

Spotlight on the most serious challenge for Europe

European Union between Democracy and Political Extremism

International Conference, 6 October 2017, Košice, Slovakia



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In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of popular support for the extremist political parties across entire European Union. Many of the radical movements have entered European, national and regional parliaments; however, the appeal of these political entities and the profile of their supporters remain very poorly understood. Reflecting this dangerous trend, the Institute of European Democrats (IED) with **Mladí Európania** of Slovakia (Young Europeans, ME) organized the International Conference titled "[European Union between Democracy and Political Extremism](#)". The conference took place on **6 October 2017** in the congress hall of Yasmin Hotel in **Košice, Slovakia**.

The aim of the event was to analyse the reasons for the current successes of radical politicians, explain who is responsible for this trend, and how the rise of political extremism can be viewed in the European context. Last

but not least, the event offered the possible suggestions how to effectively warn about the dangers of extremist politicians and eliminate the rise of political extremism across the EU Member States.

Moderator:

Alena Bašistová, Member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and university lecturer.

Speakers (in the order of speeches):

Adriana Čiefová, Project Manager of the Institute of European Democrats.

Anna Lujza Fureková, President of Mladí Európania/Young Europeans (ME).

Alena Bašistová, Member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and university lecturer.

Grigorij Mesežnikov, President and Program Director of the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) in Bratislava and political analyst.

Michal Vašečka, Sociologist and Assistant Professor at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic.

Jakub Drábik, Historian at the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAV) in Bratislava and expert on fascism.

Andrzej Potocki, Vice-President of Stronnictwo Demokratyczne of Poland and Vice-President of European Democratic Party (PDE-EDP).

Jose Felix Merladet, Deputy Secretary-General of European Democratic Party (PDE-EDP) and Professor at University of Deusto and University of Navarra in Spain.

Gabriel Eštok, Lecturer at the Faculty of Politics of University of P.J.Šafárika in Košice and expert on the EU.

The conference was opened by Project Manager of the Institute of European Democrats **Adriana Čiefová** who presented the speech on behalf of the Chief Executive Officer of IED Luca Bader. She stressed that practically in every EU Member State we can now watch the increase in popularity of the politicians who do not respect liberal democracy and European project and instead, they call for the return of the Europe of nation states and base their policies on xenophobia, hatred or racism. It is also extremely worrying that the citizens of Germany – the country which based its post-war legacy on the battle against any form of extremism in politics – voted for the far-right Alternative for Germany in the latest parliamentary elections. Taking into account the recent negative developments, discussion and sharing of knowledge are the most effective means how to stop the rise of political extremism. “The historical experience, in particular from the 1930s, shows us where it can lead when people let

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Alena Bašistová

themselves to be tempted by populist or hate rhetoric; therefore, discuss this issue with your family, friends and people around you, explain them the dangers of voting for radical politicians and, in this way, every one of us can contribute to the elimination of extremism in European politics,” was the appeal to the audience.

President of the Slovak youth organisation Mladí Európania (Young Europeans) **Anna Lujza Fureková** similarly emphasized that the gradual rise of popularity of the extremist parties, their violent expression and the organized spreading of fear are directly threatening the existence of a united Europe. We must recognize the importance of the European Union and the benefits it brings to its citizens every day. In her opinion, education is the first step in

solving any problem in the society. “This is one of the main reasons why we co-organized this event; the raising of awareness about extremism and the advocacy of pro-European ideas are the essential tasks of our youth organization,” Ms Fureková underlined.



The round of welcome speeches was concluded by the moderator of the event **Alena Bašistová**, Member of the National Council of Slovakia and university lecturer. She highlighted that extremism is certainly not a new phenomenon in the modern-day politics. “The popularity of politicians with radical solutions has been stealthily spreading for many years,” Mrs Bašistová explained, “we can recall Jean-Marie Le Pen who founded the National Front already in 1972, long-time leader of the Austrian Freedom Party Jörg Haider or Czech right-wing populist Miroslav Sládek who were both active mainly in the 1990s.” According to Mrs Bašistová, an increasingly higher number of voters feels frustrated from the current state of affairs, they are losing trust in the so-called ‘standard’ politicians and, as a consequence, they

