



Between Patriotism and Far-Right Extremism: A Case of Youth Activism in Matica slovenská

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ABSTRACT

This case study discusses a youth branch of Matica slovenská, a pro-Slovak culture organization. It is based on in-depth research of the structure of the organization and it focuses on basic characteristics of functioning of this social movement such as funding, membership base, political orientation, civic engagement, patriotic activities and also the causes of negative media presentation. Presented material pointed to a thin boundary between the perception of positive manifestations of patriotism and at the same time negative (even extremist) connotations of such manifestations in Slovak society. This duplicate perception of patriotic activities is reflected not only in polarization of opinion in society but also on the level of political, media and public communication. Thus, the article is a small probe from the scene of youth activism with an ambition to point out to such a diverse perception of patriotic organizations/activities in present-day Slovak society.

KEY WORDS: Matica slovenská, youth, activism, state-supported organisation, patriotism, Far-Right

Introduction

Young Matica (MM – Mladá Matica) represents a subsidiary branch of Slovak Matica (MS – Matica slovenská), which is a traditional cultural and enlightenment organisation with

significant historical meaning in Slovak history. This foundation (MS) was established in 1863 as a national and emancipator organisation which was supposed to create a cultural, scientific and political platform for inhabitants of Slovakia within the framework of the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. However, MS was dissolved and prohibited in 1875 as part of the centralist, nationalist and partial policy of Hungary of that time; the original activities of this Slovak national organisation were not restored until the creation of the first Czechoslovak Republic.

This restoration took place in 1920 when MS fully developed its original functions and goals. It became an important cultural and educational institution, which unified prominent representatives of Slovak cultural life and science. Its national and revivalist mission was suppressed by the creation of the independent Slovak Republic in 1939. Another turning point in the history of MS occurred in 1948 when the communists took the power. The activities of MS in the communist era were reduced to enlightenment work with an ideological and political mission in the spirit of the propagation of socialism and communist ideology (SEDLÁK 2012). Its scientific activities were moved to the Slovak Academy of Sciences and its membership base was dissolved. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989 MS was restored again, its activities started to develop and membership numbers started to increase. However, from the point of view of the scope of its activities, significance and proportion of representativeness of membership base, MS has never regained the position attained prior to 1948.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the Slovak parliament passed legislation, according to which MS became a state supported institution, with a significantly revised mission and aims, under the administration of the Ministry of the Culture. In addition to a significant patriotic orientation (protection of interests and cultural expressions of Slovaks) it became directed towards the support of Slovaks living abroad and in nationally mixed regions on the borders of Slovakia. In the interest of generational continuity, youth issues have become a focus of the support rendered by MS since 1992 when an independent branch of MS called MM was created.

MM adopted the agenda of its mother organisation, MS, complemented by a specific aim to support the patriotic activities of young members, especially in local environments. This aim is supposed to contribute to the creation of patriotism and national pride among young people in the current era. The activities of MM were intensified after 2010 when a so called new era of young members arose. Judging by the size of its membership base and its spectrum of activities, it appears that MM constitutes a relatively strong patriotic movement of young people with activities covering almost the whole of Slovakia. Institutional support of MM remains guaranteed by its mother organisation.

For the purposes and aims of the MYPLACE project¹, MM is located within the cluster of Radical Right and Patriotic Movements. While there is little evidence of demonstrations of radicalism among the researched group, patriotic elements and an ideological orientation are apparent and indisputable in MM's activities. At the same time, it is important to note that only a very thin line divides patriotism and nationalism in the post-socialist environment of Central Europe, while nationalism is understood as a very negative social phenomenon (see ŠATAVA 2013:64). Nationalism, in Slovak political and media perception, is related to demonstrations of ethnic intolerance, fascism, racism or xenophobia and presented often in a militant context in which it corresponds to the demonstration of extremism and radicalism. There are a number of neo-Nazi organisations in Slovakia which are representatives of such nationalist groups and which bring together mostly young people with largely antidemocratic and radical attitudes. Among such groups are: Slovak National Youth (Slovenská národná mládež), the youth branch of the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana); Slovak Society (Slovenská pospolitost'), which is strongly connected to its leader and district governor of Banská Bystrica district Marián Kotleba; and Defiance of Kysuce (Kysucký vzdor), which is a regional ultra-right wing organisation. In terms of its sphere of activities and engagement, it is fair to conclude that the emic opinion of MM's members, that MM is the only long-term established youth organisation with a patriotic mission on the territory of Slovakia, is a reasonably accurate one.

Scientific interest in these problems, and more generally in the problems of political and civic engagement of young people in Slovakia, is in its infancy. This is the consequence of the heritage of former political tradition and development of social sciences, which were controlled and regulated by state propaganda and ideology until 1989. Young people attracted the attention of social sciences only very sporadically in those times and, when they did, it was in the context of demonstrating the successful inculcation of communist ideology in the process of the political socialization of youth (see MACHÁČEK 1993; KOVAČEVA 2002).

Every activity of young people outside of the so called Socialist Youth Union (Socialistický zväz mládeže) was considered to be anti-state and deviant. There was almost no youth activism in the Slovak environment until the 1990s and it was captured in social

¹ *Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement* (MYPLACE) is a research project of European Commission in which the author participated between 2011-2015. Its principal aim was to focus on youth activism and political engagement and at the same time point to the process of transfer of collective memory within the social environment of young people. More details about the project can be found at <http://www.fp7-myplace.eu>.

research (primarily of a quantitative kind) only around the turn of the millennium. Research on youth in Slovakia remains undeveloped and relatively while most of the theoretical studies seek to apply western theoretical approaches to the Slovak youth scene. In relation to the particular case under study here, it can be stated that there is no existing scientific literature on the field of patriotic movements in Slovakia. More attention is dedicated to questions of right-wing extremism, youth skinheads or football hooliganism (see SMOLÍK 2004; HARSAYI 2005; MIKLOVIČ 2006; JUSKO 2011). From this perspective even the small case study of MM reported on here is pioneering. This lack of existing literature meant that this study began first with compiling a picture of MM as an organisation - number of members, membership base and structure of organisation - and, thereafter proceeded to more complicated questions related to the main research themes such as degree of civic engagement, political legacy of the movement and its media representation.

