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## Images of and associations with Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians shared by the young generation of Slovaks

The paper aims to overview the historical perception of Eastern Europe and Eastern Europeans, in particular Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians in the territory of Slovakia and to analyze modern images and associations of Slovak university students regarding those nations. Russia, unlike Ukraine or Belarus, has been a significant actor in the Slovak political and national life throughout the history. During the Soviet times, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians (as well as the other nations of the former Soviet Union) together formed a common image of „the Soviet people”, while the national differences among them were blurred. The present research aims to clarify how those three nations are seen in contemporary Slovakia. The topic became especially important following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014 and the steps taken towards the integration of Ukraine into Western institutions. The survey serving the needs of the present research was conducted among 150 university students from Bratislava, Nitra and Trnava. The respondents were asked what associations they had with Russia and/or Russians, Ukraine and/or Ukrainians, and Belarus and/or Belarusians. The results showed that all of the nations under investigation were strongly associated with the current socio-political situation in the respective countries. It seems that historical and cultural backgrounds are of secondary importance for the young generation of Slovaks when it comes to their perception of other nations.

**Key words:** Slovaks; Russians; Ukrainians; Belarusians; associations; images; politics

### Introduction

The process of forming opinions about Eastern Europe has been a fascinating interplay between the elements inherited from the past and a new need to define the modern identities of these states. The attitudes towards Eastern Europeans<sup>1</sup> in many countries are generally rather negative, and much worse than those towards other nations (e.g. Western Europeans or Americans)<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, century-old stereotypes about Russians were transferred to other neighboring Slavic

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, Eastern Europe denotes Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, LEONARD, Mark & POPESCU, Nicu: A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations, European Council Foreign Relations. In European Council for Foreign Relations, 02.11.2007. [Online]. Available at: < [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/a\\_power\\_audit\\_of\\_eu\\_russia\\_relations](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/a_power_audit_of_eu_russia_relations), accessed 12.05.2015; or BRAGHIROLI, Stefano and CARTA, Caterina: An Index of Friendliness toward Russia: An Analysis of the Member States and Member of the European Parliament's Positions. Electronic publications in: *Pan-European Institute* 2009, no. 15, p. 12.

nations, blurring the differences between them. Thus, very often all the nations of Eastern Europe were associated with similar or even the same concepts (e.g. *Russia, Soviet, East, vodka, tsar, cold*, etc.). Such kind of thinking was widespread not only in distant America or Western Europe, but also in the nearby countries.

Geographical proximity is an important factor in the mutual perception between any two nations. Those countries which share common borders generally hold more stereotypes, prejudices, and common beliefs regarding each other due to the more extensive period of historical contacts.<sup>3</sup> Since the contacts between the Slovaks and the Russians have always been of crucial importance and because Slovakia has a common border with Ukraine, the study of the perception of Eastern Europeans in Slovakia is still relevant. Currently, there are about 7000 Ukrainians, 3000 Russians, and 200 Belarusians residing in Slovakia. This number is constantly growing.<sup>4</sup> Since the eastern border of Slovakia is also the border of the EU and NATO, Slovak attitudes towards these nations became especially important after the Ukrainian revolutions in 2004 and 2014 and the steps taken towards the integration of Ukraine into European institutions.

### Russia in Slovak national discourse

Regardless of the tendency to see all the Eastern European nations as rather similar to each other, the contacts between the Slovaks and each of the nations under investigation have been different in nature. Historically, Russia played an important part in the Slovak national and political life. The Slovak territory had been intricately connected with both Eastern and Western Europe. From 18th century onwards, when the gradual insinuation of Russian political, cultural, and ideological elements into Central Europe started, Russia became involved in European political life. That was the time when the image of Russia and Russians began to be shaped in the territory of Slovaks. This image has since gone through different stages and has been influenced by various ideological, political, and cultural factors.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the crucial one, which united the Slovaks and the Russians from the very beginning of their mutual contacts, was their common Slavic origin. The Slovak lands, surrounded by the non-Slavic culturally distinct and politically dominative states, cherished the idea of Slavic (Russian) brotherhood and had a rather anti-Western tendencies. The Russians, with their similar (or at least more understandable than Austrian or Hungarian) language and culture, were seen as a fraternal nation, ready to protect the other Slavs from the invasion by their enemies. Thus, the early image of Russia was, to a high extent, shaped by the ideology of Pan-Slavism, represented by such leaders of the Slovak national revival as Ľudovít Štúr, Ján Kollár or Pavel Jozef Šafárik. According to this ideology, the common origin of all Slavs presented the background for their unity, for they are truly one nation.<sup>6</sup> The ideas of Pan-Slavism prescribed to Russia a very special role of the spiritual leader of all the Slavs.

