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## Strengthening Urban Community Resilience against Extremism: Culture and Heritage as a Tool<sup>1</sup>

### Posilňovanie odolnosti mestskej komunity proti extrémizmu: kultúra a dedičstvo ako nástroj

#### Abstract

The paper focuses on the concept of resilience in an urban environment in a broad perspective. In times of growing extremism and radicalisation – both in virtual and real worlds – it becomes crucial to build resilient communities through strategies and practices that lead to strengthening social cohesion and social bridging between various groups including minorities. The paper examines a case of the middle-size Slovak city of Banská Bystrica, which was the first (and so far the only) regional capital in Slovakia where a neo-Nazi representative became a governor in legitimate regional elections in 2013. It focuses on activities of local activists and volunteers and the grassroots movement Not in Our Town aimed at preventing and countering the growth of radicalisation and extremism in local and regional communities. Part of the movement's activities (such as Schools for Democracy or a multicultural festival Embargo) are based on cultural and heritage-based actions that tend to address and connect various groups living in the city and make them resilient to extremism, racism, antisemitism and xenophobia.

**Key words:** resilience, heritage, grassroots activism, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

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Štúdia sa zaoberá konceptom reziliencie v mestskom prostredí v širšej perspektíve. V čase rastúceho extrémizmu a radikalizácie (v reálnom aj virtuálnom svete) je nevyhnutné formovať stratégie a praktiky vedúce k

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budovaniu silných, odolných komúní, ktoré smerujú k posilňovaniu sociálnej kohézie a premostovaniu rôznych sociálnych skupín vrátane minorít. Štúdiá sa zameriava na prípadovú štúdiu z Banskej Bystrice, stredoslovenského mesta, kde v roku 2013 vyhral regionálne voľby reprezentant neonacistickej strany. Reakciou na tento výsledok bol vznik neformálnej občianskej platformy Nie v našom meste, ktorá združuje lokálnych aktivistov a dobrovoľníkov. Cieľom platformy je rozvíjať aktivity, ktoré sú zamerané na prevenciu extrémizmu a radikalizácie v regióne prostredníctvom početných aktivít, zameraných na posilňovanie tolerance medzi rôznymi komunitami, ako aj budovanie inovatívnych vzdelávacích aktivít, napr. programu Školy za demokraciu, multikultúrneho festivalu Embargo alebo vzdelávacích mestských prechádzok. Všetky tieto aktivity sa formovali na základe lokálneho kultúrneho dedičstva a ich cieľom je spájať rôzne skupiny mestského obyvateľstva s cieľom posilňovať vzájomnú toleranciu a rešpekt, a tým budovať odolnosť voči javom ako extrémizmus, rasizmus, antisemitizmus, xenofóbia, homofóbia a iné prejavy intolerancie.

**Kľúčové slová:** reziliencia/ odolnosť, dedičstvo, lokálny aktivizmus, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

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## Introduction

Resilience has become a popular (buzz)word in recent social, economic, cultural and political discourse and provoked numerous opinions related to contemporary challenges such as climate change, globalisation and urbanisation. The word and the concept of resilience has been developing theoretically by a number of scholars in various disciplines from psychology, ecology, sociology, anthropology, urban studies, heritage studies to technology and engineering for a long time, and was presented in diverse and complex multidisciplinary, primarily urban contexts. The term resilience was first introduced by an ecologist C. S. Holling who studied the behavior of systems exposed to unexpected external changes and disruptions (Holling 1973). It was further used by other disciplines and broadened to an understanding of the community's capacity to resist or recover from natural or man-made disasters such as floods, droughts, earthquakes or war destructions. Folke et al. defined resilience as 'the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure and feedbacks..., that is, the capacity to change in order to maintain the same identity... This process continues with further phases of adaptation (as the capacity of actors to influence resilience) and transformation or transformability (Folke et al. 2010, 3). Following a different perspective, Masten, Best and Garmezy described resilience as a 'process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances' (Masten, Best and Garmezy 1990, 426). Caccioppo et al. talk about social resilience – the capacity to foster, engage in, and sustain positive relationships, stressing the importance of fairness, compassion, generosity, openness, empathy, care and respect for others, tolerance, group identity, etc. (Caccioppo

et al. 2011, 44). Holtorf focuses on cultural resilience, defined as the capacity of a cultural system in relevant communities to absorb adversity, deal with change and continue to develop (Holtorf 2018, 639). His arguments contribute to discussions on heritage theory, proposing innovative applications of cultural resilience to the field of cultural heritage (Holtorf 2018, 640).

