Hungarian and Slovak national narratives with a focus on the shared boundary

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Abstract

The use of national narratives plays a major role in putting into perspective and interpreting a group's collective identity and self-perception. Hence, it profoundly influences and affects the relationship towards the ‚Other' that is usually situated in a strictly separated position. Studying the national narratives of the two East Central European countries, Hungary and Slovakia, contributes to a better understanding of their relationship. Apart from historical narratives, this includes their interpretations of collective identities, and of borders and dividing lines between them. Our study is based on a content analysis of intellectual exchanges, as well as popular and pseudo-scientific narratives and beliefs. Our comparative analysis reveals the similarities and differences between national logics and identity-interpretation. We find that, on the bi-national level at least, the prevailing national narratives are often mutually exclusive and remain the source of tensions. While the latter were quickly overshadowed by the rise of a common enemy, the (Muslim) migrants last year, this is most likely a temporary development. Further, on the local level there are many examples of more inclusive narratives as well as signs of peaceful co-existence. Therefore, local narratives should inform and contribute to modify national narratives, which can in turn facilitate improved bilateral relations as well as successful cross-border interactions.

Keywords: national narratives, collective identities, boundaries, Slovakia, Hungary

Introduction

East Central Europe is a region broken down into several small countries by physical and mental boundaries. Yet the culture, history, memories, and future fate of the region's countries are deeply connected to each other in an era of globalisation and global harmonisation processes. That means Central Europe

represents a divided geopolitical space on the one hand, but, on the other hand, it can be claimed that it constitutes a unique common meta-space. Under current and ever-changing geopolitical configurations, it is important to look deeper into individual countries of the region and to contrast their national narratives and collective identities, uncovering the differences, but at the same time seeing their unique common features as well. Consequently, in this chapter we compare prevalent national narratives in Hungary and Slovakia. The role of boundaries, physical and mental, can also be tracked in these narratives. While all societies are tied by a shared set of norms or at least some sort of a consciousness, what is specific for the post-socialist space is that

> *old structures of political and economic organization were largely destroyed, and some of the most important ideological foundations of social cohesion were rejected. In all the regions affected, this served to initiate a difficult and painful quest for what might be called new "metanarratives" of nationhood—that is new visions of national solidarity and identification that are meaningful and effective in the conditions of the 21st century. (Bassin 2012: 553)*

The aim of this analysis is thus to critically assess Hungarian and Slovak national narratives. We do this by reflecting on their historical development, their shapes and formation, to gain a clearer picture and insight into the contemporary collective identity and mentality of these two Central European states. We particularly concentrate on narratives dealing with the "other" nation in general, and the shared boundary in particular. We feel that we are filling a vacuum as earlier studies on the two countries' national narratives have tended to focus on the political right (Akçalı & Korkut 2012, Pytlas 2013), or on historical narratives in school textbooks (Findor 2002, Dancs 2014). The analysis is based on secondary sources. We chose to focus on intellectual debates, scholarly literature, media content, as well as public attitude surveys, with the aim to find out what kind of narratives are affecting public discourses. The main question is to what extent Slovak and Hungarian national narratives can contribute to a lack of mutual understanding towards each other's countries and nations?

This introduction is followed by a section each on Hungarian and Slovak national narratives. While divided into two sections, both take into consideration references to the other nation. Subsequently, we present a comparative analysis, and round up with a short summary of the conclusions.

Hungarian national narratives with a focus on Slovak relations

Hungarian national historiography usually begins with the arrival of Magyar tribes in the Carpathian Basin, commemorated to have taken place in 896 AD. What is sometimes ignored is that several tribes had lived in that area prior to this event, largely of Turkic, Slavic, and other descent (it is less controversial that today's western Hungary used to be a Roman province, Pannonia, but this only existed between the 1st and 4th centuries). The Moravian Empire at its largest extent – i.e. in the 9th century – included areas covering today's northern Hungary. Although a short-lived empire (833-906), its factual existence today serves as a reference point in Slovak historiography as the first instance of a Slovak state in this region (Findor 2002). Its most influential ruler, Svätopluk I, today has a statue on a highly visible spot in front of Bratislava Castle, which was reconstructed and reinforced by (Saint) Stephen I of Hungary in the 11th century and functioning as one of the main defense fortresses (Hung.: *végvárak*) along the north-western borderlands of the medieval kingdom (Engel 2001). According to the dominant Hungarian historiography, then, the territory of today's Slovakia was part of Hungary from the 10th century up until the First World War, following which Czechoslovakia was first established as an independent state. At a recent low-point of Slovak-Hungarian relations around 2009 (see below), the relatively young age of the Slovak state was ridiculed especially by some young people in Hungary (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A T-shirt worn by a young Hungarian person that reads "I am older than Slovakia".

