

YOUTH POLICY AND BRAIN DRAIN: LESSONS FROM DENMARK AND SLOVAKIA

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Abstract

The paper examines the issue of brain drain with regard to youth policy, which should be a tool for involving young people in public affairs so that circumstances change for the better and young people do not have to go abroad to work or study. In this regard, we compare the national policies of two European Union countries, namely Denmark and Slovakia. During the study of individual aspects of youth policies, we found that the Danish model of youth policy works with some very well implemented mechanisms, such as financial support of youth organizations, decentralization of policy, consulting services and attention to the education of youth to responsibility within the whole community. We compared the Danish youth policy with the Slovak one, and at the end of the article we propose several tools which could potentially be applicable also in the conditions of the Slovak Republic.

Keywords

Youth Policy, Youth, Brain Drain, Slovakia, Denmark

I. Introduction

Youth constitutes a specific category of population and defines a period of life between childhood and adulthood (Henze, 2015). During this period, young people adopt skills and obligations towards their future. That is why national policies should particularly focus more on youth development because how we educate, raise and socialize children and young people, how we help them to enter adult life will ultimately have consequences in the future (Molgat, Hahn-Bleibtreu, Boudreau, 2012). The European Union, despite its legal limitations, intervenes in international as well as national events at several levels. It actively enters the field of youth work, creates opportunities for youth to travel and study abroad, influences their personal and professional development, and at the same time supports progress in the development of the education system at formal and informal level for better market participation. Youth policy is thus an integral part of a complex of political efforts, and its development is inextricably a tool for shaping Europe's future (Chevalier, Loncle, 2021). In this paper we focus on tools and programmes through which Slovakia and Denmark are trying to involve young people into the decision-making processes in the field of youth policy, offering them space to influence public policies which inevitably affect areas of their lives. We also discuss the position of the European Union in these processes.

The European youth policy-making process takes place on a long-term basis and through many ways, such as institutes as Council of Europe Ministerial Conferences, surveys of the situation in the Member States, as well as consultative missions in European countries, and many more. Since 1985, conferences of youth ministers have been organized to discuss common practices in this area. So far, more than 10 ministerial conferences on youth policy have taken place, which have guided further coordination in the development of youth work at the European level through joint coordination procedures and unions. At the last such conference, which occurred as a video conference in November 2020, youth ministers agreed that youth exchanges and cross-border

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volunteering are extremely important for every young person, but also for Europe as such, as they promote a sense of diversity and European identity in Europe. International youth exchanges and transnational youth mobility thus remain an essential element of youth policy in the European Union, including migrant youth mobility (Mazzucato, Haagsman, 2022). With regard to EU youth programs, ministers welcomed the flexibility within the Erasmus + program and the possibility to use the so-called "force majeure" clause to allow for an extension of the numerous implementation deadlines. Several ministers called for increased financial support from the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programs and for these programs to be more flexible in scope. Some delegations also called for greater synergies between EU programs in relation to young people (Council of the EU, 2020). These are just some of many challenges youth policy still needs to deal with at the European level.

On 15th September 2021, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced that the European Commission would propose declaring 2022 the European Year of Youth. The young people had to undergo a stress test during the worldwide pandemic since its beginning in spring 2020. The European Year of Youth appreciates their efforts to overcome the obstacles they have caused by the crisis caused by the COVID 19 pandemic (Council of the EU, 2021). Throughout 2022, the Commission coordinates a wide range of activities in close cooperation with the European Parliament, Member States, regional and local authorities, youth organizations and young people themselves. For the European Year of Youth initiatives € 8 million budget was set from Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps and one of the main objectives is to integrate youth policy into all relevant Union policies, in line with the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, in order to promote the integration of the youth perspective into policy-making at all levels (ZMOS, 2022).

However, not everything can be influenced by the European Union. The basic powers and complex set-up of the system depend on the individual states and their approach. Young people are often seen as a useful auxiliary force for political parties, for example during election campaigns. Less so, at least in Slovak conditions, are young people given a chair to the decision table when talking about things that concern them and affect their lives (Baboš, Világi, 2022). We have not cultivated a culture of political participation in Slovakia since young age of citizens, our students feel unheard of and think that politicians have no interest in them. Just a few of them are doing volunteering activities and another big debate could be about their life motivation (Mihálik, 2015). However, all this is interconnected and related.

