

Slovakia as a Safe Country – The Perspective of the Slovak Community Members of Vojvodina

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This article explores the current migration of the Slovak community members of Serbia to Slovakia, focusing on their perception of safety and risk, in the period since 1990 when the post-Communist transition began both in Serbia and Slovakia. The authors attempt to analyse how the members of the given community, who migrated to Slovakia during the reference period, perceive Slovakia today from the point of view of their safety, understood as the search for freedom from threats. They focus on individual safety factors (life, health, status, wealth and freedom). After 1990, Slovakia became not only a country left by migrants, but also a country of destination for migrants. One such migrant group is the members of Slovak communities abroad, in particular Serbia, Romania and Ukraine. The first wave of migration of Slovaks from Serbia took place in the early 1990s in connection with the violent ethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia, and the next one as a result of the global financial crisis in 2008, which intensified after 2015. The main push factors of the migration of Vojvodina Slovaks to Slovakia in the 1990s included attempts to avoid mobilisation and participation in combat operations; after 2008, the key role was played primarily by material issues which they perceived as an existential threat to themselves and to their families. The main pull factor in favour of choosing Slovakia comprise of the relatively small administrative barriers and linguistic proximity. While our interlocutors regarded their concerns about the impacts of the 1990s war conflicts as short-term threats, they perceived the social impacts of the economic transition and uncontrolled global financial crisis after 2008 as long-term or even permanent threats. In this context, they consider Slovakia a safe country. The article is based on extensive multi-sited fieldwork – in-depth interviews with the members of the community – and on other available sources (legal documents, statistical data, media, etc.).

Key words: Slovak community of Vojvodina, co-ethnic migration, individual safety, Serbia, Slovakia, diaspora policy

This article explores the current migration of the members of the Slovak community of Serbia to Slovakia, focusing on their perception of safety and risk, in the period since 1990 when the post-Communist transition began both in Serbia and Slovakia. Our research focuses on those members of the community who left their country in several waves after 1990 and later as a result of the war conflicts in former Yugoslavia, the global financial crisis in 2008, and the on-going economic crisis in Serbia, and chose Slovakia as the place of their permanent or temporary residence. It is primarily economically motivated migration and the result of different dynamics of the political and socio-economic developments in Slovakia and Serbia during the reference period. We focus on the aspects of safety which, in the given context, we understand as the “search for freedom from threats” (Buzan, 1991: 432–433; Stone, 2009). The safety vs. risk opposition was present in the statements of our interlocutors from the very beginning of our research, and not only when they were explaining the reasons for their decision in favour of permanent or temporary migration from Serbia to Slovakia, but, in many respects, mainly when they were comparing the living conditions in their country of origin and in the receiving country. Barry Buzan defines “survival” as the bottom line of safety, but, in a broader sense, he understands it also as a substantial range of concerns about the conditions of existence (Ibid.). Buzan’s definition of safety suggests that it is a relative category. We therefore consider it necessary to explore this issue from a comparative perspective of Slovakia as a receiving country and Serbia as a country of origin. This study addresses the main factors of individual safety, understood by Buzan as “life, health, status, wealth and freedom” (Buzan, 1983: 18), which, in the context of the members of the Slovak community of Vojvodina, represent the pull and push factors of their migration. Pull factors are factors that attract an individual to migration, while push factors repel the individual from continued staying in his/her place of habitual residence (EASO, 2016: 5). We explore the security issues in a triadic relationship between the members of the Vojvodina Slovaks’ community, the country where they live and their external homeland (Brubaker, 1995), from the perspective of the national states’ governments and from the perspective of the members of analysed community. In the first section of this article we examine the political, economic and social aspects of the migration of the members of the Slovak community of Vojvodina while the second section focuses on analysis of the viewpoint “from below”.

1. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF RESEARCH

This article is based on extensive multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1995) carried out both in Slovakia and Serbia (at several locations in the region of central Banat in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina). Multi-sited fieldwork is necessary because the community is scattered: some have remained in Serbia, some are temporarily resident in Slovakia for longer or shorter periods, while others are permanently settled in Slovakia. Many members of the group exist in a kind of *limbo* between various

(im)possibilities. The multi-sited approach defines the terrain as a network of localities and allows an overview of the dynamics of different interconnected parts of the community (Hannerz, 2003). Without pretensions to such holism, we will attempt to examine the community at three analytical levels simultaneously (here, there, and in-between) (Boccagni, 2016: 4, 6). Even though the research has a multi-local character, its core part was carried out in Bratislava. Most interviews were conducted in 2017–2019, yet our research began a couple of years before.¹

The interviews were semi-structured. In-depth interviews were conducted with more than sixty interlocutors². We met with some of them a number of times and repeated our conversations. Some of our interlocutors were our friends and others became friends over the course of the research. We made an effort to ensure that the research included interlocutors of different sex, age, level of education and profession, who had migrated to Slovakia at different times. Our aim was to explore the *emic* perspective, the diversity and often conflicting nature of individual viewpoints and experiences of those belonging to the community under investigation.

The interdisciplinary and bilateral approach to the research is of key importance in reaching an understanding of the problem of this current trans-national migration: the Slovakian researcher understands the Slovakian and Czechoslovakian social, historical and political context, and their Serbian counterpart has a deeper understanding of the problem from the Serbian and Yugoslav context (cf. Fitzgerald, 2006). The interlocutors had an option to choose the language they wish to speak in. They were informed that the Slovak researcher is a competent speaker of Serbian and that the Serbian researcher understands Slovak well, though she speaks it less fluently. Both languages were used in our conversations, giving us the opportunity to assess the competence of our interlocutors in Slovak and in Serbian.

The data collected in the field were completed with other available sources (legal documents, statistical data, media, social networks, etc.). In our research, we focused primarily on the narratives of migrants. We also take into account the theoretical and methodological implications of new approaches in migration and diversity studies, including 'decentring' as a shift of attention from migrants as such to the wider social and political structures within which migrations takes place (Nieswand, 2016: 284) and, in the example of this study, specifically the nationalising processes (Brubaker, 1996) in Slovakia and Serbia, and migration policies as their parts as well as the identity and economic practices of nation states in addressing the labour shortage problem.

1 From 2013 to 2016 S. Zlatanović with her colleague Mladena Prelić (Institute of Ethnography SASA) conducted extensive fieldwork in the multi-ethnic village of Belo Blato (municipality Zrenjanin) which has a Slovak majority (Prelić, Zlatanović, 2016). We conducted smaller-scale research in the township of Kovačica and the village Padina (municipality of Kovačica) in 2015. In 2015, we began our research in Slovakia. The first results of our research were published in Zlatanović, Marušiač, 2017.