Source: Polír (2009)

Figure 2: A balloon release just north of the Slovak-Hungarian border (at Nová Bašta), depicting the Hungarian Crown and designed to signal the belonging together of Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin.

Source: Hírek.sk (2016)

Yet the Hungarian historical national myths of the '1000-year-old state' as well as of the '1000-year-old borders' must be questioned. In reality, prior to World War One Hungary was an independent state from its establishment (commemorated to have taken place in 1000 AD) up to 1541[1]. That year, Buda Castle was occupied by the Ottomans who came to rule it for 145 years. The Habsburgs eventually took over Buda Castle in 1686 and basically controlled Hungary up until World War One. To be fair, Hungary had regained a certain independence from Vienna already in 1867, with the so-called Reconciliation that year transforming the Habsburg Empire into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. To be more specific, the historical medieval borders of Hungary (themselves subject to change) were reinstalled to form an autonomous part of the monarchy. Hungary could thus establish its own ministries in all areas except foreign affairs, defense and finances related to the latter two. This era is widely seen in Hungary as a 'golden age' of the country, with important socio-economic developments indeed having taken place. At the same time, this was also a period of Magyarisation (Marzik 1990); a policy of assimilation of the country's ethno-linguistic minorities, especially through education. Indeed, the Eötvös-reforms (named after then-Minister of Religion and Education) in the 1870s also aimed at "Magyarising" ethno-cultural

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1 Interestingly enough, despite this long (though temporally distant) „occupation" Hungary today maintains very good relations with Turkey (Balogh 2015), which is just one example of a complicated shared history not necessarily predestining poor bilateral relations.

minorities, including the Slovaks (who by the mid-19th century had, to some extent, developed a national identity) all the way north to Žilina/Zsolna, where very few Hungarian speakers ever lived. Enforced Magyarisation can thus be seen to have contributed to the alienation of ethnic minorities in Hungary, by World War One turning them against the perceived interests of ethnic Hungarians and consequently aiming to rip out as much of former Hungarian territory as possible during the Treaty of Versailles negotiations. Yet even more than ethnic tensions, the fact that Hungary was a constituent nation of the Empire meant it ended up on the losers' side in WWI, leading to its "punishment" i.e. huge territorial losses (approximately 70% of its former territory was transferred to neighboring states, including Czechoslovakia).

The 'Trianon syndrome' or 'Trianon trauma' (Gerner 2007) as it is called has not fully been processed by many Hungarians ever since (Balogh 2015: 195, see also Figure 2). Instead, irredentism was a key element of national policy in interwar Hungary, leading its regime to ally with Germany in World War Two, "rewarded" by a partial (approximately 50%) return of the so-called lost territories according to the Vienna Awards of 1938 and 1940, respectively. The First Vienna Award concerned the south-eastern parts of then Czechoslovakia (today southern Slovakia and the westernmost region of Ukraine), and was coupled with a (limited) population exchange. The fact that Slovakia during World War II itself sided with Nazi Germany did not help Hungary at the Treaty of Yalta in 1945. Hungary had to return all its recently regained territories to the neighbouring states, including to the re-established Czechoslovakia. This event was followed by a large-scale population exchange: approximately 76,600 Hungarians were expelled from Czechoslovakia to Hungary, replaced by around 60,250 Slovaks from Hungary (*cf*. Vadkerty 1999, Szabó A. 1991). Still, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Hungarians remained in Czechoslovakia, largely objected to policies of assimilation, stripped of minority rights, and, in some cases, forced to move to the western borderlands, replacing recently expelled ethnic Germans there (von Arburg 2009). These events as well as minority rights were as good as taboo during the 'socialist' period in both countries.