Access to MM was facilitated by the researcher's professional activity on the editorial staff of the journal *Ethnographic Anthology* (Národopisný zborník) - the journal of the Ethnographic Department of MS. This is how he first came into contact with the Matica movement, although he has never been a member of the organisation.

The theoretical framework for researching MM is rooted in the approach of social movements; patriotically orientated movements are understood as a part of wider social movements. Most definitions of social movements emanate from the ability of a particular movement to mobilize individuals in public (e.g. TILLY 2004:5) and they assume that they have a previously constituted ideological unity and aim (SOPÓCI and BÚZIK 2009). O. Cisař (2008:29) sees in every social movement individuals, who participate in unconscious social activism where their common goal defines them much more than their group homogeneity. K. Pickvance (1997:35-6) adds that a social movement is a partially institutionalized collective activity with a certain structure that means formal membership is not a necessity. Social movements create opposition toward official policy and limit political power through protests, petitions, demonstrations etc. The means of recruitment of the members is not as important as loyalty to, and enthusiast for achieving, the goal. According to this characteristic MM fulfils the features of social movements because patriotism features as the key ideology of the MM movement.

Social movements may incorporate a range of subcultural styles or groupings simultaneously. This is evident in the case of MM where a range of styles (e.g. music styles) and outer manifestations of young people in terms of dress, hairstyle, negative media image etc is displayed. Among the members of MM it is possible to identify skinhead sympathisers, metal heads or members of eco communities and heterogeneity within and slippage between such styles is characteristic of the contemporary 'post-subcultural' environment (see MUGGLETON and WEINZIERL 2003:7).

Finally, central to this study is the question of why young people appear disinclined to engage in cultural or social organisations (especially in post-socialist countries). The degree of such civic or political participation among young people is very low (CISÁŘ 2008:25; HOWARD 2003:69). This has led some social scientists to refer to a 'disengaged generation', which has become disinterested and apathetic in relation to political participation, which has been neglected in favour of increasing volunteering activities (see ZANI and CICOGNANI 2010:83). These claims apply also to the study of volunteer-based patriotic movements that display a largely negative attitude towards all contemporary policy, political parties or political directions, and are thus a useful hypothesis to test against the findings of this particular case.

Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this study is essentially qualitative social science drawing particularly from social anthropology, or, in the Central European area, what is referred to as 'ethnology'. In contrast to a quantitative approach, the use of ethnography as a method enabled deeper insight into the organisation. Here, ethnographic methodology proved to be an excellent choice for my field research and data acquisition. The core methods of data gathering were: participant observation; field notes; and semi-structured interviews. Face book accounts of MM and official MS website supplemented these methods and acted as a useful starting source; this was where initial information about the operation of MM was gathered and first contacts with individual members were established. Initial contacts were rather negative; members distrusted giving interviews since they had bad experiences with journalists who often twisted their responses according to the story they needed, frequently in a negative way.

The trust was improved after a chance meeting with the chairman of MM in spring 2013 when I participated in event debating the contribution of M.R. Štefánik to the country's history and, MS as an institution in particular. After the meeting, I contacted the chairman with a request to assist in the research and resulted, after a couple of cancelled appointments, in an informal discussion about the operation of MS. That discussion, which included an explanation of the research goals, enabled the researchers to access the organisation and the chairman himself recommended first contacts among active MM members. He also presented the goals of the research to the membership base via electronic communication and became personally enthusiastic about the research, enquiring several times about its progress.

From this point, the snowball method of recruiting was employed whereby after each meeting respondents provided new recommendations for contacts with other members who

might be potential interviewees. Between them, over the course of fieldwork, the two researchers visited 15 localities around Slovakia, and conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with MM members in accordance with project goals. In each locality, on average two interviews were conducted; one with the leader of the local section (if they were available) and the other usually with a regular member.

In selecting respondents for interview, no particular criteria were followed over and above membership in MM. The final profile of respondents included 16 respondents under the age of 25 years and 14 less than 35 years of age. Of the 30 members interviewed, 5 worked in the MS centre in Martin, the remainder were from local sections. To get a more nuanced view of the movement, its chairman was also interviewed. In terms of gender, 9 interviews with women were conducted; this roughly reflects the membership base of MM (about one third of the members are female). The research was conducted between October and December 2012. In 2013 the researcher participated in two events organised by MM: National Climb on Kriváň (August 2013); and the national rally of MM in Liptovský Mikuláš dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the founding of MM (October 2013). On these occasions, participant observation was employed to gain insight into mutual interactions between MM members, the course of events and also diverse opinions amongst MM members. The combination of interview data and field notes generated a complex set of data that could be used to shape the case study.

In terms of quantity, around 30 hours of recorded material was gathered and the average length of interview was between 55-60 minutes. After transcription of interviews, more than 300 pages of diverse information about MM were generated. As far as visual material is concerned, my own photographs are supplemented by a collection of pictures from the archives of MM recording mostly MM activities.

With the exception of the initial lack of trust noted above, no significant ethical problems were encountered. Prior to the interview, each respondent was informed about the ethical aspects of the project through a process of gathering informed consent. Anonymity of all respondents was preserved in all archived data and in the text of the report, where pseudonyms are used for all respondents. Of all contacted members only 10 refused declined to participate in the interview, for various reasons, and no respondent had a problem with recording the interview on dictaphone. In contrast, nearly all respondents expressed concerns about the use of a video recorder during any activities of MM.

Key Findings

Before introducing the key findings of the research, it is important to outline details of the founding and activities of MM essential for understanding the context of the findings.

MM as an independent organisation dates back to the early 1990s, when on 10 May 1992, Council of Matica Youth (Rada matičnej mládeže) was formed in Liptovský Mikuláš.² This council was formed as a result of an initiative by the young members of the parent organisation whose numbers started to grow in this period. The formation of a separate platform for youth proved to be beneficial since the younger members were given an opportunity to present their opinions as a whole. Until that point, younger members had congregated in local sections led by older, long-standing leaders. This arrangement did not provide younger members with sufficient space to voice their own, specific opinions and attitudes when the group opinion of the local section was presented externally. The formation of a separate organisation was helped not only by the activity and number of young members but also by intensification of the orientation of Matica slovenská towards Slovak youth. Youth became one of the priorities of the Matica platform; it states that the future of Matica is in the hands of youth and, therefore, it is crucial to encourage and support youth in the process of the development of national consciousness (ZÁKLADNÉ DOKUMENTY MS 2011:47-8).