Many contemporary scholars conceptualise (urban) resilience not as an outcome, but mainly as a process and an ability or capability to deal with shocks (Béné 2012). In its original meaning, urban resilience was understood primarily “as the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and systems within a city to survive, adapt, and grow no matter what chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience”.<sup>2</sup>

A number of scholars have been developing the concept of resilient cities or resilient communities. These are characterized as those able to use various resources to respond to and recover from various kinds of adverse situations and natural disasters (such as floods, droughts or earthquakes, often climate change-related, and of course recently also a COVID-19 pandemic)<sup>3</sup> or man-made disasters (such as wars, genocides or terrorism); and their impact on physical, social, cultural or political appearance of the city/community and psychological effects on its inhabitants (Folke et al. 2010; Borsekova and Nijkamp 2019). In recent debates, for instance within the “100 Resilient Cities” and “Global Resilient Cities Network initiative”,<sup>4</sup> Berkowitz stressed that resilience was not only about the ability to bounce back sudden disasters, but also long-term, slow-burning disasters such as poverty or endemic violence (Berkowitz 2016). Similarly, Till in her study on wounded cities questioned characteristics of wounded and resilient cities that define these cities as ‘damaged following singular, while extreme, outside’ events, from so-called ‘natural’ forces to war (defined in a traditional sense) to forms of globalization’ (Till 2012, 6). She stressed that cities became wounded and (less) resilient in very different ways as tied to different histories, processes and traumas (Till 2012, 6).<sup>5</sup>

Following these concepts and translating them into contemporary local, national and global contexts<sup>6</sup>, we can add the lack of job opportunities, unemployment, regional disparities or the lack of social or health services in marginalised areas to the areas of serious

<sup>2</sup> <https://resilientcitiesnetwork.org/urban-resilience/>, 25.10.2021.

<sup>3</sup> This paper was finalised at the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the light of the course of the pandemic, the importance of writing about the concept of resilience has become even more important.

<sup>4</sup> 100 Resilient Cities: <http://www.100resilientcities.org/what-is-resilience-and-why-does-it-matter-now-more-than-ever/>; Global Resilient Cities Network: <https://www.rockpa.org/project/global-resilient-cities-network/>, 16.04.2021.

<sup>5</sup> These broad concepts have gained a new perspective in times of a Russian aggression towards Ukraine in 2022 and will require new reconceptualisations.

<sup>6</sup> Although this paper has been revised after the beginning of the Russian aggressive war against Ukraine, it cannot predict any further developments in the region. The only thing which is evident is that the concept of resilience will remain the topic of real survival as well as a significant research theme.

long-term disasters. All negative societal developments increasingly contribute to the lack of trust to state institutions and democracy, and consequently to growing nationalism and radicalisation of parts of the society (e.g. Gingrich and Banks 2006; Kalb 2009).

In times of an increasing number of democracy threats, violent terrorist attacks, conspiracy theories and fake news through social media, there is a growing volume of papers that address the need of building resilient communities against intolerance, hatred, xenophobia, racism, antisemitism, extremism and any other kinds of radicalisation (e.g., Ellis and Abdi 2017, Muro 2017). These kinds of endangerment have become a new threat for democratic societies. Most of the papers in this research field deal with the threat of concrete acts of terrorism (such as resilience of victims of terrorist attacks in the related European countries; e.g. Koehler 2015). A growing number of studies have been devoted to the growth of right-wing, extremist or nationalist-populist movements and political parties, and their impact on democracy in particular European countries, mainly Central and Eastern European countries (e. g. Kürti 1998; Kürti 2003; Kallius et al 2016; Podvršič and Veselinovič 2020).

The recent resilience discourse has not been only about how to protect cultural heritage (mainly tangible or built heritage) in times of climate change, natural disasters or wars and terrorism, which can be described as *resilience of heritage*. It is also about how to use existing cultural heritage and its symbolic power and means (mainly using intangible cultural heritage and its values) in making local (urban or rural) communities stronger, more inclusive, more tolerant, more sustainable and resilient to the outside, mainly virtual global pressures. In this perspective we can look at heritage as a tool and we can describe it as *heritage as resilience*.

Holtorf notes that cultural heritage can contribute to strengthening the community resilience in two ways. First, it is important to support traditional skills and knowledge that can improve the prevention and mitigation of disasters – this argument emphasises intangible heritage elements such as knowledge, skills and traditional ways of maintaining tangible heritage. Second, maybe even more important these days, is linked to „heritage values such as a sense of place and belonging supporting people’s collective identity and self-esteem“ (Holtorf 2018, 640).

According to a number of scholarly papers, social capital – social bonding and bridging is most important for building resilient communities, which involves communication, shared values and social cohesion (Ellis and Abdi 2017). Norris et al. (2008) mention community competence as an important factor, too – it shows the ability to collaborate effectively in the service of identifying and achieving goals. It can involve both collective efficacy, the coming together to accomplish a goal, as well as empowerment. Community competence is closely connected with the concept of social linking, trust and connection between institutions and community members.