With the gradual but steady weakening of the planned economies and of Marxist-Leninist ideology in the 1980s, ethno-national identities started to re-emerge as a crucial element of collective identification in East Central Europe. At the same time, the planned hydroelectric power plant at Gabčikovo and Nagymaros on the Danube was a turning point in bilateral relations. Initiated by the communist regimes of the two states in the 1980s, this mega-project became strongly contested in wide circles of Hungarian society, leading to Hungary's withdrawal

from it in the early 1990s. The Czechoslovak – and from 1993 on the Slovak – state nevertheless went on to complete the Gabčikovo plant (its equivalent at Nagymaros had been planned to be built on exclusively Hungarian territory). But the post-socialist period also saw a rise of identity awareness among ethnic minorities in Slovakia as well as Hungary, although the latter has been hosting much smaller such communities, including Slovaks. This was suspiciously seen particularly during the rule of the newly independent Slovakia's first government led by Vladimír Mečiar (Carpenter 1997). Yet a change of government in Slovakia as well as both countries' efforts to adopt European Union (EU) norms of minority rights etc. led them to become more generous on these issues, leading to a normalisation of relations in the first half of the 2000s.

Later, with a growing disillusionment of EU membership and the rise of neo-nationalist and populist politicians both in Slovakia and Hungary, bilateral relations started to worsen again. The year 2009 alone saw the banning of then-President of Hungary László Sólyom from Slovakia for his planned partaking in unveiling a Hungarian statue in Komárno (BBC News 2009), and the amendment of the Slovak language law (Pytlas 2013) that basically criminalises the use of Hungarian in official contexts in the Slovak Republic (The Economist 2009). In Hungary, one of the first decisions of the new centre-right government entering into power in 2010 was to introduce the opportunity of dual citizenship for ethnic Hungarians beyond the country's borders (Pytlas 2013), without any consultation with Slovak or any other foreign authorities. This led Slovakia to start stripping its citizens of their Slovak passports should they hold any other passports. While the Slovak measures mostly served political rhetoric than actual practice (*cf.* Turunen 2015), a small number of cases of stripped Slovak citizenship were indeed reported on not least by Hungarian media in Slovakia (ujszo.com 2011) and Hungary (Világgazdaság 2011, Origo 2012).

At the same time, it must be considered that local relations have, over the past few decades, rarely been as bad in the (ethnically mixed) borderlands as have bilateral relations in general (Hamberger 2008: 58). This is related to the hybrid identity of large segments of the population there, especially on the Slovakian side. As an example, Tünde Puskás (2009) showed in her dissertation how local identities in southern Slovakia are vacillating between 'us' and 'them', with relatively few examples of clearly distinguishable dividing lines and mental boundaries.

Curiously and controversially, Hungarian-Slovak relations at large have recently been improving mostly due to external conditions. The year 2015 saw the largest number of refugees and migrants arriving to Europe since World War II, with the

majority passing – or later rather just trying to pass – via Hungary and, although to a much lesser extent, Slovakia. Both countries' governments and citizens shared overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards this development, seeing more risks and challenges than opportunities and a responsibility to help these people (the clear majority of whom would not stay in either of these countries anyway). Thus, the governments have been closely cooperating (together with Poland and the Czech Republic) in lobbying Brussels to stem the flows of people as well as in rejecting the quota system it proposed (Zalan 2016). Consequently, the Visegrad cooperation (consisting of the four countries mentioned above), long suffering of an identity crisis, was quickly reinvigorated to, for instance, join forces aimed at a common protection of Hungary's southern borders. This practically meant that Slovak (and Czech) policemen have patrolled these borders together with their Hungarian colleagues (Reuters 2015), something nearly unimaginable up until very recently. Last but not least, the countries of East Central Europe are cooperating in rejecting new gas pipelines that connect Russia with Western Europe by circumventing the former (Rettman 2016).

Slovak national narratives with a focus on Hungarian relations

To understand Slovak approaches and interpretations of borders and borderlands, one needs a certain insight into the history of the Slovak nation and statehood, thus giving a picture about the Slovakian psyche and about the formation of Slovak collective identities.

Between the 9th and 10th centuries, the territory of contemporary Slovakia was an integral part of the Great Moravian Empire, which is explicitly referred to in the Preamble of the Slovak Constitution. The current territory was incorporated into the structure of the Hungarian Kingdom, later into the Habsburg Empire, becoming part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as of 1867. It is important to highlight that Slovak elites did not take an open anti-Hungarian nationalistic position until the 20th century: the idea that Slovakia could be separated from Hungary was indeed present in political debates, but was outside the mainstream until 1914 (Kováč 2013, 2015). Instead, Slovak ideas and endeavours supported the development of the Kingdom of Hungary as a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic state rather than an independent one (Hudek 2011, Maxwell 2005). Yet the eruption of World War I led to the disintegration of empires in Europe, including the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and the Tsarist empires, and these changes paved the way to the birth of new nation-states. It was a period of

victory of nations, national independence, Wilsonian principles over 'the age of empires'; the European continent became disintegrated and fragmented, where the winners dictated the post-world war order (Gerbet 2004).