2 In this article we use the term *interlocutor*, which implies a relationship of equality, interaction, and exchange. Our research was based on intensive interaction between the researcher and researched, dialogue, exchange of opinions and experience, and mutual creation of meanings. Since the 1980s and the post-modern critique of representation, scholars have reassessed the nature of fieldwork, the role of the researcher (subjectivity, authority, monopoly over knowledge and similar) and the influence that the researched may have on shaping the research (Clifford, Marcus, 1986; Marcus, Fisher, 1986). The researched are no longer expected merely to inform, they have now become interlocutors – equal creators of the research process (cf. Čapo Žmegač, Gulin Zrnić, Pavel Šantek, 2006). In contemporary ethnology and social anthropology, the terms *informant* and *respondent* are also used depending on the intensity and modus of the interaction.

2. CONTEXTUALISING THE SLOVAK COMMUNITY OF VOJVODINA

Slovaks settled the area of today's Vojvodina in several waves during the process of colonisation in the middle and second half of the eighteenth century (Sirácky, 1980: 64–83). The Slovaks who lived in the southern parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, today parts of Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Croatia, were called the 'Low Land Slovaks' (Slovakian: *Dolnozemskí Slováci*). As Botík explains (2011: 17), from the fifteenth century this term was used to describe the plains of Hungary stretching to the south of the political and administrative centre of the state, while the northern territories were known as the Upper Lands (Slovakian: *Horná zem*). The migrations occurred within Hungary and were therefore internal in character. The motives behind them were complex, but two interconnected factors can be identified; at that time, Upper Hungary was overpopulated, while, on the other hand, it was necessary to re-settle the areas depopulated after the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire (Sirácky, 1980). The Slovak migration came about mainly for economic and religious reasons, since the Evangelist population was exposed to pressure from the Catholic Church. The Slovak Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Serbia played a crucial role in forming the identity of the Slovaks of Vojvodina, whose settlers, as Evangelists, tended to be concentrated in particular localities (Botík, 2011: 30–31). However, they settled the land of today's Vojvodina seeking a better social and economic position, as well as religious freedom.

After the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918 and the formation of Czechoslovakia, the links between the Slovak population of the former Low Land and the parent state grew weaker (Ibid.: 24). From then onwards, their future was determined by the new political frameworks of the successor states – Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia, in which they had become a minority (Ibid.). Thanks to the friendly relations between Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (later between Slovakia and Serbia), the Slovak community in Vojvodina had good conditions for cultural life and was a textbook example of a well-integrated minority that has retained a special reputation in contemporary Serbia.

According to the latest Serbian census of 2011, 52,750 members of the Slovak community live in Serbia, concentrated mainly within the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina – 50,321 (Census, 2012: 21). In Serbia as a whole, Slovaks constitute 0.73% of the population, while in Vojvodina this rises to 2.6% (Ibid.: 23). They are most numerous in the municipalities of Bački Petrovac and Kovačica (Ibid.: 98). If we trace the results of the census, starting from 1948, it is immediately apparent that, in 1991, the Slovak community experienced a sudden decline both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the overall population of Serbia (Ibid.: 14). Apart from the expected effects of the assimilation process, the reason for this was their migration from Serbia abroad, among others to Slovakia.

Vojvodina Slovaks are highly integrated into the Serbian society. The level of their integration is confirmed by the bilingualism of the members of this community as they smoothly change from one language to another during interviews. Almost all of them stated that if it were not for the long-term adverse economic situation, they would have never left Serbia. Their statements suggest a clear positive emotional link to Serbia and Vojvodina, regardless of whether they travel there often or rarely, and whether they categorically reject the possibility of returning or do not exclude their return. Many of them continue following the political and other events in Serbia, and, for example, are

fans of Serbian tennis-player Novak Djokovic. In their spontaneous narratives, the individual interlocutors mentioned that they regularly participated in Serbian elections. Irrespective of the duration of their residence in Slovakia, when referring to life in Serbia, they frequently used phrases like “back home in Serbia” (Slovak: *tam u nás v Srbsku*) or “at our place”.

There are manifestations of the positive perception of the members of the Slovak community in Vojvodina in the Serbian public discourse. For example, Serbian historian and later Vice-Chair of the co-ruling Socialist Party of Serbia, Predrag Marković, spoke about Vojvodina Slovaks as an example “of not just tolerating but of cohabitation and unity”. He highlighted in his article their picture as working people: “Max Weber would be so lucky that he would jump out of his grave if he knew that there is a nation that completely proves his thesis on the relationship of Protestantism and high working ethics” (Marković, 2015b). Respect for the cultural heritage of Vojvodina Slovaks is also shown by the Serbian state institutions, for example, by entering the Slovak naive art painting of Kovačica in the *List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Serbia by the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia* in 2012.³

The Slovaks of Vojvodina are still strongly identified with the Yugoslav statehood. Many interlocutors said that even today they considered themselves “Yugoslavs”. Their positive perception of Tito’s regime was reflected, for example, in the fact that even though the process of visual de-Communisation by the removal of Communist symbols from public places, the renaming of towns, streets, public institutions, etc. began at the beginning of the 1990s mainly in connection with the revision of Tito’s heritage and his cult of personality and intensified after 2010, the elementary school in village of Padina (with Slovak as the language of instruction) bears the name of Josip Broz Tito even today.

3. POLITICISATION OF INTERSTATE MIGRATION IN SLOVAKIA AND IN SERBIA AFTER 1990

In terms of the interest of the Slovak political elites, international migration has long been marginalised. This has also resulted from minimum interest of foreign citizens in migration to Slovakia. The politicisation of migration began only in connection with the refugee crisis after 2015, when the majority of the Slovak political representation opposed the reception of refugees from third countries (Hlinčíková, Mesežnikov, 2016: 10). On the other hand, migration from Slovakia was seen as a historically conditioned phenomenon long after 1990 and the public discourse usually pointed out the economically conditioned emigration of the second half of the nineteenth century or a combination of the politically and economically motivated migration abroad in the twentieth century, including the ethnically motivated forced migration during World War II and immediately afterwards. After 1990, migration from Slovakia was perceived as part of the modernisation processes, as well as a means of tackling the social consequences of the transition (Bahna, 2011b). Nevertheless, Miloslav Bahna questions the role of the historical experience as an explanatory framework by pointing to the

3 For more details on the relationship of naive art and the identification of Vojvodina Slovaks: Blagojević, 2012. For detailed information about the cultural life of the Slovaks in Vojvodina: Sklabinská, Mosnáková, 2013.

fact that migration from Slovakia to other countries after accession to the EU and the opening of the labour market were, in terms of extent, similar to those experienced by other countries that became members of the EU after 2004 (Bahna, 2011a: 182).

After 1990 and even after EU accession, the political and intellectual elites regarded migration from Slovakia as a modernisation tool since their expected effect was to invest savings from work abroad in the domestic economy. The members of the political elites even encouraged Slovak citizens in foreign labour migration. We can mention in this context, for example, the statements by the then Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, Jozef Mihál, in 2011, in connection with the impacts of the global financial crisis after 2008 in the form of high unemployment and low wages, according to which leaving for abroad was a minimum step that Slovak citizens could take to resolve their poor material situation (*Plus jeden deň*, 2010).