<sup>3</sup> LAZARI, Andrzej – ROGIŃSKA, Tatiana (eds.): *Polacy i Rosjanie – przewyciężanie uprzedzeń / Поляки и русские – преодоление предубеждений*. Łódź : Ibidem, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej Republiky/Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter MV SR), Prezídium Policajného zboru, Štatistický prehľad legálnej a nelegálnej migrácie v Slovenskej republike 2014, semester I, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> IVANTYŠYNOVÁ, Tatiana: Peripetie vzájomných vzťahov. In: IVANTYŠYNOVÁ, Tatiana – KODAJOVÁ, Daniela (eds.): *Mýtus – stereotyp – obraz: Rusko v slovenských dejinách a kultúre*. Bratislava : Pro Historia, 2011, pp. 7 – 9.

<sup>6</sup> KOLLÁR, Ján: *O literárnej vzájomnosti medzi rozličnými kmeňmi a nárečiami slovanského národa*. Bratislava : VSAV 1954.

In the mid-19th century the leader of the Slovak national revival Ľudovít Štúr described Russia as a state which: „has power, tremendous power and thus the mission and right to shatter all Slavic separatist tendencies and to claim hegemony over the entire family of the Slavic nations”.<sup>7</sup> Russians were described as “good-natured, yet tough, obedient and devoted, talented and with a strong nature”, with scholars and poets that “any nation could pride itself on”.<sup>8</sup> The importance of the Russian language and admiration of it was expressed in the following way: “Russian is the language of the largest, independent tribe ruling far and wide, which also enjoys the hegemony over our national family; moreover, it is the richest, the most powerful and the most resounding language marked by power.”<sup>9</sup>

However, the idealistic images of Russia did not last long. The events of the World War I portrayed “the chosen nation” in more negative and realistic light. Slovak legionnaires deployed in Russia during the war contributed to a shift in the general perception of Russia and the Russian people. The memories brought home by the legionnaires illustrated the discrepancy between Russia’s ideal image of the past and their firsthand experience. The impressions Russia made on the Slovak legionnaires were often ambivalent and contradictory: “Russia is big, powerful, and rich, but there is no order in it. [...] Russia is lagging behind the other countries”.<sup>10</sup>

Later on, during the times of the USSR, Soviet Russia was seen from a completely different perspective than their Tsarist predecessor. Yet, regardless of the unfavorable attitudes towards the Soviet state, various spheres of Russian culture remained popular even at those times. Favorable views were strengthened by the fact that at the end of World War II, the bulk of the country’s territory was liberated by the Soviet Army, which appeared as “the Slavic Brothers coming to liberate Slovakia.” One of the major disappointments of that time came in the early 1950s, when many Slovak activists were arrested and jailed as “bourgeois nationalists”. The new wave of frustration emerged with the year 1968, after the Soviet Army had entered the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. During the following years of the Soviet domination over Czechoslovakia, the negative attitudes towards Russia were triggered by the Soviet policy, the Soviet political elites and the Soviet army present in Czechoslovakia. The Velvet revolution of 1989 ended the era of Communism in Slovakia and shifted the people’s political and cultural orientation in favor of the Western values.