The internal and external migration of young people to a large extent influences several things – the level of education, health care but also the labor market as such. More often we have the opportunity to observe the most skilled young people are leaving to work or study abroad (Huijsmans, 2015; Czaika, Reinprecht, 2022; de Jong, Caarls, de Valk, 2022). This is also related to the level of democracy in the country, because young people are often frustrated with the levels and means of democratic governance (Mihálik, 2015) and when they feel that change is not possible, or it is too complex and demanding, they resign and go abroad seeking for a better life (Přivara, 2021).

In this context we decided to compare approaches of two slightly similar countries to their national youth policy. We chose Slovakia and Denmark, both countries approximately same size, similar amount of citizens – but a distinctly different approach to young people and students. Meanwhile one, Slovakia, is facing a brain drain, when lot of students or young individuals are leaving country for the better, the other one, Denmark, is very often the receiving country for the students and youngsters from abroad. So what Denmark does better and can it stand as a best practice model for other European countries?

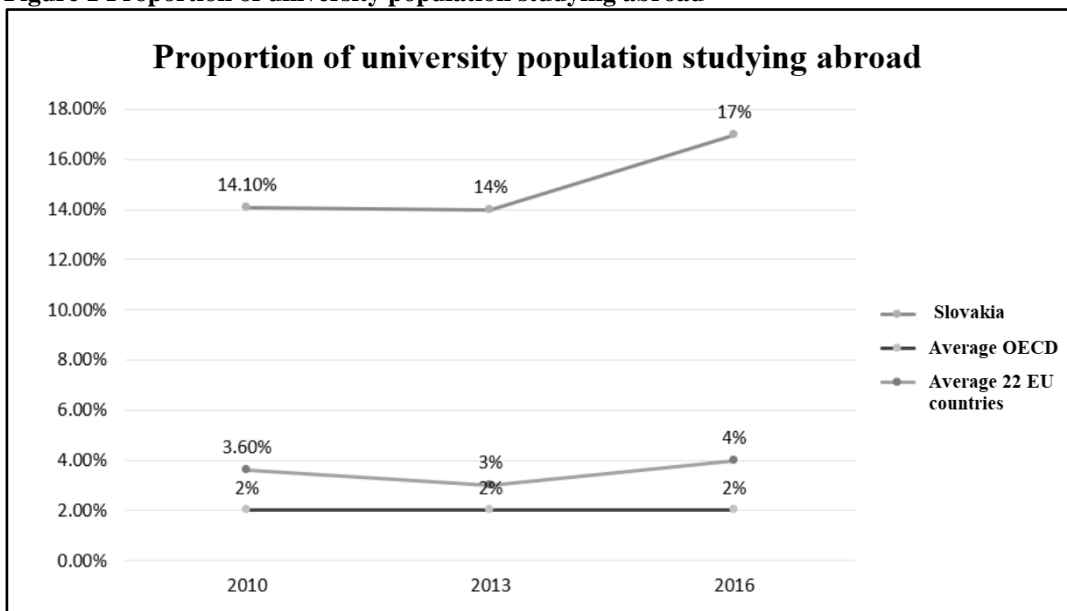
II. Brain Drain: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

The Slovak initiative "To dá rozum" (It makes sense) conducted research in the years 2017 to 2019, in which they tried to identify the most fundamental problems of education in Slovakia. One of them is, without debate, the emigration of skilled young people to study abroad (To dá rozum, 2019).

An increasing proportion of Slovak students apply to study abroad. Most of them go to universities in the Czech Republic. The reason for them is the expectation to obtain a better level of education. The results of the survey further indicate that students abroad receive a quality education, but also better access and conditions for study. Undergraduates abroad are developing more skills valued by employers. More than half of the human resources specialists expressed better preparedness of university graduates from abroad compared to university graduates in Slovakia, emphasizing better knowledge of English, independence in fulfilling tasks and motivation and desire to learn and work. However, only three out of ten students plan to return to Slovakia after graduation. These are motivated mainly by family reasons. The finding is that a large part of our university students do not consider returning back home in the future. They are discouraged in particular by societal problems such as high levels of corruption, low quality of public services and a lower standard of living than abroad. At the same time, they are not attracted by low salaries and are convinced that they will not find interesting job opportunities in Slovakia (To dá rozum, 2019).

