

Recruits in Slovenskí Branci: Reasons for joining

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Abstract

The present paper is part of a larger research project that looked at the reality of the paramilitary phenomenon in Eastern Europe (Slovakia), in particular at the influence of the so-called “refugee crisis” on the creation and maintenance of paramilitary groups in the country. This paper introduces the Slovenskí Branci (Slovak Recruits) unit as a case study of the motivations of recruits to engage in paramilitary activities. The recruits’ reasons, as well as the attraction of violence and the perceived need for social defense will be studied here. With respect to methodology, the analysis is conducted from the point of view of cultural criminology. The research question for this paper is “Why have recruits in Slovenskí Branci decided to join the paramilitary group?”. Overall, the reasons given by the recruits for participating in paramilitary activities can be divided into the need to defend the homeland against perceived invaders, based on nationalism and ontological insecurity, and the attractiveness of militarism for the people involved in the group.

Keywords: *paramilitarism; nation; ontological insecurity; recruit; vigilantism.*

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1. Introduction

*“When the people and the nation are in danger and the state is not willing to stand up whatsoever, someone must do something”*². It is a bright and warm day in Nitra, in the Nitra region, in Slovakia. I am with PS (23), a university student who decided to join Slovenskí Branci around 2015. We are waiting over a coffee for the other recruits to join us in the parking lot in front of the train station in order to get in the cars and go to Zirany, a smaller village where the trainings usually take place. PS explains that, for him and many other recruits, Slovenskí Branci is a family rather than just a hobby. They share some ideals and have a common goal: to protect their homeland against any invader or enemy, be it from inside or outside the country. Later on, during the training, NK, one of the main instructors in Slovenskí Branci, tells me that there are around 200 members in Slovenskí Branci throughout Slovakia. They all train according to Slovak military knowledge, and so share the same military discipline and tactics. In addition, every unit conducts what they call “eco-actions” in their towns or villages, according to the area’s needs, for example, cleaning the forest or picking up trash from rural areas.

Slovenskí Branci is part of the international paramilitarism scene. Ranging from Latvia to Hungary, paramilitary groups can be found throughout Eastern Europe. While in Poland paramilitary groups are supported and helped by the State, in order to be prepared for a hypothetical Russian advance into its territory, in countries like Czech Republic, Slovakia or Hungary, paramilitary groups are not openly supported. In the Slovak case, Slovenskí Branci has been characterized as a possible security threat to the country given certain aspects of its ideology.³ In this sense, Slovenskí Branci promotes and defends a pan-Slavic ideology, that is, an ideology that argues for the unification of

² PS, Slovenskí Branci recruit, interview. Zirany, May 2017.

³ Daniel Milo, senior researcher at Globsec and former advisor for the Slovak Ministry of Interior (interview, Bratislava, June 2017). Even though Slovenskí Branci might be a security threat, the organization is not considered to be as extremist and dangerous as the far-right party L’SNS (Popular Party Our Slovakia) or other organizations such as Vzdor Kysuce (Defense Kysuce).

Slavic countries in order to prevent them from losing their cultural heritage to Europe and the West. Therefore, Slovenský Branci needs to be framed in a globalized context. Notions such as multiculturalism- and migration-, feminism or LGBTQ rights are perceived as a threat to the Slovak traditional values. These are understood in terms of the traditional Christian family, traditional masculinities and a defense of the homeland. Personal motives, then, need to be framed within the larger context of the global political climate in the EU. The Slovak government is known for its reluctance to adhere to European policies in refugee distribution quotas. Besides, a certain anti-EU feeling is growing in Slovak society.⁴ Although the Slovak state has some euro-skeptic views coinciding with Slovenský Branci, the paramilitary group does not adhere to the state's discourse nor does the state support the paramilitary group in any respect.

