



ORIGINAL PAPER

## Perception of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians in Slovakia: Are They Still Seen Similar?

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### Abstract

Historically, due to the relative cultural and linguistic similarities, the people of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus were seen as rather similar to each other or even the same. The epoch of the Soviet Union made the differences between those nations even more blurred (the same political and social system, usage of the Russian language, Soviet propaganda, etc.). The aim of the present research was to find out what are the common opinions and beliefs regarding Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians among two different generations of Slovaks: university students (aged 18-28) and elderly adults (aged 70 and older), grown in different historical contexts: communism and post-communism. The research was particularly focused on the issue, whether they see any differences between Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians nowadays, many years after the fall of communism, and whether the collective image of “Soviets” or “Russians” is still alive. The case of Slovakia was chosen because of its predominantly positive historical attitudes towards Russia. For Slovaks, the early image of Russia was shaped by the Pan-Slavism ideology, which suggested the unity of the all Slavs based on their common origin. That made the case of Slovakia different from the other Central-European states, e.g. Poland, or Lithuania, which mainly saw Russia as the main threat to their national and political independence throughout the history. Secondary data analysis and focus group interviews were applied as the research methods. Six focus group interviews were conducted in Bratislava (three with elderly adults and three with university students). The results of the research show certain differences in the perception of the target nations by different age groups. Historical heritage and historical memories were much more important for the older generation of Slovaks; the young participants more often build their opinion on the present social, political, and economic situation of those states.

**Keywords:** *Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Slovaks, attitudes, perception*

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### Division of Europe on *East* and *West*

There are so many ways of how people and even the whole nations can be labeled based on the characteristics prescribed to them. For instance, Europe is often divided on “old” and “new”, “poor” and “rich”, “hard-working” and “lazy”. The formation of the images of the others – people, who, by any criteria differ from *us*, is hardly ever based on pure facts or experience with them. As it was first defined by Lippmann, there are “mental images” or “pictures in our head” which help to simplify the ambiguous information coming from the outside environment:

*“For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture”* (Lippmann, 1946: chapter VI).

Speaking about contemporary Europe, one of the best examples of such generalization could be found in its symbolic division on *East* and *West*. In fact, there is no clear definition of it, as different approaches apply various geographical, political, cultural, socioeconomic, and other criteria. However, very often the level of socioeconomic development of the state becomes decisive when it comes to its association with *East* or *West*. In general, there is an image of a rich and well-developed *West* and poor, less developed *East*. While the term *West* or *Western Europe* is associated with the modern structures of the EU, NATO, and high level of economic, political, and cultural development, the term *East* or *Eastern Europe* is connected with an Eastern Block, former Soviet Union, and a rather low level of achievements in all spheres of life. So called “new EU states” (e.g. Czech, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary), which have been the satellite states of the USSR in the past, nowadays are fully integrated into European political and economic structures. In general, their definition of *East* and *West* of Europe depends on the geographical location of the own state. For the majority of the Central-Eastern European states, the own country is seen as the *center of Europe*, while the *East* starts just behind its Eastern border. Thus, Czech Republic is the *center of Europe* for Czechs, but might be seen as an *East* for Germans; Slovakia is a *Central Europe* for Slovaks but an *East* for Czechs; Poles see the real *Eastern Europe* starting just behind their Eastern border (Ukraine and Belarus), while for Germans or Czechs Poland itself is an *East*.

In spite of the fact that Slovakia has no immediate borders with Russia or Belarus and just a tiny border with Ukraine, situated very far from Bratislava (the capital), the case of Slovak attitudes towards its Eastern neighbours is interesting and important for several reasons: 1) predominantly positive historical image of Russians in Slovak national discourse (based on Pan-Slavism ideology); 2) negative experience of Slovaks with Russians during the twentieth century (First and Second World War, Soviet domination over Czechoslovakia); and 3) a lack of systematic previous research studies in Slovakia focused on the perception of the other nations (Czechoslovak and Slovak attitudes are not the same).

### Special role of Russia in Slovak history

The term *historical memory*, or *collective memory* is understood as the shared memories held by some community or group about its past (Hunt, 2010: 97). Historical memory plays a very important role in both the national identity and the perception of the other nations. It is interconnected with social and political identities of people and could be reshaped according to the needs of the current situation. Thus, historical memory is not

fixed, but rather undergo gradual changes, depending on the historical and political necessity (Siddi, 2012: 80). The different nature of historical relations with Russia, especially during and after the Second World War, created different images of Russians in Western, Central, and Eastern European states (Siddi, 2010: 96).