As shown in the graph below, based on OECD data, the share of Slovaks studying abroad is significantly higher than the average of OECD countries but also 22 EU countries. And the trend is still growing.

Figure 1 Proportion of university population studying abroad



Source OECD, 2018.

This is not a modern problem for the Slovak Republic. We have been dealing with it more or less since the establishment of the independent republic, but the question of how to properly face it and keep young people living and working in Slovakia still has no answer. Especially after the fall of the Iron curtain, people started to feel free to travel, to move and to explore better options for living, compared to what their kin state offers.

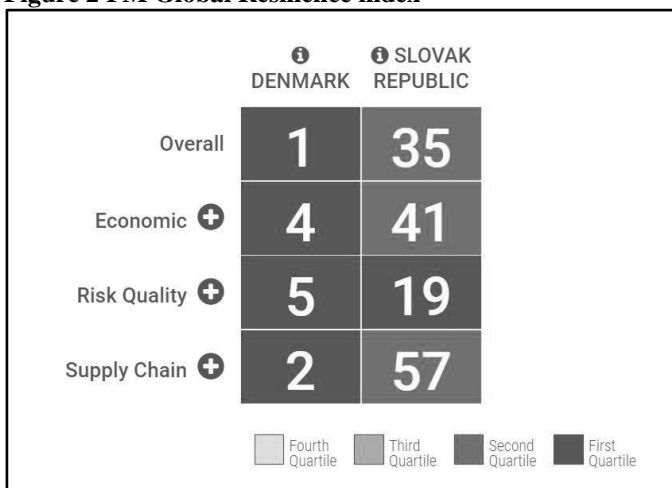
However, there are several types of policies known to keep young people or students in their home countries. Those policies are already working and are being applied in the world today. A complex of 3 types of strategies for brain drain reduction is quite well known. It consists of restrictive strategies, stimulating strategies and compensatory strategies. According to Mayer et al. (1997) the restrictive strategies are based on the principle of creating obstacles for the emigration of highly educated people. Instead, the stimulation strategy consists in offering special benefits and advantages for selected groups of highly educated and qualified people, with the aim of positively motivating them to return home, or to never leave. Compensatory strategies create space for compensating possible potential losses for the state that could occur due to the emigration of educated people, therefore they introduce, for example, special types of taxes and fees that should be paid either

by the educated people themselves or by their future host countries. As claimed by Kostelecká and collective (2008), the regions most affected by brain drain are also the poorest. Some of them cannot even apply for any form of motivational strategies because they simply have nothing to offer to potential returnees. However, one of the other types of support for national patriotism lies, for example, in the creation of active and connected diasporas, which can lead to the development of the home countries of emigrants from abroad.

One of the main reasons for the brain drain is the economic development of countries, which, for example, can also mean that for the same work in another country an individual will receive a salary many times higher than at home. In addition, however, Kostelecká et. al (2008) state that other important factors affecting the emigration of highly qualified and educated people have been identified, such as the quality of higher education, the amount of state support for the field of science and research, the level and form of functioning of scientific research, career offers and development for young scientists workers, level of equipment of scientific institutions and so far and so forth. It is clear that there are a lot of countries that have a major problem in retaining young people. Slovakia is definitely not the only one in Europe facing this kind of problem. It might seem that it is the small countries, like Slovakia, that face a similar problem. But that may not be entirely true. For the purposes of this article, we will try to compare two similarly large countries - Slovakia and Denmark. We chose them because of their different approach to youth, while Denmark is today an attractive country for young people, not only for its own, but also from abroad, Slovakia has been facing a significant brain drain for years. Our goal is therefore to compare the setting of policies and the level of participation of young people and find out what is the success of one country and the failure of another. Is there a proven way to work with youth so that young people feel involved in public life, feel that their voice has weight and want to remain active in their country? Can we consider the case of Denmark as a best practice for state work with youth?