vote for the ‘alternative’ that promises to finally resolve their everyday problems. A crucial issue is that more and more young people, highly-educated people, intellectuals and academicians have started to support populist and extremist parties. “Citizens who vote for the extremists usually say ‘we have nothing to lose’, ‘it cannot be so bad’, ‘we will try and see’, ignoring the dangerous nature and real goals of the extremist movements.” On her own experience in sitting with 14 members of the neo-fascist party ĽSNS in the Slovak Parliament, Mrs Bašistová is convinced that the major pro-democratic part of the society must warn not only about the danger but also inadequacy and incompetence of these radicals to manage public affairs. “They are not offering the solution to resolve the problems of citizens but how to destroy our democratic system with all its rights and benefits which would, in final, worsen the living conditions and make the lives of people miserable,” she concluded.



Moderator of the event,
MP Alena Bašistová

FIRST PANEL:

Democracy in danger – Rise of political extremism in *political* perspective

The first speaker of the panel, a distinguished Slovak political scientist **Grigorij Mesežnikov** talked about the long-term and situational factors which have led to the growth of the right-wing extremism in Slovak and European politics. “Generally speaking, extremism is an ideological wave aimed at weakening the existing political system,” he pointed out, “in the current context, the extremist political forces are threatening the democratic regime and the European Union that guards its existence in the Member States.”



In his view, there are 10 most important factors behind the growth of popular support for extremism (check the table on the page 4). He further explained the patterns that make people voting for the extremists:

- significant social pessimism;
- low level of general confidence in the so-called standard politics;
- overwhelming distrust in the state institutions;
- lack of interest of youth in politics, public affairs and their management;
- spreading of problematic content through the internet, ‘alternative’ media and social networks.

A very serious problem is that many young people are gradually giving their support to the extremist-orientated parties. On the basis of the latest researches, only 21% of young Slovaks aged 15 to 24 trust the Slovak Parliament, 19% of them rely on the Slovak government, and only 15% of young people feel trust towards the political parties. Based on other research provided by the Institute for Public Affairs

that Mr Mesežnikov directs, the younger a person is, the less s/he considers extremism as a problem. As a result, students and young adults are among the most eloquent supporters of the right-wing parties.

10 MOST SIGNIFICANT FACTORS BEHIND THE UNPRECEDENTED GROWTH OF THE POPULAR SUPPORT FOR EXTREMISM IN POLITICS APPLICABLE FOR THE MAJORITY OF EU COUNTRIES:

1. Critical perception of current social problems by citizens and state's inefficiency in solving them effectively (pessimism, feeling of injustice);
2. Surviving patterns of political culture that are inherited from the past and that feed political nationalism (ethnic nationalism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, paternalism);
3. Tendency to historical revisionism (mainly connected to the WWI and WWII);
4. Counter-minded moods (anti-NATO, anti-US, anti-EU), conspiracy ideas, propaganda, misinformation;
5. Wave of resistance to globalization and migration/immigration;
6. Neglecting of the public debate;
7. Insufficient response to the first signs of rising extremism in politics;
8. Lack of education for democracy and human rights, lack of history education;
9. Insufficient activity of the so-called "standard" political parties;
10. Effective pre-election and post-election communication of extremists for spreading their ideas and mobilisation of supporters (fieldwork, social networks).

When looking at the values people in Slovakia worship (and this is applicable also to other EU countries), there are further worrying patterns: as many as 63% of people feel that Christianity needs to be protected against Islam, only around 35% of people value and believe in the ideas of liberal democracy, only approximately 34% are for deepening of European integration, and merely 32% of people are in favour of multiculturalism and support for cultural diversity and ethnic minorities. “All who care for democracy must work much harder to defend it... Democracy is clearly and the best regime humanity has so far experienced across the centuries.” Mr Mesežnikov emphasized. As a result, all pro-democratic forces need to be more active in defending the democratic system in all EU Member States.

