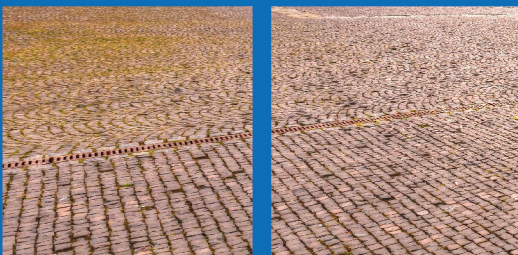
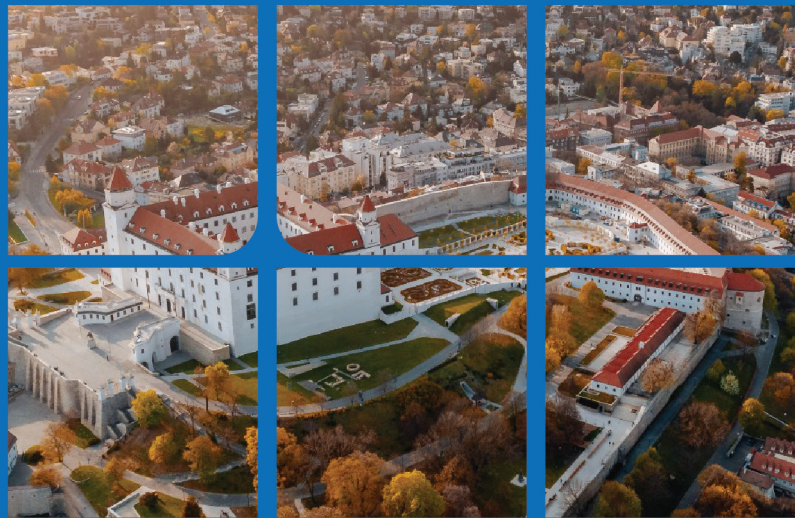




SLOVAKIA CITY CONSULTATIONS

BRATISLAVA



ŽILINA



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Disclaimer

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SCN Background

The Strong Cities Network (SCN) is an independent global network of 160+ cities and local governments dedicated to addressing all forms of extremism, hate and polarisation that can lead to violence, while promoting a human rights-based prevention framework in which local knowledge and practice inform national, regional and international approaches.¹

Strong Cities Network Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe

To date, SCN has had limited engagement with cities and other local authorities in the Central and Eastern Europe region. In partnership with Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia (PDCS), and with funding from the US Embassy Bratislava, this report is the outcome of the first phase of SCN's engagement with cities in Slovakia and the wider region.² This engagement comes at a critical time when cities are faced with dynamic threats posed by extremism, hate and disinformation and wider anti-government agitation spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic that challenge local democratic institutions and processes. Moreover, cities in the region are already confronted with the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, most notably with the responsibility to support and integrate Ukrainian refugees, which will likely be exploited as a wedge issue for extremist actors in the region.³ Over the coming year, SCN will roll out a number of initiatives to strengthen its engagement with European cities to connect cities and to enhance their role in safeguarding local communities, and local democracy, from these threats.

¹ The Strong Cities Network uses the term 'cities' as referring to and encompassing any local authority, including inter alia megacities, cities, states, counties, towns, villages and municipalities. More information about SCN is available at <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/>.

² Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia, *The Power of Cities* [website], <https://en.pdcs.sk/projects/project/the-power-of-cities>, (accessed 22 June 2022).

³ Kendrick, M. (2022) 'Europe Has Embraced Ukraine's Struggle. But Without Long-Term Planning, It Could Become a Nightmare', Morning Consult, <https://morningconsult.com/2022/03/10/ukraine-refugees-poland-europe-extremism-survey/>; And Aycart-Piquer, L. & Bailey-Morley, A. (2022) 'Ukraine exposes Europe's fractured narratives on refugees – but once again cities step up', Overseas Development Institute, <https://odi.org/en/insights/ukraine-exposes-europes-fractured-narratives-on-refugees-but-once-again-cities-step-up/>.