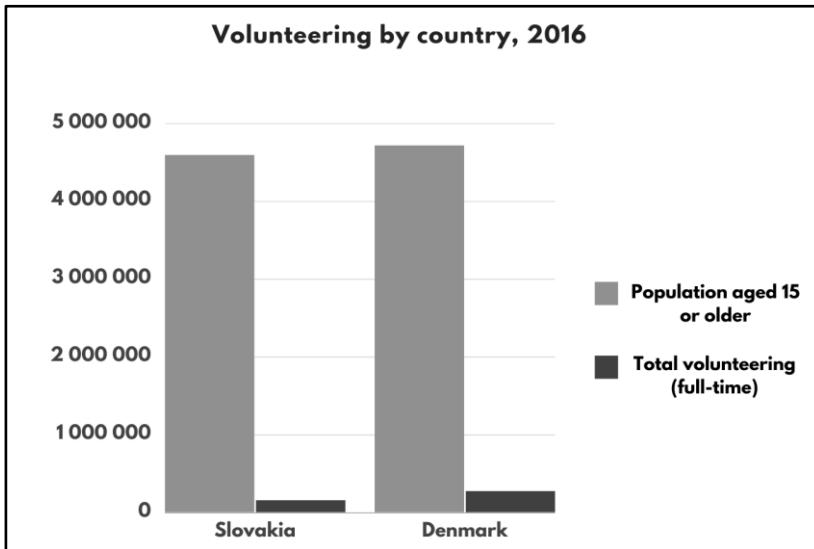
Data show that citizens who are more civically active are more resilient in crisis situations. This is proven, for example, by the regularly conducted Global resilience index, which is produced annually by FM Global. Current data from 2022 show a comparison of Denmark and Slovakia. While Denmark wins the entire ranking and leads in almost all groups, Slovakia is at 34th place among 130 countries from around the world examined for the needs of this ranking.

Figure 2 FM Global Resilience index



Source FM Global 2022

The rate of volunteering in individual countries can serve as additional data that could complement the mosaic of information. On the graph below, we can see that Denmark and Slovakia have approximately the same number of inhabitants aged 15 or older (Denmark - 4,714,000, Slovakia - 4,591,000), but on the other hand, Denmark has up to twice the number of full-time active volunteers (274,515) compared to Slovakia (156,739) if we take into account the population older than 15 years.

Figure 3 Volunteering by country, year 2016

Source UN Volunteers 2018

III. Denmark: a Role Model of Youth Policy Practice?

First, we will introduce individual aspects of the national youth policies of Denmark and Slovakia in order to point out the differences. According to the Global Youth Development Index, Denmark is the second best place in the world for young people. The index assesses the quality of cities according to specific areas: education, health, well-being, employment, opportunities and political and civic participation. This is despite the fact that Denmark has no specific ministry, no specific law on youth, or a national agency whose unique task is to manage the field of youth. Youth policy is instead an essential part of cross-ministerial policies, which are defined to support the development of Denmark as an open, enlightened and democratic welfare society. Reforms in the field of youth are thus coordinated within several ministries and are mainly cross-sectoral. The Danish model is characterized by a high level of social security (a wide range of social services and benefits) with a strong redistribution of income through the tax system (Study in Denmark, 2022).

In Denmark, the Danish Parliament (Folketinget) creates the general legal framework for the national youth policy, but in reality, the involvement of all levels in society – from national to local – is important, and that is to say (European Commission, 2022). Authorities at the national level as well as at the local level are equally responsible for the implementation of the national policy. It is understandable that individual policies should reflect the needs of the local community. The heterogeneity of social groups cannot be reflected through national policy, so the role of local authorities is very important.

Politicians are therefore authorized at the local level to define local strategies for youth, they should also be consistent with national legislation, government goals and annual management. Since municipalities set local taxes and collect them by themselves, they have the opportunity to invest in various services, political priorities and adapt their policies to local conditions. The basis of Danish youth policy (in addition to effective decentralization) is the endeavor to increase the participation of young people in society. National, local authorities and also many voluntary organizations are responsible for increasing participation, at the same time they receive considerable financial support from the government (Haarder, 2015).

The youth policy is also related to the Danish method of raising children, which is characterized by the provision of a safe environment, but especially with the possibilities of youth development and the provision of opportunities. Another important feature is the non-authoritative education system and especially the teaching of shared responsibility (which is very crucial in civil society). Denmark is aware of the power of an educated society, and therefore the creation of a "knowledge

based society" is the main priority in the field of youth – and Denmark adapts all other legislative and political steps according to this vision.

In addition to an educated society, the country emphasizes a strong economy, which can be ensured through full employment and other associated policies (housing policy, justice, social and integration policy) in order to prevent crime and social marginalization faced by young people (Haarder, 2015).

