

The Images of Slovakia in Narrations of the Polish Local Elites in the Borderland¹

Dariusz Wojakowski²

University of Rzeszów, Rzeszów, Poland

The Images of Slovakia in Narrations of the Polish Local Elites in the Borderland. The article presents the sociological reconstruction of images of Slovakia and Slovaks used by Polish local elites in Southern Poland. The analysis is based on the qualitative data from three borderland towns. The theoretical concept of space as the social construct and S. Ossowski's idea of the neighbourhood distance, led to mapping of structure of different local imaginations of Slovakia and their position in the general concept of locality used by the respondents.

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The word neighbourhood, regardless of how it is understood, is always associated with the context of spatial proximity. (Cf. Appadurai 1996; Pyszczyk 2006; Fiń 2013; Dębicki – Makaro 2016) The article describes the national neighbourhood from the humanistic perspective on conceptualisation of space. (Wojakowski 2013: 130-134) That perspective assumes that sociology analyses space primarily as an object that belongs to the “world of an individual”, regardless of objective attributes of space. (Blumer 2007: 12) In such a context, the research of neighbourhood is the research of the social construction of space, which is becoming an important topic of border studies. (Cf. Brambilla et al. 2015; Burkner 2017) Chiara Brambilla writes about borderscapes, which are oriented on “the multiplicity of social spaces where borders are negotiated by different actors” and contain “alternative border imaginaries”. (Brambilla et al. 2015: 2-3) Such social imaginaries, according to Hans-Joachim Bruckner, “refer to the ways in which social relations, the condition of a society, the relation to nation states or the world society is imagined.” (Burkner 2017: 93) The images of neighbours are only a part of those imaginaries, but are especially interesting in the borderland context. (Cf. Wilson 2012: 166)

In general there are three areas of sociological research that recognise the issue of neighbourhood as cognitively significant: local studies (Pyszczyk 2006), the research of ethnic neighbourhoods (Fiń 2013; Tamaska 2017), and the research of national neighbourhood. (Kłoskowska 1991) Each tradition has its own specific methods and tools that are used to describe neighbourhood.

¹ Project *Legislators and Translators. Europeanisation of interpretations of Polish borders and borderlands. Ideologies and actions of local elites in eastern and southern borderlands of Poland* led by Hanna Bojar, realised in 2007 – 2009.

² Dariusz Wojakowski, PhD., Institute of Sociology, University of Rzeszów, al. Rejtana 16C, 35-959 Rzeszów, Poland. E-mail: darek.wojak@wp.pl

The analysis presented here is an attempt to make use of all the aforementioned approaches, although it primarily concerns national neighbourhood and focuses solely on one aspect. The object of the analysis is the neighbourhood as recognisability (Pyszczyk 2006: 251-254): images of Slovakia and the Slovaks shared by Polish social actors who live in the specific neighbourhood of this country. The category of social distance implemented by Stanisław Ossowski (1967) is a significantly relevant research problem in this aspect. It has been created in the context of local research and it is the optimal choice for the description of national neighbourhoods due to the fact that it includes the social recognisability of groups connected with social interpretations of proximity and distance.

These theories form the basis used to analyse ways of perceiving Slovakia and its inhabitants by representatives of local governments, teachers and cultural managers from three towns of the Polish-Slovakian borderland. Implementation of such analysis gives answers to following questions: To what extent is the image of Slovakia concrete and connected with specific knowledge, space and social interactions? Which territorial contexts is the notion of Slovakia connected with? Is the neighbourhood with Slovakia a significant context in narrations of local elites?

The analysis concerns Polish environments that are connected with the southern neighbour in an exceptional manner, since the material consists of in-depth interviews carried out during the project 2H02E 020 23 *Legislators and Translators. Europeanisation of interpretations of Polish borders and borderlands. Ideologies and actions of local elites in eastern and southern borderlands of Poland*. The article used 39 in-depth interviews carried out in three towns: Sanok, Gorlice and Nowy Targ. The choice of three towns on the Polish-Slovakian border was related to their size (30-38 thousand inhabitants), their administrative position (county centres) and geographical location. That last one took into account: A) proximity of the border with Slovakia, but also B) location in three different regions of Poland (Podkarpacie, near the border with Ukraine; Małopolska; Podhale, near the Polish-Czech border). The research concerned four categories of respondents who are leaders in local politics, education, media and culture. This means that the interviewees were mayors, heads of city and county councils, school directors, chief editors of the media, directors of cultural institutions and promotion offices of the town and county. The involvement of the institution in the EU projects was an important criterion for the selection of respondents in the case of a larger number of institutions with a given profile (schools, media and cultural institutions). Thanks to that, our interlocutors were local leaders in the processes of Europeanization. The material used here is based on the Individual in-Depth Interviews (IDI). The Interview scenario had 5 thematic blocks: I) Me

and my relationships with the local community, family, my everyday life; II) My professional life, the activities of the institution I represent; III) Socio-cultural characteristics of the town; IV) The EU and my activity; V) Overlocal and European identity. The shortest interview lasted 45 min, the longest one 2 h 40 min. Most of the interviews lasted from 1h 05 min to 1 h 30 min.