Slovenský Branci, defined as a civic militia, became notorious in the Slovak media after their lessons in schools about military training and weapon handling went viral. Furthermore, Slovenský Branci carried out several vigilante activities, of which patrolling the refugee camp in Gabčíkovo, the city of Piešťany and a small rural area in Trnava are representative, insofar as those actions set out their will to control and guard Slovakian physical and symbolic borders.⁵ The organization was framed as just people running in the woods with fake weapons, but their actions suggest otherwise as Slovenský Branci is becoming visible to the general public.

2. Post-communist societies and security

At this point, it is necessary to draw on Slovakia's socio-cultural environment in order to give the reader some context to fully understand the socio-cultural environment

⁴ Interview Elena Gallova, social researcher at CVEK, Bratislava, June 2017.

⁵ Patrolling the refugee camp during the migration crisis in 2015 meant, for some academics, a political stand equivalent to saying "We will protect Slovakia because we do not trust these foreigners and could be dangerous" (interview Pavol Struhár, PhD on Political Science, Trenčín, May 2017).

of Slovenskí Branci. Slovakia's recent history is marked by the shift from a communist system to a (neo)-liberal economy and society in a few decades, which impacted the country at many levels. For the present topic, it is interesting to look at the role of the state in matters of security after this transition.

Kucera and Mareš (2015) write about the influence of the democratization process undergone by many countries in the East after the fall of Communism on vigilante tendencies and paramilitarism. From a dictatorial state, democratization meant the opening up of society and markets, which led to massive changes in security, policing, crime trends, etc. (Mareš, 2012; Kucera and Mareš, 2015). These authors suggest that in this process of opening up the state left some of its duties unfulfilled, for example, security. Their thesis is that the state enters into a security contract with its citizens by virtue of which, citizens abide by the rules and the state gets the monopoly of violence. Thus, when the state is not capable of honoring the contract, citizens tend to withdraw from it (Kucera and Mareš, 2015). Some of the reasons adduced are the under-preparation of the police force and the rise in crime. The researchers find that in a capitalistic market, opened up through democratization, the state needs to re-evaluate the expenditure on security, which used to be huge during the dictatorship. Moreover, post-Communist countries did see a rise in crime due to, authors argue (Kucera and Mareš, 2015), the loss of previously available social security. All of it could have contributed to the pervasive feeling within Slovenskí Branci of a failing state.

These findings are in accordance with Nivette (2016) and the present case. The conditions of statelessness and illegitimacy of present Slovak institutions do play a role in Slovenskí Branci. People engaged in Slovenskí Branci have not completely withdrawn from the security contract, even though they find it strongly contested due to their view of an inadequate police force. Therefore, the role that Slovenskí Branci aims to achieve within Slovak society is that of the protector of traditional Slovak values, since the state is no longer willing or able to defend the nation. Slovenskí Branci adopts an anti-EU



discourse, also held by the Slovak government with regards to certain EU policies, in which supranational entities are a danger as they are perceived to threaten national sovereignty.

3. Concepts of use

Even though the way paramilitary groups are created varies among countries (Mareš and Stojar, 2012), the reasons remain the same: to protect the country from perceived enemies. The research question for this paper is: *Why have recruits in Slovenskí Branci decided to join the paramilitary group?*

In order to answer this question, we first need to define two concepts, namely paramilitarism and ontological insecurity.

Firstly, paramilitary refers to a group which is not military, but is organized and operates as such; they can be home guard units, vigilante groups or militias (Liedekerke, 2016).