Key Findings & Recommendations

Key Findings

Hate and potential violence towards Ukrainian refugees, fuelled by disinformation campaigns and the proliferation of conspiracy theories across social media, is among the top developing risks across Slovakia. National government and local government representatives warn of anticipated offline hate, racism and extremist-fuelled violence, unchallenged by a sympathetic mainstream aggrieved perception that Slovak citizens are left behind by public services prioritising newcomers while unable to address existing demand.

Longstanding neo-Nazi and other far-right activity associated with football clubs and hooliganism remains a pervasive force for violence. Although less prominent recently, as sports events were either cancelled or played without spectators during the pandemic, football hooliganism is a key offline arena for open displays of violence, attacks on minority groups and the glorification of fascist and Nazi symbols and agitation.

In addition to mounting concern for refugees, key target groups of hate and extremism are Roma, the LGBT+ community and other minority communities and rising antisemitism. Hate speech and extremist content and incidents both online and offline routinely target one or many of these groups. However, municipal police have little authority responding to hate and extremist motivated crimes (which remain the remit of the national police), and therefore lack a clear picture of the threats and target groups in their local communities.

The armed forces, security agencies, police and local and national government departments reportedly contain some employees with extremist sympathies and even overt membership of far-right groups. A culture of anti-minority attitudes and, in some instances, excessive use of violence is a key concern for police, with senior leadership making efforts to improve trust and weed out extremist agitators. Examples exist where efforts to build political commitment and consensus around a prevention strategy have been ignored and not considered a priority.

The increasingly integrated nature of the threat is threatening the safety of democratic institutions and values. The threat is uniting previously fringe, far-right elements with a groundswell of mainstream anti-government sentiment fuelled by online disinformation and hate and is further exacerbated by the pandemic, corruption and the struggle for adequate public service provision. This is a local threat as much as a national and geopolitical risk undermining the institutions and services of municipalities. There is concern that parties such as Kotleba's ĽSNS and Republika will gain increasing support from mainstream elements that do not necessarily share their far-right views but do feel mobilised by anti-government messaging and distrust of democratic institutions and processes, or relate to xenophobic and homophobic views of populist politicians on social media.

The Slovak Government has developed and adopted the ***Conceptual Framework for Countering Radicalisation and Extremism by 2024 (Conceptual Framework)*** and other related measures on hate and extremism developed by the Crime Prevention Department of the Office of the Minister of Interior.⁴ The framework outlines four goals to be carried out by relevant stakeholders and in coordination with civil society where appropriate, and has an accompanying action plan detailing time lines, responsible parties and financial allocation. However, calls for a national coordinator for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) have gone unheeded. The framework also places no clear requirements on national government departments and does not set out a role for local governments in prevention efforts.

There is limited practical coordination between national and local authorities on either the nature of the threat or how to address it. Intra-government coordination on prevention is limited to the Committee for the Prevention and Elimination of Racism, Xenophobia, Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance (VRAX). With representatives from Slovak municipal networks amongst its permanent members, VRAX provides an opportunity for broader coordination between national and local government in prevention, however information flow has so far proved ineffective and there is an apparent lack of awareness of this mechanism amongst local government officials. Though minimal coordination exists between national and local police (on an *ad-hoc* basis and shared only with senior officers with security clearance), there is a general perception from both national and local government that the lack of willingness to coordinate are the fault of the other. There is also an apparent lack of awareness on the part of local governments on how to establish and sustain dialogue with their national counterparts.

Government-backed prevention measures consist largely of a strategic communications unit tracking disinformation and taking down platforms identified to be spreading overt hate and extremist content. The Crime Prevention Department also delivers online seminars to schools on the topics of hate and extremism, in close cooperation with experts and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Otherwise, the only dedicated offline prevention activity is a small team of police community liaison officers engaging with schools. However, teachers and the police engaging with them do not feel equipped to create an enabling environment for discussion of extremism and they do not feel comfortable addressing the topic directly.

Existing fora for city-city cooperation exist at multiple sub-national levels and are represented in VRAX. However, city networks have not focused on P/CVE or related issues and their representatives have had limited engagement with VRAX, reportedly having not attended committee meetings. Municipalities feel that these networks can play an effective role in, for example, collaboration on Roma issues, social cohesion initiatives and the allocation of EU funds (though cities can apply for these funds directly) to support local prevention efforts. They also

⁴ See Ministry of Interior, Slovak Republic, *Crime Prevention / Fight against Extremism / Basic Documents* [website], <https://www.minv.sk/?zakladne-dokumenty-3>, (accessed 28 June 2022).



feel that a prevention agenda, not overtly tied to tackling extremism (but instead the wider polarisation challenge as an enabling environment), could be added to their focus.

