

Young people from minorities – identity, trust, exclusion, and participation

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This analysis is the first output of the project "A part for all - promoting the participation of young people from diverse groups", which the Centre for Research on Ethnicity and Culture (CVEK) in partnership with the YES Forum has been implementing since the beginning of May 2022.

At CVEK, we have been working on the topic of participation of different minority groups for several years now¹ and we have been pointing out that the involvement of diverse groups in policy-making, but also more generally in the life of the society, is crucial for creating a cohesive society.

In 2021, we also carried out representative research among young people for IUVENTA², which focused on the situation of young people, and one of the important themes was the youth voice. As shown in this research, up to 70 % of young people feel that their voice is not heard enough in society. In addition, however, up to 90 % of young people thought that they should be able to express themselves and that their voice should be heard more.

Young people from different minority groups or groups that may be perceived as vulnerable are at an even greater disadvantage than young people in general in terms of participation and having their voice heard. This is precisely because of their minority status, because, as we at CVEK have long pointed out based on our research findings, minorities are mostly invisible to society and the state or public institutions.

Meanwhile, young people have faced many challenges in recent years that previous generations did not face. The COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, inflation, the growing influence of social networks and misinformation, significant social changes - all these are issues that have much more significant impacts on young people and especially on young people from minority backgrounds, who often find themselves marginalised and their needs are not taken into account even when public policies are set. Therefore, we consider it extremely important to give a voice to young people from minorities so that policies also reflect their needs and their specific situation.

In our current project we therefore focus on young Roma, young people from the LGBTI+ community, young foreigners, young people with disabilities and from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in and around Bratislava. Our aim is to empower young people from minority backgrounds and help them develop their skills so that they can actively participate in their neighbourhoods and communities. In the first phase of the project, we conducted research to understand the situation and perceptions of young people from minority backgrounds and to give them a voice. The findings from the research are included in this analysis.

The research presents important findings from individual interviews with 23 young people from a range of backgrounds, including Roma young people, foreigners, members of the LGBTI+ community,

¹ See for instance Gallová Kriglerová, E. et al. (2021), *Minority Voice. Twelve case studies on the involvement of vulnerable groups in public policy making*, Bratislava, Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development.

² Gallo Kriglerová, E., Holka Chudžíková, A. (2021), *What do the young people think? Analysis of a questionnaire survey among secondary school students*, Bratislava, IUVENTA/CVEK.

young people with disabilities, and those from poorer backgrounds. In the interviews we focused on how they perceive and form their identity, to what extent they feel part of the majority society or experience exclusion or discrimination, what kind of relationships they form and so on. At the same time, we focused on the topic of trust in institutions, who they have to turn to and who helps them when they find themselves in difficulties. We were also interested in the forms of their participation, the barriers that prevent them from participating in active public life and what the factors that help them most in this are.

MINORITY IDENTITY

Accepting one's minority identity is a long process

For young people from minority backgrounds, accepting their minority identity has been a long process. Many of them, especially young Roma, were ashamed of their identity in childhood, perceived it as something other than idyllic and used various strategies to hide it. For example, some used to refer to themselves as having Italian or Spanish roots. This was because they perceived that foreign origin were at that time better accepted by their surroundings than Roma origin. Gradually, however, they accepted their identity and nowadays there are still some signs of internalised stigma in their survival.

Young people from the LGBTI+ community need a sense of safety and acceptance

Young people from the LGBTI+ community have also gone through perhaps the most complex process of learning about and accepting their identity. For many respondents, self-acceptance only came about after they had left their original environment (e.g. moved to another city) where they had encountered more prejudice and stereotyping of LGBTI+ people and therefore did not feel free to be who they felt they were on the outside. For virtually all respondents from the LGBTI+ community, accepting their identity was closely related to a sense of safety that they could not find for a long time. Under the influence of positive reactions from those around them, they gradually opened up and came to terms with their identity, but even now, they only feel completely free and comfortable in environments they know intimately and know are not threatening to them, or within the LGBTI community.

Young trans people feel that they have to earn their identity

At the same time, young trans people had the experience that they felt they had to earn their gender identity as a trans person, so they felt that they had to be strongly masculine (in case of trans men) in order for people to really consider them as a man. This perception gradually changed towards not having a need to meet the expectations of those around them. This was mainly due to the completion of the transition process and also to the administratively changed gender, which made them feel free in their expression (use of masculine grammatical forms and pronouns). Thus, the official confirmation of gender identity also brought affirmation before the outside world.

