

Imaging the Other Side of the Iron Curtain: Then and Now. Oral History Research Conducted in Eastern Slovakia

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For forty years, the Iron Curtain was a symbol of a Europe divided between Soviet and Western influence. Powers on each side of the border invested huge efforts into creating ideologically motivated images of the *Other*. The article presents the outcomes of biographical research which offers an insight into how aged people in Eastern Slovakia remember their pre-1989 perceptions of the Western Block and how they think of life in the West today, focusing on the main element of their memories in this respect – emigration. It is the outcome of a broader oral history project being conducted in Slovakia since 2017, aiming to obtain and analyse current images of socialism, as communicated today by the generation of witnesses who were living their adult lives during the period spanning between the 1960s and the 1980s; and understanding the relations between the current attitudes and values of the respondents and their experience of life in state socialist regimes.

Key words: remembering socialism, imagining the West, Eastern Slovakia, emigration, oral history

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‘I do not want to say that we have bad lives but maybe it would be better that people stay here. Why do they need to go to Ireland?’

Public state-driven remembering of socialism in Slovakia has been strongly influenced by promoting the concepts of criminality, lawlessness and suppression of basic human rights and freedoms. In 2020, Slovakia’s government signed a new amendment of the 1996 law on the ‘immorality and illegality of the communist system’. While the 1996 law denotes the Slovak Communist Party as a criminal and reprehensible organization, its 2020 amendment calls for the removal of monuments and street names from the

socialist era.¹ This sort of approach has led to equating of the socialist regime with Nazi-fascist dictatorship, which is to some extent also symbolized by the scope of the work conducted in the Nation's Memory Institute. The institution was set up to perform evaluations of the period marked by oppression, to analyse the causes and means of loss of freedom, manifestations of fascist and communist regimes, their ideology and involvement of native and foreign persons.² Historical research on Socialism in Slovakia has thus significantly emphasized the experience of the victims and people oppressed and marginalized by the regime and focused on underground dissident movements, aiming to delegitimize the social and political system that took hold in Slovakia in the period 1948–1989. Yet, the experience and memories of the mainstream common population with the socialist era also remains an important area of study, and this has been covered mainly by ethnologists and sociologists in Slovakia (e.g. Profantová, *Ed.*, 2006, Profantová, *Ed.*, 2012).

This article presents a partial outcome of a broader research project: 'Current Images of socialism' conducted in Slovakia since 2017. The main objective in this project is to record, using the oral history method, the witnesses' current recollections of their daily life during socialism in Slovakia in the period of 1960–1989.³ Researchers are interested in the memories of respondents related to their family life, work and leisure in the given historic period. One of the aspects of the project is to study the reflections of the "socialist heritage" by respondents – in what way the experiences from their life in socialism influence them at present. The research team has been working on conducting interviews with over 100 respondents, while taking into consideration geographical balance (representation of the regions of Western, Central, Eastern Slovakia and the capital), proportionate involvement of respondents from rural and urban areas, gender balance, as well as including respondents with different professional and educational backgrounds.

The main research question explored in the paper is how the respondents from Eastern Slovakia, who were adult people in the period of normalization, remember their pre-1989 perceptions of the Western Block and how they think of life in the West today, focusing on the main element of their memories in this respect – emigration. It is important to note here that I did not pre-define the topic of emigration as a research question. Instead, it appeared rather spontaneously as a part of recollection of the interviewees when they either themselves remembered or, were encouraged by me to

1 338/220 of the Code.

2 <https://www.upn.gov.sk/>

3 The reference years 1960–1989 correspond to two milestones of the "great history". On 11 July 1960, the new Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (Constitutional Act No. 100/1960 Coll.) was adopted, stating in its declaration that Czechoslovakia completed the building of the socialist system. The second milestone is represented by the end of the rule of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia as the leading political party. This was reflected in Constitutional Act No. 135/1989 Coll. abolishing the leading role of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, as entrenched in Article 4 of the Constitution of CSSR of 1960. This time span includes several important socio-political processes, such as the culmination of the so-called revitalisation process in society, the Prague Spring of 1968, and the subsequent normalisation period, marked by restoration of the conditions prevailing before the Prague Spring, which were largely influencing the life of the Czechoslovak population until November 1989.