The project did not concern Slovakia directly, although the research was carried out in local communities on the borderland, and the respondents were active people who realised transborder projects of the European Union. The images of Slovakia represented by the interlocutors are not only individual ideologies of neighbourhood. Due to the position of the respondents in their local communities, the notions may describe local discourses and the presence of Slovakia in such discourses. (Kurczewska 2008)

The sociological concepts of neighbourhood – general remarks

Three sociological approaches make use of the category of neighbourhood: sociology of locality, American sociology of ethnicity, and sociology of nation. The first two traditions are strongly connected, since they began with research of urban neighbourhoods. Such neighbourhoods were ethnically diverse in American conditions. Grzegorz Pyszczek (2006: 248-258) carried out an analysis of neighbourhood emphasising three essential aspects of this category: cohabitation (spatial proximity), recognisability and relations. It is possible to analyse these aspects autonomously. In the research of ethnic neighbourhoods territorial proximity is associated with the support of ethnic identity and a spatially located symbolism. (Cf. Fiń 2013: 106) In both approaches there is a concept of neighbourhood that primarily determines in-group relations, constitutes a new group (neighbouring, local, ethnic), and determines self-awareness (group identity). The neighbourhood creates a social whole. It is possible to reflect on to what extent the group creates strong or weak social bonds³ or sustains ethnic symbols. (Mucha 1996) In sociology of nation, spatial proximity and social relations associated with neighbourhood are understood differently. The description of national neighbourhood by Julita Makaro and Marcin Dębicki (2012: 350-351) shows that commonality of territory is associated with distinction of borders, visibility with the perception of otherness, culture with distinctiveness, and neighbours with strangeness. In this perspective neighbourhood relations may be described as out-group or in-group relations. In a way it unveils the ambivalence of neighbourhood, which might be perceived as a category connected with social inclusion and exclusion. (Grathoff 1991: 11) This phenomenon is revealed in empirical research of local ethnic neighbourhoods. Taking East Village in New York as an example, Anna

³ It is especially stressed by Piotr Kryczka (1981: 115 *passim*) in his concept of various types of neighbourhood.

Fiń (2013) shows that the district is a space that symbolically sustains the ethnic identity of both Polish and Ukrainian people, who simultaneously create a specific social world common for both nationalities. Neighbourhood allows being distinct, but it also includes the neighbours in a common *milieu*. Mate Tamaska (2017), based on multiple categories of data gathered in his field work in Cieszyn and Teski Tesin (towns divided by a state border), tried to reconstruct the *Lebenswelt* of inhabitants of the two towns and describe the structure of local *milieus*. (Tamaska 2017: 390-394) This structure contains both the milieus of division and the milieus which are common for Poles and Czechs. The same situation of border towns may give priority to social exclusion. Similar research of Polish-German borderland towns shows the gap between Polish and German inhabitants. (Makaro 2009) According to Makaro's analysis, the Polish-German state border, despite the fact that it is solely a formal and legal construct, excludes ethnic neighbours from the consciousness and daily experiences of the inhabitants.

However, the following analysis focuses on one aspect which, according to G. Pyszczyk (2006: 252-254), can be described as recognisability. It is worth noting that it is widely referred to in research of national neighbourhoods. It is used in analyses of attitudes towards neighbours or stereotypes. In other words, recognisability refers to how neighbours are perceived. G. Pyszczyk noticed that there are many objective conditions of recognisability, but "what is essential is whether a given person is someone to get to know or, which is equally important, a person who should be avoided in an individual's cognitive map." (Pyszczyk 2006: 253) This means that the notion of neighbours is not only recognised by criteria of experience and facts, but also through the prism of their individual interpretation. However, such an undoubtedly humanistic perspective (cf. Znaniecki 1980; Blumer 2007) means that during research it is necessary to take into account numerous contexts which condition the neighbourhood. According to Arjun Appadurai (1996: 187), the category of context, which is quite broadly defined in anthropology, is essential for the description of relations in the contemporary world. Contextuality constitutes a specific framework constructed or used for different levels of interaction. The author says: "Thus, neighbourhoods seem paradoxical because they both constitute and require contexts". (Appadurai 1996: 186)

Yet it should be stressed that national neighbourhood does not have the same nature as neighbourhood in A. Appadurai's understanding. If such neighbourhoods are described as multilevel, multidimensional and multiaspectual (Cf. Makaro – Dębicki 2012: 350-352), then what is pivotal is their dependence on context and not the ability to create them. Appadurai says that local community is an essential context-creating factor, thus in the conditions of borderlands the neighbourhood as a locality may be a significant

context for national neighbourhood. The complex nature of national neighbourhoods pointed out by J. Makaro and M. Dębicki means that it is not the only context that describes them, and it is not known how important it is. However, taking such assumption into account allows focusing on contexts which refer to territoriality (locality, region, state/nation, Europe).

