, Cultures Interactive, described a problem that was common among all the organisations:

"In the projects that we can get funding for, we are often asked to do the same thing all over again and again and again. To come up with a new project all the time. Even though there are great things that already work – if the funding runs out, we need to shut them down and start something new. But this way, we can hardly get ahead, we can hardly think in terms of mid- or long-term goals. This is counter-productive for the whole field and also a waste of money. "

The experts also contemplated their organisations' role in society and, interestingly, what they said had the same message in its core. In Verena Fabris's words from the Extremism Information Centre in *Austria*:

"We need people out there to acknowledge that right-wing radicalisation is not a problem on the margins, it's there in the very centre of our society – thus, it is our common problem, a problem for each and every one of us."

When it comes to what experts would wish for the future of their organisations, Jacek Purski from *Poland* makes it very clear:

"I wish that we were not directly attacked by extremists, that we could do our job in peace."

Bulcsú Hunyadi from Political Capital in *Hungary* adds a further layer to the discussion about the future:

"To be able to work effectively, it is vital to have state support, to have a consensus regarding our values as a society. Otherwise our work can hardly have a lasting impact."

All organisations are aware of and greatly respect the work of other organisations across Europe and many also collaborate and are involved in various European networks. Still, it was unequivocally stated in the interviews that more cooperation across the borders would be welcome and beneficial. As Rodica Rusu, from PATRIR in *Romania* expressed:

"There is just so much to learn from each other."

Sylvia Weiss, from *Germany*, also acknowledged the challenges others need to face, especially colleagues in countries of the former socialist block:

"I am in great awe of all colleagues out there who need to work in countries where they receive much less support than we do in Germany. I want them to know: there are so many stones laid in your way, and you just turn them and always take a step forward. I have great respect for all that you do."

György Tatár, from the Budapest Centre for Mass Atrocities Prevention also widened the perspective:

"The work we do here, in different EU countries, can also serve as inspiration for others, for others, who are in a more difficult situation. For example, colleagues in Belorussia. That is why networking and seeking contacts in all possible places is of utmost importance."

But, as Bianca Rusu, from PATRIR in *Romania* concluded with a pinch of irony:

"We will be the happiest if there is nothing left for us to do."

Based on the interviews, it is clear that financial sustainability is a serious issue for organisations in all five countries. The other commonality is the wish for more cooperation, stronger networking among organisations across Europe. The future each organisation wishes for is strongly influenced by the challenges of the present, all shaped by the current economic and political context.

About the Author

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