Vigilantism, as defined in Johnston (1996), features six characteristics. The first one is the premeditation of those involved. In this sense, groups formed spontaneously, such as -lynching mobs- do not fall under this category. In second place, groups must be formed by “private agencies” (Johnston, 1996), meaning autonomous citizens not bound by a job contract or similar. Thirdly, in the same vein, the vigilante group cannot be supported by the state. The fourth characteristic is the use or threatened use of force. The fifth characteristic is that vigilante groups must react to crime or social deviance. Although the concept of social deviance is rather vague, it is to be understood here as deviance from social rules in any given society, which may vary through time and space. Classical vigilantism reacts to crime, while neo-vigilantism is dedicated to social control of perceived risky groups, in order to reassert social values. Vigilantism arises when there



is a perception of the establishment being under attack (Johnston, 1996), meaning that the state or nation could be victim of a variety of processes that threaten their existence. Finally, vigilantism is concerned with security as a “social good”, paramount to the social identity. Following these concepts, Slovenskí Branci is a vigilante group due to the fact that it is an established and organized group, formed by autonomous citizens who voluntarily decided to become involved, and does not receive the support of the state. They are a reaction to social deviance in the sense that they perceive a lack of commitment of the Slovak people to their country and this is a social behavior to be “corrected”. Similarly, they perceive Slovakia to be under attack from several actors, and it is their role to defy them. Finally, Slovenskí Branci is concerned with security as a primordial factor, since they claim that Slovakia might be in danger due to migration and globalization processes. They respond to a perceived social desire “to do something” when the state is seen as failing to provide for the perceived needs of the people.

The concept of ontological insecurity also needs to be delimited here. Ontological insecurity is a rather complex term used to describe the main feature of the late modern world: the lack of certainty in our everyday lives. As Giddens wrote (1990), ontological insecurity is the loss of confidence in the continuity of one’s self-identity and shared norms and values. In such a context, it is necessary to search for the meaning of our own life (van Marle and Maruna, 2010), which can be done in a variety of ways. Liberalization of markets and the commodification of every aspect of life, as well as the labor market conditions (Young, 2003), have a deep impact on everyday lives. These changes create deep feelings of precariousness (van Marle and Maruna, 2010), which stem from the multiplicity of choices, understood as consumerism, and which challenge established beliefs and certainties. In section 5 it will become clear what role the notion of ontological (in)security plays.



4. Method

The research took place in Slovakia during the months of May and June 2017. It was conducted using ethnographic methods, namely semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation.

I was based in Bratislava during the fieldwork period, although participant observation was carried out in Nitra, 100 kilometers away from the capital, since Nitra has one of the strongest squads of Slovenskí Branci in terms of numbers. It was a non-continuous participant observation because the group usually meets every second Sunday in order to train. I was totally overt to the group in that every member of the squad knew that I was conducting research for a MA thesis in the Netherlands. I attended four training sessions of around six hours each. During those sessions I assumed the role of a participant observer, with the accent on observation instead of participation; I participated in exercises where no previous military training was needed, while I stayed aside and observed during those that needed such knowledge. Most of the time I walked with NK, the main instructor in Nitra, and talked to him, while observing the exercises of the recruits. However, I did take part in a shooting training, which allowed me to experience and understand the recruits' feelings while training, obtaining the so-called criminological *verstehen* (Ferrell, 1997). In between those training sessions I conducted the interviews, both with academic experts and recruits willing to talk to me.

The interviews were conducted in English, in Bratislava, Trenčín, region of Trnava (Central Slovakia), and Brno (Czech Republic), where I met with academic experts in the field. They were semi-structured in-depth interviews. After nine interviews, saturation point was reached. Interviews were held with three of the six main instructors of Slovenskí Branci, four academic experts and two recruits. Moreover, several informal

conversations were held with recruits during trainings.⁶ Topic lists included slightly different questions according to the respondents' background and situation, in order to obtain the best quality information from them. At the end of the interviews there was an open question in case the respondents wanted to add something else. All the interviews were recorded with the oral consent of the interviewee.

Data from interviews was analyzed through content analysis, following Davies, Francis and Jupp (2011). Every interview was transcribed and coded in order to be analyzed. Fieldwork notes were also coded. The codification was done in two steps. The first, deductive, was done with codes and concepts coming from within the data, emerging from it as the discourse develops. The second step, inductive, consisted of coding with concepts from the theories used.