Slovakia constitutes an example of rather favorable historical attitudes towards Russia and Russians, which played an important role in the Slovak national discourse. It was based on the ideas of *Pan-Slavism ideology*, presented in the nineteenth century by such leaders of the Slovak national revival as Ľudovít Štúr, Ján Kollár, Pavel Jozef Šafárik, and others. *Pan-Slavism ideology* suggested the unity of all Slavs in order to protect themselves from the domination of non-Slavic hostile neighbors (mainly Germans and Hungarians). The common Slavic roots, including cultural and linguistic similarities, constituted the background for predominantly positive historical attitudes of Slovaks towards Russians (Štúr, 1995: 173; Ivantyšinová, 2011: 7). According to the *Pan-Slavism ideology*, Russia had a special role among the other Slavic states:

*“If the Slavs are not allowed to organize themselves and to develop in the federal states under Austria, there is only one possibility left, which has a future. Tell me frankly, brothers, was it not Russia, lighting our sad past like a lighthouse in the dark night of our life?”* (Štúr, 1995: 150, own translation of original text).

Moreover, it blamed anti-Russian tendencies of the other Slavic nations, for instance Poles and Czechs. Some ideas of the *Pan-Slavism ideology*, presented in the book “Slovanstvo a svet budúcnosti” by Ľudovít Štúr in the beginning of the nineteenth century remain relatively popular in Slovak national discourse till nowadays. Thus, Slovakia constitutes rather an exception compared to the other Central-European states, as it did not perceive Russia as the main oppressor for the national independence throughout the history. In Poland, for instance, the dominant role of Russians constituted the background for generally negative perception of Russians in Polish national discourse (Nowak, 1997: par I; Zarycki, 2004: 595; Levintova, 2010: 1339; CBOS, 2015: 11).

However, the October revolution in Russia in 1917 which dismantled the Tsarist regime and led to the creation of the Communist government became the starting point for the change of the traditional Russophile attitudes of Slovaks towards more negative meaning. The Soviet Russia was seen in a completely different way:

*“Russia is big, powerful, and rich, but there is no order in it. Some innate characteristics of Russian men, adverse historical conditions, and at the moreover times the lack of people’s education - all that intercepted the cultural development of Russia - Russia lagged behind the other states”* (Gacek, 1936: 81, own translation of original text).

Even though the fact of liberation of the majority of Slovak territories by the Soviet Army was portrayed as a positive element of Slovak-Russian relations, the actual attitudes towards Russia and Russians was definitely much more negative than before. During the times of the Soviet domination in Czechoslovakia, attitudes towards Russians were, to a high extent, limited to the attitudes towards the political system of the Soviet Union. However, even after the aversive development of Czechoslovak-Russian political relations, Russian culture remained relatively popular and was evaluated positively. Orientation towards the West after the Velvet revolution in 1989 weakened the general interest in Russia, including culture, language, and other spheres of life. However, analysis of the Slovak printed mass-media from the beginning of the 90<sup>th</sup> showed rather favorable

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attitudes towards Russian culture, at least among the elder generation of Slovaks (Ivantyšinová, 2011: 8).

After the break of the Soviet Union, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were often seen as very similar to each other or even the same nations. However, historically, only Russia was a significant actor for Slovak national discourse. The other Eastern European states, including Ukraine or Belarus, were not well-known either significant for national or political development of the Slovak lands. Ukraine, instead of its geographical and cultural proximity to Slovakia, remained relatively unknown till nowadays: “*Historically, Ukraine has been viewed in Slovakia as «something behind the Carpathian Mountains» which does not have a direct impact on important events on «our side»*” (Duleba, 2000: 96-97). Moreover, anti-Russian elements of Ukrainian Cossack identity constituted the background for historical “coolness” of Slovaks towards Ukrainians (Duleba, 2009: 33). During the Soviet domination in Czechoslovakia, Ukraine was presented through the prism of the Soviet propaganda. Especially negatively was portrayed the activity of Ukrainian Insurgent Army, active during and after the Second World War in the bordering to the Western Ukraine territories. Later on, those images reinforced the negative characteristics of Ukrainians, associated mainly with the mafia and criminal activities.