As seen from above, Russian-Slovak historical relations were undergoing various stages from friendly, neutral, through slightly unfavorable, towards averse and even hostile. However, Slovak historical perception of Russians is unique in some sense, as, compared to the other Central-Eastern European nations such as Poles, Lithuanians, or Ukrainians it lacks the historical experience of great animosity and confrontations. Throughout the history, the Poles saw the Russians (and the Germans) as the main enemies of their national and political independence.<sup>11</sup> Polish national ideas and aspirations have always been anti-Russian and pro-Western. Numer-

<sup>7</sup> ŠTÚR, Ľudovít: *Slovanstvo a svet budúcnosti*. Bratislava : Slovenský inštitút medzinárodných vzťahov 1993, p. 140, own translation.

<sup>8</sup> ŠTÚR, ref. 7, p. 173, own translation.

<sup>9</sup> ŠTÚR, ref. 7, p. 173, own translation.

<sup>10</sup> GACEK, Mikuláš: *Sibirske zápisky*. Martin : Rovesník, 1936, p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, NOWAK, Andrzej: The Russo-Polish historical confrontation. In *Sarmatian Review*, January, 1997. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~sarmatia/197/Nowak.html> (accessed 4.05.2015); LEVINTOVA, Ekaterina: Good neighbours?: dominant narratives about the ‘other’ in contemporary Polish and Russian newspapers. In: *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2010, vol. 62, no. 8, p. 1355.

ous historical conflicts and wars with the recurring occupation of each other's territories in the past have resulted in rather unfavourable attitudes towards Russians in present Polish society. A similar situation existed in the Baltic States. Czechs, in their turn, did not share "the Russian illusion" because, in their opinions, it strengthened the Slovak national aspirations. However, for the Slovaks, Czechoslovakia had never been "their own state" as it was always politically dominated by the Czechs. Thus, the Slovaks were probably the only Central and Eastern European nation that historically aspired towards Pan-Slavism, and, as a result, developed rather positive attitudes towards the Russians. Research on friendliness towards Russia from different EU member states showed that the Slovaks viewed Russia more favourably than the other countries in the region such as Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia or the Czech Republic.<sup>12</sup> Slovakia seems to have "a softer attitude" towards Russia, as it "did not register any particular conflict with Russia and tends to have a more acquiescent attitude in dealing with the Russian dossier."<sup>13</sup>

### Slovakia and other Eastern European countries

Slovak opinions about Ukraine and Belarus have been based on the elements of the Soviet Union inherited from the past as well as on the prevailing contemporary image of these countries. Ukrainians and Belarusians were not so well known and did not play a significant role in the Slovak national history. Ukraine was seen as "something behind the Carpathian Mountains", which does not affect the Slovak political life in a direct way.<sup>14</sup> The two nations became visible as separate national groups later than Russians; hence, they long remained in Russia's shadow. One of the reasons of the Slovak historical indifference or even coldness towards Ukrainians was the Ukrainian Cossack identification with its anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian nationalistic elements, which did not conform to the idea of Pan-Slavism ideology. However, during the times of the Soviet Union, the lines between Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians were rather blurred to be fused into a common image of "Soviets" or "Russians" – terms often used interchangeably.

Ukraine and especially Belarus remained rather unknown to Slovaks even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the new sovereign states. Due to the tendency to describe all Russian speakers as Russians and to the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in all three languages (Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian), the collective term "Russian" or "Eastern" or even "Soviet" was still alive in the colloquial language. Although Ukraine is the largest European country and the largest Slovak neighbor in terms of its population and total area, it has remained relatively unknown and unpopular in Slovakia.<sup>15</sup> Ukraine and Slovakia did not long have mass media channels situated in the counterpart country. Thus, most Ukraine-related information was broadcast by the Russian media and thus presented the news from Russia's perspective. In such circumstances, it was not surprising that Ukraine did not stir much interest among Slovaks, and, in general, was much less attractive than the other neighboring states. The capital of Slovakia – Bratislava, is situated very far from the Ukrainian border and from its capital – Kiev. Vienna,

<sup>12</sup> BRAGHIROLI, ref. 2, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> BRAGHIROLI, ref. 2, p. 12; LEONARD, ref. 2, p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> DULEBA, Alexander: *The Slovak-Ukrainian-Russian Security Triangle*. In BALMACEDA, M. (ed.): *Central European-Russian Security Triangle*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010, pp. 96 – 97.