think of their perceptions of life on the other side of the Iron curtain. The topic of emigration appeared during the interviews as the central issue when discussing the West, both when looking back to the past and when assessing the current situation. Research was conducted in different towns and villages in Eastern Slovakia between May and November 2018. This region is economically the poorest one in the country, and there is a significant regional gap in GDP in comparison to the country's richest region, Bratislava, which is almost 3.5 times higher than in Eastern Slovakia. According to OECD, in 2016, the Slovak Republic had the second highest regional economic disparities among 33 OECD countries. In Eastern Slovakia, the youth unemployment rate (30%) was more than three times higher than in Western Slovakia (9.8%) in 2017 (OECD, 2018). I deem the current economic situation of my respondents an important aspect in shaping the memory of people from the region and how they tend to remember the past.

The fieldwork consisted of conducting 20 interviews with 10 participants, all born before 1950, i.e. being already adult persons in the period researched. There were 7 female and 3 male participants in my research group. Both rural and urban respondents were involved in the research group. There were Slovaks, Hungarians and Ruthenians included in the research. Regarding religious denomination, there were practicing Catholics, Lutherans, Orthodox, and Greek Catholics as well as people declaring themselves atheists. The education level of my participants varied from the level of having completed elementary school up to having completed university education. Regarding their professional history, there were people who used to be workers in agriculture or factory labour, people employed in the building industry, teachers, nurses, doctors, administrative staff, as well as professional party employees.⁴

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH

I visited each of the interviewees three times – there was an initial preparatory meeting, where I was explaining the aims of the project and described to participants how we would do our interviews. Then followed the first interview; this was more in the hands of witnesses themselves. It was mostly a biographical narrative interview, where they themselves were freely passing from topic to topic, touching those areas of their lives they themselves regarded to be important. The second interview was held after I processed the first one. It followed usually within one week after the first one. This was an open interview where I participated more with questions related to relevant and interesting topics that occurred during the first interview, and I tried to gain more details about particular issues. After recording the two interviews with each witness, I singled out the themes recurring in the transcripts, analysed the language that constructed those themes, and identified the commonalities in the use of language in

4 All the respondents were interviewed in the Slovak language, as they were fluent in it, some of them, however, answered in the mix of standard Slovak and local Šariš region dialect, in which the interviewer is fluent. The real first names of the respondents are used throughout the text, with which they all agreed.

relation to each theme. These steps helped me in creating an analytical structure for further interpretations and explanations of the collected sources. Stemming from the concept that actual life course cannot be reconstructed and that experiences are always interpreted subjectively and mediated by perception (Rosenthal, 2018), I aimed to contextualize the data obtained through the interviews in space and time – unifying aspects of all interviews – which helped me in understanding and interpreting the material collected and in finding general patterns in different life stories I had collected. In other words, I conceptualized the analysis of the interviews within social ecology of my respondents. I studied how they interact with and respond to the environment around them, and how these interactions affect society and the environment as a whole. This has been an under-represented approach in oral history scholarship, which has so far mainly focused on two other kinds of reading: *facts*, or what happened on one hand, and the *psyche*, i.e. how it affected the human soul on the other hand (Pollin-Galay, 2018).

Qualitative forms of content analysis have been frequently used methods in interpreting oral history sources. However, discourse analysis methods transcend content analysis in that they can be used to reveal underlying and contextualized meanings of texts (Van Dijk, 1993). My work stemmed from Norman Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) – an interdisciplinary interpretative approach to the study of discourse that views language as a source of social practice (Fairclough, 1995). Merging key concerns of linguistic research and critical engagement with the social and political context in which the narratives have been produced allowed me comprehend the motivation of the interviewees when talking about their experiences. In addition to the *real* (positivist tradition which regards our thoughts as more or less good reflections of reality) and the *imaginary* (which sees reality, or at least the part that we are able to grasp, as a product of our own mental constructions), discourse analysis introduces a third independent domain. The field of a discourse study is society as it occurs in *language*. Language is regarded as a driving force behind human knowledge about the world, but even more radical, it brings reality into existence. In other words, the social reality is constructed within society, and here language and symbols play a central role (Cruikshank, 2012).