All the data from participant observation and interviews was analyzed with NVivo 11. This allowed for a clear codification and created networks and correlations between the codes.

Access to the group was firstly obtained through Facebook. I sent a message on the group's Facebook site and initiated a conversation with NK, the main instructor in Slovenskí Branci. I was rapidly accepted into the group and, once on the ground, I got to talk to almost every member of the Nitra squad. This was possible thanks to the so-called "paradox of the outsider". Being an outsider may be both an advantage and a disadvantage to enter a social group. In spite of not speaking Slovak and not being familiar with Slovak culture at that point and because I was an outsider, the group appeared open and willing to share their stories with me, since I was unbiased and not driven by information in the Slovak media. In the same vein, I was perceived as a member of a larger community to which recruits could relate, insofar as I am Western European, white and middle-class.

⁶ Interviewees were asked whether their names could appear in the present paper and they all agreed but one, who prefers to remain anonymous. However, real names have been changed in order to protect their privacy.



Therefore, since I was not perceived as an enemy in terms of culture nor was I biased because I am not Slovak, I was able to access the group quite easily. Besides, masculinities also played a role in the acceptance of the group. Being a man made my access easier, insofar as I was perceived as relatable by the members of the unit; apart from ethnicity, the only thing in common to members of the Nitra squad is gender. Except for two women, the squad is solely composed of white men.⁷ Trust was easily built during the research, both during the trainings and after them, as well as on some other occasions over drinks with some recruits. It might be the case, as Vincenová explained (interview, PhD researcher, May 2017), that for women it would be more difficult to address the group, since they might have to prove themselves more often than men.

5. Reasons for becoming involved with a paramilitary group: Nation, glory and ultimate meaning

“What is the age profile? How long do these people stay? What is the turnover? So, in a way, as far as I know, it’s a kind of revolving door, you know. You have people entering, some of them stay for longer period of time, but mostly they’ll leave after, say, they reach certain age, change their minds” (interview Daniel Milo, expert on policy making at GLOBSEC, June 2017).

There has been little academic discussion about the people involved in Slovenskí Branci, leaving aside the discussion on the extremist elements present in the beginning of the group:

“He [NK] also explains the anecdote he told the conscripts before, about a former member of the unit who went to Ukraine to fight.

⁷ This was the case for the fieldwork period: May and June 2017.



Apparently, this ex-member went to fight on the Ukrainian side but he was rejected, so he started to fight for the pro-Russian bloc. NK means with this that some extreme elements may get into the organization, but they are just that, elements that have no relation with the group's ideology.” (Fieldwork notes, Zirany, June 2017)⁸

“Some members would not tell the truth about their motivation to join, which could mean that they want to fight in Ukraine or the Middle East. Hence, Slovenskí Branci needs to be really careful when choosing members, since we do not want to have these elements among us.” (interview NK, Slovenskí Branci instructor, Bratislava, June 2017).

Academic literature on paramilitarism in Eastern Europe has not paid much attention to the question of which individuals engage in vigilante activities or their motivations and reasons for joining.⁹ Although recruits are mostly young people, they are rather serious in their training and patrolling activities, as well as regarding the reasons behind them. Data from fieldwork suggest that there are different kinds of people involved in Slovenskí Branci. It is necessary to make a distinction here between people directly and non-directly involved, the latter commonly called ‘sympathizers’.

People directly involved, recruits, are usually young people between 15 and 35 years old.¹⁰ They all have very different backgrounds, ranging from students to police officers, ex-military members, firemen or businessmen. Recruits have in common their

⁸ The presence of such “extremist elements”, as part of far-right movements, who were present in the beginning of the group is acknowledged. They were expelled from the group after a few months, once it was clear that they did not have the same objectives, according to the founder of Slovenskí Branci. (PS, instructor and founder of Slovenskí Branci, interview, June 2017).

⁹ There is research conducted on paramilitarism in Eastern Europe (Meseznikov & Bránik, 2017; Vincenová, 2015), but not from within as to understand individual realities and perceptions.