It was in line with these intentions that, in 1993, young Matica members were granted the status of an independent 'interest section' (Odbor mladých matičiarov) within the structure of the parent organisation. This granted it greater collective rights than held by the former Council of Matica Youth. Young members thus got opportunity to present themselves as a separate organisation with its own democratically elected leadership and the right to participate through their delegated representatives in the general assembly of Matica. The process of organisational and legal emancipation was concluded by the end of 2011 when new statutes were accepted and a new, simpler, name, Mladá Matica, was adopted.

Currently (spring 2013) MM consists of about 700 formally registered members. This is the largest membership base since the founding of the separate organisation and the number of members is likely to grow in the future. However, this positive situation has come about only in the course of the past five years. In sharp contrast, at the turn of the

² Paradoxically, until 1992 representatives of the youth platform were not young but older members of MS. After the founding of Council of Matica Youth, the number of younger and older members on the board of the youth organisation was made roughly even.

millennium, the number of members was falling rapidly and stood at only one-third of the current level. This decline was closely associated with the leading personalities and their activities within the movement but particularly with the system of financing of the entire organisation. The right-wing government of Mikuláš Dzurinda (elected in 2002) rapidly cut the budget of Matica slovenská and this was reflected in the drop in its activities at the local level.³

As the name of the organisation suggests, MM is a subsidiary of MS which represents youth perspectives. Its activities are markedly patriotic. According to official statutes, MM advocates the legacy of Š. Moyzes a K. Kuzmány, the founders of MS in 1863. These documents (see <http://www.ommvranov.wbl.sk>) claim that the main aims of the organisation are to satisfy the needs and interests of Slovak youth in relation to knowledge of national history, culture and traditions. The representatives of MM themselves consider it to be the only patriotic organisation for youth with any historical standing and importance in the country. All the activities of MM, on national and local level, are held in this spirit; it organises several cultural, commemorative, educational or sporting events usually associated with important anniversaries, events or personalities of Slovak history. The essence of such events is the intensification of national pride and feeling of fellowship among the participants which contributes to the strengthening of national consciousness of inhabitants of Slovakia in the current globalized era.

The leadership of MM is aware that these ideas appear outdated to contemporary young Slovaks since they were formed in the 19th century in the context of national revival. Advocating the legacy of MS today is thus problematic – appearing obsolete and irrelevant given the fact that Slovakia completed its journey to national statehood when the independent Slovak republic was established in 1993. In this context, the parent organisation is frequently presented in the media as an inward-looking and unproductive organisation. Its media image has been further damaged by numerous scandals relating to the embezzlement of national treasure, membership of agents of the former communist State Police on the board of Matica and others. Because of this, if any young person claims allegiance to the legacy of MS, he/she is automatically considered to be a non-mainstream individual, a nationalist or an extremist. On the other hand, MS is still a very well-known organisation among both younger and older generations because of its importance for the

³ According to the representatives of MS, this was a destructive period for the organisation and led to a decline in all activities of MS. The result of such state policy was a separation of the Slovak National Library, as a central library institution of the country, from MS. The library had been associated with MS since its founding in the second half of the 19th century and was considered the pride of its cultural and educational activities.

history of the country. In this way, therefore, affiliation to MM is reflected through the prism of the parent organisation. Only a small segment of interested people are familiar with the mission and activities of MM since they are not widely promoted or known to the public. That is why a substantial part of the activities of MM is based on the re-interpretation of forgotten historical facts and personalities through the use of targeted presentation of scholarly literature.⁴

In connection with the preference for electronic communication among the young people, MM tries to present its activities on its webpage and social networks. It uses electronic media and social networks for communication but the use depends on the financial and personal possibilities of the membership base. It uses the homepage of MS (<http://www.matica.sk>) as its chief communicational tool, where it has its own affiliated page with basic information about the activities of the movement. However, a webpage of the local section from Vranov nad Topľou provides extensive information as well and substitutes the central homepage with presentation of more diverse activities and history of MM (<http://www.ommvranov.wbl.sk>). Other local sections (Rožňava, Prievidza, Kamenná Poruba and Zvolenská Slatina) maintain their own websites. In addition to websites, numerous accounts have been created on social networks where, besides the parent organisation, local sections (Košice, Lučenec, Zvolen, Stropkov, Revúca, Rožňava, Michalovce and others) present themselves. These are full of links, comments and posters promoting various Matica events and activities.

As far as the administration of MM is concerned, its headquarters is formally associated with the seat of MS in Martin. Although the parent organisation has its affiliate seat in the country's capital, it does not concern MM. Its seat in Martin is only a formal centre since the membership base is spread all around the country. Currently, several members of the board of MM are employed in the structures of the parent organisation in Martin and therefore the town is a suitable centre for management activities of MM as well.

Organisational Structure of MM

Since MM is a youth branch of the national organisation of MS, it mirrors its internal organisational structure, which is not dissimilar to the traditional model of youth interest associations in Slovakia. Whether or not this structure is a legacy of the previous regime or

⁴ For this purpose, MS operates its own publishing house (Matica slovenská Publishing) and, independent research institute (Historical Institute of MS).

not is debatable, but a substantial part of the organisational terminology reflects this fact. MM has a dual internal structure; it operates at local and national levels.

At the local level, the organisation exists primarily in the form of local clubs (sections) of MM, bringing together young members in their place of residence. Each such section has a formal chairman who is democratically elected from among the members. He/she represents the entire section and is the main mediator in the communication between the local section and national organisation centre. The Chairman is complemented by a committee (the number of committee members depends on the membership base) and supervisory board, which oversees both activities and management of the section. The chairman and committee are regularly confirmed or elected anew on the basis of internal elections held during the annual section meeting, usually at the end of a calendar year. During the meeting, the chairman submits an annual report about the activities of the section. The report is then submitted to the centre of MM. It is a summary of all activities and events in which the young members participated during the year and it also presents the official number of members of any given section.