The theoretical framework of my work was inspired by Assmann's concept of individual memory seen as the personal memory each of us has of our experiences, and which shapes our relationships and identity, while being rather deceptive, subjective, and changeable (Assman, 2006: 36). This draws on Halbwachs' concept of a memory as a production of an individual who neither acquires nor recalls his or her memories in isolation, but rather in society; and his idea of social frames of memory as instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord with the predominant thoughts of the society in particular epochs (Halbwachs, 1992: 38–40). This idea was further developed by Assmann suggesting that individual memories “do not exist in isolation, but are networked with the memories of others”, and it is in their ability to overlap and connect within a particular group that they have the potential to be community building (Assmann, 2006). This concept has been to some extent challenged by Jones and Pinfold who argue that Assmann's model tends to view society as homogenous, where the formative historical experiences of individuals of approximately the same age are similar enough to constitute

group identity. The authors point out that particularly in the post-socialist context, historical experiences varied significantly according to nationality, class and social position and call for broadening the heuristic tools beyond the generational ones and introduced concepts such as individual remembering in a collective context; community remembering; mediation of memory; narratives of memory; and political memory (Jones, Pinfold, 2014). Within this context, an important dimension that I considered in my research was the current social and personal situation of my witnesses and how this could influence them remembering the past. Regarding the topic of remembering socialism, three main streams of scholarship have developed in Central and Eastern Europe: 1. works focusing on institutions, discussing mainly the character of the regime; 2. works on resistance and opposition, often dealing with concepts of oppression, martyrdom and political marginalization; and 3. social, cultural, and everyday history (Todorova, 2014). Research presented in the article follows the third thematic cluster, acknowledging that there is a particular need not only for approaching the social and cultural aspects of everyday life during socialism, but also for documenting the memories related to regime change (Bartha, 2013; Pakier, Wawrzyniak, 2016), which, as will be shown later in the article, often constitutes an important part of remembering the socialist past.

PAST PROFESSIONAL LIFE AT THE CENTRE OF REMEBRANCE

Memories of their work and professional lives became central and most important in all respondents' biographical narratives. This might be the outcome of the fact that nowadays they are pensioners and work-related memories bring back remembering the more active days filled with a dynamic social life. One of the recurring images related to this topic was recalling the benefits of collective work, which was seen by all respondents as highly valuable.

Mrs Anna's family from the village of Štrba had lost all their privately owned land during the collectivization in the 1950s,⁵ yet she was talking about working in a united agriculture cooperative with great pride and saw certain benefits in comparison to private ownership of the land:

The cooperative was established in our village in 1958. So we were going there in order to start it up, and we were working for very little money... But we were willing to work there and make it a better and prosperous venture. Maybe I do not need to tell you how they took everything away from us? ... Well, once they took our land, they merged the particular parcels into a huge single field. Then they used tractors to farm the land. [After the collectivization] the work was much easier than before, when we were individual farmers. People either had jobs or worked in the cooperative. There, we did everything with our hands: we milked, raked, made hay, made goods, and grew

5 Collectivization of land as the integration of agricultural production within a centrally planned economy was a part of the transformation of the society that commenced after the Communist party came to power in Czechoslovakia at the end of 1940s, aiming to nationalisation of property and reconstruction of the ownership structures. For more on the topic, see Varinský (2014).

potatoes. We had to work a lot and we were improving and developing the cooperative, even though our salaries were small. ... Well, we regretted that they took away our field from us. On the other hand, we were also somewhat relaxed because then we could choose the life we wanted. Either we went to the factories or we worked in the cooperative. And so we could have a different life.

There have been a number of statements recorded from all respondents indicating their pride in the high quality outputs of their work. These were ranging from factory workers and people employed in agriculture describing their production back then as much more valuable than products of today, up to doctors and nurses praising high standards of socialist school education and public health care. Mrs Anna talked extensively about the benefits of a factory labour and highlighted the dignity of workers and high standards of the production:

When I was seventeen, I went to work to the factory in Svit. There we were sewing clothes: pantyhose, stockings, pullovers, sweaters, and socks, and things like these. The norms were set high; we were working for eight hours, completing the tasks. We liked the work. We liked the work very much because we were in a team. The team was good, we did not envy to each other. We worked and we worked with a smile, we were often laughing because we were a good team... We are thankful to the factory that we were working there. I would say that we were taught to be honest while working in the factory. We were also sending decent products to the world. For example, stockings – they had to be perfectly done, well finished. There were checks so that the products would be great. And see, it was only a stocking. We were sending our products abroad. These had to be high quality things... Today we have the material I am dissatisfied with. When I see things, when I buy them and see those threads sticking out all around, I don't like it. Because we used to work for little money, for pennies, for pennies, and we could do it. And today we have such products that I am dissatisfied with.