<sup>15</sup> The total area of Ukraine is about 603,628 km<sup>2</sup>, the population – 44 million; the common Slovak-Ukrainian border is 97 km.

Budapest, or Prague are much closer geographically and are popular tourist destinations, while the Ukrainian capital is neither attractive nor popular for the majority of Slovaks.

Belarusians still remain one of the least known European nations not only for Slovaks, but, probably, for the entire Europe as well. Hence, Belarus was quite often portrayed as ‘a virtual “black hole” in Europe’, or ‘an anomaly in the region.’<sup>16</sup> Historically, Belarusians belonged to a number of political entities (such as the Principality of Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire). The name of the present state was never officially used in the past. The modern territory of Belarus was finally shaped in 1939, when some parts of Eastern Poland called *Eastern Borderland* with the capital of Grodno were incorporated into Soviet Belarus. During the Soviet period and later, Belarus was strongly associated with Russia because of the close political ties, cultural and religious similarities and high use of the Russian language in Belarus.<sup>17</sup> After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Belarus, like Ukraine, was seen as a country which was still closely tied with Russia and the Soviet past. It also became known across Europe as the “the last dictatorship in Europe”. Information related to other than political spheres of life in Ukraine and Belarus is almost absent. The only feature that could remind Slovaks and Belarusians of each other’s existence is sport, particularly ice hockey. It is very popular in both countries, and the 2014 Men’s World Ice Hockey Championship, which took place in Belarus, is still a much-talked-about event.

### Contemporary attitudes

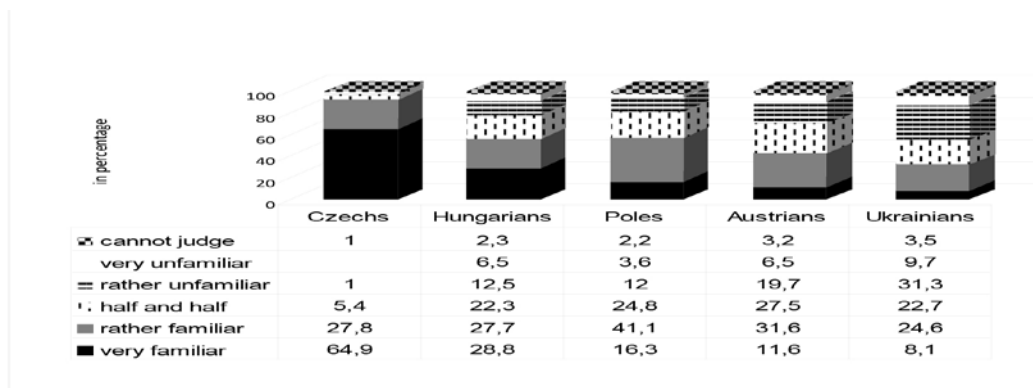
According to the public opinion polls conducted in 2003, only 8.1 % of Slovaks considered themselves to be very familiar and 24.6 % - rather familiar with Ukrainians. In the same year, only 3.6 % of Slovaks considered Ukrainians to be a very interesting nation and 17.7 % – a rather interesting nation.<sup>18</sup> The probable reason is Ukraine’s low level of economic, political, and social development. Seen as a poor, low-developed post-Soviet country, Ukraine has not excited much interest among Slovaks. Shortly before Slovakia’s accession to the European Union, Slovaks rather preferred to dissociate themselves from the unwanted Soviet past and everything connected to it. Of all the nations neighboring Slovakia, Ukrainians were also the least familiar to Slovaks, even despite their common Slavic origin; much more familiar were they to the Czechs and the Hungarians (see Graph I).

<sup>16</sup> IOFFE, Grigory: Understanding Belarus: Questions of Language. In *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2003, vol. 55, no. 7, p. 1010.

<sup>17</sup> IOFFE, Grigory: Understanding Belarus: Belarusian Identity. In *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2003, vol. 55, no. 8, p. 1267.

<sup>18</sup> Slovak Archive of Social Data (hereafter SASD), Collective Identity in Contemporary Slovakia [2003001] 2003.