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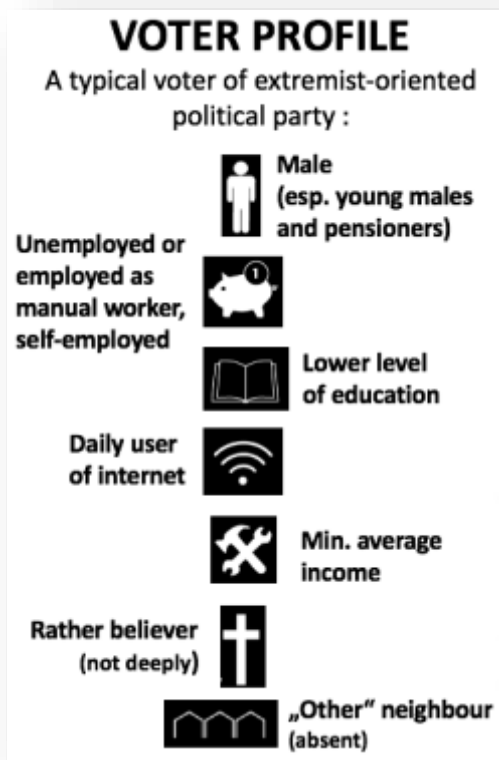
Grigorij Mesežnikov

→ [Click here to access the Full Presentation “Right-wing extremism in Slovakia: Selected socio-political contexts” \(in Slovak\)](#)

Searching for new hypotheses – Rise of political extremism in sociological perspective

A well-known and reputable Slovak sociologist *Michal Vašečka* is convinced that the factors for the support of extremists have changed radically in the last decades. “Something dramatic is definitely going on. Old hypotheses from the past world do not apply to today’s world, we need to search for the new ones.” Accordingly, he introduced his recent sociological research that derives from an assumption that economic crisis is the only trigger for the rise of extremism. This was true in the 1930s when Germans,

decimated by the post-war reparations and the world economic crisis, voted for the Nazis predominantly out of economic despair. However, nowadays people from economically strong regions with low unemployment vote for the far-right or far-left parties – this requires formulation of new hypotheses why people are turning to the extremists. Accordingly, on the basis of his extensive research, Mr Vašečka created the profile of today’s voter of extremist political parties (check the table below).



He also detected that the trigger for the extremist parties is higher in the countries where:

- economy is less open;
- temporary employment rate is lower;
- employment rate of foreigners is lower;
- minimum wage is not set by government;
- ethnic tensions are higher.

Feeling of uncertainty, ontological insecurity, panic of middle class, lack of trust, alienation, and fragmentarization of social cohesion are usually leading people opting for the extremists. But in the view of Mr Vašečka, this is only a part of the answer, there are other important variables that need to be taken into account:

Firstly, in practically all EU Member States, radical politicians utilize the selected topics as practical tools for searching, unifying and mobilizing their supporters – these topics include migration, antisemitism, Roma people, nationalism, LGBTI rights or corruption. For instance, the Roma group is the most marginalized, excluded, and discriminated group in Central Europe which provokes lot of emotions that are abused by the extremists. Similarly, antisemitism serves as a function of exclusion and disqualification of liberal elites

fostering liberal pluralism and multicultural society. The targets of extremists are in general minority groups of any kind. “Everybody who does not fit into homogeneous, ‘pure’, highly ethicized picture can be and will be the target of extremist politicians,” he stressed.

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Second feature which attracts people is that radical parties offer ‘simplistic’ explanations to them. “We are now living in extremely diversified world that is overloaded by information that makes many people feeling puzzled and confused. They often become lost and precisely the extremists offer them pleasant and simplistic answers on how the world functions. It is more convenient for many citizens when extremists explain them everything – they get simple, silly and in most cases false answers, but at least they have them and that is what matters,” Mr Vašečka explained.

Thirdly, the failure of liberal-democratic elites to tackle the problems that people consider as most important is another reason for the rise of populism and extremism.

And finally, the arrival of social media represents a crucial cause for the successes of the extremist-oriented parties. The extremists have been able to convince their supporters to not follow mainstream media and radicalize many of them on-line using their ‘alternative’ media sources. Especially Facebook is inherently dangerous in this regard because people surround them only by followers with the same

opinions. This leads to significant polarization of the society that is not only present on the social media platforms, but this polarization is making its way from the online world to the real one.