The theoretical tool for the analysis of notions concerning neighbourhood is the category of neighbourhood distance proposed by Stanisław Ossowski. S. Ossowski states that: "Distance as a factor of social relations cannot be measured in metres. The spatial distance measured physically does not overlap with psychological distances, with the feeling of 'proximity' and 'distance'". (Ossowski 1967: 352) In other words, colloquial notions of space may ignore objective categories. Thus, Ossowski formulates the problem of "measurement of distance in connection with shaping of social relations". He uses two terms to describe the measurement: psychological distance and neighbourhood distance. Although some of the parameters describing such distance consist of characteristics of physical space (Ossowski 1967: 353), the neighbourhood distance does not have a physical character. It has, however, physical manifestations which extend or reduce space. Remarks concerning this issue appear in the context of recreating the worlds of the inhabitants of Lubenia:

"The feeling of distance between Lubenia and America is not proportional to the distance measured in kilometres. Especially for the second time, there is no difference in going to America or Rzeszów. There have been stories of a woman abandoned by her husband, who left the town and went away. (...) It turned out that she moved to a town near Sandomierz. Although everybody knew that Sandomierz is closer to Lubenia than Detroit, I suppose that the notion of distance was similar. (Sandomierz is not Krynica, to be fair. Lubenians are used to working in Krynica, but no one would go to Sandomierz.)" (Ossowski 1967: 328)

The categories of proximity and distance are being broken away from physical parameters, creating their own space of nets of intersubjectively experienced relations. This was also noticed by G. Pyszczyk, who interprets Ossowski's views in the following way:

"For humans, the space is not only something given, objective and physical, but also something which individuals have their own attitudes towards. This attitude especially concerns what is proximal and distant. Distance and proximity measured in objective units of distance are not identical with distance and proximity felt by a concrete individual". (Pyszczyk 2008: 62)

Slovakia and the Slovaks in local imaginations – methodological remarks

The methodology of the research is based on four assumptions, mentioned in previous considerations:

1. Above all, the national neighbourhood creates the context of social relations “outside” of the particular national group. Thus, the image of others is relevant to the research. The inclusive character of the perception of such a neighbourhood is not entirely excluded, since the ability of the creation of relations “inside” the group is relatively powerful.
2. The notion of a neighbour is a category connected with neighbourhood as recognisability, and determined not only by objective conditioning, but also by humanistic factors. (It is an intersubjective cultural fact; cf. Znaniecki 1980: 138) This means that knowledge and information concerning the neighbours (Pyszczyk 2006: 253) do not only determine such a notion, but also stay in relation with cognitive contexts relevant for the individual (interpretation of facts and experiences).
3. The result of such intersubjective perception of neighbours is a specific notion of spatial proximity and distance described by the neighbourhood distance.
4. The research of local neighbourhoods indicates that they have an ability to expand over the borders of towns and even states (the transgression of locality). In the research of notions of concrete social actors, concerning national neighbourhoods, it is possible to assume that such notions will be concretised or narrowed, depending on networks of relation of the individual. (Wojakowski 2013: 138-139)

The assumptions determine that the object of the analysis consists of: knowledge, information, interpretations of facts and experiences. Opinions and facts concerning neighbours have to be analysed in different territorial contexts (local, regional, international), although it has to be stressed that the neighbourhood itself is also a territorial context. (Appadurai 1996) Determination of components describing distance has a significant meaning for the conceptualisation of national neighbourhood. It directs reflections towards a completely new issue of the perception of “external neighbourhood”, which is a problem of the structure of the neighbouring nation, society, state. The research of images, stereotypes or attitudes towards national neighbours tends to face the problem of the complexity of the researched phenomenon (a stereotype or an attitude), along with the assumption that its object has a holistic, non-complex character. In the research of national neighbourhoods, even if the authors are aware of the multilevel character of neighbourhood, which relates to individuals, nations and state (cf. Makaro – Dębicki 2012: 152-155), the structure of each level is not described.

Taking all this into consideration, I do not assume that such a structure has to be absolutely perceived within the images of neighbours, although the problem of neighbour distance draws attention to the fact that notions of space are quite fragmentary. Thus, it may determine completely different views of

national neighbourhood. Inspired by the implementation of the concept of town maps in local (Milewicz – Zarzycka 2006) and borderland (Makaro 2009) research, I analysed neighbour distance and tried to create maps that illustrate the structures of notions concerning neighbours. During the analysis of spatial notions I assumed that the basic units of such a structure are determined by the name of the country (Slovakia, the Slovaks, Slovak) and town names (also in adjective forms). It turned out that the state border is an essential element of this structure, and it was implemented in the analysis. Yet this is a starting assumption which constructs general rules for the structure of neighbourhood. Above all, precise criteria of the description of spatial distance and proximity are necessary for the proper preparation of the maps.