Other important topics that Danish youth policy focuses on according to Danish youth policy (2015):

- All young people must complete a certain type of education (the aim is to prepare young people for the labor market) - young people should either have a certain form of vocational education or a general, vocational upper secondary education. Those who completed vocational training had a high rate of employment;
- Responsibility for youth policy (from the implementation of policies to the education of young people) is borne by the whole society, including young people themselves, their parents, municipalities, from enrollment to school until its completion;
- The obligation of universities is to offer quality education and employers must provide places for practical teaching;
- Support programme for young people who need special support which is happening annually and it is free of charge (e.g. young people with multiple handicaps, autism, ADHD, or another physical or mental disabilities);
- Counseling activities in the educational system – which has legal basis in Act on guidance and it is bringing new types of counseling centers young people, concretely: 46 counseling centers for youth, whose goal is to help with the transition from compulsory school attendance to further education and 7 regional counseling centers that are aimed at counseling within higher education programs: both types of counseling activities are visible mainly at the local level;
- Various specificities and needs of young people are also taken into account during counseling activities, for example, in the case of more geographically remote areas, consultation activities can take place in public libraries);
- There is also a significant emphasis on training consultants;
- Regular monitoring of the youth sector (government and research centers).

How does Danish society manage to maintain and secure a democratic youth that is civically active?

We are listing few of the main findings according to Danish youth policy (2015):

- Participation of national organizations in various international youth organizations;
- Active involvement of youth within organizations (e.g. sport, leisure, politics, culture, religion, social and humanitarian activities) in which most young people participate;
- A strictly decentralized model of youth policy;
- Providing funding for non-governmental organizations (for example, the Danish Youth Council, which represents an umbrella organization for approximately 70 national youth organizations);
- Ensuring high informativeness – by creating a number of public websites and portals about education, training, careers, inspiration for students and teachers, parents and other stakeholders;
- Educating pupils about how democracies work;
- Pupils are led (already during education) to be responsible for their own learning;

- Learning to be participative during class – students are led to be non-authoritative, think critically and stand up for their rights and opinions;
- Learning about the functioning of representative democracies (students have the right to elect representatives from the teaching environment to look after their interests);
- The Danish model of education makes sure that young people are active in youth organizations, and if they are not, that they are at least somehow included in the system;
- The effort to equalize volunteer activities with other experiences within the framework of applying for a job in the public sector;
- National, local and school stakeholders pay attention to the participation of young people in volunteer activities already during their studies.

IV. Slovakia: Time to Catch the Train?

The main themes within the framework of youth policy in Slovakia can be seen especially in the Strategy of the SR for Youth for the years 2021-2028, which is based on other framework documents, namely the Concept of Work with Youth for the years 2016-2020, Action Plans for the Implementation of the Concept of Development of Work with youth and from the Act on the Support of Work with Youth (Z.z. 282/2008).

Among the most fundamental tasks that the strategy highlights is the need for intersectoral cooperation in the field of youth, which currently does not achieve a very high score. As part of the SGI measurement, it achieved a score of 5.3, which is behind the average of the OECD countries, which is at the level of 7.2. (OECD, 2020). The phenomenon of insufficient interdepartmental cooperation is also mentioned by the European Commission, which considers fragmentation in the design of individual strategies and departmentalization as significant obstacles to the implementation of strategies (European Commission, 2018).

Below we list the key areas covered by the Strategy:

- Emphasis on youth work and nonformal education;
- Develop measures within the framework of youth participation and a partnership approach;
- Support the establishment of student school councils;
- Promote global education;
- Develop key competences of youth, including critical thinking, support mobility and volunteering;
- Investigate and evaluate trends, factors, forms and consequences of social exclusion of youth;
- Health and healthy lifestyles of young people, including physical and mental health;
- Support education for active citizenship;
- To implement educational programs for young people about the possibilities and ways of active participation in events in the community, at the local, regional, national and international level;
- To provide young people with information about the possibilities of participation and activities that teach participation, about their rights, opportunities and services that are offered at the local, regional, national and international level (Strategy of Slovak republic, 2021).

Within the strategies (or in any of the documents) there are not specified how, or through which specific platforms, information will be provided. The reason why this is so, is that the vast majority of areas defined by the Strategy will be subject to implementation in the following years.