The organisational structure at national level is similar to the local one. The only difference is that it has a more formal character and importance. The entire organisation is headed by the chairman of MM, who is highest representative of MM and the external representative of the organisation. The chairman is elected by a general assembly, held according to MM statutes every three years. Each local section has the right to send four delegates, who among themselves elect the chairman, deputy chairman and supervisory committee of the entire MM. The committee consists of twelve members with executive powers, headed by the chairman of MM. Among the members are, for example, the deputy chairman and secretary. The supervisory section of the committee consists of a 5-member control board, which oversees the activities of both the entire MM and the chairman. It calls attention to the violation of statutes and controls implementation of the programme of MM. Similarly to the local level, chairman submits a summary report to the general assembly about the status of the membership base, programme implementation, range and diversity of the activities, management of the organisation and future perspectives. This report is then submitted to the chair of the parent organisation.

In contrast to, MM has a legal status within the parent organisation. It has the right to ask for a subsidy from the funds of the parent organisation or apply for external grants, sponsors or EU funds. Previously, MM had been able to request support only from MS, which, however, was only minimal and all activities were conducted on a voluntary basis. This voluntary character of the organisation has not changed since none of the representatives of MM receives wages for his/her active participation. Here, significant credit goes to the current chairman Marián Gešper (who holds a doctorate in law) who,

together with a number of other members of the committee, actively participated in creating new statutes with the goal of making MM activities more effective and independent. Local sections of MM can also achieve status of legal entity if they prove long-term active functioning and a high number of members. Most of the sections are associated with local or regional sections of MS; this means they usually do not have status of legal entity (Houses of MS⁵).

Thus, the organisational structure of MM might be summarised as being formal, hierarchical and democratic (with representative system of management). From the viewpoint of MM members, the structure is transparent and acceptable, though from an outsider's perspective it seems rather complicated. As noted above, this reflects the structure of the parent organisation and that of similar interest or political groups of young people in Slovakia. In terms of the freedom and mobilisation of young people, it presents ideal conditions for self-realization, particularly on the local level. Upwards, the structure is tighter and more important for MM members. It is a challenge for enthusiastic members with leadership or political aspirations. Marián Gešper, the current chairman, is such a person. Thanks to his long-term activities at the local level in MM structures and the parent MS, he is a respected leader who has managed to modernise and mobilise this youth movement. This is reflected in the following excerpt from an interview with a member of MM:

"As I mentioned before, we have more than 700 members, but we used to have less than that. After Doctor Gešper took the lead, the number of sections rapidly increased. Several non-active sections were revived, several new sections were established and the activities of young people were mobilised." (Simon)

Young People and Their Membership

MM is an interest section of MS bringing together only young people who are the members of the parent organisation. From this perspective, it is an exclusive club based on age. After

⁵ Houses of MS are regional centres of the MS administration. Currently, there are 19 of them in the country, 11 being located in the southern part where there is a mixed Slovak and Hungarian population. They are administered by professional employees of MS who coordinate the activities of MS closer to the membership base. Such houses frequently provide basic organisational and supportive assistance in the formation or operation of the MM section.

reaching 35 years of age, members lose their membership in MM and become regular members of MS on an individual, collective or interest basis.⁶

The reasons for the special status afforded to young people within the organisational structure were noted above; among them, however, it is worth emphasising here the need for a platform for the younger section of the parent organisation membership to express their shared opinion. Younger members have been given special attention recently, since MM is valued not least for the organisational continuity it provides for within MS. MM is also the most progressive section of MS in terms of its size and the approach of its members. There are currently about 700 members registered to MM, grouped in 46 local sections which are evenly distributed around the whole country. It is, therefore, a national organisation representing young people sympathising with the ideas of patriotism, defence of their national culture and history. Moreover, it is a constituent part of a larger organisation, MS, which historically has been the institutional embodiment of this patriotic attitude.

In order to understand how membership in MM has developed, it is important to consider the motivations for joining the movement of individual members. The primary motivation is the group values noted above, which can be generalised as 'love for nation.' This term occurred frequently in the statements of all respondents. At the same time, it offers a platform where young people can spend their spare time and meet people with a similar outlook. Such attitude was expressed mostly in opposition to present-day consumerist and informational way of life. Following is a representative statement for such opinions:

"Most of the Slovaks just sit at home and criticise the situation or simply, what they would do differently. But they actually do nothing. So I decided that I would join, I mean become a member. I could do something for the society. We are lucky that in Rožňava [local section of MM], Matica looks the way it does and it tries to give society something culture-wise, sport-wise and it is not just bragging about politics from behind the table... Currently I

⁶ Membership in MS can be individual and this status is used by numerous sympathisers from localities where there is no local section or by individuals who do not want to be associated with local sections. Collective membership is granted to a local or interest group (section) of people registering as a unit. In MS, there are currently 19 interest and scientific sections including dramatic, historical, artistic and linguistic. Any registered individual, if they wish, can become a member of an interest section.

would say that it is like giving them other opportunities besides the routine they experience every day. (Tomáš)

"The main idea is to bring together these young people so, through excursions or trips, they can learn about Slovak history, important personalities. This was the main motivation, to get among young people, people with the same outlook and really I can say that I found a bunch of new friends. It is different if you go out with people with the same interest than going out with someone who is totally different. So mainly the motivation is being with people with similar interests." (Simon)

"I think that it is good when people are organised somehow. It is better than hanging around the town or joins in some extremist groups." (Palo)

Thus, most of the respondents expressed positive feelings about the self-realisation they had experienced as a result of their membership within this kind of community. Other reasons for joining that resonated in the statements of young members were the opportunities the movement afforded to develop new contacts and skills, exchange knowledge and feeling that they were benefiting society in general. Of course there were also critical opinions; of the significant underfunding of MM, its weak membership base, the large gap in the state of local and national levels of the organisation, and the media image of the parent organisation. Overall, however, there was a feeling of pride among MM members that they belonged to this patriotic organisation; the work within MM fulfilled them and they enjoyed it.