The Council of Europe in The Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Council of Europe 2005) shifted the concept of cultural heritage

from objects and places to people, and stressed the importance of inhabitants – stakeholders in heritage management, called „Heritage Communities“, defined as „people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations“ (art. 2b).

The key objective of the paper is to look at the ways of building and strengthening resilient urban communities in a broad perspective and to explore the ways how to prevent and combat the problem of growing extremism and radicalisation in a contemporary society. The study is based on the example of the city of Banská Bystrica, which was the first (and hopefully the last and only) regional capital in Slovakia where a neo-Nazi representative became a governor in legitimate regional elections (2013)<sup>7</sup>.

In the paper, I use examples based on my ethnographic research about local activist projects aimed to strengthen community resilience to counter extremism and radicalisation through various participatory actions and practices organised by the grassroots movement Not in Our Town (later NIOT) and local volunteers. Part of these practices have been based on culture and heritage actions, which are the main focus of this paper.

The paper draws on a five-year ethnographic study of grassroots activism (2014–2019) in the city of Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, based on participant observation and multiple formal and semi-formal interviews with 25 activists and volunteers. It is important to stress that the author herself is a native citizen of Banská Bystrica and has been involved in the organisation of a number of activities in a position of an active citizen, but also a position of an engaged anthropologist and an adviser in an educational programme. Although this multiple engagement might raise ethical questions, the author followed ethical principles of engaged ethnographic research, which means that all participants in the NIOT activities were informed about the research and of the multiple role of the researcher in the movement, and agreed on this approach.<sup>8</sup>

In the paper, I work with a broader concept of resilience that goes beyond tangible heritage protection and management. I tend to turn the focus from discussing the resilience of heritage (usually tangible heritage) to the community resilience based on (or supported by) intangible heritage practices (heritage as resilience). The aim is to pay a closer attention to practices based on intangible cultural heritage that can become a tool of strengthening urban community integration, resilience and sustainability. The need for building community resilience through cultural heritage has been highlighted in a number of international documents, such as the ICOMOS Delhi Declaration on

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<sup>7</sup> The regional governor in Slovakia is an elected representative of the region within the eight higher territorial units/selfgoverning regions. This is different from the position of a Mayor – the governor of the local self-government – a municipality, in this case the city of Banská Bystrica. The competences of local self-governments and regional self-governing regions are different, described by the law.

<sup>8</sup> The approach using autoethnography in anthropological research has been discussed and used numerio- sly, e.g. Okely and Callaway 1992; Ellis 2004; Maréchal 2010; Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2015.

Heritage and Democracy or the Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11) – making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.<sup>9</sup>

### **Not in Our Town (NIOT): A story of a grassroots urban civic movement against extremism and radicalisation**

24 November 2013. Banská Bystrica, the city of 78,000 inhabitants situated in Central Slovakia and the seat of the Self-Governing Region Banská Bystrica (the biggest region out of eight regions in Slovakia),<sup>10</sup> woke up to a black morning. The results of the second round of regional elections revealed a shocking fact: a neo-Nazi, whom no one believed could succeed, was democratically elected as the regional governor for the next four years. Slovakia filled the pages of all world newspapers although warnings of trends towards anti-democratic right-wing developments within some political parties or movements in Slovakia (and elsewhere – such as Hungary, Poland or Slovenia) have been present for some time. Marian Kotleba, a former IT teacher at a grammar school, was famous for his open hatred against the Roma minority, Jews and migrants, for denying holocaust and celebrating the fascist Slovak State during the WW2 and its president Jozef Tiso who was executed in 1947 for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Kotleba was acting strongly against the EU and NATO, and the first thing he did in his office was removing the EU flag from the building of the self-governing region. He formed a far-right political party in the past, which was legally banned (due to openly using fascist symbols) so he founded a new party, named after him – “Kotleba – People’s Party Our Slovakia”. As the chair of this party, Kotleba and his party fellows managed to get not only to regional structures in 2017, but 2 years later also to the national Parliament (8.04% in 2016, 7.97% in 2020 in Slovakia).