The easiest criterion, used by Ossowski, is to point out particular places and people. Since the transcript of in-depth interviews is the source material, it allows the use of the quantitative measure of such indications. The indication of certain names (people, states, towns) and their frequency is a very general level of the analysis of neighbour distance. It is certain information concerning the knowledge about neighbours or relations with them. Of course, because the data has a qualitative character, the results of such analysis have only a qualitative character: they show some types or models of thinking without assumptions about their frequency. To capture the strength of such neighbourhood contacts, the criterion of concreteness of such indications is proposed. It is a three-level criterion which takes into account the precision of names which are used by the interlocutor. Assuming that neighbour distance determines proximity in a subjective impression of space, the most general terms concerning Slovakia and Slovak towns can be acknowledged as a weak indication of proximity. Thus, such terms include agreement, cooperation, people, the Slovaks, Slovakia, Humenne, Bardejov, and all the other terms that do not allow an identification of concrete activities, people or institutions. The second level of proximity is indicated by mentioning the concrete activities (e.g. *...this week part of the youth came back from Humenne, where they presented their high school cultural output.*), people (*two teachers from that other school have come here and we established cooperation*) and institutions (*museum in Lipovsky Mikulas*) in the statements during the interviews. The third and strongest level of proximity in the notion of Slovakia is revealed in giving proper names of people and institutions. It can be noticed that such forms of speech are the source of indirect information about neighbour experiences. However, they are an eminent part of the notion of Slovakia. The acknowledgement of the concreteness of singular statements allows the creation of the “space of social relations” on the map, relations that are subjectively imagined by an individual.

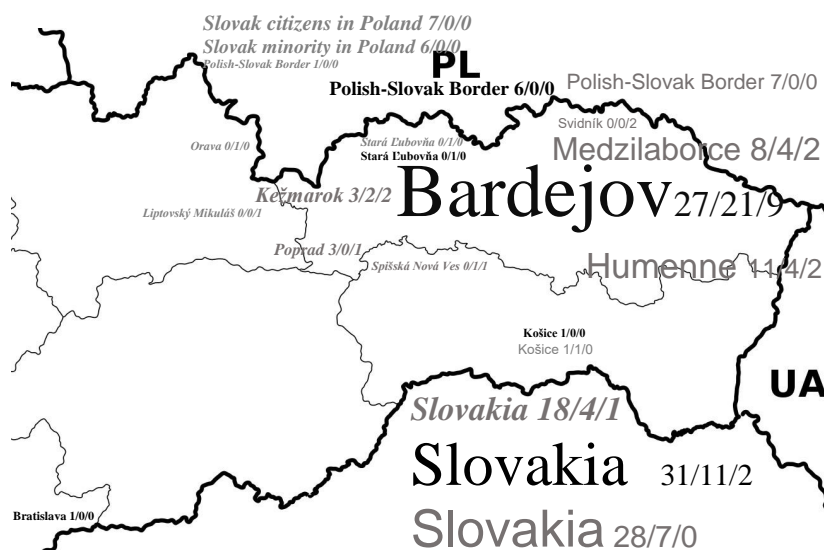
However, the analyses that aim to create the imagined maps of Slovak neighbourhood have to be overlaid on the contextual analysis of interviews. The neighbourhood maps illustrate the notion of Slovakia, but they do not answer the question of what is the meaning of such an image to the respondents. Contextual analyses take into account the connections of an individual with different spatial contexts and relatedness with one's biography, experiences and world view in general. It is such analyses that allow the received images of Slovakia to be put in broader local and individual contexts. The character of the researched group is essential for a proper understanding of the results. The research used in the analysis did not directly concern the issue of the neighbourhood. It was carried out in towns of the Polish-Slovakian borderland in the context of the Europeanization of such local communities. It has been assumed, though, that the borderland character is a substantial criterion of the sample selection. (Bojar 2009: 18) Thanks to that, the received material may also be analysed from the perspective of the perception of national neighbourhood in local and European contexts. The interlocutors in the three towns were purposefully chosen, regarding their position and role in the local community, and their engagement in integration initiatives. The term local elites does not only refer to their virtual privileges, but also their location in the "broader social context", which means that they are people "responsible for defining competences that are functional for the communities more than any other group in the community". (Kurczewska 2008: 40, 42) Thus, the research of their notions concerning Slovakia does not only give information on what are the personal cognitive competences of the interlocutors, but also what image of Slovakia they can popularise in local public discourses. This is the reason four categories of respondents present in this analysis: 1) cultural managers, 2) teachers, 3) journalists, 4) politicians and local government officers, have been merged into two categories: practitioners of neighbourhood and popularisers. The first group includes cultural managers, politicians and local government officers, who above all realise neighbourhood contacts and communicate them rather indirectly (by appearing in the media). Whereas the second group is comprised of professional groups which – regardless of personal engagement in neighbourhood relations – have an ability of direct popularisation of their image of neighbours within the institutional and mass system of culture.