Another factor, contributed to rather negative images of Ukrainians, was the flow of migrants, coming mostly from the Western Ukraine to the neighboring to Slovakia territories in search for a job. That made the competition on the Slovak labor market even tougher. Despite the fact that Slovakia is the country with one of the lowest number of incoming migrants among all EU member states, the number of foreigners, coming to Slovakia, is constantly growing (Divinský, 2009: 107). Very often foreigners in Slovakia experience difficulties in integration into the labor market from legislative, administrative, cultural, and other reasons (Bargerová, Divinský, 2008: 74-77). Research showed (Vašečka, 2009: 105), that the labor migrants in Slovakia are mostly perceived in a negative way. Thus, competition on the labor market reinforced the negative images of Ukrainians, especially in those places, where the level of unemployment was very high. According to the *realistic conflict group theory*, the conflicts between the groups over a limited amount of sources or goods, including social and economic welfare, constitute the favorable conditions for the antagonistic attitudes towards the other groups. The reduction of the conflicts or satisfactory amount of the resources for all of the members leads to the normalization of the relations between the groups (Sherif, 1962: 8; Valentim, 2010: 587).

Belarus and Belarusians remained rather unknown for Slovaks not only throughout the history, but also nowadays. The Russophile orientation in Belarus as well as low level of Belarusian national identity, made Belarus seem particularly similar to Russia in the eyes of the other nations (Ioffe, 2003: 1267). That nation was included in the present research in order to compare the attitudes of Slovaks towards three states, which often were seen as similar to each other.

Nowadays there are about three thousand Russians, seven thousand Ukrainians, and two hundred Belarusians resided in Slovakia. However, their real number, including illegal migrants, is estimated as much higher (MV SR, 2014I: 11). The lack of information about their cultural, social, and other spheres of life, and the current political situation in the region (Russian-Ukrainian conflict) made the criminality, labor migrants, and the political conflicts the main topics associated to the Eastern European states. Thus, in 2003 only 8.1% of Slovaks expressed opinions that they are very familiar with Ukrainians; 24.6% were rather familiar, 27.5% were not familiar neither unfamiliar; 31.2% - rather unfamiliar; and 9.7% very unfamiliar with Ukrainians. The rest 3.5% had no opinion about

that question (SASD, 2003). Thus, among all neighboring nations, the most familiar to Slovaks were Czechs, followed by Hungarians, Poles, Austrians, and the least known Ukrainians. Even less Slovaks found Ukrainians to be a trustable nation: only 1,5% of respondents found them trustworthy; 12,3% - rather trustworthy; the majority of respondents found Ukrainians to be equally trustworthy and untrustworthy or rather untrustworthy (29,1% and 29% respectively), and 14,9% - very untrustworthy (SASD, 2003).

Historically, Ukrainians and Belarusians became visible as separated national groups much later than Russians. Moreover, for a long time they remained in the shadows of Russia. Information about them was often coming to the Slovak mass-media through the prism of Russia. In spite of the geographical proximity of Slovakia and Ukraine and the fact that Ukraine is the biggest Slovak neighbor in terms of the state's territory and population, it remained rather unknown for Slovaks even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Due to the lack of significant historical contacts with Ukrainians, and Belarusians, Slovak opinions about that states mostly originated from their modern images.

### **Methodology**

The present paper aimed at answering the following research questions:

- 1) What are the contemporary attitudes towards Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians in two generations of Slovaks (university students and elderly adults)?
- 2) Are there any differences (and, if yes, what are they?) in the attitudes towards Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians between two generations of Slovaks (university students and elderly adults)?

As the university students and elderly adults were raised in different socio-historical contexts: communism and post-communism, we assume that their opinions, common beliefs, and attitudes towards the nations under investigation would differ. The first age cohort – university students, aged 18-28 at the moment of the research, represents the younger generation of Slovaks, who does not have their own memories of the Soviet times; they are rather not familiar with the languages and/or cultures of Eastern European states. Since Slovakia is the member of the EU and Schengen Area, they have a broad possibility to travel abroad, which elderly adults did not have in their young ages. The second age cohort encompassed elderly adults, aged 70 and older at the moment of the research. Some of them may remember the life before, during and after the Second World War and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic; they (or some of them) may have personal experiences and memories with different nations of the former Soviet Union (predominantly Russians), be familiar with Russian language and culture.

In order to allow detailed and deep analysis of the common beliefs and opinions about the target nations, the method of *focus group interview* was applied. The main advantage of this method is that it allowed collecting rich and detailed information over a short period of time. The respondents give their answer *in their own words*, what is crucial for studying the attitudes. It also allowed the observation of participants' reactions and non-verbal signals concerning the topic of the interview. However, the results of the *focus group interview* method cannot be applied over the whole population in general.

Six focus group interviews were conducted for the purpose of the present research: three with university students and three with elderly adults. In total, 46 participants took part in the research (18 and 28 university students). The participants were chosen randomly: elderly adults were recruited among the Universities of the Third Age

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and the other organizations for seniors; young generation – among the university students. All of the interviews were conducted in the capital of Slovakia – Bratislava.