Banská Bystrica, the seat of the Kotleba’s neo-Nazi far-right party, is the city that played a very important role in the WW2. In 1944, it became the centre of the Slovak National Uprising – the biggest anti-fascist movement in Central Europe (including Slovenia and Croatia – the South-East European territories). People from the region – together with partisans from 30 other countries – fought against the Nazis in the nearby mountains, many lost their lives, several entire villages were burnt by the Nazis as

<sup>9</sup> ICOMOS 2017. Delhi Declaration on Heritage and Democracy; [https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Charters/GA2017\\_Delhi-Declaration\\_20180117\\_EN.pdf](https://www.icomos.org/images/DOCUMENTS/Charters/GA2017_Delhi-Declaration_20180117_EN.pdf); United Nations. 2015. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>, 12 March 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Public administration reform in Slovakia started after 1989 and was completed in 2002. The administrative structure of the Slovak Republic is represented by eight self-governing regions, 79 districts (historical territorial units - now only statistical units) and almost 2900 self-governing local municipalities. The legislative powers are connected to three levels: the National Council of the Slovak Republic – the Parliament with 150 members; Regional self-governments, and Local self-governments – local municipalities.

a revenge... The region has been full of memories of this period and a state commemoration of the event has been annually organised in Banská Bystrica since the end of the WW2. It was therefore a shock that a neo-Nazi party won elections in this region (the party won even in the villages that were burnt by the Nazis during the WW2). Political analysts and experts were astonished after the elections as none of them expected the extremist neo-Nazi party to get that far.

The shock and despair of many people in the region about the result of the elections mobilized some to collective action. Immediately after the elections, a group of friends and activists met to discuss what to do to make the community “more resilient” in order to prevent anything like that to happen in the future. The group met several times for brainstorming. The founder of the Centre for Community Organising in Banská Bystrica – an American citizen – told the group a story of Not in Our Town – a US movement to stop hatred and build safe, strong and inclusive communities. It started in the town of Billings, Montana, in 1995, when citizens of Billings stood up for their Jewish and Indian neighbours after a series of hate crime. Since then, hundreds of communities in the US and elsewhere were inspired by the story taking action against hatred.

Activists in Banská Bystrica decided to follow the objectives of the Not in Our Town movement and use them in a new local context. The Not in Our Town (NIOT) platform in Banská Bystrica was launched in February 2014. The core group of the movement consisted of 20–25 people (NGO activists; academics; artists; religious, church and minority representatives; and individual volunteers). Within a few months in 2014, the NIOT has expanded. It organised first public events - debates on the Jewish and the Roma holocaust, and formulated the value statement of the NIOT local movement called „Breaking the silence“:

While respecting diversity of opinions, we support collaboration and community building through strengthening the following values: solidarity, responsibility, loyalty, tolerance, respect, honesty and wisdom. We believe that silence is not the right response to hatred and violence. Sometimes it is enough to break the silence and talk.<sup>11</sup>

Since 2014, the NIOT grassroots civic movement has grown into a platform focused on prevention and deradicalisation in the region of Banská Bystrica. Its aim is to address radicalisation, extremism, hatred and violence, promoted by new extremists and neo-Nazis, in an active, creative and direct way based on good examples from Slovakia and abroad.<sup>12</sup> The NIOT has been organising a number of activities and events for the

<sup>11</sup> Nie v našom meste; <http://niot.sk/o-nas/>, 02.04.2020.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, the Centre for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade, established in 1995, is a similar organisation, aiming at fighting nationalism, xenophobia and any kind of violence using numerous ways of cultural and social engagement; <https://www.czkd.org/en/about-us/>; 16. 04. 2021; Čirić, and Sekulic 2014/15; 18.12.2021.

public. The key actors decided to focus on educational and cultural activities targeting 1. teachers; 2. younger generation as an important part of the local community and potential voters, and 3. the general public.

### Case 1: Schools for Democracy: Living Libraries

One of the first and so far the most successful programmes developed by the NIOT has been a programme called „*Schools for Democracy*“. It is an innovative 1-year long educational programme for primary and secondary schools aimed at developing critical thinking and human rights education using methods of *Cultures Interactive*.<sup>13</sup> It was first tested in 2017 and has been since implemented in numerous primary and secondary schools in the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region (32 schools in 2021). The programme has been offered and provided by a non-governmental organisation The Centre for Community Organising (CKO), guaranteed by the Faculty of Education of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, and financially supported by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports; the Ministry of Justice; and since 2018 also the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region. Following the “Cultures Interactive” methodology, the aim of this educational programme is to provide new forms of human rights education in order to support critical thinking, strengthening values of democracy, freedom, equality, open civic society and combatting any kinds of intolerance, hatred, prejudices and stereotypes. It is important to stress that education in this area (so called “value-based” education) has been rather underestimated in the Slovak educational system.

The *Schools for Democracy* Programme has been using a number of innovative educational methods (helping people in need; watching films; role playing; or living libraries/ human libraries/ living books/ storytelling) and proved to become very popular and successful. The activity using the method of living libraries has been seen as the most attractive by the students.