¹⁰ The minimum age to join Slovenskí Branci is 15 years old.

love for their country and some ideological aspects found in the group's system of ideas and views:

“On our way back from the shooting range I talk to the youngest recruit; he is 15 and joined Slovenskí Branci 5 months ago, about December. He joined because “he likes the military and to be in nature”. Notwithstanding the short time he has been in the unit, he says that the Slovak army is not effective enough and not as big as it used to be; he has, therefore, not considered joining the professional army” (Fieldwork notes, Žirany, 2017).

Drawing from terrorism literature, Cottee and Hayward's work on “*Terrorist emotives*” (2011) might shed light on the reasons for becoming involved with paramilitarism and paramilitary groups. It is necessary to not conflate terrorism and militarism: although their means -violence- might appear to be similar, their ends and methods vary greatly, so both phenomena cannot be strictly compared. On the one hand, terrorism is defined, very simply, as any violent act aiming to disrupt any given social order, affecting the distribution of power and creating a state of panic in the general population (Reinares, 2005). In order for an act to be considered terrorist, it is necessary that there is a conflict between asymmetric structures, in which the state is the powerful one, while the terrorist group remains powerless yet violent. On the other hand, militarism is a much broader concept, insofar as it refers to the weight of the military in any given society (Soto, 1997).

In their work “*Terrorist emotives*”, Cottee and Hayward (2011) reflect on explanations for terrorism through the feelings that such acts cause the terrorists to experience. Following Katz's seductions of crime (1988), terrorists' feelings are a driver for their behavior, since those feelings allow them to make sense of their lives. Terrorism is a way to live less ordinary lives, which is as important a reason as the political one that



drives the actions (Cottee and Hayward, 2011). Thus, there are three main categories of *emotives* that drive terrorists to engage with such action: desire for excitement, desire for ultimate meaning and desire for glory. Only the two first concepts are of use for the present research, since Slovenskí Branci cannot be categorized as a terrorist group. In that sense and taking into account all the differences between terrorist groups and Slovenskí Branci, desire for excitement and ultimate meaning were found during the present research.

5.1. *Enjoyment of military and belonging*

The most common motivations for joining Slovenskí Branci can be categorized in two ways. The first category referred to by recruits is the enjoyment of the military and the activities undertaken. Recruits share a taste for the military; uniforms and weapons make them feel stronger or, in Kraska's terms (1996), show that we cannot escape the "habitus of violence" (Kraska, 1996:423). In other terms, the desire for excitement (Cottee and Hayward, 2011) has an important role. The motivation for involvement in this specific case is the appeal of violence itself. Violence makes us face our own humanity in the sense that we get to see real flesh and blood, going beyond the screen where we usually experience such sensations (Cottee and Hayward, 2011). This is also seen in a different setting, such as the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan. The documentary with the same name (Junger, 2014) and the previous film, *Restrepo* (Junger, 2010), shed light on the experience of war for the American soldiers that lived and fought in that valley, which is also the case for the recruits when carrying out shooting training:¹¹

¹¹ I experienced and analyzed the situation following auto-ethnography methods. For a detailed reading on experiencing militarism, see Kraska (1996). On auto-ethnography, see Ellis et al. (2011). I shall not go into detail here due to space constraints.

“The recruits tell me that, while shooting, they feel the adrenaline and the stress pressuring them. They have to focus on the task because they do not want anyone to be hurt.” (Fieldwork notes, Zirany, June 2017)

Although in Slovenskí Branci there is no real exercise of violence, the experience is still real due to the attached meaning of the trainings:

“At first sight they might look like a group of friends doing role play, like other groups who dress up in medieval customs and fight each other with fake weapons. However, there is a paramount difference here; all those exercises are aimed to be executed in real life, they are preparing themselves for real combat situations.” (Fieldwork notes, Zirany, June 2017).