"I would see it positively on the regional level, where people do not profit from their work. They do it because they want to do it and because they like it. They see a sense in their life that they want to do that job." (Tomáš)

A great benefit of membership is freedom of opinion, as long as it does not run radically counter to the statutes and mission of MS. Every member can express any opinion, regardless his status or experience and in this respect, the movement claims plurality of opinion. Agreement is reached by majority (group) consensus. Contravention of internal statutes might arise if an individual sought to publicly promote any extremist political party or expression. Such opinions are banned and they are in significant conflict with the statutes of MS/MM. This is discussed further below.

The membership in MM is very loose and informal; it suffices for a young person to express sympathy for, and a willingness to engage in, some of the voluntary activities or events organised by MM. If they are interested, they complete an official application (for registration purposes) and become a member. Membership can be discontinued anytime, without any reason. Of course a new member has to express support of the goals and

mission of MM and its written statutes and respect them. One of the members speaks about the admission requirements thus:

"Everyone who is interested and wants to do something for our nation, for our country or just for culture in their surroundings can join. Basically, everyone who wants can join."
(Jana)

If the individual is joining a section that is just forming, then the section needs to have at least seven prospective members of eligible age, draw up a report from a constituent meeting and elect a chairman. The report then becomes a requirement for the registration of membership of the MM section. Other than age eligibility, the candidate member does not need to meet any particular individual requirements. After fulfilling the formal requirements, the candidate becomes a full member with the right to vote and present their opinions within the section. The membership fee is symbolic only, to ensure it is affordable for students and young people who are not working. Depending on locality, it is about 1-2 Euros a year.

An unwritten but highly valued requirement of members, however, is their active engagement in common events. Here, the members position themselves either as 'active' or 'passive'. Active members are usually local leaders who participate in most of the activities. Although passive members fulfil the formal requirement for membership, they do not frequently participate in activities organised by the section. They might thus be considered rather as 'sympathisers' with the movement. In some sections, more than a third of members discontinued their membership because of their passivity.

Recruitment of new members of MM is also loose, non-aggressive and un-organised. It is expected that new members show some active engagement, some spontaneous and enthusiastic reaction to the social or cultural impulse presented by MM during their events. Recruitment of new members often takes place, firstly, among family and friends of active members:

"I have a brother whom I take to our events although he is only 13. He will be a good Matica member!" (Ďuro)

This suggests a family predisposition towards membership as a result of intergenerational transmission of values or family transmission of social memory. More than half of respondents confirmed that their affinity to the Matica movement had been nurtured through education from their parents who had previous membership experience or were sympathisers of MS.

"My parents are regular members; they do not have any functional roles. They were regular Slovaks, they did not lead any cultural groups but they have always sympathised with the Slovak nation." (Gašpar)

"Often it happens that, for example, the siblings are members, or parents and children at the same time. My mother is a member of a local section, so it happens pretty often." (Jana)

The other half of respondents found their own way to MS through a process of self-realization and the search for an expression of 'self' amongst the myriad ideologies and lifestyles encountered by contemporary youth.

Financing

MM, as a constituent part of MS, is a state subsidised organisation supported from the national budget. The financing of MS is tied entirely to state subsidies, only rarely and irregularly are their other sources of income (such as from sponsors, foreign contributors, grants etc). The annual state subsidy depends on the programme priorities of the current government and the budget of MS has to adapt to this condition. The worst economic period Matica experienced was in 2002 after the right-wing government of M. Dzurinda was elected; after this its budget was significantly cut and MS had to reduce its structure and activities.

Left-wing periods of Robert Fico governments have been more favourable to MS, but every year the management of MS is in deficit, reflecting of course the wider economic situation in the country and the European Union. These circumstances are reflected in the level of support of MM as an interest section; since the parent organisation is constantly squeezed, the support it provides MM is very symbolic. The annual contribution from the parent organisation barely covers the operational expenses of the MM centre and the youth section has to obtain funds itself in order to undertake any activity. It was for this reason that the MM centre, and some of the more developed local sections, acquired legal status themselves; this allowed them to apply to the grant programmes of various internal and external funds.

A significant part of MM's activities are of a non-financial character and undertaken on a voluntary basis. MM draws on the social capital of individual members at the local level, who organise numerous cultural and educational projects and events on their own. External financial and non-financial support is usually tied only to a particular activity or event. Where events are organised collaboratively, MM offers its partners organisational and membership resources in place of any financial contribution. Each well-organised and successful project arouses admiration and strengthens the feeling of fellowship among the

members. They organise these activities selflessly and voluntarily or, as respondents repeatedly put it, *'We do it for the nation, for the love of the nation'*.

Income from membership fees is low – as noted above, contributions are kept minimal in order not to exclude students and others without income - and does not cover any operational expenses of MM either at the local or the national level. This non-profit character of the organisation is reflected in the poor publicity presence of MM; this was recognised emphasizes one of the weakest parts of the operation of the organisation by interviewees. As in the organisation of events, MM tries to use the contacts and social connections of individual members to publicise the movement or puts information out on forms of electronic representation (such as social networks) that do not require financial investment. In its own institutional newspaper (Slovak National Newspaper), MM occasionally presents its activities. Publicity by MM is thus based primarily on word of mouth communication among the participants, or among the membership base. Depending on local possibilities, bulletins may be produced for use at lectures, school discussions. At larger events (of regional or national character), MM promotes itself via t-shirts with logos.

Politics

The relationship of MM members towards politics generally ranges from neutral to negative and aversive. On the one hand it results from the statutes of the organisation which forbid association with, or promotion of, any political party within the activities of MM. On the other hand, opinions of the members reflect aversion to the present-day political situation and orientation of Slovakia in the European Union. There is a general feeling of disappointment among the respondents over the political situation and distrust towards politicians in the country. This is because they perceive politics through their own economic and social situation, which is generally quite bleak; reference here is made, *inter alia*, to high youth unemployment, labour migration abroad, disinterest in the country towards youth, nepotism, high rate of corruption, corrupt judiciary. There is a general feeling of apathy and scepticism about changing the current state of affairs and negative attitudes were encountered also among MM members:

"Generally, there is a feeling of scepticism after 1989. Suddenly, people were given freedom, both economic and political, and it went hand in hand with politics, corruption, overgrown public administration, bureaucracy and poorly adjusted education." (Fedor)

"What bothers me about the young people is that they are demotivated by this state of things. It looks like they are afraid, they don't ask much, they agree with everything. In my opinion, they cannot even revolt." (Lukáš)

"It is difficult with housing. A lot of young people, if they don't leave for abroad, cannot save money for their own housing. There are few job opportunities. Unemployment is high and young people give up pushing themselves forward." (Ďuro)

The respondents did not connect their patriotic activity with any struggle against the current political authorities. When asked about politics and politicians, nearly all of them mentioned the rule that forbids their movement to be connected with any manifestation of politicking.