The first living library was organised in Denmark in 2000. This human rights educational tool/ method became a part of the Council of Europe’s programme in 2003 and had been further developed with the aim to foster mutual understanding, tolerance and respect for human rights and freedoms. According to local contexts, the method is used to challenge stereotypes, stigma, prejudices and discrimination.<sup>14</sup> Living books within living libraries are real people – particularly the people from various socially vulnerable or marginalised groups. These are the people who experienced some kind of discrimination and prejudices and they are willing to act as storytellers or living books. This means they

<sup>13</sup> Cultures Interactive is a German NGO for Intercultural Education and Violence Prevention. It started in 2005, targeting the wide-spread right-wing extremist and Neonazi milieus in East-Germany which appeared after reunification in the 1990s and later on also included inner-city districts struck by migration-related radical ethnic and religious tensions; <https://cultures-interactive.de/en/our-work.html>, 18.05.2021.

<sup>14</sup> Council of Europe; <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/living-library>; accessed on 23.03.2020.

bring to the class their personal narratives – oral histories or family/ personal heritage stories passed on orally as a means to teach young people about history, human rights, discrimination, racism, anti-semitism, xenophobia, intolerance and hatred.<sup>15</sup>

Oral tradition – stories, knowledge and experience transmitted by oral channels – has been the key part of individual and collective identities since the beginnings of humankind, and it is important even in modern times, both in urban and rural societies. Despite all technologies, oral tradition remains a powerful form of human communication and intergenerational knowledge transmission. It often includes an unwritten history of a particular human group and demonstrates its strategies of conservation, survival, adaptation and transformation, and values and beliefs related to these strategies (Civallero 2017). Oral tradition is a significant part of intangible cultural heritage of the mankind. In this broad sense, storytelling or living books can be understood as part of ever evolving concept of intangible heritage, supported also by UNESCO and other organisations.<sup>16</sup>

The NIOT living library programme built on oral tradition involves a group of about twenty volunteers – representatives from the Jewish community, the Roma community, migrants, people from LGBTI+, victims of communism and a former neo-Nazi supporter.<sup>17</sup> These volunteers visit a classroom (individually) at a primary or secondary school<sup>18</sup> and tell the students their real personal story. These living books based on personal oral histories proved to be a powerful educational tool against prejudice and stereotypes. Many students for the first time in their life have a chance to meet and talk to a person from a marginalised or stigmatised group. Living books present contested narratives and as such, they are often rather emotional as young people face their own stereotypes and prejudices, and are often moved by real stories of real people standing in front of them. These classes are followed by further tasks for the students – such as finding and contacting more people who experienced discrimination in their family or neighbourhood, or collecting personal stories of their grandparents. The experience is emotional and educational on both sides. Not only students, but also storytellers experience various emotional challenges. Alica, the Jewish “living book”, is one of the

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, in Slovenia, the organisation Legebitra that provides service and support to individuals, LGBTI communities and people with HIV has also been using living library – živa knjižnica - as a method to combat prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination: <https://legebitra.si/ponujamo/#ziva>, 30.03.2020. In Poland, the Foundation IRSE (Institute for Social and Economic Balance) coordinates actions of the Human Library Trójmiasto (Gdynia, Gdansk and Sopot): <https://irse.pl/en/the-human-library/>; 10.09.2021. Also see Groyecka-Bernard et al. 2019.

<sup>16</sup> UNESCO, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/tell-your-living-heritage-story-2018-01002>; 20.05.2021; Mortimer, I. 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Nie v našom meste, <http://niot.sk/ziva-kniznica>; 31.03.2020.

<sup>18</sup> These living books only take place in the classrooms with students between 14 to 17 years old at schools that voluntarily joined the programme „Schools for Democracy.“

storytellers who also wrote a book of family memoirs. She is always emotional when addressing the students and talking about her past:

For me, the most emotional was a Living Library in the town B. At the beginning, I usually ask students whether they have ever met or heard of a Jew. At this school I was told by the teacher that in the classroom (grade 9, 15-year olds) there was a rather strong group of Kotleba supporters. Yes, green T-shirts,<sup>19</sup> party logos on their smartphones. When I told them what I was going to talk about – a story of my Jewish family – they looked at each other and it was clear how they despised me. Their behavior was arrogant and superior. During my talk (usually it lasts about 20–25 minutes) I could see that the atmosphere has slightly changed. Especially one boy and one girl who looked most arrogant at the beginning, started to listen more carefully; and after they saw my emotions when I was telling them about my mother who was pregnant and lived in a bunker in a forest for 6 cold months of 1944–45 with almost no food, the girl was crying and the boy listened with open mouth... At the end I received a small piece of paper with the words: 'Thank you for opening my eyes' (female, 77).