**Graph I. “Are you or are you not familiar with Ukrainians?” (In percentage). Source: Own elaboration of the data file „Collective Identity in Contemporary Slovakia“, Slovak Archive of Social Data, 2003.**



High unemployment rate in Ukraine and much lower salaries have caused labor migration from Ukraine to Slovakia, including illegal migration. Job seekers, streaming mostly to the neighboring eastern parts of Slovakia, where the unemployment rate is also very high, are yet another reason that rather discredits Ukrainians in Slovak eyes. However, the tendency to see labor migrants in a negative light does not apply only to Ukrainians. Although migrant employment in Slovakia contributes to the national GDP level, Slovaks mostly perceive foreigners as those who do not contribute much to their living environment, do not know how to take care of themselves, and are a burden to the state budget.<sup>19</sup> The negative image of Ukrainians was reinforced by their strong association with the mafia, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. According to the public opinion research, only 1.5 % of the respondents found Ukrainians to be very trustworthy; 12.3 % – rather trustworthy; the majority of the respondents found Ukrainians to be equally trustworthy and untrustworthy or rather untrustworthy (29.1 % and 29 %, respectively); and 14.9 % – very untrustworthy.<sup>20</sup>

The number of foreigners living in Slovakia has increased dramatically following the country's admission to the EU. In 2004 Ukrainians, followed by the Czechs and the Poles, were the most numerous group of foreigners holding an official residence permit in Slovakia (4 007 Ukrainians). The number of Russians residing in Slovakia has also increased, albeit slightly.<sup>21</sup> In 2007 – 2008 the number of foreigners in Slovakia increased by 30%, which was one of the highest growth rates among the EU countries. However, Slovakia still remains a country with one of the lowest proportions of foreigners and migrants among all EU member states. As Ukraine was and still is the only neighboring state for which the visa is required, the number of Ukrainians crossing the Slovak border illegally is huge compared to the other neighboring nations.<sup>22</sup>

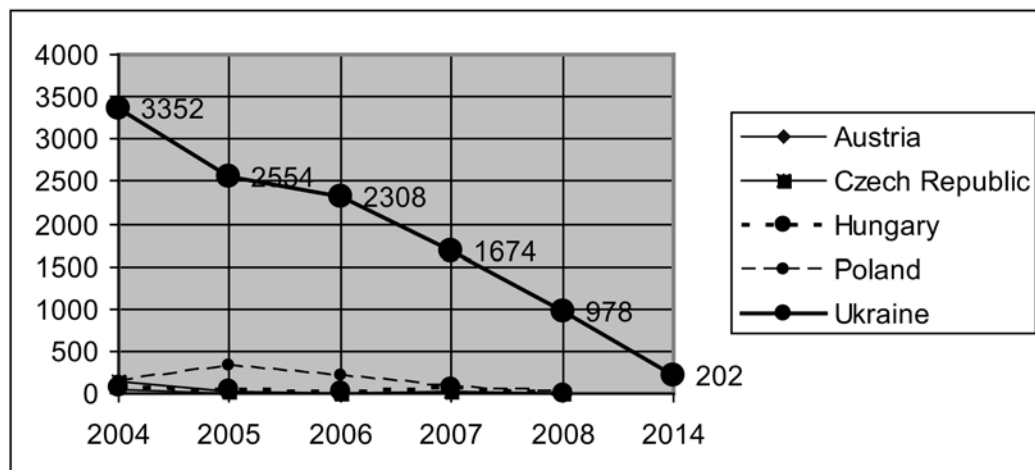
<sup>19</sup> VAŠEČKA, Michal: *Postoje verejnosti k cudzincom a zahraničnej migrácii v Slovenskej republike*. Bratislava : Medzinárodná organizácia pre migráciu 2009, p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> SASD, ref.18.

<sup>21</sup> MV SR, ref. 4.

<sup>22</sup> MV SR, ref. 4.