There is a discrepancy between how young people with disabilities perceive themselves and how they are perceived by the environment

A number of young people with disabilities felt as though there was a disconnect between how they were perceived by society because of their disability/diagnosis and how they perceived themselves. The young man with Asperger's syndrome did not perceive his diagnosis as a disability, even though society defines it as such. Another young man with a physical disability is comfortable with his identity, but counts on not being accepted by other people in new situations. Young people with disabilities perceived that society ascribed a certain difference to them, but they often did not consider themselves different. Rather, they placed themselves on a spectrum of diversity.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND FRIENDSHIPS

Most of the minority young people we spoke to maintain mixed friendships and move in mixed social groups. The exceptions to some extent were young people with disabilities and young LGBTI+ people who moved predominantly within the queer community.

Roma in our research form rather mixed friendships

According to their statements, young Roma have rather mixed groups of friends, which they explained by the fact that they are friends with people who "fit" their personality. However, some also explained it by the fact that non-Roma are closer to them, more similar. In their statements, several of them practically automatically distanced themselves from other young Roma, whom they described as "rude" or "maladjusted". For some, however, friendships with other young Roma were a source of a sense of home and positive emotional experience that they found difficult to describe. Young Roma men and women saw mixed social contacts as important for creating mutual bonds, but also for not deepening the social isolation of, for example, young Roma from marginalised communities.

Young foreigners meet mainly within expatriate communities

Young foreigners also formed mixed social relationships and friendships, but these tended to be mixed international communities. It was more difficult for them to establish relationships with Slovaks, mainly due to very different life experiences. The foreigners perceived being foreigners and having a migration experience as a common feature on which they could build. Another reason was that foreigners did not share a cultural context with Slovaks, and so they used to feel that they were outsiders.

The social relationships of young people with disabilities depended largely on the type of disability they had. If it was an intellectual disability, their friendships and social relationships were mostly made up of young people with similar disabilities, or people from the helping professions who were connected to their network in some way. In the case of physical disabilities, the young people had friendships from a variety of backgrounds, which they acquired through their hobbies (e.g. music).

LGBTI+ young people tend to enclose themselves in communal bubbles

LGBTI+ young people almost exclusively moved within the queer community. This was due to the sense of security that this community provided them with to freely embrace their identity and the opportunity to be authentic. This is not necessarily just about a feeling of physical safety (security), although this is of course also an extremely important topic. Young LGBTI+ people have many experiences of inappropriate comments, insults, questioning and, from schools, bullying.

PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG MINORITY PEOPLE BY OTHER PEOPLE

A number of young minority people have experienced bullying, particularly in the school environment, and also being underestimated in primary school. Some young Roma have had negative experiences in primary school, where teachers gave preference to non-Roma pupils. For our respondents, this brought feelings of confusion; they did not understand why teachers behaved this way. Young people with disabilities had also experienced humiliation within their own extended families, and had also experienced bullying in childhood by older children.

The foreigners also had the experience of being welcomed by the teachers in the first few months while they oriented themselves in the Slovak higher education system and acquired at least some knowledge of the language. Teachers tried to be helpful, as did some of their classmates. Roma students at universities also felt mostly accepted, but there were also experiences of bullying, or

inappropriate comments about their origin or questions stemming from the stereotypical perception of Roma as those who cannot study at university.

Young LGBTI+ people recalled their experiences at school in different ways. They were mostly accepted by their classmates in secondary school, they also had several queer classmates in their class, so they were not alone and did not experience explicitly homophobic expressions. Experiences of the attitudes and behaviour teachers varied. Some teachers were supportive, but others had experienced homophobic teachers, especially of the older generation, who brought various conspiracy theories about 'LGBTI propaganda' into the classroom.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S CONFIDENCE IN INSTITUTIONS AND PROBLEMS THEY FACE

According to young people, school should not just be about learning

School should be, above all, a safe place and a space where young people can be helped if they find themselves in a difficult life situation. Trust is a very important aspect, so young people need to have someone to turn to at school. It is important that young people get some kind of support at school and that pupils and students are encouraged to help each other and adults together. The support our interviewees felt should be given particularly to students who come from complicated family backgrounds, who do not have the opportunity to lean on their siblings, or whose immediate environment is failing them. Another role that the young people in our research believe the school should play is the inclusion of minorities. This is very important in terms of our research, as this topic tends to be very often neglected. In this sense, schools should follow the core values of respect for diversity and support young people from different groups to feel comfortable within it. At the same time, according to young people, school is a very important space for getting to know each other, forming relationships and bonds with each other, and it is the first institution in life where young people can learn how to build quality relationships and how to respect each other. The school is a space for forming important friendships that can also act as a support and safety net when other sources of help fail.