Public trust in local government and even municipal police forces is comparatively higher than trust in national government, state police and mainstream media. For example, the mayor of Bratislava has a significant following and influence, with a redevelopment plan that includes a dramatic increase in budget for social affairs and community engagement.

Recommendations

International partners, including SCN, have a role to play in facilitating enhanced national-local P/CVE coordination. Further efforts dedicated to national to local coordination on prevention could compliment the foundations laid by VRAX to elevate the role of cities in these efforts. This could initially be facilitated by a third party, with the aim of securing commitment to convene at least twice annually after initial SCN or partner-led workshops. Representatives of social affairs departments, municipal police commissioners and mayoral advisers on public safety should be included from key cities, together with the Ministry of Interior's Crime Prevention Department, NAKA's National Counter-terrorism Unit and state police leads.

Slovak cities bordering Ukraine urgently need to take steps - including by facilitating inter-community dialogue and cooperation - to adequately support and integrate refugees and address the fears of a backlash of extremist and hate-fuelled violence, which has the potential to garner mainstream support. Local governments, especially departments of housing, social affairs and education are playing a frontline role, working with civil society and other NGOs. Bratislava's Crisis Centre, set up to support incoming Ukrainian refugees, is an example of effective, local multiagency coordination developed with minimal lead-in time, which should be shared with other cities in Slovakia and the broader region. With online hate towards Ukrainian refugees already prevalent, it is essential that cities across the region have opportunities to share concerns and work together on preventing violence and extremist fervour.

Slovak cities need to be engaged in regional and global conversations about safeguarding local democracy from the hybrid threats of extremism, disinformation, hate and wider anti-government agitation. The anticipated SCN working groups and enhanced engagement in Europe will be key mechanisms to bring Slovak cities into a wider conversation, together with upcoming in-person sessions in various locations throughout 2022. These and other efforts by SCN and international partners should work toward expanding the partnerships and support available to cities to counter a threat many agree is an increasingly urgent risk with the potential to unite extremist fringes with mainstream anti-government and antidemocratic activities.

Municipalities in Slovakia have a critical role to play in filling the gap between national government-focused efforts on countering disinformation and limited community policing efforts on prevention. Strategic communications efforts are focused on online threats. Efforts to



address the offline threats are not only extremely limited and police-led but, critically, cannot currently address extremism issues directly. Stakeholders consulted agree there is an opportunity for municipalities to bridge these efforts with a focus on violence prevention, including by using their public services, communications platforms and institutional trust to safeguard against hybrid threats.

There is a critical opportunity to increase the role and mandate of municipalities on preventing hate, extremism and polarisation, starting with the new social affairs plan in Bratislava.

Combined with effective national-local coordination, this could set a precedent for local governments to play a greater role in preventing and countering hate and extremism as part of mainstream service delivery and community outreach, while informing and strengthening local and national policy across the country. If ratified by the Bratislava municipal council vote, financial and human resources dedicated to preventing a range of social challenges are set to increase, with an annual budget of ~€10m per year for the next seven years. Plans are already underway to open a number of new community-based social services support hubs in key neighbourhoods.



Methodology

Data for this report was primarily collected during a five-day visit to Slovakia, when the SCN Management Unit met with municipal officials in Bratislava and Žilina, and representatives from national government, including the National Crime Agency (NAKA) and the Ministry of Interior's Crime Prevention Department and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Due to the ongoing emergency response to the Ukraine crisis, SCN was unable to meet with civil society organisations (CSOs) in person. In place of this, following the five-day visit, SCN scheduled an online consultation with a local Bratislava-based CSO to corroborate findings from consultations held with national and local government officials. Supplementing in-person and online meetings, the SCN conducted desk-based research on the broader national and regional context and issues relating the historic and current threats of hate, polarisation and violent extremism in the Slovak Republic.