Mr Ján has spent all his professional life in Prešov, where he held different positions as a paediatrician, including teaching medical students and management of health care facilities. He commented on differences in health care functioning during socialism and today, highly praising the former one, including his perceptions of changes in societal behaviours and attitudes towards health and health care after 1989:

Before, [the health care system] was very well organized. Both people and employees were taken care of. When the freedom came, it stopped working. Before, there was a good level of healthcare. There was no technology, for example like in Western countries. We did not have access to it, here and there, some equipment was bought to Prague to Motol, or to Bratislava, and that was all. Yet, the system worked. There was a lack of money for buying the equipment and paying people well. Well, we cursed it, but we took it in such a way that we were all equal, you know. Health was the priority, and people were more responsible for their health than they are now... Nowadays people demand different medical checks and they complain, under the influence of the media, who encourage them to do so... and yet they do absolutely nothing for their health... Mentally, we are constantly under stress and the society is constantly rushing somewhere,

*this will kill us. So this is bad society as a whole and the healthcare cannot save it...
The nutrition is catastrophic.*

References to private life would usually also come in tight connection with the narratives on the professional affiliation of the respondents. The prevalence of the work-related memories when remembering life during socialism might not be surprising, taking into consideration the social and personal status of the respondents. Almost all being already pensioners, they face complex issues related to experiencing retirement. Apart from social and psychological impacts, the aged people in Slovakia also encounter a number of challenges related to economic constraints. Various EU and national reports have shown that due to demographic development and low income, older people are nowadays exposed to one of the greatest risks among all age groups – the risk of poverty. They are also experiencing social exclusion, limitation in their social lives, lack of mobility, disrespect and health problems, and limited access to social services and assistance (EC, 2010). Internalizing the idea of impoverishment and social exclusion of the elderly, which suggests that they do not have equal access to services, information, education or integration into the workforce, might have contributed to even stronger reinforcing of the positive memories of their lives in socialism, which were marked, in the case of the respondents, by their most active professional years. Overall, memories of social coherence in the sense of alignment and harmonious order in a network of relationships among individuals who share common interests and objectives were often articulated. Comforts of socialist modernity and remembrance of happy times were the most frequently communicated images of the socialist past. Here it is important to understand these memories within the local social and economic context: during socialism, the region of Eastern Slovakia profited largely from industrialisation and modernisation. In the interwar period, Eastern Slovakia, apart from the town of Košice, mainly depended on agriculture, and when compared to the rest of Czechoslovakia, it was a rather poor region. Eastern Slovakia was also significantly damaged during the Second World War. The reconstruction of this region and the massive industrialisation and urbanisation accelerated especially in the second half of the 20th century, i.e. during the period we discussed with the respondents. However, although positive images of life prevailed when talking about life during socialism, there were also some patterns related to the negative side of life in that era. In general, there were two recurring negative connotations when remembering the socialist past occurring in the narratives produced by my respondents: limited public religious life and fear from the network of informers who were seen as dangerous and capable of causing a lot of trouble to ordinary people.

REMEMBERING IMAGINING THE WEST

Although five out of ten respondents spontaneously mentioned the concept of the West during the first interview, this usually would not play a very important element in their narrative. In the majority of the cases, it was me in the role of the interviewer who had to bring up the memories of perceptions of life in the West as a topic of discussion during the second interview. Consequently, the narrators (eight out of ten) would refer

to some closer or more distant family members who emigrated to the West, and that they acquired the image of the West only through their experience, usually by exchanging letters (in two cases a visit of foreign relatives in Czechoslovakia was mentioned). One respondent mentioned a fear from this mail exchange being checked by the state authorities:

My mother had a cousin in Argentina, she emigrated there during the crisis (i.e. during the Great Depression in 1930s, S. O.). Her husband worked as Perón's bodyguard. My mother used to exchange letters with her, telephone communication was not possible. They (the state security, S. O.) knew everything. They followed these exchanges, thus the letters had to be very casual. Half of it was just something like "God bless you and your family, so that you and your children remain healthy" – just generalities. My husband also had relatives, in the USA. But they were simple people, a common worker and his wife. Here and there they also sent some gifts, some dollars. This communication was not so much controlled by the state, as there was no danger here. But my father and my mother, as teachers, they were very much checked.