However, if any general political orientation of young representatives of MM were to be discerned, then it leans in the direction of the governing left-wing party (SMER - Social Democracy). This is related to the policies of the former right-wing government, which almost bankrupted MS as a whole and, to this day, the period 2002-2006 is considered to be the worst in the history of MS in the post-1989 era. Left-wing governments led by the current Prime Minister, Robert Fico, in fact are much more in tune with values of patriotism and protection of Slovak culture than the Slovak right-wing parties. A case in point here is the relationship between young people and the Slovak National Party (SNS, a conservative, right of centre party). This party, and its entire political heritage, is built on patriotic and national principles which are very close to MM members. The researchers thus presumed that at least a proportion of young MM members would be politically drawn towards this party. However, during the period of fieldwork, when SNS had no elected seats in -parliament, those leaning in this direction supported rather the ruling Smer-SD. However, evidence of the political intersection of the ideas and policies of these two parties is seen in the fact that both parties were part of the ruling coalition in power 2006-2010. Connection between former MM members and SNS is documented in one case when a former chairman of MM stood as a candidate for SNS in both parliamentary and regional elections. He is still in a managing position in the office of Žilina autonomous region.

Another form of manifestation of some political activity is the involvement of members in the structures of the parent organisation. Thanks to the mobilisation of MM under its current leadership, several young members began to be involved professionally in national centre of MS. During the period of research, there were five or six such individuals. Active MM members also frequently find employment in larger regional centres of MS, in the Houses of MS discussed above. A case in point here is of the current chairman, M. Gešper, who, after performing the role of secretary of MS, subsequently became deputy chairman of MS and then Chairman of MM. This form of public politics and activity is approved by members of MM although their own propensity to undertake such roles in the organisation depends on individual predispositions and preparedness to invest time and effort. Members of MM consider the successful career of their chairman and other members to be highly beneficial and valuable from the perspective of the

achievement of the goals of the organisation. Since these individuals moved up from the lowest levels in the organisational structure, they are in touch with the problems of young members and the youth environment and they can react to them from their own direct experience.

Finally, members of MM consider their patriotic efforts to be a certain form of political activity since they are actively involved in public life in their places of residence. It is not politics however, in the strict sense of the term, but more akin to a personal public benefit initiative. Holding an organisational function in MM is considered to be a benefit in terms of developing oneself and gaining management experience. In the words of a female MM member:

"I personally began to develop my organisational skills. I am studying Slovak language, I frequently use rhetoric. My first time, I spoke in front of 400 people, so it was a great experience. It helped a lot in my study." (Jana)

Despite the declared apolitical character of the movement, some members see participatory activities within MM as an opportunity to learn the art of politics. Some of them (3-4 openly) even formally confirmed in interviews that they view their work for MS as a preparation for a professional career in politics.

Activities and Public Involvement

Mobilization activities of the movement result directly from the goals and mission of MM; the promotion of patriotic activity in a form that is appealing to young people and encourages their interest in national history, folk culture and traditions. Such activity should be directed, according to MM statutes, towards the support of the legacy of important figures in Slovak history and towards the legacy of important historical events which stir national pride for future generations of Slovaks (see <http://www.ommvranov.wbl.sk>). It is important to emphasise the orientation towards young people. However, analysis of attendance at numerous activities of MM shows that not only youth participate in them. Thus, the activities undertaken can be seen as events directed towards the wider public good. Although most of the activities are organised in coordination with the MM centre or a regional centre, their running is fully within the responsibility of local organisers and members of MM. It should be emphasised again here that the activities are organised on a purely voluntary basis in the free time of individual members. Where MM cooperates in the organisation of an event, it does not require from its partners or sponsors any financial contribution, but only various services that help to the smooth course of the event (poster printing, rent of a room or technical equipment, printing of memorabilia and other).

The circuit of cooperating partners depends on the range of activities and local conditions in which the sections of MM exist. The most usual partners are various cultural and educational institutions in the regions (schools, cultural sections of municipal authorities, Houses of MS). In return, MM offers to its partners the organisational resources of its young activists, its institutional background or historical authority that is attached to its name. Depending on the membership base, some of the sections of MM have their own ensembles, which are used not only by MS sections but also by other cultural organisations in the programmes of various events (theatre company of MM in Liptovský Mikuláš, dance ensemble of MM in Bardejov etc.) Usually, the activity of MM events reflects the membership base of the local section. Sections with more members organise more activities and events than small, village sections, especially if a section is attached to a House of MS, which lends it powerful support and momentum. For this reason, the most active are local sections from Liptovský Mikuláš, Rožňava, Banská Bystrica, Lučenec, Michalovce, Topoľčany and Vranov nad Topľou. Sections from Martin and Bratislava, where centres of the parent organisation are located, have an advantageous organisational background as well.

The spectrum of MM activities might be usefully broken down into national activities (directed from MM centre) and local activities. National activities are not organised frequently; usually they are held once a year and are called national rallies of young *matičiar*. On average, 200-400 members participate at these rallies. The preparations for organisation begin a whole year in advance with financial help emanating mostly from the parent organisation. The location of the national rally changes on a yearly basis, moving from one local section to another. These local sections are responsible for devising the programme of the rally and thus a rivalry ensues as every section tries to outdo the previous rally. As far as the programme is concerned, there are discussions with important figures of the region, music concerts or dance performances.

Numerous protest activities have a national context as well. These are not frequent events but from time to time, MM members participate in such activities or organise them themselves. The protest meeting against the removal of the statue of L. Štúr from a Bratislava square was noted above and a petition was organised in support of the statue as well. Such events are an expression of patriotism and protection of cultural heritage of Slovaks by the MM members. However, protests are not a dominant feature of the movement since they are rather sporadic.

