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## **SPEAK UP! AS AN EXAMPLE OF INNOVATIVE EDUCATION**

**Vanesa Opšénáková\***

Speak UP! is a new project of the Euro-Atlantic Centre, which in its two-phase form focuses on topics that have long been absent from secondary education, despite their importance and resonance in society. This year, the first edition of the project took place on the occasion of the European Year of Youth, focusing on the priority themes of the European Union that emerged from the Conference on the Future of Europe. The selected topics - hybrid threats and disinformation, the importance of the European Parliament elections, environmental protection, climate change, migration issues, and the current situation in Ukraine - were adapted to foster critical thinking and debating skills among secondary school students.

In the first phase of the project, five expert lectures were held in secondary schools across Slovakia. In addition to the usual presentations, the experts prepared exercises and discussion questions on the issues. At the end of each lecture, students were given the assignment to write an essay based on which they could proceed to the next phase of the project - the final conference.

The first part of the project started with a lecture at the Grammar School of J. C. Hronský in Vrútky, where the invitation was accepted by **Marie Stracenská**, a journalist and PR manager, who, in addition to an engaging presentation, also prepared creative activities on the topic "Media in the everyday life of young people". The students had the opportunity to try their hand at creating media content, paying particular attention to its relevance and professionalism. The expert introduced the students to basic information about news agencies and television journalism, while she also focused on statistics of spreading misinformation in Slovakia and discussed with the students what media they read and how to generally select between trustworthy and untrustworthy media.

**Alan Vagabov**, General State Counsellor at the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, presented the information space and the fight against hybrid

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threats and disinformation to the students of the Grammar School of Ivan Horváth in Bratislava. In the first phase of the lecture, the expert focused mainly on a comprehensive introduction of the issue, especially on the definition of key terms - hybrid threats or hybrid warfare. In the course of the lecture, the students learned in which spheres they may encounter this issue and what steps are being implemented as prevention against it by the Slovak Republic and the European Union.

The third lecture "EU priorities in the field of environmental protection" took place in Banská Bystrica at the Grammar School of J. G. Tajovský, prepared by **Radoslav Považan**, an expert on biodiversity and ecosystems from the Slovak Environmental Agency. The introduction of the lecture was in the spirit of an open discussion, the aim of which was to find out the majors of the students, based on which the expert focused mainly on the legal, political and international areas of the lecture topic. The lecture itself was divided into several parts, with the guest trying to present the topic from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view. In the end, the expert focused on the institutional side of the topic and provided the **pupils** with information about the European Green Deal, the European Environment Agency and last but not least his workplace - the Slovak Environmental Agency.

An important lecture on the current topic - climate change - was given to the students of the Jozef Lettrich Grammar School in Martin, where the analyst **Zuzana Jarošová** from the Carpathian Development Institute accepted the invitation. At the beginning of the lecture, the expert presented the scope of her work in the field of climate in general and specified the importance of this issue in light of climate change and global warming, emphasizing the importance of young people's participation in climate issues. The lecture was thematically specific, particularly on the issue of climate change in cities. She drew attention to the fact that climate change-related problems such as droughts and floods will occur more frequently in the future, which is why the second part of the lecture was devoted to possible solutions.

The first phase of the project concluded with a lecture at the Grammar School Konštantínova 2 in Prešov. The guest speaker was the manager of the Europe Direct Prešov Information Centre **Matúš Žac**. In the beginning, the expert opened a discussion on migration, where he and the secondary school students tried to include important and related concepts and their connection to practice. The second part of the lecture consisted of highlighting migration in different historical periods. Mr. **Žac** explained that the phenomenon of migration has always been

the most influenced by complex phenomena in human history, involving a multitude of actors, motivations and processes. At the end of the lecture, the migration of Ukrainians after the invasion of their territory by the Russian Federation was also highlighted.

On 24.11.2022 and 25.11.2022, the final conference of Speak UP! took place in the atmosphere and under the motto: "Speak up to the European Union!". Thirty young leaders from all over Slovakia met at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, where an interactive programme was prepared for them. The conference was symbolically opened by **Patricia Chnúriková**, President of the Euro-Atlantic Centre, followed by **Radovan Gura**, Director of the Slovak-French University Institute, and **Viera Uhlárová** from the Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia. In the beginning, it was important for the students to get to know each other better through ice-breaking activities, which was to ensure better and more effective cooperation. On the first day of the conference, the participants had the opportunity to enrich their knowledge at a lecture on "The importance of the European Parliament elections" with **Róbert Sermek**, Head of the European Parliament Office in Slovakia. Afterwards, they took part in an interactive workshop on migration, where **Matej Sapák**, Director of LEAF ACADEMY, taught them how to use modern learning platforms and incorporated statistics on the opinions of EU citizens on the issue in comparison with the statistics of a closed circle of participants. The first day also included a discussion on the current topic "Us and Ukraine", where **Vladimir Müller**, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, willingly answered all questions and discussed the various circumstances of the situation or refuted the misinformation that the war has brought with it. The accompanying programme was a night tour of the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising so that the young leaders would always remember our history. The day ended with a lecture "Young to Young", where **Michal Salini**, Slovak Youth Delegate to the United Nations, accepted the invitation and enriched the students' knowledge not only about the United Nations but also about the need to engage young people in the world.

The second day of the final conference was opened by **Iveta Hricová**, Director of the Department of General, Institutional and Personnel Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic. The first lecture of the day was entitled "How not to succumb to disinformation?" presented by **Peter Dubóczy**, Director of Infosecurity.sk, who also drew attention to the need to select information nowadays. The workshop "Am I European?" was prepared

in the form of a simulated plenary session of the Conference on the Future of Europe by **Zuzana Hozlárová**, delegate for the Slovak Republic at the Conference on the Future of Europe. The final point of the conference was a simulation of diplomatic negotiations, where the participants, representing the different European Union countries tried to reach a compromise on the topic "The European Union on the road to climate neutrality" under the expert guidance of **Rastislav Amrich**, Director of the Institute of Climate Neutrality. At the end of the event the participants received a certificates and prizes. The final conference Speak UP! was proof that the younger generation is interested in the issues facing the European Union and wants to say it out loud.