It is not a game for them, it is a matter of defending their land. Moreover, and in relation to the taste for outdoor sports, being in Slovenskí Branci allows the recruits to escape their daily routines.

Apart from that, there is a feeling of belonging to the group, since being part of Slovenskí Branci means being part of a greater organization, a group of people with the same feelings and values:

“For him [recruit] Slovenskí Branci is a group of friends with the same ideas and perceptions; he says he is shy and non-conforming with the mainstream ‘mindset’, so when he first heard of the group via a friend, he decided to give it a try.” (Fieldwork notes, Zirany, May 2017)

In Young’s terms (1999), we need to search for ontological security and to regain control over our lives; we need to believe that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. This regaining of control within ontologically insecure worlds can be achieved through crime (Hayward, 2002), once anger due to economic insecurity and relative

deprivation has been added to the equation (Young, 2003). It is posited here that this can also be achieved through “deviant activities”, inasmuch as they represent a danger to the state. This could be the case of Slovenskí Branci: ¹²

“When asked about the reasons that led to the foundation of Slovenskí Branci, he [NK] believes that RK was angry at his generation because they [men] give themselves to decadency and immorality; they do not have respect for the elderly, guys dress up as ‘bisexuals’ and they ‘even fuck with each other, the guys’, says with face of disgust.” (Fieldwork notes, Zirany, June 2017).

By joining Slovenskí Branci, the recruits may feel that they have some kind of control over their lives and that they are “fighting for the right cause” (Cottee and Hayward, 2011) when they oppose other ways of understanding sexuality, morality or nationalism, all of which contradict the ideas of people in Slovenskí Branci:

“In a way, we [Slovenskí Branci] exist in order to provide the right morality to all those who train with us, so the more people we train, the better for the country” (Fieldwork notes, Zirany, June 2017)

At the same time, they are part of an organization that fulfills an essential task for individuals (van Marle and Maruna, 2010): defending culture as a means to manage the terror that stems from the ontological insecurity we are forced to face.

5.2. Nationalism and ultimate meaning

The second category of motivations refers to the love for the country and its traditions. Young (2003) posits that globalization, an integral part of a late modern

¹² Even though there are not as many new recruits per day as the last year, the number of people involved is still growing (personal communication NK, instructor in Slovenskí Branci).

society, leads to a diminishing of cultural differences, which has raised discontent among nations. Nations have been manufactured as cohesive communities that share values, language or traditions (Anderson, 2006). The diminishing of cultural differences might be a stress factor, leading to an identity crisis within the nation. Besides, as a taken-for-granted social institution, the nation inspires self-sacrificing love and is able, therefore, to ask for the sacrifice of the individuals in order to protect it. Here, sacrificing one's life for the nation, even if in symbolic terms as is the case in Slovenskí Branci, inasmuch as they are preparing themselves for war, is an act to protect one's culture, to defend those who likewise believe that culture gives us meaning, casting off the doubts about one's self-identity.¹³

“Young people like me are not led to any feeling of patriotism from the state or any kind of connection with the state. In Slovakia there's this new attitude spreading, and I believe it's not just in Slovakia, but also in EU and the rest of the world; the attitude of egocentrism, where young people don't really care about their country, they don't care about where they're coming from and they just want to get as much money as possible and kind of take care of themselves, rather than care for what's gonna happen with the country.” (interview RK, Slovenskí Branci founder, Bratislava, June 2017).

RK posited in the interview that Slovenskí Branci is needed in Slovakia to lead the youth towards the nation and to care for the country, which has been abandoned because of a number of factors, such as, consumerism, multiculturalism and migration.

¹³ Furthermore, following Gerwarth and Horne (2011), nationalist paramilitarism was used as a means to reclaim the land by peasants in France and other countries after the Great War. Based on local defense and patriotism, the same concept used by Slovenskí Branci, paramilitarism becomes a way to claim possession of land that might have been impaired by the changing conditions of society. Excluding the differences between society after the First World War and the late modern society of the XXI century, paramilitarism seems to be a response to turbulent epochs.