The situation is very similar when we are considering the implementation of a methodology to ensure the active participation of children and young people at the level of local and regional self-government (Strategy of the Slovak republic, 2022).

We can see the difference between Danish and Slovak youth policy in two perspectives. While the Danish policy has long been focused on interdepartmental cooperation, the Slovak one is very unsystematic and fragmented in this regard. The second perspective consists in the high degree of decentralization of Danish youth policy, while as we can see from the Slovak Strategy, the involvement of local governments will still be a matter of future implementation. The same situation is applicable in the following areas, while the date of their fulfillment is planned differently until 2023 or until 2028:

- Support the establishment and activity of municipal youth councils, youth parliaments, youth commissions or other participatory bodies at the level of local governments (implementation deadline until 2023);
- Financially support youth organizations, municipal youth councils, youth parliaments and other entities in the field of active involvement of young people at the local, regional, national and European level. In this case, we perceive a significant difference between Denmark and Slovakia. In Denmark, funding support for youth organizations is a long-term policy, in Slovakia, the mentioned mechanism is to be applied by 2028 at the latest. Currently, public resources are tied to a given calendar year and do not take into account the needs of the sector in connection with long-term financing. In terms of availability, there are also geographical differences, as not all municipalities allocate financial resources to support youth work;
- To map youth parliaments and municipal youth councils on the territory of the Slovak Republic. As we mentioned, the Youth Council which operates in Denmark is umbrella organization for other 70 youth councils, which ensures greater transparency and continuity. Fragmentation and lack of information about the existence and functioning of youth organizations causes chaos and moreover the impossibility of reflecting and representing the needs of young people. The mapping of youth organizations in Slovakia should be carried out by 2023;
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- Create programs and provide subsidies aimed at supporting leisure, interest, peer, volunteer and community activities of young people at individual levels, including programs for digital work with youth (fulfilment of the goal from 2022-2028).

Volunteering, which may appear to be almost mandatory in Denmark, is very negligible in Slovakia. Research results show that the majority of young people do not participate in volunteer activities. Volunteering, which is very important at the level of civil society, is not yet a society-wide routine, but rather an exceptional trend (Čavojská, 2020). The reason is insufficient capacity of volunteer centers and organizations. Very weak support of schools in terms of involving young people in volunteer activities is also identified in the strategy. On the basis of the Danish model, we can see that targeted support and education for volunteering in schools is important, therefore we conclude that the given systematic setting would also be appropriate in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. The Slovak strategy further names other mechanisms for increasing volunteering: support

for campaigns to promote domestic and international volunteering (implementation year 2023), involvement of disadvantaged youth groups in volunteering and abroad (implementation years 2022-2028), recognition of the skills and competences of young people which they obtained through volunteering (years of fulfillment 2022-2028, and implementation of educational activities for pedagogical and professional staff as well as other youth workers (years of fulfillment remain the same, namely from 2022 to 2028). In addition to individual areas, however, in Strategies (or other relevant documents) there is still a lack of a mechanism, or a method, of how the individual goals will be systematically implemented.