→ [Click here to access the Full Presentation “Determinants of a Rise of Extremism in Times of Economic Crisis within the European Union”](#)

Can history repeat itself? Rise of political extremism in *historical* perspective

“History does not repeat itself; however, we can identify certain similarities between Europe of the 1930s and the current situation,” stated **Jakub Drábik**, the historian from the Slovak Academy of Sciences and expert on fascism. In his view, the current rise of extremism and the ‘rebirth’ of fascist or far-right movements is alarming, but he does not think that it is fascism that we really have to worry about. “Fascism is based on an irrational idea that the nation is falling and ‘bad’ democracy is responsible for it; as a consequence, fascists want to destroy democracy,” he explained. In most cases, fascists look for the suitable external ‘enemies’ (e.g. like Nazis abused Jews) which they then unjustifiably depict in the extremely negative light in order to attack people’s emotions and create the atmosphere of fear. By this mechanism, they try to prove to people that the nation’s prosperity and viability are truly threatened because of the ‘enemies’. Accordingly, fascists base their politics on the promises that they will make the nation rising again and they will renew the nation once they clean it from those harmful external enemies. Fascism is thus not rational ideology but quite the opposite, it is the ideology which utilizes emotions and fear in order to get power. All these basic characteristics of fascist party are applicable for the fascist movements of the 20. century and the current far-right forces. There are nowadays three EU Member States which have openly fascist parties sitting in their parliaments – Greece (Golden Dawn), Hungary (Jobbik), and Slovakia (ĽSNS). These three political parties clearly want to eliminate democracy while other populist and extremist parties in Europe still (at least they claim it publicly) want to function within the democratic regime.

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Jakub Drábik

Despite all negative trends and shocking elections’ results in many European countries in recent years, Mr Drábik does not think that fascists can really gain the power as it happened in the 1920s in Italy or in the 1930s in the Weimar Republic. The current situation and social tendencies are absolutely different from the realities of the interwar period. Nevertheless, even though he does not think that fascism is capable to substitute democracy in a near future, he emphasized that “everything that starts with dehumanization leads to gas chambers”. Accordingly, he is sure that voters need to be much more responsible in their voting behaviour and never forget on the bitter lessons of history.



Speakers of the first panel (left-right: Grigorij Mesežnikov, Michal Vašečka, Jakub Drábik)

SECOND PANEL:

The fear from unknown – Role of *society* in tackling political extremism

The first speaker of the second panel, Vice-President of Stronnictwo Demokratyczne of Poland and Vice-President of European Democratic Party **Andrzej Potocki** focused his presentation on the current trends in behaviour of European society. “Fear of the changes is one of the main reasons for the rise of populism and extremism in Europe,” Mr Potocki thinks. He highlighted that homogenous societies have never truly existed, the countries were changing their borders over the centuries so each country is the home for more than one nation – usually there are several nations, ethnic minorities and religious groups living together in every European country. Globalization now accelerates this situation and the states are becoming even more diverse. But many people do not understand that these changes are natural to the world we live in. For example, for many Europeans, Muslims represent the biggest fear since 2015 when the massive migration flows to Europe have started. However, the level of



fear is proportional to the level of ignorance. The problem is that many Europeans – usually from the regions that are not significantly multicultural – do not have the experience of having a Muslim neighbour or a Muslim classmate or colleague, and that is the reason why they are afraid of them. It is the fact that the greatest anti-Muslim and anti-migration feelings are in the countries or regions that have the lowest number of migrants from the Middle East and/or Africa, such as the Central European states. Also, the Alternative for Germany received the highest support in the German regions with the lowest number of migrants and vice-versa – the regions with higher numbers of migrants did not show a great support to the far-right party.

“We live in the best world ever, we have peace, democracy, prosperity and development, and still some people do not want this world due to the fear from unknown...the fear makes people vote for radical solutions.”

Andrzej Potocki

unknown,” Mr Potocki pinpointed. In his opinion, we need to work on better strategies how to eliminate the fear from unknown in people because “the fear makes people vote for radical solutions.”