Cities and key stakeholders involved in the consultative process were selected based on their engagement and participation in the PDCS project, *The Power of Cities*, as well as on the relevancy of the issues they face relating P/CVE and alignment with SCN's regional strategic engagement.⁵

Data collection was limited in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which delayed the delivery of this report, as well as the impact following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which impeded the availability of key local and national stakeholders due to ongoing emergency response efforts.

⁵ Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia, *The Power of Cities* [website], <https://en.pdcs.sk/projects/project/the-power-of-cities>.

Regional Overview

The nature and threat of hate and violent extremism in Central and Eastern Europe is heterogeneous and evolving, though typically posed by far-right extremism. Neo-Nazi movements, anti-Islam, anti-migration movements, and ultranationalist movements are a pervasive and rising threat across the region.⁶ Xenophobia, racism, and ultranationalism have historically been directed towards Roma, Jewish, LGBT+ and other minority communities.⁷

With regional liberal and local democratic institutions increasingly under attack, safeguarding local democracy in the region is an emerging priority as the threats have become more diversified and more mainstreamed over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the emerging fissures generated or exacerbated by other social, political and economic crises.

National Overview

The risk and threat profile of hate and extremism in the Slovak Republic has evolved over the past 30 years. While enduring traditions of right-wing extremist groups have long existed in Slovakia, their ambitions, motivations, strategies and targets have shifted over time.⁸ In the late 1980s and early years of independence, Slovakia was home to a prolific skinhead subculture that was characterised by violence, anti-social behaviour, racism and sympathies with neo-Nazism, which targeted Roma minorities, foreign nationals, and other minorities.⁹

From the early 2000s, previously fringe elements of the Slovak far-right sought mainstream legitimacy and support by establishing their own political parties and expanding the support-base of civic associations.¹⁰ Since then, a number of established political parties and civic associations including Slovenská Pospolitosť (Slovak Togetherness), Kotleba's ĽSNS (People's Party Our Slovakia), the Slovak Revival Movement (SHO) and Republika, have either historically represented or currently represent mainstream far-right and political extremism in the country.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and fuelled by perceptions of corruption and inadequate service provision, previously fringe elements of the far-right are increasingly united and mainstreamed. A recent nationwide representative population-level survey of the public commissioned by Interior Ministry found that 30% of respondents reported to know of

⁶ Pauwels, A. (2021) 'Contemporary manifestations of violent right-wing extremism in the EU: An overview of P/CVE practices', *Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)*, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran_adhoc_cont_manif_vrwe_eu_overv_pcve_pract_2021_en.pdf.

⁷ Kordaczuk-Was, M. (2020), 'Current radicalisation trends in Central and Eastern Europe', *CHAMPIONS*, <https://ppbw.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RADPol2020-conference-Policy-Briefs.pdf>.

⁸ Ministry of Interior, Slovak Republic (2020) 'The Conceptual Framework for Countering Radicalisation and Extremism by 2024', *Crime Prevention Department*, <https://prevenciakriminality.sk/static/pdf/the-conceptual-framework-for-countering-radicalisation-and-extremism-by-2024-pdf.pdf>.

⁹ Smolík, J. and Novák, P. (2019) 'Roots of the Czechoslovak skinheads: Development, trends and politics', *Human Affairs*, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/humaff-2019-0013/html?lang=en>.

¹⁰ Abbass, M. et al. (2011), 'Right-wing Extremism in Central Europe An Overview', *Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung*, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/08840.pdf>.

individuals or groups in their immediate social circles or communities who held extremist views.¹¹ There are mounting concerns that broader segments of the population, which do not necessarily share far-right views, may be mobilised around perceived, shared grievances related to anti-government messaging, distrust of democratic institutions and processes, anti-lockdown protests and COVID-19 related conspiracy theories.

More recently, many of the same actors espousing COVID-19 misinformation and conspiracy theories are now spreading pro-Russian and anti-refugee sentiment online following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. National government and local government all warn of anticipated offline hate, racism and extremist-fuelled violence, unchallenged by a sympathetic mainstream aggrieved perception that Slovak citizens are left behind by public services prioritising newcomers while unable to address existing demand.