**Graph II. The number of foreigners crossing the Slovak border illegally. Own elaboration of data file “Prezídium Policajného zboru, Štatistický prehľad legálnej a nelegálnej migrácie v Slovenskej republike” 2004 – 2014.**



The Orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004 caused a shift in the perception of Ukrainian nation, although not a significant one, since in the long term it did not lead to the integration of Ukraine into the European Union and the subsequent democratic changes in the country. The revolution in Ukraine (called *Euromajdan*), which started in 2013, and the subsequent Russian-Ukrainian conflict, became another important issue. When the wave of demonstrations and civil unrest started in Ukraine, it was largely supported by the democratic world, especially the EU. While it may be too early to speak of a shift in the image of the Ukrainian nation as a result of the *Euromajdan* and the following events, there is a likelihood that the general image of Ukraine and Ukrainians would be gradually changing from that bearing the traces of the past (such as post-Soviet mentality, corruption, passiveness, obedience to the government, etc.) to the new definition of the Ukrainian national identity with national aspirations, Western-oriented mentality and democratic values. The results will reveal themselves in the long term.

### Research methodology

In the present research study I sought to find out what are the images and associations of young Slovaks with Eastern European countries and their nations: Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. It was particularly important to learn the opinions of the young people, who do not have their own experience with communism and the Soviet domination in Czechoslovakia to draw on. Compared to the older generations, university students are rather free from the stereotypes about Russians and Eastern Europe inherited from the past. They are those who will ultimately lead the society and decide about its political, economic, social, cultural, and other

spheres of life. Thus, the opinions of young people are crucial for the formation of the future policy towards the other nations and states.

The survey serving the needs of the present research included demographic questions (age, gender, place of residence, field and year of study) and three main questions: *“Please enter three main words or phrases that you associate with Belarus and/or Belarusians”* (The same question was repeated for Ukraine/Ukrainians and Russia/Russians.) The questions began with the less known Belarusians, followed by Ukrainians and Russians. Such an order helped to mitigate, at least to some extent, the effect of the prevalence of “Russian associations” over those with the other two countries and nations. The survey was conducted in Slovak.

The research took part in February – May 2014. When planning the research, I did not expect that certain social and political events would take place in the territory of Ukraine, which could probably influence the image of the nations under investigation. The research took place when the social upheavals in Ukraine were followed by the escalation of violence from the government, the escape of the former president Viktor Yanukovych, the transformation of power, the referendum in Crimea and military conflicts in the Eastern part of Ukraine. However, those events did not attract so much interest among the majority of the Slovak society, as for instance, it did in Poland. Geographically, Kiev is situated very far from Bratislava, not to speak of Crimea, where the Russian-Ukrainian conflict took place at the moment of the research. The information about the conflict was coming by television or the Internet rather than drawn from first-hand experience, relatives or friends. Additionally, the public’s attention was rather attracted to the presidential election campaigns in Slovakia. Thus, the events of Euromajdan were not followed so closely. Predominantly favourable attitude towards Russia in the past, and, probably, the historical experience and common roots, prevented Slovak society from an open support for Ukraine and open condemnation of Russia (as was the case in Poland, Lithuania or other countries).

## Respondents

The research was conducted with 150 university students from the Comenius University in Bratislava, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, and the University of Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. As I aimed to find out the opinions of the young generation of Slovaks, the answers of the students above 28 years of age or of those who did not reveal their age were excluded from the data. In total, 138 filled-in surveys underwent further analysis. All of the students were in the target age cohorts (Mean=23). There were 38 % of male and 62 % of female participants. 32 % of the respondents were originally from the villages and towns with a population up to 20 000; 37 % were from the towns with a population between 20 000 and 100 000; and 31 % were from the towns or cities with populations of more than 100 000. About half of the respondents (58 %) were undergraduate students; the other half (42 %) were the students of the Master’s degree programs or postgraduate programs. The majority of participants studied social sciences or other humanities (66 %); technical sciences and natural sciences accounted for 3 % each, while others made up 28 % of the respondents.



## Data analysis and interpretation

For the sake of a more detailed analysis of the opinions and associations provided, the answers were divided into five main categories:

- 1) Politics (past political system, political figure, current political situation, etc.);
- 2) Geographical characteristics (names of the cities, regions or places geographical characteristics of the countries or their regions, etc.);
- 3) Characteristics of the people and/or the culture (national character, habits, appearance, culture, etc.);
- 4) Sport (sport-related events, persons, etc.);
- 5) Others (not listed above).