MM is involved in numerous educational projects at primary and secondary schools, where it organises discussions on various historical anniversaries and presents its perspective in an historical context. Such activities can be considered opportunities for the promotion of the organisation among young people who are potential recruits.

Finally, the movement engages in sporting events, focused either on national hiking trips or various tournaments, for example football tournaments, organised by MM for young people. Events organised by MM are evaluated by members of the organisation thus:

"The basic legacy is that people think that the young are not active; they do not care about anything. If something is happening, one stops by, sees the symbols of Matica and young people and understands that things are not as they are portrayed, that Matica is alive, that it is not as bad as presented on television. Young people are doing something for society and have not forgotten about Slovak values." (Ďuro)

"Certainly every event held under the auspices of either MS or MM has a certain legacy. It leans towards the nation, the idea of patriotism and national pride. So if there's some event, rock concert or something, it is to commemorate something or it is dedicated to something, to some ideal. So it is clear why it is held, but it is difficult to speak about it globally. If there is a discussion about history, there's always a certain connection with the nation and national consciousness." (Križka)

There are far more activities organised at the local level since there are almost 50 local sections of MM. Thus numerous events are organised at the same time and run in parallel. These local activities are also more diverse, drawing as they on the local capacities and possibilities of individual sections. Particularly dominant are cultural activities – dramatic plays, discussions, annual commemorative marches but also Matica balls. All these cultural activities are organised with an emphasis on a legacy of a specific historical event, figure or anniversary. The interviews showed that for anniversaries, the most popular figures of Slovak history are M.R. Štefánik, L. Štúr, A. Hlinka, founders of MS Š. Moyzes and Š. Krčméry, duke Rastislav, Cyril and Methodius, A. Dubček, V. Mečiar but also a controversial figure in the Slovak war state (1939-1945), J. Tiso⁷. Among key events are the arrival of Cyril and Methodius to Great Moravia in 863, the formation of the first Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, the formation of the first Slovak state in 1939 as a first independent state entity of Slovaks, 1989, as the year of the Velvet Revolution, or 1993 as

⁷ The Slovak war state (1939-1945) is a controversial political phenomenon in the history of Slovakia. On the one hand, it was the first independent political entity of Slovaks but, on the other, its formation was a result of the politics of Nazi Germany. J. Tiso, as its president, was responsible for accepting Hitler's proposal and de facto becoming an ally of Nazi Germany. The alternative would have been the annexation of Slovakia by Hungary. It is this connection with Nazi Germany which forms a basis for several controversies. Alternative historical discourse claims that J. Tiso was right to act in this way, since effectively he had no other choice. The Slovak state was, in this period, a developed, prosperous economy.

the year of the formation of the current Slovak Republic. To commemorate anniversaries of these turning points, commemorative marches are held to the sites of memory, where the historical importance of the figure, event or location is ceremonially presented. Annual climbs to symbolic Slovak sites, usually hills or peaks which are considered to be national symbols (Kriváň, Bradlo, Sitno and others) are among major events as well. Typically, MM presents national and Matica symbols during these events. A certain specific feature of such events is the fact that these important historical events, figures and locations are often presented in a different light from the official historical narrative. This aspect is emphasised by the members of MM themselves and also by non-members as being very beneficial, educational and interesting. For example in Eastern Slovakia, MM popularised anniversaries of the Eastern Slovak Peasant Revolt (1831) of the so-called Small War of 1939 in Spišská Nová Ves.

Local MM sections also organise charity events, blood donations for hospitals or spontaneous events associated with the cleaning and maintenance of commemorative sites.

Mass Media Space and Connection with Far-Right Extremists

The combination of the discussion of the media representation of MM and relations with far-right movements in a single section is determined by the recent media reports that MM members consisted mainly of far-right extremists. These claims arose from a protest which was co-organised by MM against the removal of a statue of Ľ. Štúr from Štúr Square in Bratislava. During the march of protesters to Bratislava Castle, members of far-right groups joined the crowd and deliberately sought confrontation with the police. After this protest, several commercial media immediately associated MM with right-wing extremism. In the same spirit, a demonstration against the Rainbow March in Bratislava was held at which MM members expressed their conservative attitude and protested against what they perceived as non-Christian values. Again, the final stage of the demonstration led to confrontations with the police in which mostly right-wing extremists participated. The result was again a negative reaction of the media towards MS and its members. Since the members of right-wing groups deliberately seek similar mass events and provoke conflicts with security forces, such situations cannot be avoided. A rather recent example is a series of demonstrations associated with the Gorila case in 2013.⁸

⁸ These were a series of demonstrations around Slovakia initiated mostly by young people. They were a response to published information that showed the connections between politicians and financial groups.

Association of MM with right-wing radicalism, together with numerous scandals (especially concerning Slovak national treasure) casts a negative shadow over MS and its sections. Responses of MS members call for purification of the name of MS and a renewed promotion of its mission:

"I think that Matica as a Slovak cultural institution has a problem presenting itself in the media these days, since the media depend on tabloid information and on financial resources, and there are only a few media that would be pro-national enough to care about cultural stuff, or about our patriotism, or about the nation itself. In my opinion, this is one of the problems. And another is the issue that damaged the reputation of Matica, I am speaking about the foundation and the national treasure, where Matica lost its reputation... Matica is building a new face. We can call it that name." (Gaba)

Even though such manifestations of extremism are banned by the statutes, it is difficult to identify far-right members among the membership base. This fact is reflected by the looseness of the requirements for membership. If an MM member does not publicly present their radical attitudes and actively participates in the operation of the organisation, there is no reason for sanctions. If there is cause to suspect a member of holding a radical position, a supervisory committee or local committee can discontinue the membership of such a member or an entire section on grounds of the violation of the statutes.