This trend proves that when you live with migrants/Muslims/people from various ethnic, religious or sexual minorities, you are usually not afraid of them, people are generally afraid of those things they do not know. And this is why so many of them have chosen to support populists and extremists in recent years. “We live in the best world ever, we have peace, democracy, prosperity and development, and still some people do not want this world due to the fear from

A Change of Era – Role of *political elites* in tackling political extremism

“We are not anymore in an Era of Changes but we are rather witnessing a Change of Era,” said **Jose Felix Merladet**, Deputy Secretary-General of European Democratic Party and Professor at the University of Deusto and the University of Navarra in Spain. According to his definition, populism

refers to the attitude of some parties that oppose the ‘elite’ of the rulers, the social and economic ‘establishment’ and the traditional or mainstream political parties. He reminded that the difference we should make is between those who want to change the system, while protecting a democratic society as they conceive it, and those who want to destroy our present social order and democratic system by radical and even violent means. These should be called ‘extremists’ or revolutionary, rather than ‘populists’. Most of these parties have in common being nationalist, anti-Islam, anti-immigration, anti-globalisation, Eurosceptic or Europhobe.

Although the EU citizens are living in the best of possible times, the populist parties and movements, mostly on the right, are becoming a powerful force in both Europe and the USA.

Mr Merladet sees the following causes of the rise of these radical political forces:

“While antisemitism was the unifying factor for the far-right parties at the beginning of the 20. century, a strong rejection of a sizeable presence of Islam in Europe has become the unifying factor for the far-right parties in recent years.”

Jose Felix Merladet

- I. **Discontent and frustration of the people:** if we mix together ignorance, fear, lack of self-confidence, absence of values or strong wish to retrieve them, insecurity and perceived absence of horizons, we will get the perfect recipe for populism.
- II. **Large-scale immigration:** radical parties usually manipulate the concepts of ‘us’ and ‘the others’ that are seen as a menace. While antisemitism was a unifying factor for the far-right parties at the beginning of the 20. century, a strong rejection of a sizeable presence of Islam in Europe has become the unifying factor for the far-right parties in recent years.
- III. **Last EU enlargements:** the ‘Big bang’, namely the enlargement to 28 Member States, aroused the concerns within the populations of the ‘old Europe’. There was unjustified fear, more or less politically manipulated, concerning the relocation of companies to these countries, or the social dumping (the ‘Polish plumber’ syndrome), caused by the influx of cheaper labour from the new Member States.
- IV. **Globalization and multiculturalism:** globalization, new technologies and global unchecked movement of finance caused the increase in social inequality.
- V. **Poor knowledge of history:** populism is growing also thanks to the fact that new generations do not know the history of the 20. century. The solution is more culture, knowledge, critical spirit and higher values – that means to give a better education to people both in childhood and in adulthood.
- VI. **Failure of European elites in coping with populism:** there are no real visionary and charismatic leaders on the EU level now, Europe would need new Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet or Alcide de Gasperi. Also, the EU bureaucracy and procedures are not really understood by the masses and they are also often not even understood by high-educated people.

In his opinion, the only possible guarantee of a better future for the continent is the European Union. There should be an enormous effort to persuade the people that they cannot get rid of Europe but they need to get more Europe. But for that it should be a Europe in which they feel comfortable in and with which they can identify themselves. “We need to defend the European Union because no one has invented anything better yet,” Mr Merladet concluded.

→ [Click here to access the IED Working Paper “The EU and the European Elites in the Face of Rising Populisms in the Continent” presented at the Conference](#)

Democracy versus Extremism – Tackling political extremism in the *European* context

The last speaker of the conference was a lecturer at the Faculty of Politics of the University of P.J.Šafárika in Košice and expert on the European Union **Gabriel Eštok**. In his view, extremism is the activity based on the attitudes hostile to democratic system, which either directly or in a certain period of time destructively affects the existing democratic system and seeks to replace it with totalitarian regime or dictatorship. “Democracy has a self-defeating element in itself, because it allows the creation of political movements that can destroy it,” he stressed. In this sense, extremism has always been a part of democracy, the only variable is the extent towards which extremism stands out above the rest. The issue is that political extremism stands out and gains popularity nowadays. Mr Eštok then described the

“Democracy has a self-defeating element in itself, because it allows the creation of political movements that can destroy it.”

Gabriel Eštok

main populist and far-right extremist parties in the majority of EU Member States, including Freedom Party in Austria, Danish People’s Party in Denmark, True Finns in Finland, National Front in France, Golden Dawn in Greece, Jobbik and Fidesz in Hungary, Dutch Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, Law and Justice in Poland, ESNS in Slovakia, or Sweden Democrats in Sweden.