The Austro-Hungarian Empire was a direct object of these changes and it was divided into several smaller states; thus, Czechoslovakia was born in 1918 on the 'ashes of empire'. It was a common state of the Czech and the Slovak nation under the political, ideological, and spiritual leadership of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. While the Czech and the Slovak nations jointly formed the new titular nation, the Czechoslovak idea was marginal among Slovaks and Slovak society never accepted it on a wide scale; thus, it was a rather pragmatic political concept with the aim of achieving certain goals for the Slovak and Czech nations (Hudek 2011). As Milan Nič (2010) wrote, the Slovaks became a state-creating nation together with the Czechs in a very controversial formulation of the "Czechoslovak nation". The first decades of the first, interwar Czechoslovakia experienced development and liberal democratic orientation with strong agrarian and centrist parties. Nevertheless, the first relatively peaceful decades were followed by massive changes, traumas, and (geo)political earthquakes (Kováč 1998).

The Czechoslovak entity has undergone several changes both in terms of borders, territory and sovereignty. The first Czechoslovakia was disintegrated by *Fall Grün* ('Case Green') and by the Munich Agreement, where the Czech and Moravian territories came under German rule, while parts of the Slovakian territory came under Hungarian and Polish rule by the First Vienna Award. These changes led to a second Czechoslovakia that lasted 169 days between 1938 and 1939. However, the German invasion of Bohemia and Moravia also led to the birth of the first Slovak state, a client state of Germany under the controversial leadership of Jozef Tiso during the Second World War. However, at the end of the war the borders were altered again, and the third Czechoslovakia was established, once again for a united Czechoslovak nation. Subsequently, the biggest political issue in the common state was the question of Slovak autonomy and a federal reformation of Czechoslovakia, achieved only in 1968. Finally, on January 1st, 1993 the third Czechoslovakia peacefully divided itself into two separate and sovereign political entities, namely the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. As a result, since the establishment of the first Czechoslovak state structure Slovakia has experienced dramatic developments, from a political and from a cultural point of view as well. Hence, six constitutional models, three political systems and, within them, several regimes succeeded one another on its territory (Slovensko: krajina s potenciálom 2011: 14).

Slovak national and collective identities were not just influenced by pure border changes, but also by the country's location at the crossroads of the Eastern and Western civilisations. Therefore, Slovak national identity was heavily affected by the borderland shifts of these civilizations, and by the inclusion and membership of Slovakia either in the Western, or in the Eastern frameworks of civilization. There is an international and Slovak consensus that the Slovakian territory has always been part of Western civilisation. An example of the former is Samuel Huntington (2006: 258), who identifies Central Europe, including Slovakia, within the Western frameworks. Domestic commentators include for instance Gonda and others (2003), Káčer (2016), Káčer and Stanke (Týždeň 2016), and Bátora (2014), who all stress the Slovakian membership in Western civilisation. And yet there is a lack of consensus about the exact determination of Slovakia's presence in the Western civilisational framework. For instance, Gonda and others (2003) point out that this was disrupted in 1945; while Rastislav Káčer, Ambassador of the Slovak Republic in Hungary, claims that Slovakia was part of the Western frameworks only until 1948. That means that in the middle of the 20th century Slovakia became part of the Eastern framework of civilisation with a western cultural mentality. Consequently, the combination of an eastern and western membership led to that Slovakia and its collective identity is characterised by 'hybridity'. Hence, Slovakia is torn between different forms of identity and understandings; such as between civic and ethnic understanding of nation, and between pluralist and monolithic conceptions (Gonda et al. 2003: 16). This 'mixture' and hybridity was explicitly expressed by Jozef Bátora (2010: 174) when he wrote: "we know that the Slovak Republic is a state, but we do not know what kind of state it is".

To understand Slovak collective identities and psyche there is a need to underline that the Slovak nation constituted a 'minority' within the constitutional structures in which it was included, except during the First Slovak State (1939–1945) and since 1993 (Kusý 2002). Slovaks were a minority in the Habsburg Empire and in the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire too, where they increasingly fought for federal establishment and the equality of nations (Kováč 2015). Slovaks also constituted a minority within the first, second, and third Czechoslovakia, where they fought for either autonomy or the establishment of a federal Czechoslovakia (*cf.* Čaplovič et al. 2000). Subsequently, following the change of regime in 1989, Slovak nationalists widely started to emotionally describe the Hungarian rule as a 1000-year-long oppression of the Slovak nation (Halás 2015: 63). Thus, a separate and independent Slovakia has tended to be an exclusionist and closed society; first under the Slovak state during the Second

World War when the Hungarians, together with the Czechs, were identified as the 'negative others' and as traditional enemies (Hudek 2011), and later during the independent Slovak Republic since 1993 (Chmel 2010).