Another living book, Ľuboš, has transformed from a neo-Nazi supporter to a successful governmental official. Participation in the Living Library project helped him in his career development.

I am part of the Living Library project. I visit classes and tell them my story – the story of an idiot, a former Nazi supporter who used to fight against everyone... I had excellent feedbacks from the children I talked to... I was in a class once – the majority of them were total fans of Kotleba, and I told them my story: I knew Kotleba, he was my teacher, I used to go out with him... I could see that my personal story, my transformation had some impact on these young people. I really liked it (male, 23).

Schools for Democracy are active at 32 primary and secondary schools of the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region (2021) and the interest has been growing. However, the programme is still only an informal part of education, organised by the Centre for Community Organising and by the NIOT volunteers. It is not an essential part of official curricula, and it cannot cover all schools or replace formal education. Still, the experience of the participants – both the storytellers and the students – has proved to be efficient and should be explored more. The living libraries were so far organised about fifty times a year at the schools involved in the programme (in addition to other

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<sup>19</sup> All Kotleba party members and their supporters wear dark green T-shirts with a party logo as a symbol of their common identity.

activities within this educational programme, such as critical thinking courses). According to the feedback from the students, living libraries have been seen as the most popular part of the programme. The students enjoyed having a chance to meet and talk to representatives of various communities that have been unknown or invisible to them before. They also expressed that meeting the people outside their educational circle has been novel and inspirational.

Participating in the Schools for Democracy programme and mainly in living libraries was rather moving for me because I had to reflect on my own prejudices. This kind of education is much more powerful than memorising history facts (female student, 16).

The effectiveness of the Schools for Democracy programme has been annually measured through an association experiment (a Wilcoxon-Signed Rank Test) in each class, run at the beginning and the end of the school year by the Faculty of Education of Matej Bel University. The test focused on the analysis of attitudes of students towards categories such as a racist, a homosexual, the Roma (member of the Roma community), a migrant, a Jew and a person with disability. From the analysis in 2020 (evaluation of the programme in the school year 2019/2020) it is clear that in all categories there has been a clear positive development in attitudes of the programme attendees in all categories (Školy za demokraciu 2020, 4).

These days, the formal education does not always attract the interest of students. New educational - more attractive, more innovative and more efficient ways are needed. Living books/ living libraries based on storytelling and oral histories are a good example because they offer an opportunity to connect young generation with the experience of older generations in a direct face-to-face contact. A part of the programme is a task for the living libraries students to interview their grandparents and older relatives, and to explore their own family histories. This process can lead to raising awareness of their own diverse identities.

The intergenerational transmission of knowledge and experience has always been at the centre of heritage safeguarding as it is stressed also in a number of UNESCO documents (e.g., UNESCO: Living Heritage and Education 2019). The methods using living heritage in education prove to be one of the ways of strengthening community empowerment, resilience and tolerance.

## Case 2: The Embargo Festival

During the Kotleba's regional governance (2013–2017), the governor managed to stop a number of educational and cultural activities in the area of his legal competencies.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> In Slovakia, the framework of self-government is organised within two dominant levels – the regional level represented by eight Self-Governing Regions and the local level represented by 2,890 municipalities. Some

To give an example, Kotleba banned an educational event planned by the Puppet Theatre at the Crossroads – the performance based on a novel by Irena Brežná „A Letter to the Black Son“ that was offered to primary and secondary schools in the region. Brežná emigrated to Switzerland after the Soviet invasion to Czechoslovakia in 1968 and became a famous writer. She published her personal story (the marriage with a black man and giving birth to a black son) in Switzerland, which was translated after 1989 into the Slovak language and made into a play. As majority of theatres in Slovakia are governed and funded by the regional government, Kotleba (mis)used his legal authority to stop this performance and banned it at all schools. The same way he stopped performances and funding of the Dance Theatre celebrating respect and tolerance towards any „others“, including LGBT+. He also advised to ban any formal discussions about human rights and extremism at the schools in the region. Instead, he announced his support for folklore ensembles promoting traditional Slovak culture, and recommended to organise beauty contests for female students at secondary schools.<sup>21</sup> Although it might be surprising how his acts were legally possible in a democratic country, it is important to stress that numerous criminal complaints were filed against Kotleba that still wait for court ruling.

As a response to the bans introduced by Kotleba, the NIOT movement introduced an independent annual multicultural festival Embargo.<sup>22</sup> The first festival was organised in 2015 and was promoted as a festival of human rights, tolerance and mutual understanding. Since then, the festival has been annually offering a wide range of activities focusing on human rights protection through diverse cultural performances – theatre, film, folklore, and mainly numerous debates. The festival targets all sectors of the society in order to foster solidarity and resilience within the local community through discussing and sharing values and traditions important for the community.