Therefore, the nation, understood in the sense of traditional Slovak values, needs to be protected.

This paramount task of defense of the land can be framed in the desire for ultimate meaning of Cottee and Hayward (2011). Just as terrorism becomes a source of identity for members of terrorist groups, since they adopt and construct their own image, the same happens for recruits in a paramilitary group. Nationalism is, then, a big narrative to understand their place in the world. When fighting to defend the sacred and their land, terrorists are part of something greater than themselves. Moreover, terrorists also fight for their comrades, not only due to political reasons. Thus, Slovenskí Branci, as an organization, provides its members with the ultimate purpose of defending the nation. Nationalism becomes the ultimate meaning for the recruits, who believe that Slovakia needs to be defended from its enemies. Nationalism becomes a great narrative (Anderson, 2006), which provides people with life meaning and purpose. However, such a purpose can only be achieved against an enemy that needs to be dealt with.

Thirdly, the politicization of the army is referred to by some recruits as making them refuse to join the professional army. This politicization means the use of the national army to pursue NATO goals, mainly. The nation, as a super-self, worthy of dying for, cannot be subordinated to other organizations:

“NC entered Slovenskí Branci because of family tradition, as he puts it; his father fought in Serbia and he has always liked the military, although he does not want to join the army because he thinks it is not what it should be. This same thought is shared by another recruit, who likes the military and, therefore, joined Slovenskí Branci, but feels that the army is too politicized.” (Fieldwork notes, Zirany, May 2017).

“And then, of course, the military, or regular Slovak army was ended or finished and we become as a member of the NATO (...), so we got

professional army; it counts nowadays, maybe, somewhere around 10.000 or 11.000 soldiers, but I think 3.000 are really ready for some action. (...) The others, you know, kitchen, administration. And we recognize that this is not good because, of course, our system of seal defense... not only from the military point of view, but the point of view of civilians. It's gradually decayed and nowadays it's completely missing” (AP, Slovenskí Branci instructor, interview, Bratislava, June 2017).

This third motive is linked to the fourth and most important: distrust in the government. This is a widespread feeling in Slovak society due to corruption scandals in the national government.¹⁴ Recruits refer to this problem in terms of “we need to do something if the government does not”.¹⁵

“In an informal conversation with RC [recruit] some days before this training, he told me that most youths in Slovakia do not feel anything for the country because they do not trust the government. For people in SB [Slovenskí Branci] this is slightly different: they do not fully trust the government, but they are loyal to the nation” (Fieldwork notes, Zirany, June 2017).

Rosenbaum and Sedeberg (1974) stated that vigilantism is more likely to appear where the state is seen as tied up by its own rules, a state of affairs Nivette (2016) referred to as conditions of perceived “statelessness”. Recruits believe that the state is not capable of dealing with all the problems of the people and the state itself so, in order to defend the system, they may have to step in and “do something”. Although Slovakia cannot be

¹⁴ Elena Gallova. Expert on migration policies and social researcher in Slovakia at CVEK (Center for Research on Ethnicity and Culture). Interview, Bratislava, July 2017.

¹⁵ Fieldwork notes, Zirany, May 2017.

considered as a failed state following international standards, for paramilitary groups like Slovenskí Branci, the perception of a failing state is enough.

“He [NK, instructor] says that their [Slovenskí Branci’s] main aim is to operate like the National Guard does in the US; they aim to be deployed whenever the state, the police or another state body requires them” (Fieldwork notes, Zirany, June 2017).

The absence of previous social institutions and metanarratives, caused by the transition to capitalism, has left national identity in a void. In this void, Slovakia could be considered a failed state by the recruits, who feel forced to take action for their country.