At a later period, the perspective of the perception of Slovak citizens' migration abroad began to change and related mainly to the migration of young people who declared their interest to leave Slovakia. *Slovakia's Strategy for Youth 2014–2020*, adopted by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic, states that around 70% of young people would prefer living in another country. According to the Financial Policy Institute estimates, young people aged 24–29 made up more than a half of the citizens who cancelled their health insurance in 2010–2015, which most likely indicates that they decided to leave Slovakia. Another 34 thousand Slovak citizens studied at foreign universities at that time (Sokolová, 2017). According to another survey carried out by the Youth Council of Slovakia in collaboration with Focus agency in 2017, almost a third of young people aged 15–24 considered leaving the country; 9.5% of respondents planned to move abroad over the next three years, while another 19% said this option was rather likely. Similar views were shared by young respondents in other countries of the Visegrad Group (Folentová, 2017), as currently also reflected by top Slovak political representatives who primarily highlight the need to encourage the return and reintegration of Slovak citizens who currently live abroad (*Hospodárske noviny*, 2018). However, unlike in the 1990s, the departure of young people is regarded as a safety risk in the context of the economic and social security of the population due to labour force emigration.

The migration of own citizens abroad represents a political and economic problem for Serbia as well. Since 2008 the economic crisis in Serbia has played a key role, with high unemployment rates as a consequence. The drop in unemployment from 24% in 2012 to 12.7% in 2018 (ILO, 1995–2018) is, among other things, the result of mass migration that affected all Serbian citizens regardless of their ethnic affiliation. In 2008–2018, first residence permits⁴ in EU Member States were issued to 335,913 Serbian citizens, and this number increased after 2017; in 2016, the number of first residence permits reached 31,289, and 40,350 a year later. In 2019, 52,049 first residence permits were issued. In absolute figures, Serbia ranked 15th among the countries of origin of immigrants to EU Member States (Eurostat, 2009–2019).

4 According to the European Commission “residence permit means any authorisation valid for at least 3 months issued by the authorities of a Member State allowing a third country national to stay legally on its territory. First permit means the residence permit issued to a person for the first time. A residence permit is considered as a first permit also if the time gap between expiry of the old permit and the start of validity of the new permit issued for the same reason is at least 6 months, irrespective of the year of issuance of the permit” (Eurostat, 2009–2019).

Slovakia ranked fourth among the target countries of Serbian migrations abroad in 2018, after Germany, Slovenia and Croatia, and the migration trend of Serbian citizens to Slovakia shows a growing tendency. Between 2009 and 2019, 17,597 Serbian citizens obtained the first residence permit in Slovakia, whereas their number increased from 1,394 in 2015 to 4,140 in 2017 and 4,834 in 2018. In terms of the number of first residence permits granted to Serbian citizens in 2018, Slovakia was ahead of Austria which had been the second most popular destination of Serbian migrations in the past. Slovakia became an important country of destination after 2014, when the labour market began showing signs of labour shortage, especially in the industrial sector (Karšay, 2018).

GEO/TIME	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
EU28 (2013–2020)	26,024	22,818	21,064	25,131	27,059	25,041	27,195	31,289	40,350	52,049
EU27 (from 2020)	25,122	21,651	19,471	23,490	23,770	24,367	26,603	30,574	39,673	51,541
Germany	4,881	3,327	2,709	7,806	7,898	8,337	7,745	10,263	13,728	16,156
Slovenia	1,900	1,040	1,480	1,376	1,338	1,331	1,874	2,399	3,259	5,147
Croatia					430	456	446	678	1,031	4,910
Slovakia	818	483	568	548	603	830	1,394	2,076	4,140	4,834
Austria	2,951	3,577	3,944	4,205	4,120	4,660	5,288	5,018	4,426	3,956
Hungary	1,407	1,226	1,075	747	697	650	777	960	2,409	3,767

Table 1. Citizens of Serbia – first residence permits by year and country or residence (2009–2018, without Kosovo) – the first six target countries. Source: Eurostat 2009–2018

According to Eurostat (Statistical Office of the European Union) estimates, an average of 142 people leave Serbia each day, which is double the figure compared to the situation five years ago. This means that 52,049 persons left Serbia in the course of 2018, which represents one larger town (Blic, 2019). Migration abroad as a problem is also confirmed in the report of the International Monetary Fund, according to which approximately 400,000 persons (around 5.5% of the 2016 population) emigrated from Serbia to OECD countries in 2008–2016, which is a significant labour force decline, including qualified workers (IMF, 2019: 22).

In Slovakia, since 2017, the number of people working in other countries has declined slightly. According to the Labour Force Sample Survey, at the end of 2019, approximately 129,100 people worked abroad (around 4.9% of the total number of employed) (Statistical Office, 2020). However, the share of young people studying abroad is rapidly increasing, from 12.81% of total number of undergraduates in Slovakia in 2010 to 18.27 in 2017 (Krajňáková, 2019: 20). While the labour migrations from Slovakia are driven by the ambition of increasing of income (Bahna, 2011a: 130), in the case of Serbia, “the people come because they must”, as our informant from the Bureau for Slovaks Living Abroad, a Vojvodina Slovak herself, expressed succinctly. In the case of Slovakia and Serbia, it is a problem to identify the exact number of emigrants, since only a minimum number of them cancel their permanent residence (Divínsky, 2005: 51). The liberalisation of the movement of people after 1989 allows them to leave the doors open or partially open for return to their country of origin.

Just like the Government of the Slovak Republic, the Government of the Republic of Serbia, too, begins to perceive the outflow of the population and labour force as an economic and social challenge. At the end of February 2020, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the *Economic Migration Strategy for the period 2021–2027* with the aim of minimising labour outflow from the country. Similarly to Slovakia, in 2018, 70% of young respondents in Serbia considered emigration: “The main reason for emigration is the desire for a better standard of living, but the intensity of this desire is more related to a pessimistic view of the future of the Serbian society than to the difficulty of the current financial situation in which youth find themselves” (Popadić, Pavlović, Mihailović, 2019).

It seems apparent that the political elites of both countries are beginning to attach greater importance to the negative aspects of people’s migration abroad. The target countries of migration from Slovakia and Serbia are primarily developed EU Member States – including the Czech Republic in the case of Slovakia. Relative to them, both Slovakia and Serbia find themselves in a peripheral position, and the exodus of workers creates a situation where this position is further deepened. Their populations thus suffer from an increased feeling of relative deprivation, which results in an unequal position as labour-exporting, low-wage countries (Brettell, 2015: 155), on the periphery of the global system. On the other hand, at least since its entry to the EU, Slovakia is becoming a country of destination for interstate migration, which is largely due to Serbian citizens. In terms of migration, Slovakia as an EU Member State has acquired a semi-peripheral position, at least related to some Central East European states, like Serbia (Wallerstein, 2004).