Images of Slovakia – mapping of their structure and neighbourhood distance

The preparation of the map is exemplified by notions of Slovakia reconstructed in accordance with the aforementioned rules of analysis of neighbourhood distance. The maps show a socially imagined space, reconstructed by the

connection of statements of people who are active in one town and represent a common category of people practicing or popularising neighbourhood. The acknowledgement of such rules allows the description of notions concerning Slovakia, along with the two first contexts of its creation: the social-professional and the local context.

Map 1: The notion of Slovakia imagined by practitioners of neighbourhood (cultural managers, politicians and local government officers)



Key: Nowy Targ (*italics, grey*), Gorlice (**normal, black**), Sanok (**normal, grey**)

Size of names shows how frequently the name of the city or the state appears in the interviews. The numbers after the name points 1st/2nd/3rd level of proximity (1/ giving a general name; 2/ indication of a specific activity, person or institution; 3/ giving the proper name of the activity, project or institution).

Above all, the map of Slovakia in the narrations of cultural managers and local government officials shows three different “local Slovakias”. The Sanok map has numerous general references to Slovakia and the Slovaks (35 indications of different levels of proximity altogether). The three most significant structural points are Humenne, Medzilaborce and the state border⁴. However, there are very concrete indications of numerous representatives of this category concerning the two Slovakian towns (6 indications of the second

⁴ A: I mean... I even realized six or seven projects ... yyy... connected with the Polish-Slovakian state border.
B: In that moment there is no problem to get to... ride through that border.

and third levels of proximity altogether for both towns)⁵. Also, Svidnik is associated with a particular institution (The Folk Architecture Museum)⁶, and the image of Slovakia is complemented by two indications of Kosice.

The “map” of practitioners from Gorlice seems unique, partly due to the number of indications, but given the quantitative character of the research it should not be overrated. Although, a dominant and at the same time very concrete indications of neighbouring Bardejov (57 indications including 30 of the second and third level of proximity)⁷ may be interpreted in qualitative terms. In fact, those numbers mean that respondents from Gorlice talk about Slovakia in a different way than in the other towns. They use more sophisticated and more concrete narrations about Bardejov.⁸ In those interviews not only is a presentation of the neighbourhood proximity of Bardejov observed, but also a structural domination of that town over the other indications (Stara Lubovna, Kosice, Bratislava). It should be stressed that in the case of general category indications (Slovakia, the Slovaks, Slovak) the respondents may in fact describe their experiences with Bardejov⁹.

The image of Slovakia in respondents from Nowy Targ is quite similar to the Sanok “map”, since there appear two significant towns: Kezmarok and Poprad¹⁰, with relatively few indications of Liptovsky Mikulas, Spiska Nova Ves and Stara Lubovna¹¹. However, it is worth mentioning that the most numerous indications of Slovakia consist of the Slovaks in the context of local

⁵ *We get to the car, I drive to Medzilaborce, for example to the museum... There is no problem... I may drive to Kosice or somewhere ... ekh... to talk with somebody there, to engage the contact with the art gallery. Now it is very easy, isn't it?*

⁶ *We have a closer cooperation with some museums, we have cooperation agreements with [...] Open Air Museum in Svidnik.*

⁷ *A: ... and there Bardejovska street in Gorlice and Gorlice street in Bardejov. We have a Polish-Slovakian House here, and there is also a Polish-Slovakian House.*

B: Our talks with our friends from Bardejov are mainly about where to go abroad for holidays, where their children live, where our children live.

C: Our visits, contacts with that town are close, at least because the institution which I represent, that is the House of Youth's Culture, cooperates with a similar institution in Bardejov. It is called Free Time Institute or something like that and our contacts in that professional field are very familiar.

⁸ *A: And it turned out that Bardejov also cooperates with other towns, but the agreement that we proposed here, signed together with Boris Hanushak, Bardejov's primator, was also their first contract.*

B: No it is very difficult ... our infrastructure is expensive compared to, e.g. Slovakia, to Bardejov, with which we work very closely, our partner city... Gorlice has to spend more funds on infrastructure than Bardejov.

C: This is the earliest signed partnership agreement – with Bardejov in Slovakia. It is 52 km from Gorlice. It is a very medieval place... medieval town... the size of Gorlice, about 30 thousand inhabitants. We feel very good in Bardejov.