The independent Slovak Republic and the majority status of the Slovak nation are still not linked with a post-ethnic – perhaps a post-modern – identity. As Rudolf Chmel (2010) writes, the Slovak nation has a huge problem in the domain of self-identification, and as the strategy of the Slovakian public diplomacy (2011: 7) reads, Slovakia and the nation lack self-confidence and self-irony. The Czech nation has a clearer identity reference to historical statehood and own kings that generates a substantial basis for forming a clear collective identity, while the Slovak nation misses significant references to real statehood and it links itself to the Great Moravian tradition, which was not an explicitly Slovak state (Chmel 2010: 26). Moreover, Slovak national identity has few girders to build on, such as heroes, martyrs, or saints, who can generate a wave of pride, self-respect and self-satisfaction (ibid: 61). It thus has a limited cultural memory as a cultivation power (Gonda et al. 2003: 18). What is more, Bátora (2014) highlights an important feature in the Slovak political identity and thinking, which has brought a substantial perplexity into Slovak society. To be specific, Slovakia has eagerly been emphasising its links with the Great Moravian Empire (Findor 2002). Great Moravia, which was partly situated on the territory of contemporary Slovakia, was an integral part of the universal (Western) Christian world and not of the Eastern civilisational frame, since Byzantium was a leading center of the Christian civilisation, and Great Moravia was respected and acknowledged even by the Pope himself. Resurrection of the heritage of Great Moravia and the tradition of Cyril and Method powerfully appeared during the 19th century by the philosophers/writers around Ľudovít Štúr. Their interpretation of Great Moravia was linked to Russia; although Russia was not part of the Western world but rather an Asian 'Other' (Neumann 1995) eagerly fighting for recognition (Ringmar 2002). According to Bátora (2014), Štúr and other nation-builders of the Slovak nation promoted an ahistorical approach, and they 'lost in translation imperii', thus constructing Slovakia at the intersection of the East and the West, instead of positioning Slovakia as an integral part of the Western civilisation.

Controversies around collective identity in Slovakia, generated by the lack of self-identification, were further intensified after the recognition of independence. That means Slovak collective identity suffered a crisis after 1992; namely, the independent Slovak Republic 'habilitated' on the basics of nation, authoritarianism, and

privatisation. In other words, state property was 'tunnelled out'[2] in such a massive scale that there was almost a need to once again establish it. Furthermore, the automotive plants of Kia, Hyundai, and Volkswagen cannot generate a pride and self-respect of the nation (Chmel 2010: 47). Hence, there is a need for more and deeper connections of identity and achievements of Slovakia. The new republic inaugurated itself with an inability to digest the past, with an unwillingness to integrate all its citizens, thus Slovakia was reborn with a strong tradition of a closed society and a ceaseless tradition of fear (ibid: 132). Miroslav Kusý (2002: 129) adds that even the national anthem reflects the elements of the Slovakian closed society since it addresses only ethnic Slovaks while other citizens are left out, unlike in other national anthems like the Czech and the German that attempt to address every citizen of the state. The Constitution reflects an ethnic nation instead of a civic one, emphasising long oppression, thus it is still kept within the traditional defensive attitude of eternal struggle against the others (Hudek 2011). Consequently, Michal Vašečka (2015) highlights that the inclusivity of the Slovak Republic should be achieved through several steps, and one step should be a reformulation of the national anthem into a less primordial orientation and with more value-basis. Apart from economic privatisation, Bátora (2004) underlines that for Slovakia the years between 1993 and 1998 meant a massive identity ambivalence with collective cognitive dissonance, as the Mečiar-government was unable to achieve recognition from the EU and NATO (Carpenter 1997).