Social media and the broader online sphere are key to the circulation of both far-right political party doctrines and fringe extremist group messaging. Extreme content is most prolific and accessible on Facebook; however, other social media platforms, particularly Telegram, are increasingly used to spread ever more hateful and extremist content.¹² Football hooliganism, and more recently fighting sports such as Mixed Martial Arts, with fringe neo-Nazi and far-right elements, are key areas of offline concern for municipal stakeholders, with sporting events often giving way to open displays of intolerance and the glorification of fascist symbols and agitation. Fringe extremist groups have also engaged in community-level activities, attempting to replace functions of the state such as in public order, with broader public perceptions of inadequate service provisions and preferential treatment for minority groups being capitalised upon to these ends.¹³ The armed forces, security agencies, police and other national and local government departments reportedly contain employees with extremist sympathies and even overt membership of far-right groups. A key area of concern for the police and municipalities is a culture of anti-minority attitudes and in some cases excessive use of force, with senior leadership making efforts to improve trust and weed out extremist agitators. Examples exist where efforts to build political commitment and consensus around a prevention strategy have been ignored and have not been considered a priority.

National P/CVE-relevant actors

Slovakia has a number of national-level authorities and units either relevant to, or directly playing a role in, addressing hate and extremism. Responding to extremism falls under the responsibility of the National Police, primarily through NAKA, which consists of seven units including the

¹¹ Ministry of Interior, Slovak Republic, (2021), 'Prieskumy Verejnej Mienky Subjektívne Vnímanie Bezpečia: Obyvatelmi Slovenskej Republiky', *Crime Prevention Department*, <https://www.minv.sk/?zakladne-dokumenty-3>.

¹² Kuchta, R. (2021) 'Online Extremism in Slovakia: Actors, Topics, Platforms & Strategies', *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/online-extremism-in-slovakia-actors-topics-platforms-strategies/>.

¹³ Ministry of Interior, Slovak Republic (2020) 'The Conceptual Framework for Countering Radicalisation and Extremism by 2024', *Crime Prevention Department*, <https://prevenciakriminality.sk/static/pdf/the-conceptual-framework-for-counteracting-radicalisation-and-extremism-by-2024-pdf.pdf>.

National Counter-terrorism Unit (NPTJ), and the Ministry of the Interior's Crime Prevention Department.¹⁴ NAKA's efforts to address extremism and radicalisation consist largely of online monitoring and analysis of extremist and criminal content online. NAKA is not responsible for developing or rolling out offline prevention strategies, however, they play a role in counter-extremism efforts by monitoring and analysing extremist trends in the Slovak Republic to inform legislation that protects the democratic rule of law and the safety of the population.¹⁵ The Interior Ministry's Department of Communication and Prevention is a strategic communications unit that tracks platforms used to spread hate and extremist content and debunks disinformation as well as works to improve the visibility and image of the police both online and offline. Officials recognised that there is space and need for municipalities to collaborate with the Department of Communication and Prevention, for example, through communicating the work the department is doing to safeguard communities from disinformation, conspiracy theories and other online harms with local communities.

The Crime Prevention Department of the Office of the Minister of Interior oversaw the development of the Slovak Republic's *Conceptual Framework for Countering Radicalisation and Extremism by 2024* document. In addition to developing strategic documents, the Crime Prevention Department delivers concrete activities on the ground. For instance, it runs online seminars in cooperation with NGOs to schools and students on hate speech, extremism, media literacy and critical thinking and cyberbullying. However, teachers and the police engaging with them do not feel equipped to create an enabling environment to discuss extremism and they do not feel comfortable addressing the topic directly.

National P/CVE Policy

The *Conceptual Framework for Countering Radicalisation and Extremism by 2024* sets out the priorities for preventing and countering radicalisation and extremism, associated with anti-social activities.¹⁶ VRAX, along with other ministries, and CSOs were consulted in the development of the framework. It seeks to enhance the central government's response to the threat of radicalism and extremism and to raise the public's awareness, with emphasis on coordination with CSOs. While recognising the threats posed by extremism and radicalisation as multifaceted, and therefore a whole-of-society issue, the framework does not outline a role for local governments, which have a critical role to play in coordinating a multi-actor response to these threats. However, on adoption of the conceptual framework, a government resolution lays out a recommendation for the Chairman of the Association of Towns and Municipalities of Slovakia

¹⁴ OSCE POLIS, *Country Profile: Slovak Republic* [website], <https://polis.osce.org/country-profiles/slovak-republic>.