Festivals generally are considered a significant part of (mainly urban) cultural life that contribute to resilience of local communities. They foster local networking and development, they contribute to building social capital by bridging various kind of stakeholders and organisations – festival organisers, NGOs, municipalities, private sector, media, agencies, local residents and visitors (Derrett 2009). Community resilience can be only built through „solidarity and co-operation; creativity and adaptability; proactivity; prudence, preparation and planning; responsibility; awareness of environment and where a holistic methodology is present“ (Derrett 2009, 116). Culture and cultural heritage presented in diverse and innovative ways play a significant if not a crucial part of community resilience strategies.

The Embargo Festival started in 2015. During eight years of its life (so far) it hosted 184 artists performing in 67 performances and events that were visited by more than

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primary and all secondary schools are in the competencies of Self-Governing Regions (as of 1 July 2002).

The same way, most cultural institutions are directly governed and funded by the Self-Governing Region.

<sup>21</sup> Fajčíková, K. and Cuprik, R. 2015.

<sup>22</sup> EMBARGO FESTIVAL, <https://www.embargofestival.sk/>, 08.10.2021

1400 visitors.<sup>23</sup> It is organised annually in December (around the date of the UN Human Rights Day – 10<sup>th</sup> of December) by the Independent Cultural Centre Záhřada (in co-operation with the Centre for Community Organising and the Not in Our Town platform). The seat of the festival is the Záhřada, based in the Banská Bystrica central square courtyard, which has indoor and outdoor performance areas.<sup>24</sup> The festival has been funded by private sponsors and from competitive funding through the state programme of the Ministry of Culture “The Fund for Arts Support” and other funding schemes (e.g. Norwegian Funds). The Záhřada centre carefully considers the ways of its funding in order to keep its independence, freedom and values.

The objective of the EMBARGO Festival has been to open topics that reflect on respecting human rights and democratic values, and to address societal challenges such as discrimination, xenophobia, homophobia, antisemitism, racism, extremism, radicalisation, populism and other global problems that have a direct impact also on life at the local level and local democracies. The festival presents diverse forms of artistic interventions, theatrical or dance performances, visual arts, lectures, debates and workshops. The topics are often rather provocative or controversial, dealing with the conflicting past such as the pro-Nazi Slovak State during the WW2; societal division related to gender or LGBTI+; or (mis)use of traditional Slovak culture and folklore by political representatives (including far-right and nationalistic political parties and movements).

The EMBARGO Festival – although still young – systematically builds on its original objectives to discuss difficult topics; to combat intolerance, stereotypes and prejudices; and to challenge and strengthen identity, purpose and resilience of local communities. Diversity of topics and the growing number of visitors each year<sup>25</sup> demonstrates that it is becoming an accepted annual cultural event in the city and can be considered “a resilience festival” – a festival that contributes to support local inhabitants’ and communities’ democratic values and statements.

### Case 3: Heritage/memory trails

The third example of using culture and/ or cultural heritage as a tool for making the urban community socially and culturally resilient, more educated and stronger are heritage/memory trails organised by the Central Slovak Museum and the Banská Bystrica

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<sup>23</sup> From the interview with Milan, the Záhřada director, 02.04.2022.

<sup>24</sup> The Independent Cultural Centre Záhřada in Banská Bystrica started in 2010 by a group of cultural enthusiasts who renovated an old warehouse in the courtyard of the Beniczky Passage, given to them for a symbolic rent by a local businessman and philanthrop. Thanks to many volunteers, their friends and families, local sponsors and patrons, the renovation was completed within a year and it now serves as an island of positive deviance and a buzzing platform for many human rights events and civic activism. More at: <https://en.zahradacnk.sk>; 18.03.2022.

<sup>25</sup> In 2020 and 2021 the festival was organised online due to the pandemic, still, the number of visitors increased significantly.

local municipality. One Sunday afternoon each month (from spring to autumn), a guided tour around the city has been organised, focused on specific memory topics – such as a tour of memorial places related to the Slovak National Uprising<sup>26</sup>; the stories of Jewish families (a tour following the Stolpersteine)<sup>27</sup>; histories of famous personalities and local heroes; and other special traces of local historic events. All these trails based on particular local narratives and oral histories aim at rising awareness and strengthening of local identity and belonging, but also at attracting and educating tourists visiting the city. These trails (although supported by the museum and the local municipality) are based entirely on a volunteering activity of one individual – an elderly enthusiastic local historian, Jozef, a former history and geography teacher in Banská Bystrica. His volunteering work can be considered an important memory-work and place-based caring, as described by Till (2012). Till argues that caring about place „encourages attentiveness in the way that places are both deeply personal as well as socially shared“ (Till 2012, 11). Memory walks and storytelling about local histories, local personalities and heroes have become popular and are sometimes even chosen as an unusual birthday present. Jozef is not a native citizen of Banská Bystrica, he has no Jewish roots and became the lover of the city history as a teacher and resident. Thanks to his enthusiasm and volunteering he offers regular monthly thematic guided tours in the city to local and external visitors.