### Data analysis and interpretation

The analysis of the focus group interviews allowed drawing general tendencies in the attitudes towards each of the nations under investigation by two generations of Slovaks. Thus, the attitudes declared by the elderly adults had often quite opposite meanings – their answers were polarized between positive and negative opinions; moreover, sometimes the same person declared both sympathy and aversion towards the target nations in different contexts of their speech. The examples of the common answers were as follows:

*“They are close, definitely, absolutely close to me [exited]. Better nations as are Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, we don’t know. Thus, they are the closest to us nations which we have. And we also belong there... And even Czechs belong there, but, I don’t understand, why Czechs are separating and go more towards West? It is not normal!”*[irritated] (Participant 1);

*“[...] after the Soviet Army came here there are no reasons why we should love them...”* (Participant 8).

The attitudes of university students were more neutral or ambiguous. They did not have very positive nor very aversive attitudes towards the nations under investigation. The most common answers were as follows: *“I don’t have anything against them”* (Participant 39); or *“I don’t have bad attitudes towards them, but I can’t say I feel close to Russians, or Ukrainians”* (Participant 23).

University students and elderly adults had a different understanding of division of Europe on East and West. For young people, Slovakia was definitely seen as the center of Europe: *“Everything Eastern from us is an Eastern Europe. We are the center, and everything starting from Ukraine is an East... So Slovakia is the center, exactly, the heart of Europe”* (Participant 44). Elderly adults presented a different view about the place of Slovakia and the other states in Europe. One of them said:

*“Eastern Europe are, actually, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and further Czechs. That is probably it, the Eastern Europe. Not speaking about Germany or France, which, according to the old system, were also an Eastern Europe [...] [Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus do not belong to the Eastern Europe. They belong, to some extent, to the Soviet Union. Even If they are independent, they are just in the process of integration to the Eastern Europe...”* (Participant 1).

University students, in contrary to the elderly adults, did not want to be associated with the Eastern Europe; they saw it as something behind the borders of the EU. Both verbal and non-verbal communication showed that Western European states were much more attractive for the young participants than Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus:

*“There [in Western Europe] there are more opportunities... and for personal growth... compared to the East, at least concerning the job. But if I have to say, who is closer to me, German or Ukrainian, maybe I would said that Ukrainian, because he is a Slav, and I would understand him more, at least concerning the language...”* (Participant 30).

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*“I would like to know [about Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus], but rather for the general development. For me those Western states are rather more interesting” (Participant 21).*

However, there was a tendency, that the youngest among the university students (18-19 years old) have the least amount of knowledge and interest about nations under investigations. They were more likely to switch their attention to the other topics:

*“Russians? I don’t know much about Russia. For me England or other Western countries are more important. I can earn a lot of money there, and if to study, I would also choose those states, not Russia...” [laughing] (Participant 42).*

*“Even despite that we are neighbours with Ukrainians, they are distant to me, I do not know that state at all, and I am not planning to visit it... maybe just Russia. They are not that close to us, young people, rather to the elder people, but not to us” (Participant 29).*

Speaking about the perception of similarities and differences between the nations under investigation, a very interesting tendency was mentioned: elderly adults more often used the words like “they”, “all of them”, “Eastern Bloc”, “Soviet Union”, etc. to address the Eastern European nations. That can mean that they are still seen as the group of similar to each other nations. Some of the participants said:

*“We took it everything as the Soviet Union... the same... Ukraine, Belarus... We took it all as Russians. It was the Soviet Union, thus they were Soviets. Not the Russians, in fact, but they were Soviets [...] I always thought, that Belarus, I mean Ukraine, was the part of Russia, that they were lands united forever. Now I am surprised, that something like that happened [Russian-Ukrainian conflict], that they separated from one another. In my opinion, it is very bad” (Participant 1).*

*“We were thinking that it was [...] that it was everything together, everything united, but, in my opinion... Russians dominated everything, those lands were not so free [...] Everything was blurred; we learned it at school in geography classes about Soviet Union” (Participant 2).*

*“I don’t know if I met any Ukrainians, because I took it all in such way that they all were Soviets, they were not Russians, not Ukrainians - they were Soviets. Whether he was from Azerbaijan, Ukraine, or Russians, we did not realize it” (Participant 4).*

*“Former Soviet Union? Former Soviet Union was the nations of the whole Russia, wasn’t it?” (Participant 4).*

University students did not have a tendency to perceive all Eastern European nations as somehow connected to the former USSR or Russia. However, young participants did not know much about the differences between the target nations. It can be explained by the fact, that information, coming through Slovak mass-media has a selective character – it is mostly concentrated on the sensations in political and economic life. There are almost no information about culture, history, science, and social life of ordinary people. Some of the participants from young generation said:

*“I don’t know, because I am not familiar with those nations, but I think those Ukrainians are the closest one to me...” (Participant 41).*

*“So probably, each of that states had the own culture, but I don’t know what were the differences...because I don’t know that states closer. But each state had the own language, even if they were very similar probably...”*

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*they came from the same language roots, from the Slovak roots...”* (Participant 29).