¹⁵ Ministry of Interior, Slovak Republic (2020) 'The Conceptual Framework for Countering Radicalisation and Extremism by 2024', *Crime Prevention Department*, <https://prevenciakriminality.sk/static/pdf/the-conceptual-framework-for-countering-radicalisation-and-extremism-by-2024-pdf.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ministry of Interior, Slovak Republic (2020) 'The Conceptual Framework for Countering Radicalisation and Extremism by 2024', *Crime Prevention Department*, <https://prevenciakriminality.sk/static/pdf/the-conceptual-framework-for-countering-radicalisation-and-extremism-by-2024-pdf.pdf>.



and to the President of the Union of Cities and Municipalities of Slovakia to: (a) participate in the implementation of tasks presented in the Conceptual Framework, and (b) provide information for processing the bi-annual monitoring report on extremism.

National-Local Government Coordination in Prevention

Practical coordination between national and local authorities on either the nature of the threat or how to address it is limited to non-existent. Comprised of national government representatives, security services, CSOs and representatives from the SK 8 (the association of eight self-governing regions of Slovakia) and Union of Towns and Cities of Slovakia (UMS), VRAX provides an opportunity for national to local coordination in prevention and for city needs and perspectives to be reflected in the conceptual framework. However, limited engagement and motivation from municipal representatives in the committee have remained a barrier for effective integration of the needs and role of cities in prevention. Although there is limited coordination between state and local police (on an ad-hoc basis and only with senior officers with security clearance), a broader culture of collaboration currently does not exist and national police do not see connecting with municipal police as a priority. Some local government officials report that since the central government primarily leads on analysing the threat and developing strategies, it has yet to communicate the role of local governments in responding to this threat, with few means to establish and sustain dialogue with national counterparts on these issues. Stakeholders consulted reported that calls for the appointment of a national coordinator for extremism, terrorism and hybrid threats in 2019 were not answered and cited resource-deficits and an absence of political will as primary barriers to developing coordination.

City-City Coordination

Existing fora for inter-city cooperation exist at multiple levels, including SK 8, the Association of Cities and Municipalities of Slovakia (ZMOS) and UMS.¹⁷ In particular, SK 8 and UMS connect municipalities on a range of social areas, including education, development and integration. The UMS recently released a declaration of readiness to for Slovak Cities to support those seeking refuge from the war in Ukraine.¹⁸ Though there are currently no dedicated discussions around the prevention of hate and extremism, these platforms provide an opportunity for city-city dialogue and cooperation on these issues and to advocate on behalf of Slovak cities at the national level, such as through VRAX.

¹⁷ See Samosprávne Kraje, SK 8, [website] <http://samospravnekraje.sk/en/home>; Unia-Miest, *Union of Towns and Cities* [website], <http://www.unia-miest.eu/>; and, Združenie miest a obcí Slovenska, ZMOS [website], <https://www.zmos.sk/sekcie-rady-zmos-0.html>.

¹⁸ Iotkowska, S. (2022) 'Union of Slovak Cities announces readiness to help Ukraine', *The Mayor*, <https://www.themayor.eu/en/a/view/union-of-slovak-cities-announces-readiness-to-help-ukraine-10007>.

Bratislava overview

Threat Profile

Bratislava officials determine the risk posed by violent extremism in the city as moderate and consider preventing hate-motivated violence and youth radicalisation as a priority. Overt displays of hate and extremism in Bratislava are more commonly directed towards LGBT+, migrant and refugee communities. In October 2022, a lone gunman killed two people outside an LGBT+ bar in Bratislava having previously posted a manifesto online laden with anti-Semitic and anti-LGBT+ hatred.¹⁹ Local football clubs are hotbeds for hooliganism and associated far-right activity who display Nazi and other hateful symbolism, targeting minority communities including LGBT+, Roma, and more recently, Ukrainian refugees.