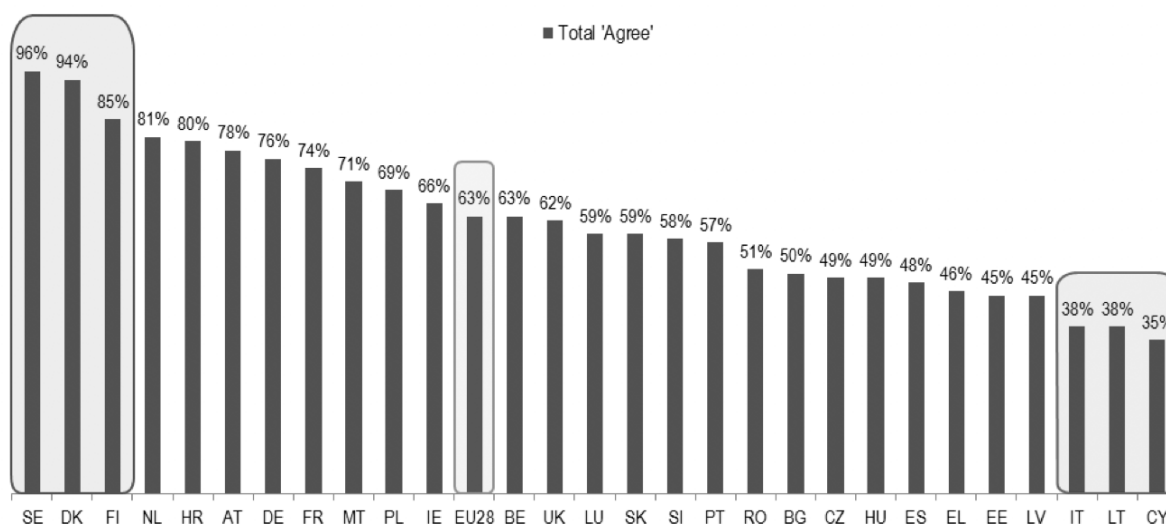
Employment, which is one of the dominant areas in relation to youth policy in Denmark, has ensured that the current unemployment rate in the country is at 10% according to Eurostat. The research was conducted among young people aged 15 to 34 (Eurostat, 2019). According to the latest EU Social survey, Denmark had youth unemployment at 8.8% during the COVID-19 crisis (EU Social survey, 2022). The same research recorded youth unemployment in Slovakia at a rate of 20.3%. Thus, 20.3% of the population of young people potentially experience social and economic challenges. Aware of this trend, the youth strategy will in the coming years increase youth awareness of educational opportunities that should make it easier for youth to find employment on the labour market. The aim is also to improve career guidance for young people. It is the policy of consultative (also regionally diversified) counseling that belongs to proven methods in the field of youth in Denmark (the year of implementation in Slovakia in 2024).

In connection with increasing employment and connecting young people with the labor market, the goal is also to implement programs for young people's business skills, including coaching (implementation year from 2022 to 2028). The competitiveness and higher qualification of young people can be supported through internships, therefore the goal of the strategy is the mapping of the internship system and the subsequent introduction of the institute of internships – this goal is to be fulfilled by 2026 (Strategy of the Slovak Republic, 2021).

V. Conclusion

In the individual parts of the article, we have presented the strategic areas that Denmark and Slovakia are focusing on. The quality of youth policy is also reflected in the overall satisfaction of young people in individual countries. And their overall satisfaction also affects their participation, young people are more participatory, whether politically or civically, if they feel that their voice is heard. Based on the figure below (Figure 4), we can see what young people from Slovakia and Denmark think about their voice being heard.

Figure 4 Opinion on the question: "my voice counts"



Source European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2015

In the picture, we can see that Denmark was in second place and the Slovak Republic in sixteenth place. Denmark achieves very good results in the field of youth, which is also reflected in the mentioned trend. A very likely reason is the effective setting of the youth policy. In our work, we have identified nine main areas that are implemented in the Danish youth work model and that we believe are also applicable in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. Through the introduction of the mentioned mechanisms, participation of young people, volunteering, but also readiness for the labor market and, last but not least, the level and quality of democracy could be increased. Ensuring better conditions for the youth can also potentially reduce the brain drain from the Slovak Republic, which is currently occurring due to the dissatisfaction of young people with overall social and economic conditions. We summarize the individual mechanisms:

- Ensuring a decentralized model of work with youth (involvement of all levels from national to local), including non-profit organizations, volunteer organizations and other institutions relevant to the field of youth;
- Greater intersectoral connection in the case of the implementation of the youth policy, which is currently unsystematic;
- Securing significant funding for mentioned organizations from the government;
- Consider the model of education in schools and lead pupils and students to a non-authoritative education system and earning about shared responsibility (at schools, for example, through learning about responsibility for "own learning");
- Emphasis on full employment based on the assumption that all young people must complete some form of education. The goal is to create a knowledge-based society and to increase the quality of life with the help of social security (for example, housing policy or social and integration policy);
- Create specialized advisory services for pupils and students;
- Effective inclusion of young people in youth organizations, by creating a specific scheme of youth organizations in Slovakia, so that an overview of the possibilities of participation is evident;
- Attention to participation in volunteer activities during studies;
- Greater connection between education and practice.

In ensuring and fulfilling all criteria, we perceive the necessity of including various interested groups from the government, individual ministries, but also educational institutions, non-profit and youth organizations, local authorities and other entities in society such as parents and young people themselves.

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