⁹ *E.g. I talked about Polish-Slovakian cooperation – between Gorlice and Bardejov in this case.*

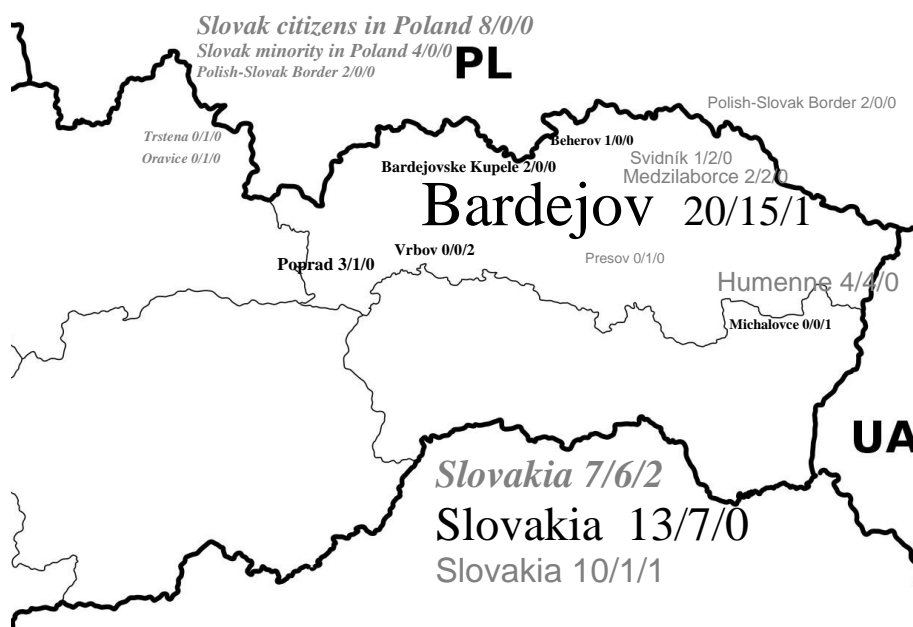
¹⁰ *A: Poprad is very close, and Kezmarok is friendly with us, so thanks to the people I met there at the meetings, we managed to go there with our Nowy Targ's art presentations... and also Slovak artists, at least once a year, are here at our exhibition.*

B: Whereas for our Art Gallery, as I remember, we made 8 Art Presentations... now we have the 16th, so that was eight years ago and we made them just in Kezmarok. We had contacts with the Castle Museum in Kezmarok. We were there and the director of that museum also arrives here.

¹¹ *On the Slovak side, and we were the partner there, they opened the knight village for themselves in Stara Lubovna. But we also had such... we planned to make the common project with the museum in Liptovsky Mikulas but it failed... because not... this Liptovsky Mikulas did not try to gather any funds.*

trade (Nowy Targ) and the Slovak market (7 indications)¹², and the presence of the Slovak minority in the region (6 indications)¹³. It means that in this notion there are entirely different contexts and structures than in the image of Slovakia represented by people from Gorlice and Sanok. This difference is connected with the presence of Slovak people in the Polish region Podhale (Slovak minority in Polish part of Spis and Orava regions, and economic tourists).

Map 2: The notion of Slovakia imagined by popularizers of neighbourhood (journalists and teachers)



Key: *Nowy Targ* (italics, grey), Gorlice (normal, black), Sanok (normal, grey)

Size of names shows how frequently the name of the city or the state appears in the interviews. The numbers after the name points 1st/2nd/3rd level of proximity (1/ giving a general name; 2/ indication of a specific activity, person or institution; 3/ giving the proper name of the activity, project or institution).

¹² The character of Nowy Targ as a trade centre. It influences our fairs. Mainly our neighbours come here, our brother Slovaks who leave their money here. Thanks to that our companies develop, because they are... they produce to meet the needs of those clients [Slovaks – DW]. And it is certainly a positive impact, because much of the funds remain in the town. Of course, they are not only collected through the fair fee, but also the inhabitants of the town earn money... and the opening of the border is the reason that the town is developing.

¹³ The question of the Slovak minority is problematic for that group of respondents. They try to describe it even without the term “national minority”: A: We have here in the country something like three regions: Podhale, Spis and Orava. The last one, let’s say, always in some way leans towards Slovakia.

B: In the case of Orava, there are also many Slovaks, and now I don’t know how they define themselves there... but... and there were some clashes, weren’t there? In... in Spiz and Orava.

The second map presents the structure of the notion of Slovakia imagined by “popularisers”, that is by journalists and teachers. First and foremost, the regional or rather local differentiation of the image of Slovakia is confirmed here. After the connection of indications of all categories, the structure of the notion of Slovakia imagined by interlocutors from Sanok is mainly based on images of Medzilaborce and Humenne¹⁴, and it closes West on the line Kosice-Presov-Svidnik. It confirms the strong concentration of respondents from Gorlice on Bardejov and its direct vicinity (Becherov¹⁵, Bardejovskie Kupele¹⁶, Vrbov) with certain “islands” of few indications of other towns (Mihalovce¹⁷, Poprad, Stara Lubovla, Kosice, Bratislava). In New Targ the “proximal Slovakia” consists of Spisz, Orava¹⁸ and the Tatry Mountains (Kezmarok, Poprad, Trstena, Oravice)¹⁹, in other words regions that are located on the two sides of the border. The indications of teachers and journalist have also strongly confirmed that the image of the Slovaks is clearly referring to the Slovaks who live in Poland (or rather in the region) as clients²⁰ and representatives of the national minority²¹ (14 indications altogether from all 31 indications in this group of interlocutors).