Thus, the Slovak Republic was constructed on ethnic Slovak elements, where the approach towards the minorities, especially towards the Hungarians can be described as 'what are they doing here?'. Consequently, the Hungarian minority is perceived as a strange element and Slovak identity is constructed against the Hungarian (internal) 'Other', driven by a fear of Hungarian revisionism and irredentism (Kusý 2002: 43, 180). As a result, Slovak national identity is stuck within the antagonist approach and interpretation of Self and Other. Halás (2015: 62–64) provides a relevant point on the Slovak antagonist identity, in his analysis of the Slovak reaction to the piece of art sculpture during the Czech Presidency of the EU Council. Entropa, performed by Czech artist David Černý, tried to deconstruct existing national stereotypes by making an irony of the individual EU Member States through their stereotypes. In this piece of art Slovakia was sculptured as a Hungarian sausage. To fully grasp the meaning and the Slovak reaction, there is a need for a brief etymologic explanation of the issue. The

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2   The process of privatisation often occurred through the establishment of subsidiary or sister companies and transferring of property to these, coupled with the bankruptcy of the original company. This became known as ‚tunnelling’, in Slovak language: ‚tunelovanie’ (Leška 2011: 17).

Czech name of the Hungarian sausage is 'uherák', which is very close to the word 'Uhorsko', the name of the pre-World War I Hungarian Kingdom and later the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, in which the Slovakian territory was incorporated. It should be noted that the Slovak language makes a difference between 'Uhorsko' (pre-1918 Hungary) and 'Maďarsko' (post-1918 Hungary). Hence, the sculpturing of Slovakia as 'uherák' associates Slovakia with pre-1918 Hungary. Consequently, there was a strong reaction from then-Slovak Foreign Minister Ján Kubiš as well as several other politicians to this performance, referring to this portrayal of Slovakia as unacceptable. As Halás (2015: 63) pointed out: "Instead of saying: 'Good point! Show them we are not like that!' they said 'Yes, precisely! We are just like that!'"

Despite the challenges described above, it can be claimed that Slovakia has achieved to reintegrate itself within the Western framework of civilisation over the past years. That means Slovakia looks like the West and is regarded as part of the West (Káčer 2016, Týždeň 2016). Furthermore, Slovakia has gained the image of a successful "reformer" on the international economic and financial scene in the new millennium (Slovensko: krajina s potenciálom 2011: 14), confirmed by the European Commission's regular evaluation of Slovakia that can be perceived as a form of a 'recognition game' (Bátora 2004). What is more, Slovakia was a co-leader, together with The Netherlands, in the Tunisian transition, transmitting and sharing its successful transitional experiences. Incumbent Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák was once the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (Zalan 2016), later appointed as Head of the EU European External Action Service (EEAS) department for relations with the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Russia. He is now an official candidate for the next UN secretary general (ibid). Slovakia has also successfully been organising the global security conference 'Globsec', visited by the highest security and political leaders of the world. Likewise, it regularly organises the Tatra Summit with the ambiguous goal to shape the future of Europe; as well as the Château Béla Central European Strategic Forum. A Slovak diplomat held the position of Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, and now holds the position of Special Representative for Iraq. Simply, Slovakia has achieved substantial progress; as Michal Vašečka (2015) wrote, Slovakia is more modern from a structural point of view than from a cultural point of view.

Still, Slovakian understandings and interpretations of borders is a difficult issue. Huge euphoric mood resonated in the society at the beginning of the millennium. Numerous breakthroughs were successfully achieved in the domain of the European Union and in the space of Central Europe, like entrance into

the European Union; the establishment of a common (economic and possible political) community where the Central European space is an integrated part of Europe; the introduction of the Schengen system that has significantly erased the borders, thus the inter-state borders can be crossed easily, without any problem and difficulty. Integration into the EU also meant that nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies should be avoided from the political realm of Central Europe.

The euphoric mood explicitly vibrated from the long-awaited European peace; thus, it was a silhouette that the so-called Kantian 'perpetual peace' was on the close horizon in the imagination of Central Europeans. Nevertheless, the reality after a decade of integration and membership of the Central European countries in the EU seems to be significantly different than originally envisaged. Extreme political parties are on the rise not only in the western and northern parts of Europe, but have received significant support on both sides of the Danube River, and the long awaited political and historical reconciliation between Slovakia and Hungary has not yet been realised (Kollai 2008, Daniška 2012).

