

Conference Report “The East is not Exit”, Košice, 28th November 2017

The conference “the East is not Exit” which was organized by the associations Progress Promotion and Apolis in the prestigious cultural hub of Košice’s Kulturpark, can be summed up with: ‘the East [of Slovakia] is waking up’. The event was an apolitical initiative whose organisers were attempting to raise awareness of the massive outflow of young people from this remote region (from the perspective of the capital) and make proposals for possible solutions which would halt this undesired trend. For this reason, the organisers of the conference invited well-renowned professionals from the fields of management, advertising, marketing, self-government, academia, as well as representatives of the third sector and the most important regional employers.

In the first part, the panellists – professor of the Economic Faculty of the Technical University of Košice Oto Hudec, political scientist from the Šafárik University in Košice Alexander Onufrák and consultant Tomáš Hellebrandt – talked about historical determinants and consequences of mass emigration from the region. They agreed that the current flow of emigration is alarming. They pointed out that a reform of the educational system is necessary, as well as support for local pride and the creation of strong urban centres in the region (Košice, Prešov) which would constitute attractive places with high living standards. At the same time they argued that East Slovakia could also profit from immigration from the neighbouring regions of Hungary, Poland, and especially from Ukraine.

In the second part, specialists from the branding and advertising industry, Simona Bubánová, Matej Martovič and Jakub Ptačin took part in the discussion. As none of them comes from East Slovakia, the discussion focused on the image not only of the East, but the whole of Slovakia which is lacking visible commercial successes worldwide. Such successes, for example, the Estonian telecommunication application Skype, are useful for making global comparisons, and despite their absence in Slovakia the panellists agreed that the country has all the necessary conditions for their development. The renowned designer Jakub Ptačin pointed out that East Slovakia is not the most underdeveloped region, but there are many other, far more deprived and remote ones which attract little attention, such as Gemer or Orava.

In the third part, Mišo Hudák (the association Východné pobrežie), Ľudmila Kolesárová (a manager of the organisation Dobrý anjel), Pavol Mirossay (the director of IT Valley) and Veronika Poklembová (Teach for Slovakia) talked about the prospects of young people getting employment in the East. The panellists referred to the many job offers for qualified positions and that young people should attempt to gain the relevant education and skills so that they can apply for such jobs. Many of the panellists called upon the students present in the conference hall not to wait for help from the governmental authorities (such as foreign investments, incentives, transport infrastructure), but instead actively participate in initiatives for improving the entrepreneurial environment in East Slovakia rather than going elsewhere; either home or abroad. The rector of the Technical University in Košice, Stanislav Kmeť said “Eastenders, only we can help ourselves”, which produced applause from the audience.

The main outputs of the conference “The East is not Exit” may have a long- lasting, positive impact on the mentality of the local population.

In contesting the recent stereotypical image of East Slovakia as an unproductive and unattractive region lacking in prospects, whose population only passively waits for a “help from the West”, regional entrepreneurial and intellectual elites are attempting to activate the local potential in ideas and innovations to promote the improvement of living standards. For that purpose, the organisers will in the future initiate a series of conferences, collect relevant data about migration processes and improvement of local living standards and, last but not least, produce an information campaign aimed at young people to prevent further emigration.

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