The second issue concerning the comparison of the two maps involves the differences in the image of Slovakia that stem from the professional context. It is noticeable that the number of indications concerning Slovakia is greater in the group of practitioners than in the group of popularisers. The qualitative character of the research requires qualitative and contextual interpretation of the differences. In the comparison of individual notions of the respondents concerning Slovakia it is noticeable that Slovakia always appears in the

¹⁴ *It means we have cultural agreements with Medzilaborce, such partnership... with Humenne... they come here on celebrations, visit us, we also go there.*

We had an idea to make a transborder tv. We have agreements with tv in Uzhorod [in the Ukraine – DW] and tv in Humenne, newspaper in Humenne and... I don't know... with someone there, I don't remember.

¹⁵ *It certainly contributed to the revitalization...to activate this area, especially near the borderline, let's say, from the village of Gladyszów on our side to Beherow on the Slovak side.*

¹⁶ *The people in their free time, when the swimming pool here hadn't been opened yet, they went to Slovakia very frequently. They spent their free time there 'cause it was cheaper and basically Bardejovske Kupele is so near here, and this is the main reason.*

¹⁷ *There have been Polish shops for years, e.g. in Bardejov or there in Mihalovce.*

¹⁸ *Those ties are very visible there, if you go to those Orawa or Spisz communities... They are every day... cause there is new small bridge in Sromowce, and the Poles go every Wednesday to Red Monastery... and there are something like informal fairs at Mondays, so those contacts are familiar. Even music bands exchanges and sometimes Slovak bands play at Polish weddings.*

¹⁹ *And now it is obvious – we are in Europe, in Schengen and so on... So... You can go everywhere you want and even to those hot pools... don't you? To...near here... so called Oravice... such town.*

²⁰ *Our season fairs are very specific. Until All Saints' Day, specially in October, it is the top of the fair season. And it is possible that even 20-30 thousand Slovaks and other tourists come to that fair. To trade, of course. And those are the peak moments when the town is in traffic jams on Thursdays and Saturdays, the fair days.*

²¹ *I'm directing your attention to this part of Spisz. Here are Łapsze Niżne, later it was Slovakia, you know. That area here and down [respondent shows the map]. The Slovak minority is very large there. I don't say they are the majority, but a minority which is large and strong. They have a very strong identity, they feel they are Slovaks.*

statements of cultural managers and politicians in at least two contexts (e.g. professional, local, European, personal). In the case of journalists and teachers, there are only a few narrations with a similar character²². The majority of interlocutors, regardless of their place of origin, gave only from one to six indications²³. Popularisers are not a homogeneous group in regards to their image of Slovakia, since in some cases it is created in the same way as in the group of practitioners and the majority of popularisers – despite the fact that they are equally engaged in shaping the international cooperation – almost completely ignore this national neighbourhood. Except for Gorlice, the notion of the proximity of Slovakia in this group of popularisers is weaker. It is especially apparent in Nowy Targ, where the indications “move” from concrete towns to stories of the Slovaks in Poland (such stories are also present in the category of practitioners, but are proportionally less significant) and general indications of Slovakia. Such general indications include, however, professional contacts within broader international initiatives (*Slovak journalists of the journal “Smer” visited us*) or statements that imply a very concrete connections with Slovakia (*My mother’s sister and brother live in Slovakia*) which do not translate to significant expansion of the Slovak context in a given narration. It is possible to deduce that regional images of Slovakia have a much more visible structure and concreteness in the narrations of practitioners than popularisers, who sometimes speak very generally or have a “more vague” image of Slovakia. This can be observed in mistaking town names and giving a precise description of foreign institution without naming the town it is located in.

Above all, the image of Slovakia present in the maps is dependent on the local context. The place of residence located near the state border determines the structure of the image, and it probably brings Slovakia and the Slovaks to local experience, directly and indirectly, on the other side of the border. Such locality of national neighbourhood seems to decrease the neighbourhood distance. The most evident example of this phenomenon is the image of Bardejov present in Gorlice. It is worth noting that Slovakia is mentioned there more often in three contexts than in the other two towns: the memory of international relations before 1989²⁴, the European context and the personal

²² 6 respondents, who amount to a third of the group.

²³ In 21 respondents only three had six or less indications.