4. SLOVAKIA AS COUNTRY OF DESTINATION OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

The influx of foreign immigrants to Slovakia intensified after Slovakia joined the European Union in 2004. Ever since, Slovakia has been subject to the political and legal framework governing the free movement of persons within the EU. Mainly during the first years following its EU accession, the group of foreign immigrants in Slovakia was made up predominantly of EU citizens and after 2007 by foreign workers from Bulgaria and Romania. Today, labour migrants in Slovakia are mostly represented by the citizens of Serbia and Ukraine. At the same time, Slovakia became a country of destination for the voluntary migration of Slovaks living abroad, in particular from Serbia, Romania and Ukraine. This type of migration is also supported by the *Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic – Perspective until the Year 2020*, adopted by the Slovak Government in August 2011, designating it as ethical recruitment of workers. In addition, it fully complies with the integration model based on full acceptance of Slovakia’s realities by the migrants. At the same time, the cultural proximity of the members of these communities to Slovakia’s environment follows another principle of the *Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic* – the prevention of the “risk of emergence of an economically, socially and culturally divided society and closed migrant communities”.⁵

The diaspora status of Slovaks in Vojvodina created favourable conditions for various forms of legal and institutional support from the Slovak Republic. The basis of the

⁵ Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with an Outlook to the Year 2020, adopted by Resolution of the Government of the Slovak Republic No. 574 of 31 August 2011: <http://www.rokovania.sk/Rokovanie.aspx/BodRokovaniaDetail?idMaterial=20174>.

State's compatriot policy is the *Act on Slovaks Living Abroad* (Act No. 70/1997 Coll. on *Foreign Slovaks*), which came into force in 1997. The provisions of this act define Slovaks from abroad as individuals who are not citizens of the Republic but who are of Slovak nationality or Slovak ethnic origin and cultural and linguistic consciousness. This act guarantees such individuals the right of entry into the Slovak Republic without letters of invitation or visas, and for those subject to bilateral agreements, the right to remain in the Republic, the right to apply for courses of study and the right to seek employment without having to apply for a residence permit. The new *Act on Slovaks Living Abroad* of 2005 allows Slovaks living abroad to apply for citizenship of the Slovak Republic after three years of continual residence in the country while, for other foreign nationals, the requirement is eight years. This act also allows such individuals to open businesses after having acquired temporary residence, the right to employment without a work permit, the right to material support in cases of need and access to social services (Act No. 474/2005 Coll. on *Slovaks Living Abroad and on changes and amendments to some acts*). The *Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic* targets Slovaks living abroad, as well. The 2016 document confirmed support in their case for controlled economic migration.⁶

A sudden influx of Serbian citizens was reported in mid-2015. In July of 2015, 702 Serbian citizens were working in Slovakia and, by January of 2016, this number grew to 1,216 and by December of the same year the number increased yet again to 5,410. In January 2020, 5,913 Serbian citizens were employed in Slovakia based on a work permit. In terms of nationality, they represented 20.5% of third-country nationals (i.e. non-EU countries) working in Slovakia, i.e. the second most numerous groups after Ukraine citizens (17,029) (UPSVAR, 2015–2020). Serbian citizens are usually employed in manufacturing and the building industry.

The growing interest of Slovaks from Vojvodina in working and living in Slovakia is confirmed by the growing number of "Slovak Living Abroad" certificates issued. Serbian citizens filed 681 applications for this certificate in 2014 and 592 were issued. In 2015, the number of applications reached 1,156, resulting in the issue of 1,056 certificates, and in 2016 this number doubled: 2,223 applications were filed, and 2,068 certificates issued. This trend slightly decreased in the next years (Table 2), yet the figures are still substantially higher than before 2015⁷. This data suggests that the members of Slovak communities from Serbia and Ukraine represent a major part of applicants for the "Slovak Living Abroad" certificate.

6 *Koncepcia štátnej politiky Slovenskej republiky vo vzťahu k Slovákom žijúcim v zahraničí na obdobie rokov 2016–2020* [Policy Document of the Slovak Republic towards Slovaks Living Abroad for 2016–2020] <http://www.uszz.sk/data/files/KONCEPCIA%202016.pdf>

7 Data acquired from the Bureau for Slovaks Living Abroad (Úrad pre Slovákov žijúcich v zahraničí), 2017–2020. We were informed by the Bureau that the influx of applications for this certificate from Serbia was so high that they had had to employ additional staff to handle them.

Year	2012		2013		2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020 (till 29 February)	
Country	A	I	A	I	A	I	A	I	A	I	A	I	A	I	A	I	A	I
Serbia	577	609	395	399	681	592	1,156	1,050	2,223	2,068	1,643	1,646	1,767	1,708	1,354	1,398	196	168
Ukraine	158	162	145	249	235	101	277	56	411	127	422	355	569	641	613	671	53	87
Total	769	808	558	674	941	718	1,445	1,116	2,653	2,207	2,095	2,025	2,363	2,371	1,988	2,092	251	256

A – number of filed applications for ‘Slovak Living Abroad’ Certificates

I – number of issued ‘Slovak Living Abroad’ Certificates

Table 2. Statistics of issued Slovak Living Abroad Certificates by year and country (2012–2020).

Source: Bureau for Slovaks Living Abroad https://www.uszz.sk/data/2020/STATISTIKA-RS-UA2012_02-2020.pdf

The growing trend is further confirmed by the number of Serbian citizens who received the right of temporary or permanent residence in the Slovak Republic, especially after 2015 and 2018 (Table 3). Also, 62.3% of Slovaks living abroad who hold the certificate and received citizenship of the Slovak Republic in the period 2005–2017 have Serbian citizenship. In the period 2018–2019 their share increased to 88,6%.⁸

Number of residence permits granted to nationals of the Republic of Serbia by type of residence				
Year	Temporary residence	Tolerated residence	Permanent residence	Total
2006	650	21	80	751
2007	834	24	48	906
2008	1,244	15	45	1,304
2009	836	8	25	869
2010	484	11	37	532
2011	625	5	32	662
2012	1,989	11	85	2,085
2013	740	9	70	819
2014	1,019	10	60	1,089
2015	2,669	25	82	2,776
2016	2,248	22	92	2,362
2017	4,511	13	130	4,654
2018	6,156	3	168	6,327
2019	6,233	1	143	6,377

Table 3. Number of residence permits granted to nationals of the Republic of Serbia by type of residence. Source: Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic 2006–2019.

⁸ Data from the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, 26 April, 2017 and 23 March, 2020.