In fifth and last place, linked to the concept of local patriotism, the protection of the country and family is an important reason to join. Every recruit must be ready to protect their relatives and friends, as well as their neighborhood and city. The following quote is from the interview with AP, one of the main instructors of Slovenskí Branci:

“I live close to Bratislava and I know lot of people. So, let’s say, literally saying, this is my universe; I got kids here, family here, my grandparents, also wife, wife’s grandparents. We know each other. In case that there will be any attack or any conflict, I will professionally defend, you know, myself, my family, my home, my house, my village, my local area.” (interview AP, Slovenskí Branci instructor, Bratislava, June 2017).

Recruits may also teach some skills to those close to them in order to show them how to protect themselves, as they perceive a potential threat to their way of life in the elements of multiculturalism:

“I teach my wife to handle weapons because it’s useful. There’s fear of Muslims because we live in a cross-house, typical Slovak, and Muslims

don't like crosses. And with all the refugees going on... they could attack us" (interview AP, Slovenský Branci instructor, Bratislava, June 2017).

Gerwarth and Horne (2011) describe something similar to this concept of local patriotism in post-Revolutionary Russia in 1918. In both, Bolshevik and whites, paramilitary groups were formed to defend the local areas from the threats of the other side. This was also documented in France (Gerwarth and Horne, 2011) in the same period, where anti-Communist groups were created. Moreover, this has also been studied in Nigeria (Pratten, 2008), where vigilante activities have added meaning for young men who participate in the night shifts. It follows from this analysis, then, that preoccupation for "the local", the neighborhood or village is a constant in vigilantism.¹⁶

6. Discussion and conclusions

Vigilantism, linked to paramilitary groups, seems to have been useful in convulsive times. As seen, from France to Russia, ranging through America, Africa and Eastern Europe, paramilitary groups have sprung up in order to combat a perceived threat against the social group or social order. In Slovakia, people in Slovenský Branci believe that the nation is endangered due to a number of factors, from consumerism to the breakdown of traditional values caused by multiculturalism. Therefore, in conditions of perceived statelessness and unwillingness of the state to tackle those perceived social problems, Slovenský Branci has a role to play. Whether Slovakia is really in danger of losing its traditional values, whatever they might be, is not relevant for this study. What

¹⁶ As Zizumbo-Colunga (2010) explains in the case of Mexico, an important factor for this to happen is that people in the village or surroundings protected by the vigilante group have to think likewise, in order for the group to be totally accepted and endorsed. This has also been explored by several authors in different settings, for example, Gitlitz and Rojas (1983) in Perú; Abrahams (1987) in Tanzania; Doty (2007) in USA; Martin (2012) in South Africa.

matters is that people in Slovenskí Branci are ready to fight if they need to. Notably, there has not yet been any reported violence from the group.

In the context of a late-modern society, self and group identities become hard to define. Hence, initiatives like Slovenskí Branci appear useful to those who need reassurance in their daily lives. These groups become something to hold onto when there is nothing settled and security is at stake. Slovenskí Branci has been defined as a threat due to their far-right-wing discourse and their vigilantism on disadvantaged social groups like migrants or Roma people. Therefore, although there has not been any real violence carried out by the group, they still ought to be considered when talking about the far-right in Europe.

7. Epilogue

It is the first training session I attend, a bright sunny day. It has already been a long day of marching and exercises in the woods, digging trenches and learning how to protect people against chemical and biological weapons. We get to the final exercise after a short walk; a road block and car search. This exercise is the last and the conscripts are tired, so they mess around with the car until NK and his second reprimand the group and call to order. Three kids descend the road close to us by bike and shout “Allahu akbar” when one of them falls. Rapidly, some of the recruits go to assist them and in the end the kids stay with the group until the session finishes because they are curious about the guns and the exercises. When we finish, the kids leave on their bikes with stickers of Slovenskí Branci, their curiosity satisfied, and playing a cheerful soldier game. The seed of the military and protection of the nation has been planted; whether it flourishes or not depends on the kids, their families and the evolution of the country itself.



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