*“For sure they are very similar [the language]. Even if you will compare Ukraine and Russia, they are rather similar”* (Participant 41).

Thus, university students did not know much about generation of Slovaks was not very familiar with the Eastern European nations. It can be explained by the fact, that information coming to Slovakia has a selective character – it is mostly concentrated the sensations in politics and economy. There information about cultural and social life, as well as the information related to the ordinary people is rather limited: *“I don’t know, because I am not familiar with those nations, but I think those Ukrainians are the closest one to me...”* (Participant 39).

Russians were definitely the most well-known for the elderly adults. The majority of them had personal contacts with Russians and/or were able to speak and understand Russian language. They had a very positive opinion about Russian achievements in world culture, literature, and art: *“I really admire, really appreciate intellectual and cultural achievements of Tsarist Russia [...]”* (Participant 8). Elderly adults more often used the historical memories as the background for their attitudes towards the nations under investigation, especially in case of Russia and Russians: *“In my opinion, they [Russians] should be people... and they are people, which have big ambitions, and they are ready to fight a lot for their ambitions, that’s why it was used to call them «russkij hozijajin» [Russian owner] (Participant 2). The common Slavic root of Russians and Slovaks constituted the background for the positive perception of Russians: “Those Russian roots are still the same, Slavic. We shouldn’t forget it. Those roots are still Slavic, and this is important, I think so...”* (Participant 1). Ukrainians and, especially, Belarusians, were less familiar to the elder generation of Slovaks.

University students did not mention history so often. They had much less knowledge and experience with the nations under investigation, which remained relatively unknown to them. However, for university students the most familiar were Ukrainians, whom they met during study or work in Slovakia or other European states. They knew Russians mostly from the politics, books, and movies. University students also mentioned the common Slavic roots as an element which unites them with the nations under investigation, however, it was not so important as for the elderly adults: *“but they [Eastern Europeans] are not close to me, they are not close to me just because they are Slavs...”* (Participant 33).

### Conclusion

Slovakia constitutes an example of the state with rather favourable historical attitudes towards Russians, which started changing towards more negative meaning in the twentieth century. Regardless of the fact, that historical memories are still very important, they play different roles in the perception of the other nations among different generations of people. The results of the focus group interviews showed, that elderly adults much more often recalls the historical memories and personal experiences, while university students rather based their opinions and beliefs on economic, political, and social characteristics of the other states. Common Slavic roots were also much more important for elderly adults than for university students.

The results of the research showed that elderly adults and university students had different attitudes towards Eastern European nations, what confirms the assumption of the present research. Thus, the attitudes declared by the elderly adults were often polarized



between positive and negative meanings; moreover, sometimes the same persons declared both sympathetic and aversive attitudes towards some of nations under investigation. The attitudes of university students were more neutral – they avoid direct positive or negative judgments.

The present images of Russians are still connected with the former Soviet Union, especially among the elder generations of Slovaks. While the cultural achievements of Tsar Russia were evaluated very positively, the period of Communism and the Soviet domination over Czechoslovakia was seen in very negative lights. Surprisingly, but recent revolution in Ukraine and Russian-Ukrainian conflict was not mentioned by the participants of both age cohort almost at all.

Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are still seen rather similar to each other by the elderly generation. Speaking about them, elderly adults often said: “*they*”, “*all of them*”, “*Eastern Bloc*”, “*Soviet Union*”, etc. University students did not express such opinions; however, they had much less opinions or beliefs about Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians.

Nowadays the eastern border of Slovakia is also the border of the EU and NATO; hence Slovak attitudes towards Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are of high importance due to political and economic factors. Different political development of Russia and Ukraine nowadays (e.g. the Orange Revolutions in 2004, revolution in Ukraine in 2013-2014 (Euromajdan), Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and the steps taken towards the integration of Ukraine with Western institutions) provided the likelihood, that the perception of different Eastern European states and their nations may change: probably, they would not be seen as one and the same, but rather as separated states with different national identities.

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