The answers of each of the respondents were put in one or more categories (depending on the number of associations and their content). Each word or phrase was put in one category only.

## Associations with Russia and/or Russians

95 % of the respondents had at least one association with Russia and/or Russians. The main associations were *Putin, vodka, Moscow and hockey*. 58 % of the respondents associated Russia with *Putin (president Putin, strong president Putin, Vladimir Putin, personification of Russia by Putin, the cult of Putin, etc.)*. This was the strongest and the most readily recollected association, as it often appeared as the first in the list. What was surprising was that even such a popular century-old stereotype of Russians as *vodka* was mentioned much less frequently than the name of the current president, who personified the entire Russia. *Vodka*, known as one of the main associations with the Russians was mentioned by 24 %, *Moscow* – the capital of Russia – by 19 %, and *hockey* by 17 % of the university students.

76 % of the respondents had at least one association with Russia and/or Russians, connected with politics. As mentioned above, the associations with *Putin* were the strongest; the other associations were mentioned less often. They included: *power, communism, Kremlin, USSR, Soviet state, Medvedev, conflict, corruption, totalitarian regime, Lenin, empire, superpower, strong, Stalin, war, aggression, army, autocratic, Brezhnev, citizenship, crime, dangerous, dictatorship, Duma, Eastern, economic, energy* (each of them mentioned by no more than 10 % of the respondents); *Euroscepticism, federation, game, Gulag, hard, hegemony, huge, imperialism, international, Klitschko, Lavrov, military, monopoly, nationalism, oligarchs, Partnership, poor, Pussy Riot, Red, regime, violation of human rights, socialism, sovereign, space, Red Square, stratification of society, Ukraine, wealth, Yeltsyn, Cold War* (each of them mentioned by no more than 5 % of respondents).

43 % of the university students associated Russia and/or Russians with culture. However, the main associations were not very positive: *vodka and alcohol* (29 % altogether). The rest of the associations were not mentioned so often: *matryoshka* [Russian doll], *Russian literature, Azbuka or Cyrillic alphabet, culture, emotional, family, da* [yes], *bear, story, beautiful girls, breakfast, Orthodox Church, Ded Moroz* [Russian Santa Claus], *Russian ballet, emotional, family, history, joy, painting, Pushkin, Red color, country, culture*.

About 30 % of the respondents mentioned at least one Russian city, region, or place, or geographical characteristics of the country or its regions. The majority mentioned *Moscow* (19 %).

The other answers included: *Sochi, Siberia, large country, huge country, Crimea* [which may have been mentioned rather in a political context], *Petersburg, Stalingrad, and Caucasus*.

20 % of the respondents associated Russia with sport – the most often with *hockey/ice hockey* (18 %), the less often associations were with *Olympic Games, Olympic Games in Sochi, figure skating and World Championship*.

The remaining associations, which belonged to any of the aforementioned categories, mainly concerned Russia's natural resources: *natural gas, oil, minerals, Aeroflot, Gas prom*; or other concepts: *Trans-Siberian Railroad, rifle, shopping, cold temperature, winter*. They were mentioned by no more than 30 % of the respondents. The list of all the main associations with Russia and/or Russians is shown in Picture 1.

**Picture 1. Main associations with Russia and/or Russians. Larger fonts indicate more frequent associations.**



### Associations with Ukraine and/or Ukrainians

95 % of the respondents had at least one association with Ukraine/Ukrainians. The main associations were as follows: *Crimea* (30 %), *revolution* (*revolutionary, Orange revolution, Majdan, Euronajdan* – 25 %), and *Yanukovych* (15 %). 77 % had at least one association of Ukraine and/or Ukrainians with politics. In addition to those mentioned above, associations connected with politics were as follows: *fight for their rights, Russia/Russian influence/Russian language* (13 %), and *EU/EU access/pro-European* (12 %), which reflected the influence of the current situation in Ukraine at the moment when the research was conducted. The other associations were as follows: *social unrest, political crisis/political protests, demonstrations, war, divided, instability, tension, problematic, Timoshenko, Klitschko, Kuchma, Yushchenko, Putin, border, post-Soviet, USSR, communism, socialism, federalization, West, democracy, economic crisis, domination,*