He found out several common topics they all share when mobilizing the voters:

1. Anti-migration – all of them are against migration of citizens of the third countries to Europe.
2. No European integration – practically all of them are against the EU and cooperation of European nations, they call for protectionism.
3. Nationalism – nationalistic positions and ideas in the form of pre-WWII Europe.

The topics, however, are changing on the basis of actual fears of people – e.g. EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe was the issue in France in 1990s; Hungarian minority is no longer issue in Slovakia as it was in past. “Populism is not connected only to the extremist parties but it is certainly the main tool of the extremist politicians,” Mr Eštok explained. However, this does not rule out the fact that populist rhetoric is sometimes used by ‘traditional’ or ‘standard’ politicians, that makes sometimes very difficult for people to differentiate which politicians and parties are extremist and which are not. He also introduced the term ‘secondary illiteracy’ – under this term we understand the refusal of people to participate in politics that stems either from low intelligence or disappointment in politics, or from the lack of true and complex information. According to Mr Eštok, this tendency of some people to not care about politics is one of the important triggers of the rising support for political extremism.

→ [Click here to access the Full Presentation “European Union between Democracy and Extremism”](#)
(in Slovak)



Speaker of the second panel (left-right: Andrzej Potocki, Jose Felix Merladet, Gabriel Eštok)

The conference was attended by a high number of students of grammar schools and universities, representatives of NGOs, Embassies and media (Slovak national TV and radio channel *RTVS*, regional TV *Košice:Dnes* and *Radio station Košice*) which interviewed the speakers of the conference. The event was organized with the financial support of the European Parliament.



Main outcomes and proposals:

- Political extremism is an ideological wave aimed at weakening the existing democratic system and the European Union that guards its existence in the Member States;
- Populists vs. extremists – populists want to modify the system while protecting democratic society, extremists want to destroy democratic system by radical means and replace it with totalitarian regime or dictatorship;
- The real goal of extremist-orientated parties is not to resolve the problems of citizens but to destroy democratic system with all its rights and benefits which would, in final, worsen the lives and living conditions of people;
- Although populism is not connected only to extremist parties but it is certainly the main tool of extremists;
- Extremist parties are generally highly nationalistic, anti-Islam, anti-immigration, anti-globalisation and Eurosceptic, defending conservative and Christian values and economic protectionism;
- Old hypothesis that people vote for the extremists out of economic despair is not applicable to today's world because nowadays people living in economically strong regions with low unemployment vote for far-right parties;
- Today's factors that make people voting for extremists include: feeling of uncertainty, social pessimism, ontological insecurity, low level of confidence in 'standard' politics and in the state institutions, offer of 'simplistic' explanations by extremists, failure of liberal-democratic elites to tackle problems that people consider as most important, spreading of 'alternative' media and social networks, and lack of interest in politics and public affairs;
- Typical voters of extremist-oriented political parties are mainly young males and/or pensioners, who are unemployed or receive minimum average income, they have lower level of education, they are daily users of internet, and they do not have experience in living in multicultural environment; nevertheless, extremists are also finding their supporters also among youth, highly educated people and intellectuals;
- Fascism is based on an irrational idea that the nation is falling and 'bad' democracy is responsible for it;
- The targets of extremists are in general minority groups of any kind – everybody who does not fit into homogeneous, 'pure', highly ethicized picture (in past Jews, nowadays mainly migrants and Muslims) – far-right extremists utilize these groups to prove to people that the nation's prosperity and viability are threatened, and want to destroy democracy in order to clean the nation from those 'enemies';
- We can identify certain similarities between the Europe of the 1930s and the current situation and learn from the bitter lessons of history;
- People are afraid of accelerating globalization and multiculturalism – we need to work on better strategies how to eliminate the fear of the changes in people because the fear makes people vote for radical solutions;
- Education, discussion and sharing of knowledge are the most important means how to eliminate political extremism;
- Democracy is clearly and unprecedentedly the best regime humanity has so far experienced across the centuries and the EU is the only possible guarantee of a peaceful and prosperous future for the continent.

Prepared by Adriana Čiefová (IED, 2017)

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