Favourable policy towards the members of Slovak communities abroad is one of the reasons for their growing migration to Slovakia. Several of our interlocutors emphasised that the absence of or small linguistic (the level of knowledge of the Slovak language differs from interlocutor to interlocutor) and administrative barrier were the key reasons why they decided to leave for Slovakia: "I would prefer leaving for Germany, but that's harder" (m. 1986). Similar thinking can be observed among people who did not grow up in a Slovak environment, but are able to obtain the "Slovak Living Abroad" certificate because of coming from ethnically mixed families:

My children already have expatriate cards; they haven't chosen the place of residence yet, but I wanted them to find out first what's best for them. Now that they've seen how hard it is to get a job in Serbia. (...) And now my son, too, who was not willing to leave for Slovakia, but when he saw... he thought he would go to Germany. And when he saw that the situation is not easy in Germany either, that everything that is required in Germany is also required here. And so he thought it over, and it's easier for me to learn Slovak than German. Well, I said I don't know, you said that (m. 1957).

The migration of Vojvodina Slovaks is co-ethnic – the immigrants belong to the same ethnic group as the population in the regions to which they have migrated. Due to this characteristic, it belongs to the category of an ethnically privileged migration (Münz, Ohliger, 1997, quoted by: Čapo Žmegač, 2005: 200). The immigrants of Slovak ethnic origin are in a privileged position among the citizens of other states living in Slovakia. Such a compatriot policy is a part of the "nationalizing policies" aiming to strengthen the role of the "core nation", at both the legal and symbolic level (Brubaker, 1996: 416). Although one might expect a less complex process of integration under such circumstances, the results of many scientific works in different parts of the world show that the same ethnic affiliation between the migrant and the old inhabitants don't necessarily play a significant and connective role (Čapo Žmegač, 2005; Čapo Žmegač, Voss, Roth, 2010; Duijzings, 2000: 52–64; Zlatanović, 2015).

5. MIGRATION OF THE MEMBERS OF THE VOJVODINA SLOVAKS COMMUNITY: PERSPECTIVE "FROM BELOW"

The first influx of migrants from ex-Yugoslavia countries, including members of the community of Slovaks living in Serbia, related to the war conflicts in former Yugoslavia (1991–1999). At that time, migration concerned mainly young men whose aim was to avoid mobilisation and participation in combat operations, mainly in the territory of Croatia, and, to a lesser degree, they also related to fears from the deterioration of inter-ethnic relationships in Vojvodina. This process intensified after 2008, but this time it was related to economic threats as a result of the global financial crisis which seriously hit Serbia. After 2015, it grew to such extent that some interlocutors spoke about an "exodus".

The reason was the persistent bad economic and social situation in Serbia, which is also regarded as an existential threat by its citizens. Another reason for their migration is the high level of corruption and clientelism, as well as the current political atmosphere in Serbia. At present, migration concerns people of various age categories, professional groups and qualifications. Along with young people who primarily choose individual

life strategies, which characterised the 1990s, we can now also increasingly speak about family strategies. The most typical pattern is the leaving of one of the parents. Most often it was the father, but not always, in some cases it was the mother who came to Slovakia as the first member of the family. After getting a job and the necessary funds needed to rent a flat, he or she was followed by other family members, including minors. We also encountered cases when Slovakia was first visited by minors/dependent children for the purpose of study and were later followed by their parents. Part of younger interlocutors see the possibility to study, work and settle in Slovakia as an opportunity to get a job in other EU Member States in the near or more distant future. For example, a university graduate who worked in the Volkswagen car factory in Bratislava during his studies, decided, together with his girlfriend, to enrol for a German language course (m. 1997).

In connection with the motivation for emigration, we will compare two types of threat – fears from the effects of war that dominated in the 1990s, and fears from the effects of the economic transition and uncontrolled global financial crisis after 2008.

5.1 The impacts of war conflicts in the former Yugoslavia (1991–1999) on the migration of the Slovak community members of Vojvodina

Our interlocutors described their childhood in Yugoslavia and later in Serbia as peaceful, and relations with the majority Serbian community as neighbourly. After the outbreak of the war in 1991, many interlocutors pointed out cases of ethnic tensions provoked mainly by the members of Serbian extreme right nationalist groups, but also by immigrants – refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina from where the Serbian population was fleeing due to war conflicts (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as cases of ethnically motivated verbal and physical attacks in the municipalities of Vojvodina, inhabited by immigrants from Montenegro, Bosnia and southern parts of Serbia who replaced the expelled German population after World War II. Several interlocutors consistently pointed out the statement attributed to the leader of the Serbian Radical Party, Vojislav Šešelj, who incited ethnic cleansing in Vojvodina: “Slovaks, get out of here! Two sandwiches to Slovaks and one to Hungarians, because we like Slovaks more and they have a longer way to get home.” This statement at the outbreak of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia raised concerns among the members of national minorities. However, the war enthusiasm, which was initially shared by part of the general population, disappeared very quickly:

Normal people withdrew... people of all nationalities, they started to be the principal ones, walking through the streets on horseback ... whom they recruited to the war, and when he returned, he said no more, he would tell everything, it's a pity I wasn't there. He saw what war was about. He had seen war on television, in a movie. But he also saw a bullet shooting dead a person next to him, this is war live. It's different. And most of those who experienced the war had been saying 'I'll tell them who we are here'. And, as they returned, they didn't say anything to anyone. This, too, was the first year of the war, and we had peace afterwards. They had problems finding people... and the Serbs also started to run abroad. This was at the time when the first Slovaks came here. (...) It wasn't because of politics; it was because of saving one's own life (m. 1962).

In the interviews, they consistently stated that they had considered the war threat to be short-term; they had been hoping that the situation would improve, that peace

would soon be achieved, and, in most cases, they regarded co-existence with the majority population of Serbia positively. Members of the younger generations who had not experienced the war were also positive about inter-ethnic relationships. The Slovaks of Vojvodina therefore represent a community which continues to be very well-integrated in the Serbian society, as also documented by the high share of ethnically mixed marriages (Botík, 2016: 221).

Mainly young men who left Serbia during the wars were motivated by an attempt to avoid military service. Some of them justified their departure legally by being admitting to study in the Slovak Republic, which, given the absence of a linguistic barrier, was not a problem to achieve despite the fact that relevant legislation governing relations with Slovaks living abroad was non-existent. However, some of them left illegally at the time they expected a call for military service (or such calls were delivered to them after they had left for Slovakia). Many of them refused to take part in the war, not only because of personal security concerns, but also for political reasons, as it was unacceptable for them to fight against the former citizens of their country. Another interlocutor stated: "This was not our war" (m. 1964). They chose Slovakia because of linguistic proximity or because of work or family contacts:

Everything was fine until it all started to crumble, and then I came here in 1991 because I had been drafted for service and because I had had no intention of shooting at anyone, and, especially, I felt uncomfortable with the idea that anyone would shoot at me. My basic motivation was to run away from mobilisation. I didn't really mean to come to Slovakia. It didn't matter where. The thing was to run away as soon as possible, because there was real danger, so everyone who had family anywhere – I had my aunt here, and so I came after her. Those who had relatives in Budapest went to Budapest, and those who had ones in Germany went to Germany... I ended up here (m. 1963).