with *Lukashenko* and *dictatorship*, the following words appeared in the survey: *authoritarian regime, non-democratic, death penalty, Russian influence, between Russia and Europe, KGB Committee, Ceausescu, censorship, totalitarian, communism, contraband, corruption, dependence, economic problems, disorders, former Soviet state, social guarantees, harassment of human rights activists, injustice, isolation, lack of democracy, no free media, Russian neighbor, opposition, oppression, pro-Russian orientation, outdated, partnership, quasi-democracy, poverty, prisoners, regime, restrictions, sovereignty, Soviet, no freedom of speech, social unrest, USSR, violation of human rights, weak, young, visa*, and others.

28 % of the respondents associated Belarus with some geographical characteristics: *Minsk, Eastern Europe/Europe, Asia, Baltic Sea, border, capital, Kishinev, North, Dnieper river, forests, lakes, nature, close to Russia*.

There were no strong associations of Belarus and/or Belarusians with the respective culture. 24% of the answers received in this category included the following: *Russian language, alcohol, Slavic nation, beautiful people, birch syrup, black raspberry, Orthodox Church, students, cordiality, white color, culture, decency, feelings, flag, folklore, friends, national identity, Lyapis Trubetskoy [music band], nice people, Oksana, piano, yellow*.

Belarus was associated with *hockey* (21 %), *Ice Hockey World Championship, Dynamo*, and *weight lifters*. There were just a few other characteristics, such as: *nice student dormitories, map, petrol, pipeline, petrol, tourism, radioactivity, rural region, science, tourism, cold*. The list of the main associations with Belarus and/or Belarusians is shown in Picture 3.

**Picture 3. Main associations with Belarus and/or Belarusians. Larger fonts indicate more frequent associations.**



## Conclusion

The Slovak images of, and associations with, the Russians have been influenced by many factors and have been shaped by the centuries of mutual contacts. Slovaks were probably the only

nation in the Central-East European region that historically developed rather positive attitudes towards Russians. Nowadays, the historical ties are still important; however, when it comes to the modern perception of the other nations and states of the former Soviet Union, socio-political situation seems to be more important than historical memory and old stereotypes. Historical nostalgia rather gave in to reality, especially in the moments of acute political conflicts and social changes. All of the nations under investigation were strongly associated with their political situation and political figures; associations with culture and people, as well as with other spheres of life, were less numerous. Thus, it could be said that political life shaped the general images of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus to a high extent among the group of university students participating in the present research.

The most frequent associations with Russia were *Putin, vodka, Moscow and hockey*; with Ukraine – *Crimea, revolution and Yanukovich*; with Belarus – *Lukashenko, dictatorship, Minsk, Russia and hockey*. Russia and Belarus were first and foremost associated with their political figures (presidents) who, in some way, personify the images of those nations. Those were the immediate associations coming to the respondents' minds, as they were mostly listed first. The other associations with both Russia and Belarus concerned the characteristics of their political systems and were deeply negative: "*dictatorship, totalitarian regime, no freedom*", etc." Russia, unlike the other two states, was also characterized by *power, strength and political and military force*, which underlined its superior position among the three. Only Ukrainians gained emotionally positive associations related to their current socio-political situation: "*fighting for their rights, dignity, patriotism*," etc. There were no other strong associations with Ukraine except politics: *social and political unrests, protests, demonstrations, revolution, conflicts, war, Kiev, Lviv, Eastern Ukraine, Pro-Russian, Pro-European*, etc. Both Ukraine and Belarus were associated with Russia, however, in a completely different manner: while Ukraine was seen as a state attempting to escape the Russian zone of influence, Belarus, on the contrary, was seen as totally dominated by Russia (e.g. associations like *Russia, Russian influence, Russian language*, etc.). Russia can still bring back some nostalgia among certain generations of Slovaks (mostly elderly adults), however, compared to historical discourse, it has definitely lost its special role.