Support for young people comes most often from 'compassionate adults' and peers

Many young people in the research reported that they also get support from specific teachers who are empathetic and know how to listen. However, it is always about helping students and responding to their needs. According to several, it always depends on the particular teacher whether they are empathetic enough or just dedicated to the learning process itself. So in most schools it is not a systemic approach. For many of the young people in our research it was very important to be able to discuss their problems with their peers or friends. These, they said, are often able to give them very strong support because they understand the problems that the person has and often share common concerns or topics of interest. They therefore turn to loved ones rather than adults.

Counselling systems in Slovakia are failing to provide support to young people from minorities

It appears that the counselling system in Slovakia is failing to a large extent. Several of our research respondents did not even know whether any counselling facilities existed in their area. Alternatively, they reported that today they would already know who to go to, but during primary or secondary school they were completely unaware of the possibility to see a psychologist. A very important finding that was brought up, especially by young people from the LGBTI+ community, was that they do not trust mainstream counselling facilities because, according to them, these facilities are not sufficiently prepared to provide adequate psychological help to people from minority groups.

NGOs are more likely to provide support to young people

Young people in the research identified much more often various NGOs that focus on helping specific young people from particular groups. For young people from the LGBTI+ community, there are a number of NGOs that bring together young people from this community, do various advocacy activities or provide them with direct psychological or other support.

For young people with disabilities, there are a number of support organisations targeting this group of young people. In the research, young people identified, for example, the Muscular Dystrophy Organisation, Butterfly, Spina Bifida, ASD Vision, and several others, where young people with disabilities can either associate, spend time together, or receive direct help or assistance related to psychological support.

Young Roma in particular identified the Divé Maky organization, which helps talented young Roma, provides them with mentoring, accompaniment, etc. In the research, young foreigners tended to mention various migrant communities that organise themselves, operate online or run joint events.

Overall, then, the NGO sector is much more vital than state or public institutions in this respect. However, it is true that a young person must already have some social capital, know his or her way around, and be able to get help from different organisations actually on his or her own. However, it is crucial that such institutions are functioning, their activities should be linked to city or state activities to make it effective for all the young people who need it.

Local government supports young people, but usually only symbolically

There is a lack of support for activities aimed also at young people from vulnerable groups. The current leadership of the Bratislava self-government is perceived by young people as quite progressive and inclined to be interested also in the issues of young people from different minority groups. According to a number of young people in our research, the city supports various cultural activities and, on a symbolic level of declarations, the importance of inclusion and involvement of these groups of young people. However, there was also criticism that this is more declarative than factual support. Young people from some communities did not have a clear-cut positive or negative attitude towards the city's actions. Several spontaneously mentioned the importance of political participation of young people, for example the creation of youth parliaments.

What young people in our research missed most were youth community centres/spaces where they could spend time together.

Many young people in the research felt that, first and foremost, the city should systematically map the needs of young people, either in general or the needs of specific groups. Only in this way can it be possible to respond to them and create adequate conditions for them to lead a fulfilling life in the city. This is also linked to the issue of communicating with young people, listening to their voices and involving different groups of young people in decision-making at local level.

Young people suffer from a lack of recognition and inclusion, but also from common socio-economic issues

In this part of the research, we also focused on the problems faced by young people in today's society, and specifically by young people from vulnerable groups. These young people very often have a feeling of unacceptance and a resulting low self-esteem. They feel lonely and feel that they do not fit into society. Consequently, they lack the courage to engage in wider society, and to pursue topics that interest them. Young people from minorities also pointed to discriminatory behaviour they encountered, often to the point of bullying, with children from minority backgrounds being more affected by it than others. It then leads to social isolation and feelings of loneliness.

Another topic that concerns young people from minority backgrounds, is the issue of their social situation and finances. Many young people feel their financial situation is worsening, often these are people who have moved to Bratislava from smaller towns and have high living costs. Instead of their own personal development or building a good social life, they often have to deal with existential problems. Housing is also a theme, as it is expensive and unaffordable in Bratislava. University graduates, for example, have great difficulty finding adequate housing before they earn enough and therefore cannot afford a mortgage because rents are too expensive. This has been a serious issue for the LGBTI+ community, for example. Indeed, they still often face the fact that after coming out they lose support of their families, they have to take care of themselves practically alone.

THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM MINORITIES WITH SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Young people from minority backgrounds have had a varied experience of social exclusion. Several of the interviewees had experienced a difficult situation when they came to Bratislava from other regions of Slovakia or from abroad. They had to build a background here, get used to the city. Most of them managed to do this mainly because they were active and took advantage of the opportunities they came here for or because someone supported and helped them in their new life situation.