Some interlocutors described in detail how they sought to leave Yugoslavia at the beginning of the war even in a way that was on the edge of the law, since men were forbidden to leave the country after the outbreak of fighting in the summer of 1991. Nevertheless, it was possible to negotiate with border police officers at border crossing points. As one of the interlocutors described:

It was always possible to leave. Fortunately, it always worked there. It was people who had an understanding of it and said – run away, boys, I would go, too. They either took a bribe, or simply ignored it... They let us go (m. 1963).

Another interlocutor remembered that he had not been interested in being mobilised for the war and said he received the call for military service in Bosnia and Herzegovina when he had already left for Slovakia:

It wasn't really for me, and so I packed up my clothes in 1993. Right after completing the oral part of my school-leaving exam, I ran to Slovakia and worked as a bricklayer at my uncle's... and then I began studying at the faculty. (...) Certainly, if I had stayed at home for one or two days, they would have taken me, and bye-bye. My dad was waiting for me in the car until I finished the oral part of my exam and then left immediately. I didn't go home, but straight to the border (m. 1974).

For young men who left Yugoslavia after 1991, returning to Serbia posed a threat, since they could have been prosecuted for desertion or for avoiding military service. As a result, they reduced their contacts with their country of origin, and met their family members and relatives only during their visits to Slovakia or to third countries. The possibility for them to cross the Serbian border re-opened only after 1996 when the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia passed an Amnesty Act in 1996 (*Službeni list*, 1996), which applied to all those who did not respond to the call for military service or left the country before the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreements.

However, young women, concerned about the absence of a life prospect in Serbia after it fell into political and economic stagnation as a result of wars and sanctions imposed by the international community, also decided to move to Slovakia, officially mainly for the purpose of study. Several interlocutors had already graduated from university and found a job in Slovakia that matched their qualifications. One of the interlocutors from the first wave of the immigrants in the early 1990s, recalled the Serbian proverb: "Worse than the war is the end of the war" (m. 1961), since the socio-economic relations and power changes that had occurred in the former Yugoslavia during the war, were also established in the post-war period.

However, not all of them managed to avoid mobilisation, especially men with elementary or secondary education, who did not continue with university studies. Some younger interlocutors remembered that their fathers had been mobilised. Other ones pointed out the immediate traumatising experience from the war:

I was there for a year and six months, when Vukovar fell, we were in the background, keeping peace, but I truly saw a lot of different things there during that year and a half. I could see that mentality and everything that the Arkans were doing...⁹ We stayed in a small Croatian town (...) We were standing guard when those para-troops arrived, they even took away my grandpa and grandma, they did not come back before the morning. Why? They found out that their son was in Croatia, fighting there and there. Well, these were the things that happened, sometimes it's better not to experience it when it comes to that (m. 1962).

This interlocutor also referred to the fact that he had had no other choice:

We were recruited for a war that was not our war. We didn't feel it was our war, that we were about to fight for something. For some rights here. We went and suffered more damage than if we hadn't gone. Because the other alternative was to lose your job and go to prison (m. 1962).

During the 1990s, migration to Slovakia most often concerned young men, mostly with university education, or university students who took advantage of the opportunities provided by the Slovak Republic through the scholarship system. The primary objective of migration was to avoid military service or the impending ethnic unrest. Although Yugoslavia experienced severe economic problems in the 1990s e.g. hyperinflation in 1993, these issues ranked second among push factors.

9 Members of the para-military Serbian nationalist formation Serb Volunteer Guard, led by Željko Ražnatović, nicknamed Arkan. They are also known as Arkan's Men or Arkan's Tigers. This group was

5.2 Current factors of migration of Vojvodina Slovaks to Slovakia

Among the political reasons that prevailed in the 1990s, the reasons for migration that are currently mentioned most frequently are party clientelism which penetrated all spheres of life, and nepotism which has transformed into an economic and existential threat. Our interlocutors pointed out the impossibility to obtain anything, including employment or necessary permits from state authorities without being involved in clientelist ties:

I can't see any future prospects in Serbia. (...) If you want to work there, you have to be in a party. Unfortunately, I was a member of a party when I got this job, but the government changed. Every two-three years, everybody puts pressure on you to enter. Every new government puts pressure on you. I couldn't bear it mentally. I was always working under some kind of pressure. And so I don't see a future there (m. 1973).

One interlocutor of pre-retirement age, who worked at an administrative position, found a manual job in Slovakia after a period of bullying.

My boss... in the office, a 26-year woman (...) behaved as if I was her slave... she was in a party that ruled in the country, was very self-confident, saying you don't mean too much here, you're not going to do this and that, and she started to do mobbing, step by step. (...) and I told her I would quit my job (...) I accepted this risk, as I realised that, over there, we didn't have money, not even for bread. (...) I could see that most young people left because they couldn't find a job. They simply didn't see any future prospect in all that, young people, 25–30 years old. In fact, they took their children and wives with them, left and stayed in Slovakia. Most of them managed to get citizenship and all other things, and they would never come back. They have even bought flats here. I suppose they wouldn't go back (m. 1962).

He estimates that round 300 people from his surroundings left for Slovakia. In spite of the difficult working conditions and the need to rent a flat, he says he got rid of stress which had accompanied his daily life in Serbia. This had a positive effect also on his health condition. He emphasises that he got rid of stress in Slovakia, but also of material uncertainty, as his wife did not manage to get an official job in Serbia.

Well, I like it here, and especially when both of us work, we have some economic certainty with our salary, though we don't have excess money (...) at home, we were constantly thinking about how to survive from the first day of the month until the next one... I don't have these problems here. My wife got used to having her own salary... before, it was only me who worked, my salary was our salary; now, both of us have our own job. (...) And we breathe easier. Just a few people experienced that, I can tell you. When I was in Serbia, stress was destroying me, I had high blood pressure, I had high cholesterol level, and I got diabetes. I was about to die. Here, you come to your workplace every day and you know whether you'll be working tomorrow or not. Whether you will survive until the first day of the next month or not, whether you would have enough money for your instalment or not. My blood pressure was sixty to

active in 1990–1996. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) accused Ražnatović of war crimes committed during the war conflicts in former Yugoslavia.

one hundred sixty. (...) this was, diabetes 8–9. Here – I feel as a young man, drinking beer normally, 80 – 120 pressure, I don't avoid anything. Everything seems normal to me, two years in Slovakia. This is my wealth. Money, all this. I left my stress in Serbia. I wouldn't bring it with me here (m. 1962).