Three of the interviewees had themselves travelled to the countries beyond the Iron Curtain before 1989. As the discussions followed, some of the respondents admitted that either they themselves or their relatives had considered emigrating to the West but finally decided not to leave and stay at home, as this ultimately looked like a more reasonable option at that moment. As the usual reasons for this decision, they would state that they had close relations to some people at home they felt they could not abandon (parents, girlfriend) or that there was a fear that part of their family could be persecuted after their emigration. Mrs Deta, a retired teacher, recalled her brother, a musician, and what she saw as the lost life opportunity when he decided not to stay in emigration in West Germany:

I have to mention an important thing caused by the normalization: the closure of the borders. My brother was a professional musician, playing in restaurants and bars. He got to West Germany. By the way, my mother had a cousin in Munich. I used to exchange mails with her, but she has died. Anyway, my brother was staying with her and playing there in a band. And he was thinking of staying there, as his friends there were persuading him to do so. There was also a factory nearby there, I don't know which one, maybe Mercedes, and they told him: "Cyr, you will find a job here", he even could speak German. But then he thought: "while I was considering it" – it was in the seventies – "I had in mind that you were studying at the university, father and mother were still teaching in school, they were just a few years before their pension ...if I stayed in Germany, they would lose their jobs, you would be kicked out of the university..." and this then caused all of his subsequent life drama. When he returned back home, he already faced problems on the borders, since his visa had not been prolonged as the leader of their group had not taken care of that. My brother was taken to the police. He was examined there like some murderer. He asked me to send a letter to Germany on his behalf; they found out and alerted him, asking why he was pulling his sister into this capitalist crap, whether he wanted me to get kicked out of school.... So this was the times. And he didn't want to cause any troubles. And, therefore, he returned back

home. And then he found the love of his life. But it was an unhappy love. His son died when he was twenty-five years old, he was struck by electricity. And today my brother is actually a homeless person, and this is all the consequence of those times, when one could not decide freely. I am so sorry for him: his life could have taken a completely different course if he had not returned back from Germany. He could be a musician there, or he could do anything else, he was very clever. It was the year of 1973.

Several respondents claimed they had moral barriers preventing them from abandoning their families and friends. Despite the relative initial lack of interest in the topic of the West during our interviews, these recollections indicate that my respondents were actually interested in the life in the West during socialism, and did indeed think of it, at a certain point of their life, as an option.

In general, two clusters of topics emerged when remembering imagining the West during socialism: relative material well-being and availability of goods, and, more prominently, the constraints of life in the emigration. The memories of the West produced by the witnesses that I encountered during our conversation as first were those of the availability of exquisite commodities in the Western shops. Mr Ján spent, as a student of medicine, a summer in Düsseldorf at the beginning of the 1960s, staying with a distant relative and earning some money at a book printer's workshop:

I was happy when this elderly lady, with whom I stayed, kindly asked me to do shopping for her. I just asked her to write me on a piece of paper what she wanted. I really enjoyed that shopping. There were huge supermarkets; we didn't have such shopping centres at home those times. I was young and entertained by that and I thought it was good.

Mrs Marta from Prešov remembered that in the 1980s, when she and her socially well-positioned and politically well-connected husband obtained permission to travel abroad, she visited her cousin in Vienna (who had emigrated there in 1968):

I would not say I was interested in life in the West. We had all we needed here. But then my cousin who was two years younger than me emigrated and I got interested... My husband managed through his connections to get permission to travel out of the country to visit them... We were amazed, that was incomparable to what we had back at home... My husband liked DIY projects, and we entered a shop ... they had there such things that shocked us, we were going crazy just looking at them.

However, certain limitations were applied when assessing these as some ultimate advantages. For example, Mrs Marta was commenting on the situation of her cousin in Austria:

Well, they could do whatever they wanted. But you know, my cousin was a nurse, and she couldn't get this sort of employment there. Such a lady from Prague she was – and in Vienna, all she could do was cleaning other people's homes.