A comparative analysis of Hungarian and Slovak meta-narratives

Difficult issues between Slovakia and Hungary are still present. According to an article of the Slovak conservative weekly newspaper Týždeň, Slovak politicians often draw a picture that the southern neighbour does nothing else but tries to disturb the Slovaks, their independence and the Slovak nation and nationhood; thus, issues regarding Hungary and Hungarians are very vivid within the Slovak political realm and thinking (Kollai 2008). At the same time, issues of Slovakia and of Slovaks are mostly on the periphery of Hungarian public attention. As an example, most Hungarians do not even know who the Prime Minister of Slovakia is (ibid). This of course does not exclude that Slovakia can occasionally receive strong attention in Hungary. In his presentation in Smolenice, at the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Institute for Sociology at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Vladimír Krivý (2015: 3) claimed that the grouping aversion of Slovaks and Hungarians are not so different in its basics, but the aversion towards the 'other' is significantly stronger among Slovaks than among Hungarians. This is in line with Rudolf Chmel's (2010) and Dušan Kováč's (2015) idea about the closed character of Slovak society. Subsequently, this internal aversion and closure of Slovak society is made particularly clear by using the slogan 'na Slovensku po slovensky' (see Figure 3), which can be translated as 'speak Slovakian in Slovakia'. This motto originally targeted Czechs

during the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), when Czech bureaucrats also prevailed within Slovak administrative structures. The Slovak language was perceived to be profoundly overshadowed and pushed to the periphery by the Czech. Later, the slogan was reoriented toward the ethnic Hungarian minority and the Hungarian language, and has successfully preserved its strong aversive resonance up until today.

Figure 3: A partly damaged sticker propagating 'speak Slovakian in Slovakia'. A local resident, on whose apartment house's entrance the sticker was put, commented: "I wanted to remove it entirely, but kept it to remind me where I live whenever I get 'home'."

Source: Szabad Újság (2011)

The resolution of mental border issues and reconciliation of history is very hard because interpretations of history are in a ceaseless change. Slovakia has experienced approximately six or seven changes of interpretation of its history during the century of its existence (Chmel 2010: 43, Michela 2011). This is the central point of an article published by Martin Hanus and Jozef Majchrák in Týždeň (2013). Their article makes a brilliant exploration of 'our and their history', specifically the different interpretations of history. The highest Slovak political representation introduced the term 'old Slovaks' at the 15th anniversary of the Slovak Republic, supported by many historians, thus triggering an early mythic entity of the contemporary Slovak nation. The introduction of this term

has triggered considerable controversy even among Slovak historians, with several of them – such as Dušan Kováč (2016) – deeply disagreeing with it.

Yet the most difficult topics between Hungary and Slovakia appear in their historiography of the 19th and 20th centuries. To be specific, the political revolution in 1848 is an event described in different ways on the two sides of the Danube: the mainstream Hungarian interpretation is that it was a revolution that represented all entities of the Kingdom and the Slovaks were fighting in the revolution army of Lajos Kossuth, while the Slovakian approach underlines the Slovak national movement as a movement around Ľudovít Štúr and his group of 'Štúrovci'. Slovak interpretations omit the fact that Slovaks were fighting along other segments of society, and emphasise that the army around Kossuth was a Hungarian army (*maďarská armáda*), rather than a multi-ethnic army (*uhorská armáda*). Yet the most difficult historical events concerning Hungary and Slovakia are the Treaty of Versailles (1920) and the First Vienna Award (1938). The dominant historical narratives interpret these events from substantially different points of view, which leaves space for further disagreement. The latter is understood by the Slovak side as a violent behaviour of Hitler and its allies (despite that Slovakia was one itself), and the regained territory is described as occupied territories. At the same time, the Hungarian side presents the decision that reflected the ethnic composition of the territories. Slovak approaches see the post-World War development as a historic moment of independence that was preceded by cruel nationalistic policies of Hungarian elites and which is described as the 'Treaty of Trianon', while the Hungarian approach emphasises the injustice of a decision where a substantial part of the Hungarian population suddenly found itself within a foreign state system described as 'Trianon dictate' (Hanus & Majchrák 2013). Moreover, Krivý (2015: 3) notes that the events after the Second World War led to different interpretations, namely what was (is) a historic trauma for the Hungarians is either an unknown thing for Slovaks, or it is highlighted as a moment 'to which there is no need to return any more'. Hence, a 'collective empathy' is significantly weak within Slovakia.

Apart from various interpretations of history, an important element of interstate relations is the feeling of insecurity and threat. That means there is a threat among Slovaks of Hungarian revisionism (Kusý 2002: 43) and a repetition of the Vienna Award still powerfully resonates (Surján 2013). Miroslav Bahna (2014) from the Institute of Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences wrote that 40% of respondents expressed that Hungary was the threat number one for the Slovak Republic in 1996. This feeling of threat and danger from Hungary has been substantially altered during the last few years, and in 2014 only 5% of

respondents expressed the same view, thus it was a substantial decrease of seeing Hungary and Hungarians as prime threat to Slovakian statehood.