The political reasons for emigration thus overlap with material ones. As many interlocutors noted, all spheres of public life and all institutions are controlled by party interests, which is a problem for the whole Serbian society. In addition to political clientelism, the obtaining of a job is often dependent on the existence of personal acquaintances. The interlocutor who completed his PhD studies in Slovakia repeatedly tried to get a job in Serbia, even at the time he was already employed in Bratislava:

I was going there for half a year (...) I was looking for a job in Serbia. I spent about three hundred euros on petrol, I managed to get to the third or fourth round of interviews in some larger companies. I ended up in the situation when they asked me straight who my parents were. And I asked them how relevant this was to the position? It cost me, I think, a whole three hundred euros. I told myself – I'm sorry, I fuck that all, I've exhausted all the possibilities. I gave a chance many times. It's like you're in a relationship and it's you who is always disappointed. So, I decided to cut it and thought that even though I was trying to make a career for ten years or just become a man... that even though I have failed, let at least my son succeed and have a stable background (m. 1986).

For some women, interlocutors over 40 and in pre-retirement age, their arrival in Slovakia was the first chance to get an official job that they could not find in Serbia and earned their living only by occasional work (e.g. cleaning in homes, baking of cakes for weddings and similar events, etc.). Under these circumstances, they would not be entitled to a retirement pension in Serbia, and so they need the years worked in Slovakia to ensure their existence in old age. The threat of unemployment, low salaries, and lack of job opportunities, especially for the young people, were mentioned by the major part of our interlocutors as their reasons to move to Slovakia: “They come here because back there you can't live normally” (f. 1996). Another interlocutor compared his standards of living in Serbia with those ones in Slovakia:

It's hard to leave everything you have and go. If there were jobs waiting for me and my wife and if we each had fifty thousand [our interlocutor means RSD, roughly 430 euro equivalent] we'd go back. Without a hundred thousand a month you can't get by over there. As a family. And here you can go to the seaside. We're planning to go. Back there I worked a lot and there was no chance of going on a trip or to the lake at Bela Crkva. I had a car, but it was as if I didn't. Not enough money for petrol. So – it's tough. It was a tough decision, I'll tell you, but there was no other way (m. 1973).

Our interlocutors consider Slovakia a safe country, where they can have decent living conditions, provided that they adhere to the existing formal and informal rules. This concerns not only material security (the salary level compared to Serbia is regarded very positively), but also respect for the rules such as compliance with the laws. They perceive Slovakia primarily as a country where they can get a job at minimum administrative costs and with a minimum or non-existent linguistic barrier. However,

they also point out the unrealistic expectations which, nevertheless, arise from the lack of knowledge of the situation. For example, workers in Serbia do not distinguish between gross salary and net salary. They consider the information on financial remuneration as the value of the net salary, though Slovak employers and job agencies usually state the gross salary.

A 62-year-old interlocutor considers his immigration to Slovakia as temporary and said in the interview that he was thankful to Slovakia for the opportunity to work (in two jobs) for a decent salary from which he could provide for his family members back home in Serbia, since his two sons with university education (after completing their medicine studies) were unemployed. Like several other interlocutors who obtained a job in Slovakia at an older age (over 50), he expects, unlike younger interlocutors, to return to Serbia once he attains the retirement age. One of the positive elements of life in Slovakia is transparency in labour relations and better functioning of the welfare system compared to Serbia:

Health insurance, social insurance, you have it all. I've noticed, they can't get a residence permit unless they have a normal labour contract. Companies are forbidden to employ people, because they were employing who knows how. (...). And this works well here. And you know, there's some order here. In our country, you don't know for whom you work, for how much you work, whether you'd get some salary or not, and you don't know how much. They would give you some money and promise to give you the rest later. You know, this is the biggest difference between Slovakia and Serbia (m. 1957).

His children are also seeking employment in Slovakia. Most of the younger interlocutors do not consider returning to Serbia, although they do not exclude it entirely. They keep their houses and farmlands in Serbia and admit they would return after reaching the retirement age but consider it unlikely. Essentially, they maintain a positive attitude to Serbia and the Serbian culture and appreciate the possibility of relatively free movement between Serbia and Slovakia. It allows them to maintain close relationships with family members and relatives living in Serbia and to leave an "open door" to decide whether they will live in Slovakia or in Serbia in the future. Nowadays, the amount of Vojvodina Slovak community members living in Slovakia or in other countries is so high that we are justified in seeing them as a spatially dispersed community, and even family-kin groups, living in different states (mainly in Serbia and Slovakia). Therefore, due to the migration processes after early 1990s, this community has been transformed from a community based on geographical proximity and co-residency to a community whose members practice in a transnational mode of living (Nazarska, Hajdinjak, 2011: 111, 122; Markov, 2019: 502). Its members are integrated both in Serbian and Slovak societies, but, at the same time, the inter-ethnic (in Serbia) and intra-ethnic (in Slovakia) boundaries between them and majority population persist. They are taking part in several diaspora circles – they are part of the Slovak diaspora in Serbia, as well as the diaspora of the Slovak community in Vojvodina. However, their self-identification with Serbia and Serbian culture, their participation in Serbian cultural events in Slovakia (like Serbian parties and similar events with Yugoslav and Serbian music), makes them a part of the Serbian diaspora in Slovakia too (cf. Brubaker, 2005).

The interlocutors characterised Slovakia predominantly as a country of open opportunities. For example, one of our interlocutors, a primary school teacher, said she had lived in Serbia under constant stress because of the threat of losing her job. She

performs the same job in Bratislava, but she says she feels calmer because she is convinced that if she lost her job, she would find a new one. She is calm, even though she describes her situation as more complex: in Vojvodina she taught at a village school where Slovakian was the language of education, while at work in the centre of Bratislava she encounters different and very demanding linguistic and cultural norms.

Another interlocutor, a Slovak, whose husband is of different ethnic affiliation, mentions how they came for a trip to Bratislava. It was her husband who noticed that people in Slovakia were more peaceful:

I remember that as we came to Slovakia, we went to Partizánske to visit some friends, and it was cold. And it was cold, and it was snowing, and we were walking outside, and there were boys playing hockey under a streetlamp. There was ice and everything was frozen, and the boys were playing hockey there, it was so joyful, such a pleasant atmosphere, and he said that it would be nice to live here. Shall we come to live in Slovakia? He asked me (f. 1979).

The couple became very successful entrepreneurs in Slovakia. She commented upon a meeting with a former neighbour from Serbia:

It's such a sad thing that Serbia remained where it was. And we had so many things to talk about our life. Where we are, where we moved to... Not to mention that now we have a company and that we have our own car (f. 1979).

When asked what she particularly liked in Slovakia, a young female student told us:

Perhaps it's the fact that people are so relaxed, they don't have the worries people do over there – will there be money to pay the bills. People here are more relaxed, that's obvious (f. 1996).

On the whole our interlocutors are highly satisfied with their work and earnings in Slovakia, but some individuals nonetheless decide to return to Serbia and the reasons behind such decisions are complex (integration into Slovak society is not simple, it is hard to adapt to a different way of life and they miss family and friends, etc.). In addition, it is important to bear in mind that, after their arrival in Slovakia, certain migrants, especially those with secondary and lower education get physically demanding and not always safe jobs which, in individual cases, results in health impairment.