Bratislava is not home to a large number of supporters and members of established far-right parties. However, as the capital city, it is a focal point for demonstrations, drawing in supporters from neighbouring urban and rural areas. Despite low levels of support, there is growing concern that far-right candidates running in upcoming elections will leverage the pandemic and Ukraine crisis to broaden their support base and make significant popularity gains in the city. While voters might not align with the intolerant and extremist views of these parties, there are nevertheless broader currents of frustration with public institutions and overstretched public resources, which running candidates use as a wedge issue to broaden their support.

Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent spread of conspiracy theories, already low levels of trust in public institutions has further deteriorated. Public health workers and officials are often the target of disinformation, harassed and occasionally physically attacked in the city, along with an increase in reported anti-Semitic attacks in the city since the start of the pandemic. With conspiracy theories appealing to a significant minority of the public, far-right and extremist groups have been able to integrate and inspire broader public discontent with both official COVID-19 response policies and public institutions, constituting a significant threat to local democratic institutions and processes.

Local Prevention Structures and Initiatives

While not explicitly related to the prevention of hate and extremism, Bratislava has a number of existing social initiatives to empower young people, support people without homes, and impoverished neighbourhoods, particularly where drug use is high.

Under Mayor Vallo's leadership, the municipality prioritises a 'soft' approach to dealing with social issues. This is driven in part because the city has had a history of heavy-handed policing practices that has undermined public trust. Previously, the municipality had a small Department

¹⁹ Rose, H. (2022) 'The Bratislava Attacks: Insights from the Shooter's Manifesto', *Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET)*, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/14/the-bratislava-shooting-and-manifesto-initial-insights-and-learnings/>.



of Social Affairs, with no teams dedicated to supporting NGOs working on social issues. Public order was therefore under the sole remit of law enforcement agencies, which favoured punitive approaches to social disorder. Now, the Department of Social Affairs consists of around 60 employees who work in tandem with police and other municipal departments for a more holistic and preventative approach to social issues.

If ratified by a municipal council vote, the new social affairs plan in Bratislava is set to bolster financial and human resources dedicated to preventing a range of social challenges, increasing the annual budget for the Department of Social Affairs to approximately €10 million per year for the next seven years. *Plan (B) Bratislava*, a major redevelopment initiative, includes plans for building community resilience for youth at risk, families, the elderly and marginalised communities as well as to establish platforms for intercommunity interaction.²⁰ This provides an opportunity to increase the role and mandate of Bratislava on preventing hate, extremism and polarisation. Combined with effective national-local coordination, this could set a precedent for local governments to play a much greater role in P/CVE as part of mainstream service delivery and community outreach, while informing and strengthening local and national policy across the county.

Coordination

In recent years, the municipality has strengthened its coordination with and between local actors across a number of social initiatives. A new public order initiative called *Nočná pomoc* (night help) was launched over the summer of 2022 and brings together local police, the Department of Social Affairs and civil society to improve safety in the city and to address night-time anti-social behaviour.²¹ The municipality is currently holding coordination meetings with a rapid response unit on a monthly basis to develop a coordinated approach for this initiative.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the municipality set up a Crisis Centre to support and integrate incoming Ukrainian refugees. The centre coordinates local NGOs, local police and national agencies to deliver substantial support to deal with the crisis. The centre sets an example for effective multiagency coordination that was developed with minimal lead in time and presents an opportunity to share lessons and be expanded to other cities in the country.

There is no mechanism to facilitate national-local police coordination. Communication takes place on an ad-hoc basis, for instance during high-profile events in the city or when a serious threat arises. In these cases, intelligence agencies will share sensitive information with those who have security clearance at the municipal level, including the Chief Commander, the mayor and other relevant local government officials. Local officials report that a barrier to improving this

²⁰ Plán Bratislava (2018), *The Bratislava Plan* [website], <https://www.planbratislava.sk/en>.

²¹ Bratislava, the capital of the Slovak Republic, *Nočná pomoc* [website], <https://bratislava.sk/mesto-bratislava/projekty/nocna-pomoc>.



coordination is stigma associated with national and intelligence agencies that may undermine public trust in local governance.