"There was a problem with one section (MM Púchov) which manifested extreme attitudes, fortunately it was discontinued. It has done us harm." (Jana)

Ultra-right extremist groups legitimise their activity through participation at protests or other events of MM or through membership in MM. Ideologically, the call for the nurturing of positive patriotism, a pro-Slovak stance and religious or ethnic conservatism are very close to such extremist groups. The marginalisation of these ideas is facilitated by the widespread opinion that patriotism today is an outdated ideological concept with no basis in a unified and multicultural Europe. Various manifestations of young neo-Nazis, which nearly all Slovak media report intensively, contribute significantly to this 'social negativism'. In this context, membership in MS or MM is considered to be a highly nationalistic, racist or xenophobic expression and only slowly are such stereotypes being overcome by MM through positive achievements of its events and diverse activities. On the other hand, the presence of extremists is a natural consequence of the loose and uncontrolled recruitment of new members (see above), which makes it virtually impossible to exclude young Neo-Nazis in the admission process. Respondents themselves admit they

are present in MM. A good example of this trend is the Bratislava-Petržalka (MM of M.R. Štefánik) section. This was, until recently, a very active section, which unofficially registered members from the radical ultra-right spectrum. However, after the last elections to Chairman of MS, the section resigned as a protest and discontinued its membership.

"Very often Kotleba⁹ supporters attend our events and very often we are associated with them. Young matičiari are seen as some lackeys of Slovenská pospolitost' [see footnote 8] which is absolutely not true." (Jana)

Another problem resulting from such a negative media attitude is the fact that MM loses the opportunity to respond in the media to various accusations or connections to radical groups. Even educational articles or invitations to events, in several cases, have been rejected by editorial offices of small local magazines or newspapers, just because of this negative label. MM considers this fact to be a major problem for the movement. This also explains why MM has to rely on its own promotional materials, internal print media (within the parent organisation), electronic media and mostly promotion via positive personal references to their events, workshops and activities.

"Matica pretty often fights with these influential dailies, with the fact that they all want to do harm to Matica, instead of taking it in some style and trying to promote themselves also in such media. I would say that the mass media are not favoured in Matica. I would say that their reactions are frequently offensive and useless. Connection with extremist groups. I would say that Mladá Matica, since it creates an image that it is just an organisation of national character and that's it, of course it attracts the extremists, and this is very unfortunate. But at the same time, since they are members of MM, of course that opinion is created, so it goes hand in hand. " (Tomáš)

Conclusion

This case study – although far from exhaustive - has allowed an in-depth understanding of the functioning of a contemporary Slovak youth organisation. The question of the degree of radicalism within MM remains open. Certainly radical groups in Slovakia draw on ideological principles of patriotism and pro-Slovakism that MM also promotes. Moreover,

⁹ Slovenská pospolitost' [Slovak society] as a political party was banned soon after its formation in 2006. Since its founding violated the Slovak Constitution because of its extremist orientation. Marián Kotleba, the former leader of the party won regional elections in Banská Bystrica region in 2013 and he is now a legitimate chairman of the regional self-government, He is also a leader of Ľudova strana – Naše Slovensko political party.

the presence of young radicals in the Matica movement is evident and undeniable; every national level activity of MM observed during research was marked by the presence of young radicals. Thus, although the programme of MM is quite clearly against any extremist manifestations, the line between healthy patriotism and passive nationalism of MM's members is thin and these sentiments are often mingled. Moreover, several interviews, and their further analysis, confirmed frequently latent hostility to non-Slovak groups or legitimization of the Nazi-aligned Slovak State (1939-1945) and its prominent representatives (J.Tiso, etc.). These tensions feed the negative media image of MM, especially in the current Slovak media and political environment when any manifestation of positive patriotism is considered to be negative, Nazi and racist. In the world of mass media, where only economic profit and viewer ratings are evaluated, the search for sensations and the lack of context of information are profitable (see HLÚŠEK 2010:13). The propagation of positive activities under the label of patriotism is not interesting for the Slovak media and means MM must rely on its own promotional and communication network and channels.

In relation to formal politics and political activism, MM has sought to profile itself as an apolitical organisation. Interviews with members of the organisation, however, in fact reveal that they articulate a very strong critique of the Slovak political system, European Union and political representatives and parties. MM members perceive there to be an apathy, hopelessness and lack of interest in political activity and engagement among the majority of young people. It is necessary to see these tendencies, however, through the prism of the poor social and economic situation of young people, which has been exacerbated by economic recession. This kind of social environment provides the basis for an escalation of manifestations of patriotism and their development into radical nationalism.

The activism and civic engagement of MM's members are characterised by a broad range of cultural, enlightenment, educational and sports activities for the benefit of the broader public. MM is very active especially at the local level. Since the financial support of MM from MS is very low (almost zero), more than 90 percent of activities, workshops and events are undertaken exclusively on a volunteer base. Youth organisations are very flexible and effective and, in the opinion of many members, volunteering that is simultaneously patriotic activity, fills them with pride and contributes to the self-realization of young people. Such welfare activities are supposed to contribute to the building of a positive name for MM as well as of the reputation of MS, which has been damaged over recent years due to a number of scandals. Increasing numbers in the membership of MM provides evidence of the fact that the historical legacy of MS is still alive among young people, even though it must be adapted to the new conditions of the present era.

Looking to the future, this trend towards an increase in MM's membership has significant prospects of continuing and extending to the mother organisation (MS). However, the reasons for this upward trajectory may well lie in the intensive activities of the current chairman of MM. The trend is also shaped, however, by a very appealing agenda, free structure, possibility of self-realization in one's own local environment and a wide network of contacts. Family background is also a contributing factor; the research showed that the first contact of young people with MS is mostly via their parents who are also members of MS. A certain advantage of MM relates to the fact that eligibility is restricted by age. This means, on the one hand, it brings together only young people whilst, on the other, it ensures a constant renewal of membership base as older members outgrow it and move on.

On the basis of the first analysis of the material gathered, it can be concluded that membership in MM offers young people a platform for participatory activity which, in a period of poor social and economic prospects, fulfils their desire for self-realisation. The main principles of the movement are: spontaneity; dedication; voluntariness and enthusiasm for making a success of organised events; and contribution to the success and good reputation of the organisation. The main ideology of the movement is linked to patriotic activity ('love for nation'). However, most of the activities are primarily of a cultural and social character and aim to promote the public good. Combining activism and patriotism is thus a core group value to be transmitted to future generations of young *matičiari*.

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