I often do a guided walk on Jewish families and their stories, following Stolpersteine in Banská Bystrica. There are always local people present, but often also members of the Jewish community, usually visitors from other countries, some of them with roots in the city or the region. For the people from the local community, it is like uncovering something they know nothing about, a taboo topic, a mystery. But it is sometimes also about fighting their prejudice. For the Jews it is very personal and emotional, hearing stories of their lost ancestors. They want to hear all details... (from the interview with Jozef).

As Till stresses, those who do memory work and practices of care-giving and receiving, teach us „to respect those who have gone before, attend to past injustices..., and treat the past as a dynamic resource in imagining different urban futures“ (Till 2012, 21).

Heritage/memory trails (especially those focusing on local narratives and histories) contribute to education and empowerment of the local community. In addition, they often also aim at attracting tourists, demonstrating the importance of the trail in an historic context (Timothy and Boyd 2006, 9). In the case of Banská Bystrica, the heritage trails provided by a volunteer primarily target mainly local populations and aim

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<sup>26</sup> The Slovak National Uprising was the biggest anti-Nazi armed insurrection organised by the Slovak resistance movement during the WWII.

<sup>27</sup> Stolpersteine are concrete cubes bearing a brass plate inscribed with the name and life dates of victims of Nazi extermination or persecution.

at deepening their history and heritage knowledge, understanding and tolerance. They are promoted by local channels through the local newspapers *Radničné noviny* (online version and printed version sent to all residents' mailboxes). The local municipality and the Central Slovak Museum co-organise and promote the guided heritage/ memory trails provided by Jozef. However, in order to make his "memory-work and place-based caring" sustainable, it is important to train more guides who can build on his expertise.

## Conslusions

In this article, presenting primarily activities of the Not in Our Town (NIOT) grassroots civic movement and volunteering activities in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, I explored the concept of resilience and its relation to culture and cultural heritage. The aim was to look at practices using culture and intangible cultural heritage that could become a tool to strengthen community resilience and its sustainability (heritage as resilience).

I focused on the challenge of building community resilience through diverse culture and cultural heritage tools aimed at combating new man-made threats such as radicalisation, extremism and fascism/neo-Nazism. I wanted to demonstrate that culture and cultural heritage – or at least some aspects of it – can become useful means of deradicalisation in contemporary societies.

The findings of the case study showed that culture and cultural heritage in its diverse forms played a significant role in activities of the NIOT movement in the city of Banská Bystrica. The key element of the programme „Schools for Democracy“ has been based on living libraries (oral histories) approach and it proved to be a successful educational tool leading to combating stereotypes and prejudices. The multi-cultural Embargo Festival has become a recognised cultural urban event addressing difficult and challenging human rights and history topics, attracting various segments of local urban communities. The example of activism of a local historian – a volunteer who offers and runs heritage trails for local residents as well as tourists – showed the importance of memory-work and place-based caring in the local context.

These multiple activities demonstrate the importance of the use of culture and cultural heritage and the need of collaboration between the stakeholders and actors from various sectors who manage to unify in activities supporting tolerance, solidarity and community resilience.

The main objective of the NIOT movement since 2013 was to defeat the neo-Nazi governor and his political party in the 2017 regional elections. The NIOT has been developing many activities in order to do so. The final action was organising the March against Facism on 7 October 2017, which was the key event of the NIOT public activities before the elections. Following all these efforts, Kotleba and his party fellows lost almost all positions in the regional government (mainly thanks to local civic activism), however, in the meantime, they managed to gain seats in the Slovak national parliament at the parliamentary elections in 2016. Therefore, despite a regional victory, the NIOT

movement continues in its efforts to combat fascism/ neo-Nazism at any level whether presented in local or national politics.

The lessons learned from the bottom-up NIOT activities demonstrate that culture and heritage can become useful tools to foster common identity, solidarity, understanding and tolerance, and to cope with unexpected social, cultural or environmental disturbances (Fabbricatti et al. 2020). In order to strengthen local social and cultural community resilience and sustainability, a close co-operation among individuals, institutions (both governmental, non-governmental and private), researchers and facilitators, and participatory governance are the only ways to achieve the goal of deradicalisation of the society.

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