Almost all young people had sometimes felt unaccepted and experienced prejudice

Respondents also mentioned situations or environments in which they did not feel accepted. For example, LGBTI+ young people have to constantly consider whether they feel safe enough to be authentic in a particular environment. They also often experience rejection from their own family. A certain amount of rejection leads in their case, but also in the case of Muslim women, to trying to live within the safety of their bubble. Young Roma face astonishment if they do not conform to widespread negative stereotypes about Roma, for example when they study at university. If they want to achieve something they have to try significantly harder than others. Young people from different minority groups also experience barriers in the labour market, both because they are young but also because of their minority background. Young Roma and people with disabilities in particular, but also young people from the LGBTI+ community, especially if they were trans, reported difficulties in finding work.

Many young people have also encountered openly hostile reactions

Negative stereotypes about minorities often lead to open expressions of hostility. Although these expressions have been verbal rather than physical in nature, members of minorities have to be constantly alert to whether they are potentially in any danger because of their minority status. These negative experiences mostly took place in public and tended to come from strangers. Young Roma reported experiences of discrimination and a number of negative stereotypes about Roma that they encountered in the wider, as well as their immediate, environment.

The experience of rejection is quite common among foreigners. Openly negative expressions are experienced especially by foreign women who wear the hijab.

Young people with disabilities experience being overlooked and underestimated.

A group that very often experiences hostile expressions, negative stereotyping and rejection are trans people.

Minority young people do not feel that they are in a different situation to majority young people, although they admit that they have to overcome more barriers in their lives

Minority young people do not feel that they are significantly limited in the opportunities they have in life compared to majority young people, although they themselves admit that they have to overcome a number of barriers, partly as a result of their minority background.

All of the young Roma we spoke to in our research reported that at some point in their lives they had met a support organisation or person who had given them specific help or given them a new perspective on life than they had experienced in their immediate environment. This moment was very much a defining moment in their lives, as young Roma often struggle with little support from those around them and with not believing in themselves and not having the courage.

Young LGBTI+ people reported that clarifying their identity costs them a lot of effort. However, there is also the challenge of the never-ending coming out that results from the way the majority society is set up.

Many barriers also have to be overcome by people with disabilities. Again, these barriers stem from the setting of society, which means that they have to make much more of an effort in their education compared to ordinary young people if they want to find a job and lead the life they want to lead.

In particular, young people from low-income families feel little support from their own family, which means they cannot engage in the same activities as young people who do have that support.

Minorities in Slovakia are still perceived and portrayed negatively

According to the respondents of our research, minorities in Slovakia are perceived negatively. Young people from minorities explain this, for example, by the fact that during socialism people did not encounter otherness and any difference seemed undesirable and unnecessary. However, they perceive the environment in Bratislava as more tolerant.

In this context, they also reported that older people in particular behave less respectfully compared to the young. However, young Roma also see a problem in the image of Roma presented by the media and how they are portrayed in social discourse. People then form their image not on the basis of their own experience, but on the basis of the stereotypical image of Roma in the media. Young foreigners also perceive their unequal status and experience rejection in environments where people have little or no contact with foreigners. LGBTI+ youth perceive their unequal status very intensely, some trying to engage for their rights. Others are considering leaving Slovakia for countries that are more respectful of LGBTI+ people.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES WITH PARTICIPATION

Young people are mainly involved in the projects and activities of various non-profit organisations, clubs or associations. Some have created their own projects.

School can be the first space for participation

Young people can get their first opportunities for participation at school through various parliaments or university societies. It is at school that they can gain their first experience and motivation to get involved further. Various organisations, clubs and peers, or someone who is a role model, are also important. Young people can also be motivated by the need to change the system or the environment they are in or to help others.

If young people do not engage, it may be related to an insufficient or uninteresting range of activities

The main barriers to young people's engagement may be, firstly, an insufficient range of activities that do not meet what they would be interested in in their lives. Some young people may not be motivated to get involved at all, for a variety of reasons. Most often it may be a lack of free time for activities outside of school or work. More opportunities and information on where young people can get involved could help. If there is no environment for participation in school, some young people may find it harder to find a space to participate if they do not know organisations, projects or clubs or other young people who could help them with possible participation. For young Roma and people with disabilities, fear of how they would be received by people in these organisations can also be a big barrier.

Young people would be helped in their participation especially by available spaces and contacts

For better opportunities for participation, it is necessary to create spaces for and with young people, e.g. community centres, where different young people could meet and thus create mutual links and contacts, create ideas for their own activities and projects. This could also be helped by various people who are already involved, who can help young people with their ideas, guide them if necessary, but also help them with various administrative and other tasks. Financial support for various activities is also needed. Communication about these activities should emphasise that the activities are inclusive and for all groups of young people.