SOCIALIST NARRATIVES OF A HARD LIFE IN THE EMIGRATION PENETRATING INTO THE IMAGES OF THE WEST TODAY

Imagining the life of people who decided to leave their homeland and live abroad became a central topic when talking about the life in the West. There was also a certain spanning through the periods visible – although I asked my respondents if they had any contacts – relatives or friends – living in the West in the period between the 1960s and 1980s, they would often refer to the experiences (and family stories told from generation to generation) of the members of their families who emigrated already in the interwar period or even earlier – always for economic reasons – to find a job and earn a salary. These stories were usually accompanied by the images of hardship, extremely exhausting and dangerous work, divided families, and complaints about unfair life in the emigration (usually in the United States), as well as challenging times the families missing their fathers at home had to undergo. Mr Jozef from the village of Štrba commented on the experience from the interwar period:

Some people from Štrba, they literally had to escape to America. Life was very hard here, it was necessary to speculate in order to survive. Some returned, but the majority never came back, they stayed there, far behind the mountains. We did not have much news about them. One returned back, Mišo Pleteník, we learned that without hard work you would not survive, neither at home, or abroad. Abroad, you even had to work much harder, so that the locals would see that they can include you among themselves.

Mrs Deta recalls the experience of her relative who spent some time in the USA during the interwar period with the aim to improve his financial situation and enable himself to buy some land:

My father, as a teacher, had to participate in the land collectivization. He had to go from house to house and persuade the farmers to give up their lands... it was no fun. One of our relatives had been to America long before, having an exhausting and a very dangerous job in a mine. With what he had earned, he returned back home to buy some land... and then the Communists took away from him everything he had. And he was put in prison. It was not worth the risk and toil abroad.

Particularly these images of hardship that the narrators recalled about the idea of emigration were deeply influenced by the contemporary socialist narratives. Marxist theories of migration, based on historical materialism which was applied rigorously to a wide array of economic and political issues, examine the relocation of people from one region or country to another in response to the economic forces at play in a specific historical context (Vogel, 2013). Another important interpretation Marxism offered in relation to the migration can be seen in the claim of John Kosa that *it can be generally observed in the history of European emigration that minority people showed a greater tendency to leave their country than the sons of the majority* (Kosa, 1957: 504). Thus, economic deprivation and social marginalization as two main driving forces of emigration were propagated by the Marxist historiography, sociology and narratives

in general, Slovak authors included (e.g. Tajták, 1961; Svetoň, 1970).⁶ Concurrently, socialist propaganda was developing the image of the West as *the place of the exploitation of the working class, hunger, hopelessness and crime, on the one hand, while the socialist world was presented as a place with better living conditions, where there is no unemployment, where people are equal, where the workers are governing by themselves, where new factories, new roads, new flats are being built* (Štefančík, Nemcová, 2015: 101).

Since the 1990s, there have been a number of efforts by sociologists in Slovakia to challenge the explanations offered by the Marxist narratives, pointing out that official narratives produced during socialism had a tendency to exaggerate both scope and social impact of emigration. A more granulated picture of emigration, its causes, patterns and consequences have been offered, fine-tuning the scholarship with such concepts as importance of existing social networks and the level of education as important factors influencing decisions to emigrate (Bahna, 2011). Archival research of state security documents by Ivica Bumová showed that in 1970, there were around 70.000 Czechoslovak citizens living abroad, out of which 17.5% came from Slovakia, and two thirds of these were from Western Slovakia (Bumová, 2006), which leads to contesting the explanation of emigration as based predominantly on economic reasons, and highlighting such aspects of the migration like human and network capital, not poverty (Bahna, 2011).