Almost all interlocutors pointed out that, in Slovakia, they were not recognised as Slovaks, but were rather perceived as Serbs, and they are disappointed with it. Many of them said: “We’re Slovaks in Serbia, and we’re Serbs in Slovakia”. An interlocutor who remained working in Slovakia after her university studies remembers:

When I arrived here, no one accepted me as a Slovak. Even today, I have the problem that for Slovaks I'll never be a Slovak because I'm from Serbia. (...) I am a Slovak, but they don't understand that. Even today, the Slovaks here don't understand that we're Slovaks too, but from Serbia. 'How come? You have a Serbian passport and you're a Slovak?' They don't understand. And then I explain to them; in the same way as Hungarians live in Slovakia and are citizens of Slovakia, we're citizens of Serbia, but we're Slovaks (f. 1990).

Some of them pointed out they experienced a high level of xenophobia in Slovakia, regardless of their Slovak origin:

Never in my life was I discriminated against in Serbia because I'm a Slovak. Quite the opposite. In Slovakia I sense a much higher level of xenophobia here than in Serbia (m. 1986).

Another of our interlocutors emphasized the differences between Slovaks from Serbia and those in Slovakia:

I was very surprised at how different people here are to back home [literally 'at our place']. I thought Slovaks were – Slovaks, all the same. Maybe they were a little different, but not this much. They lived under a completely different regime, they know some completely different things from us, different films, different music, so I realised that I would have to learn a lot of that in order to understand how people here think. Although, even today, there are still some things I don't understand [laughter]. They lived through socialism, and back then we were in free Yugoslavia (f. 1980).

Somehow we're affected by that Serbian culture. Because we're different Slovaks from the Slovaks here in Slovakia, because the way of life and the way they see life is different (f. 1974).

The Vojvodina Slovaks are heterogeneous in origin (individual and regional), according to the time they moved to Slovakia, according to their education and their economic status. They use different individual strategies in order to fit in to their new surroundings, depending on their age, level of education, social skills and individual flexibility. Many of our informants expressed satisfaction with the level of integration and the professional status they had achieved. With time, as they adopt the cultural and linguistic norms of their environment, the intra-ethnic boundaries become porous.

Nevertheless, labour migration, in particular from Serbia but also from other countries, is regarded as a risk element also in Slovakia, either for security reasons, because co-habitation of foreign labour migrants with the general domestic population can be problematic at the local level, but also for economic and social reasons, as it raises concerns about the price of labour being reduced in Slovakia. Conflicts concerning the relationship between the majority population and foreign immigrants occur mainly at the local level and primarily concern protests in the form of public gatherings (e.g. Voderady) (Mikušovič, 2017) and petitions (e.g. Devínska Nová Ves) (Žatko, 2019) against the building of new hostels for foreign workers. Concerns about the reduction of the price of labour for domestic workers have also become part of the trade union agenda, while employers' associations have stressed the need to open up the labour market to workers from third countries, i.e. non-EU countries. These concerns have also been partially thematised at the level of political parties. While the political parties in government, especially the representatives of the Smer – Social Democracy party, seek to meet the demands of employers on one hand, for which they have been criticised by trade union representatives, they also declare their efforts to prevent social dumping. In the election campaigns, conflicts between the majority population and foreign migrants have been raised mainly by the opposition party We

Are Family (*Sme Rodina*), especially during the presidential campaign of Milan Krajniak in 2019 (Webnoviny, 2019). As for the parliamentary elections taking place on February 29, 2020, the newly formed Socialisti.sk party commented on this issue by supporting strike action of PPS Detva employees in connection with the projected dismissal of long-term employees to be replaced by Ukrainian workforce. In this context, the party criticises the Slovak Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Ján Richter, that “he stands with the cheap Ukrainian workers and forgets about the breach of the social rights of Slovak workers” (Socialisti.sk, 2019). Certainly, such a statement indirectly targets Serbian workers as well, including Vojvodina Slovaks.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Based on these phenomena, we point out to what extent the construction of a potential threat depends on concrete perspectives of individuals/members of different population groups. We also note that, along with the perception of international migration as a modernisation factor, which is prevailing mainly from the perspective of labour migrants from Slovakia or their family members and partly also from the perspective of the political and economic elites of the Slovak Republic, a negative reflection of interstate migration comes to the fore, highlighting their negative impacts not only on the receiving but also on the sending communities. In this context, using the terminology of Immanuel Wallerstein (2004), Slovakia is gradually transforming from the periphery of the global system, i.e. the source of labour migrants, into a country which is both the source and recipient of migrants, i.e. to a state of the global semi-periphery. The migration of Vojvodina Slovaks to Slovakia is perceived also as a security issue from several aspects – from the point of view of individual security as well as from the point of view of the security of Serbia as a country of origin and of Slovakia which ceases to be only an “external homeland” for a great part of the community members, as it is also their country of destination and is becoming their new homeland. Under such circumstances, the diaspora policy of Slovakia has a significant impact on the lives of the members of the Slovak community, although Slovakia is not a neighbouring state of Serbia. At the same time, the good bilateral relations between Slovakia and Serbia make the process of “transnationalization” of the Vojvodina Slovak community easier.

The main push factors for the migration of Vojvodina Slovaks to Slovakia during the 1990s that we identified included attempts to avoid mobilisation and participation in combat operations. The other push factors that emerged later were awareness of the absence of a life perspective and the overall political and economic stagnation in Serbia, as felt by our interlocutors. The main pull factors for choosing Slovakia included the relatively small administrative barriers, linguistic proximity, as well as the presence of family or friendly ties in Slovakia. After 2008, these factors also included different dynamics of the economic development in the two countries. While Slovakia as an EU Member State was experiencing a period of economic growth and job creation, Serbia was marked by the deepening of negative tendencies in the socio-economic and political situation. In addition to better material well-being, the pull factors in favour of Slovakia as a choice comprised higher legal certainty compared to Serbia, better functioning of public services (e.g. healthcare) and more transparent labour relations. Our research has led us to the conclusion that while our interlocutors considered their

concerns about the impacts of the 1990s war conflicts as short-term threats, they perceived the social impacts of the economic transition and uncontrolled global financial crisis after 2008 as long-term or even permanent threats. While individual life strategies played a key role in the case of migration of Vojvodina Slovaks to Slovakia in the 1990s, in the post-2008 period we can speak about family life strategies. Overall, most interlocutors stated that, compared to Serbia, they attained a better quality of life in Slovakia. At the same time, our interlocutors spontaneously expressed their positive attitudes towards Serbia, stressing that the motive for their emigration were primarily material factors which they regarded as an existential threat to themselves and to their families. For them, leaving for Slovakia means a solution to individual safety factors, as B. Buzan called them. Slovakia is thus becoming a safe country for the members of this migrant group, given the situation in which they found themselves in their country of origin.

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