Žilina overview

Threat Profile

As in Bratislava, Žilina officials determine the risk posed by violent extremism as moderate and consider online extremism and conspiracy theories, as well as integrating historically marginalised Roma communities and incoming Ukrainian refugees as prevention priorities. According to national government officials, Žilina is ranked fourth in the country for extremism and third for incidents of hate speech. Though the city has experienced few incidents of hate-motivated violence in recent years, hate targeting Roma communities and Ukrainian refugees as well as declining trust in public institutions spurred on by misinformation and discontent surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and Ukraine crisis are of increasing concern for the city. Though this sentiment seldom manifests into offline action, it has all but proliferated in online spaces over the past two years, in particular on Facebook.

The two most visible extremist groups in Žilina are football hooligans and their associated far-right and neo-Nazi fringe elements and political extremists who have incrementally expanded their influence and prominence in the city. Currently, there are no members of ĽSNS at municipal level, though, as in Bratislava, there is growing concern that with coming elections the party will broaden its support base in the city. As a major city in the region, people from neighbouring towns and villages, known for more vocal support of both fringe and political extremists, are drawn to Žilina during football events and other national and cultural celebrations, when extremist messaging and symbolism become most visible in the city.

Pandemic-related conspiracy theories have further diminished public trust in institutions. Those sceptical about the official response to the pandemic, or to vaccine and mask mandates, have directed their frustration at health workers, teachers, and those supporting the restrictions in the city, including public officials who advocated for public health measures. While public trust in schools and teachers is generally higher than other institutions in Žilina, misinformation and polarisation have steadily eroded this. Local officials are concerned over how the pandemic has become a divisive issue in schools with teachers and local communities divided between promoting public health measures to curb the spread of the virus on the one hand and promoting conspiratorial thinking around the pandemic on the other, thus undermining official public service efforts.

Local Prevention Structures and Initiatives

The municipality has no departments explicitly tasked with prevention of violent extremism; however, the Department of Education, Culture, Sports, Tourism and Regional Development, Department of Social Affairs and Housing, Department of Prevention and the City Police each



play an important role in efforts to build community resilience and cohesion, trust in institutions and prevent violence.

The city is actively working to continue the integration of Roma population and other minority groups into the broader community through a range of social initiatives including infrastructural rehabilitation, access to education, and citizenship support and advice. The municipal community centre leads much of this work, providing social services for marginalised and disadvantaged communities, and is coordinated by municipal departments, social workers, local police and national police.

The schools are another key area for prevention activities. For example, the Department for Education works with prevention specialists, psychologists and local police in schools to monitor and support students who engage in anti-social and disruptive behaviour. The department also works to raise awareness of teachers themselves, to promote critical thinking, and to address the role that some teachers play in perpetuating conspiracy theories or racist and divisive views. In partnership with national government, the Department for Education is working with psychologists to support students with behavioural difficulties in schools; however, there is no specific mandate for coordination for P/CVE efforts.

Coordination

In response to the pandemic, the municipality was quick to mobilise and coordinate local resources to respond. The city has built on this momentum to strengthen local coordination on social services going forward, including in its response to support and integrate incoming Ukrainian refugees. In addition to the community centre, the City Crisis Council meets regularly to develop its response to both the pandemic and influx of Ukrainian refugees and periodically involves the broader district, including mayors of other cities in the region, district police, the army, and other crisis rescue systems.

There is space and appetite to fold a specific mandate to prevent hate and extremism into broader coordination efforts to strengthen community cohesion and resilience. However, local officials note there is an urgent lack of data and tools to understand both the nature and the prevalence of community-level risks and threats. This is a critical gap in understanding the link between online hate and extremism and offline community-level risks and threats. Moreover, given the recognition that neighbouring towns and cities harbour more extremist actors who work, visit, and sometimes migrate to Žilina due to its hub-status in the region, there is an opportunity to work with other municipalities to prevent extremism.

There are no structures in place to enable sustained practical coordination between national and local police on the threats posed by hate, polarisation and violent extremism. Such coordination takes place on an ad-hoc basis. For example, over the course of the pandemic, and more recently with the Ukraine crisis, there has been ongoing communication between national and local police



through the crisis council. Communication between the national police and head of local police department also exists when exceptional threats arise. However, there is no consistent mechanism for coordination or information sharing on the risks and threats and how to address them. Addressing this gap is critical as local officials highlight the need to build trust between national police and local police, where local law enforcement could benefit from the information and resources of their national counterparts and national police could benefit from the knowledge that local police have of their communities and the threat issues.



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