Yet, talking to my respondents in Eastern Slovakia about their memories of perceiving the West during the times of socialism, and also today, it seems that it is exactly the images of economic restraint and social marginalization leading to emigration that pertain in their minds when imagining the West, and the boundaries between different periods (today/during socialism/pre-socialist times) of emigration are rather blurred. I have observed that when talking about imagining the West during socialism, my respondents often switched in their narration to articulate their opinions on the present-day situation. Thinking of the life in the West today, the issues of the availability of material goods seem less relevant, and my respondents focused on exploitative and disruptive aspects of the emigration, well aligned with the Marxist narratives of the migration, often accompanied by a nostalgic tone of remembering the socialist past and its benefits of modernity. These were visible, for example, in the contemplation of Mrs Mária, a former nurse, when she was commenting on changes of society and education after 1989, which she put in a direct connection with the contemporary emigration:

We should pay more attention to the education, the things might consequently progress and maybe people would then stay here... And maybe life would be different. I do not

6 Historically, there were two major types of emigration from the region of Slovakia (being a part of Hungary before 1918), which could be divided into economical and ideological (including religious and political reasons). The history of emigration from this area includes both internal and external movements of people as a consequence of religious turmoil caused by the Hussite movement, later by the Reformation and Recatholization in the 16th to the 18th centuries (people fleeing the country being persecuted for their faith, becoming marginalized within their original societies). Another important wave from this region was the economic emigration being boosted in the 19th century, targeting mainly Western Europe and the USA (in this sense, Hungarian authorities were strongly supporting emigration from the ethnic minorities). The massive emigration from the region of Slovakia that began in the third quarter of the 19th century was certainly a significant phenomenon with a substantial social impact (Harušák, 2013).

want to say that we have bad lives but maybe it would be better that people stay here. Why do they need to go to Ireland? Now I am not speaking about the well educated people with university degrees, but about common people, like waiters or people with secondary technical education. What to do with a kid who completes a secondary technical school? Where will he find a job? The old factories were closed... There children used to learn all sorts of things. Now we have here colossal Renault, Honda and god knows what else. Will these factories take students to teach them how to repair the cars? Maybe yes, I am only asking.

While understanding very well the reasons for the emigration of current young generations, related to finding work, commenting on the contemporary life of these emigrants in the West is held in a similar mode as how they recalled their family histories and lives of their grandfathers who left homes in order to earn living for their families, illustrated by a comment of Mr Jozef:

This is a very delicate topic. Youth is scattered around the world. Young families have moved abroad, also from my own family – they left to Germany. They went there because of the work... and they could earn there much more than here at home. I don't believe that there are many who would not like to come back. They have their connections here, their relatives, and strong ties. But there they have better conditions... People are happy to have a good job and earn well.

CONCLUSION

When reflecting their lives during socialism, central to my respondents' memories were their professional lives, which went hand in hand with relatively happy recollections related to their social inclusion and recalling feelings of satisfaction stemming from pride from their production. This is not surprising, given the fact that the respondents lived their most active and productive part of their lives during the period in question, when massive modernization took place in the region where they had their homes. Initially, the respondents did not explicitly recall much interest in the West during socialism. Spontaneous recollections of their perceptions of the West were rather scarce, and needed to be encouraged by the interviewer. However, during the course of their narratives, it became clear that the image of living in the West was present in their lives during socialism. Despite their different social background and life experiences, imagining the West brought about among my respondents unanimously the internalization of the idea of living in the West as a possible choice and subsequently reflecting on the life in the emigration in general. In this respect, all my respondents showed that they have been highly influenced by those ideas about emigration, which were produced and circulated by the official narratives produced during socialism. Not distinguishing between the social and political circumstances of the old and contemporary emigration contexts and patterns, emigration continues to be perceived as an escape route for the marginalized population (i.e. people living in a peripheral region) and as motivated by economic reasons (people from the economically less advanced area). The respondents articulated their opinions mainly in relation to fear that many people today need to

abandon their homes and go to live and work in the West, as they do not have any access to decent means of living at home. This opinion was voiced rather unanimously; no differences were registered based on ethnic or religious self-identification, nor in relation to the level of education or past professional affiliation of the respondents. Emigration has been deeply embedded in the collective memory and historical consciousness of people living in Slovakia, and analysing interviews with my respondents proved that the connotations related to emigration are those of poverty, fight for a better life but also abandoning of the family, and thus constituting a sort of a reluctant attitude towards the West, as a target of the emigrants. In the next steps of the research, regional disparities and generational differences will need to be focused on in order to further granulate the outcomes and find/confirm the correlation between the results of my preliminary analysis with factors such as age and corresponding social status of my respondents (pensioners) and the fact that Eastern Slovakia currently belongs to the regions most affected by the work-related emigration to the West.

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The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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