Furthermore, several articles highlighted that one of the principal problems in reconciliation and normalisation between Slovakia and Hungary is Hungarian pride. To be specific, Milan Zemko (2011) underlined the pride of 'great Hungary', and Miroslav Lajčák (2009) emphasised that there is a need to end the rhetoric that Hungary must teach Slovakia.

Border issues between Hungary and Slovakia are ambivalent. Most likely, the most important diplomatic incident of the past few years related to crossing the border has been the refusal of entry of the President of Hungary, László Sólyom, at the Komárno-Komárom border that occurred in 2009 (BBC News 2009). The issue was that a historical monument was planned to be inaugurated in Komárno with the participation of the former (at that time incumbent) Hungarian President Sólyom. A diplomatic communication took place between the two diplomatic sides and foreign ministries, but finally, the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a diplomatic note, which informed the Hungarian President that his arrival is not welcome in the Slovak Republic and that Slovakia cannot guarantee his security. Moreover, the Slovak Prime Minister explicitly expressed at a news conference that the Slovak officers will inform the Hungarian President at the border that his arrival and visit is undesirable in the Slovak Republic, and if the President crosses the borders despite the expressed opinions of the highest political authorities, it will be interpreted as a rough provocation from Hungary. Consequently, the Hungarian President respected the Slovakian authorities and their decision, and did not cross the Slovak-Hungarian border.

Finally, it is important to analyse contemporary interpretations and understandings of borders during the migration flow across Europe. Contemporary debates of borders have shifted from the strict interpretation of Slovakia and Hungary and take a more holistic European approach, where 'the other' is seen and interpreted as an important ally in the issue of illegal migration flows. The absolute priority of the two countries is to assure an efficient management of the refugee flows in the EU. To achieve this, maintaining the Schengen system and EU external borders are perceived as substantial preconditions. The Dublin agreement and other instruments for asylum are regarded as the key here.

As the refugee flow was unfolding in Europe, the dismantling of Schengen and establishment of mini-Schengen(s) is not interpreted as an appropriate political approach that is able to solve the crisis. As seen above, the refugee crisis has triggered a profound cooperation in East Central Europe, with the

leaders of the Visegrad group explicitly rejecting the idea of a mini-Schengen that was proposed by Dutch leaders. Consequently, the Visegrad states, including Slovakia, underlined that cooperation and concentration of individual strengths are the only solution to protect external borders of the EU. What is more, as already mentioned, Slovakia sent police forces to Hungary with the aim to help protect the southern borders of Hungary (Kováčová 2015). But there are also signs of disagreement related to the refugee crisis, pushing down the issue on the European agenda (Zalan 2016), with Hungary carrying on with its hard line against migratory quotas as well as the EU more generally (Kegl 2016).

Conclusions

Relations between Slovakia and Hungary are burdened by historical deeds from both sides. Relatedly, border relations have recently oscillated on a pendulum between harsh incidents on the one hand, such as the diplomatic tension when the Hungarian President was denied crossing into Slovakia, and signs of intense cooperation on the other hand, for instance when Slovak police forces join Hungarian ones with the aim to protect Hungarian and EU borders. This oscillation between intensive cooperation and disagreement mirrors the complex set of relations of two neighbouring East Central European countries. Nevertheless, their occasional cooperation points to the fact that the only viable path for such small East Central European nations is to closely cooperate, something which becomes particularly valuable in times of general EU crises.

We further tried to show that neighbourly and border relations are also affected by the many national narratives that linger on and even today have a strong impact on collective memories and identities, such as quite a few still important anxieties, fears and phobias in both countries. Hungary has still not processed its 'Trianon trauma' and been able to develop relations with its ethnic kin beyond its borders that involve negotiating with its neighbouring countries. Slovakia, on the other hand, is hampered by its – by no means unique – complex of being a relatively young state. More importantly, it has so far failed to develop an understanding of its nationhood that ethnic minorities equally feel part of.

Bilateral relations are also somewhat asymmetric in the sense that Slovakia is generally more concerned with Hungary than vice-versa. However, as was demonstrated, mainstream national narratives in Slovakia have more recently become subjects of heavy arguments, at least among the country's intellectuals. Additionally, relations and attitudes among local borderlanders, on both sides of

the border, have for long been more reconciliatory than have bilateral relations on national levels in general. Rather than a focus on external Others, such as migrants as well as larger European powers, it is hopefully these elements that will serve as a basis for future friendly neighbourly relations.

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