²⁴ A: *Not everyone remembers the times when we went to Slovakia... Pardon, to the Czech Republic, it was called Czechoslovakia back then. So we did go to that Czechoslovakia for some souvenirs, small gifts, not to mention alcohol.*

B: *Contacts with Slovakia (...), Czechoslovakia that is, were very, very tight. (...) it has been like that for years, even when I was a student here. That was the end of the 60s and 70s, we had camps and the youth exchanges. We used to go to Bardejov and Poprad, and they would come to us, so just since I can remember, despite the old days, the cooperation existed.*

contacts context²⁵. Obviously, these contexts appear in every researched town, but it does not seem coincidental only in the interviews from Gorlice it. It means that such an image of Slovakia, although focused on Bardejov, has a multi-context character.

Naturally, in Sanok and Nowy Targ the image of neighbouring Slovak towns is more concrete and proximal than notions concerning Slovakia in general. Even if such images are not as complex as in Gorlice, they have their own local tone which strengthens the proximity of national neighbourhood through the images of concrete Slovak local communities. Cultural managers and local politicians tend to mention Slovakia more often than journalists and teachers. This means that respondents from the first category – practitioners of neighbourhood relations – already had the image of Slovakia in 2007, which was strongly based on professional experience. It seems that the connection of activity in neighbourhood cooperation and the notion of Slovakia's proximity among local practitioners creates a strong interpretative and discursive structure. Such a structure could strengthen the locally developed and positive image of national neighbourhood. However, the phenomenon is not unique for the three described towns. The most recent research concerning international cooperation of local communities in southern Poland shows that the activity of the smallest self-government units (gmina) is correlated with transborder location, and most often concerns the field of culture. (Nijander-Dudzińska et al. 2016: 10-13) Moreover, these three criteria quite strongly overlap. It might mean that such a model of notions concerning Slovakia is typical for local elites of the Polish-Slovakian borderland: the image based on regional-local and professional contexts, where the feeling of proximity is a result of the common realisation of tasks and activities.

It has to be stressed that many teachers and journalists who are actively engaged in their local communities do not have such a strong image of Slovakia. Since they belong to the professional category, and so are more influential in the popularisation of particular interpretations in the local community, the key question of this analysis is does the presented notions concerning Slovakia, present in the narrations of local elites, translate to common notions in local communities? It is not possible to receive the answer from the analysis, although the meaning of the described images for the respondents can be traced.

²⁵ A: Bardejov is a town which I gladly visit also personally, or even other borderland towns. I just visit them often during Sunday or weekend trips.

B: Often, sometimes even for the weekends. Not only me, my friends also. We like to visit the nearby towns – Vrbov, hot springs, Poprad or Bardejovske Kupele. So basically when you go on vacation you have all your friends around.

Dominant spatial imaginaries among the local elites and the meaning of neighbourhood with Slovakia

The previous analysis showed that the representatives of local elites on the borderland have generally quite well-developed notions concerning Slovakia and the Slovaks. However, they are always strongly influenced by the local context. So what meaning does the southern neighbour have in perceiving the activity, life in the local community, and the broader social environment for the respondents? To answer this question the interviews had been analysed regarding the dominant spatial imaginaries and their connections to the image of Slovakia²⁶. “*Spatial* imaginaries specifically relate to geopolitics or economic restructuring: they address basic ideas about the shape of territories, ‘natural’ relationships between societies or nations to territories, the way boundaries and borders are drawn and processes of regionalisation”. (Burkner 2017: 93-94)

Spatial notions in Sanok refer most often to internal differentiation of Europe on the East-West line. This type of dominant imaginary could be referred to as “latitude thinking”. Regardless of whether the statements concern the local community, region, general European problems, culture or politics, they are organised throughout the East-West dichotomy. Such a spatial arrangement develops from the smallest units to the global scale. The mix of Latin and Greek cultures (Polish and Rus) is noticed locally, and in the regional perspective it is the orientation towards relations with Ukraine. The context of the border with Ukraine instantly moves some statements to the level of national neighbourhood, although on this level the situation of Poland is collated with Ukraine and Germany. The border with Ukraine, as the eastern border of the European Union, is also a starting point for the description of differences between the European West and the Asiatic East. The domination of this manner of thinking means that Slovakia is sometimes invisible as a neighbour. It is mostly perceived as a weak spatial imaginary connected with professional activity (mainly by cultural managers and politicians) and transborder location.

The most meaningful consequence of latitude thinking is that Slovakia is absent in the European context. Despite the well-developed transborder cooperation in Sanok, many parties involved in it do not associate the practices with Europeanization processes, since such processes are thought to concern relations with partners from the East and the West. Thus, the dominating imaginary in Sanok is a disadvantage for implementing the image of Slovakia into the local discourse.

²⁶ Here the assumptions of holistic analysis oriented towards the determination of general types of interpretation have been used. (Cf. Wojakowski 2007: 113-114)

In Gorlice, despite the presence of latitude thinking in some of the interlocutors, references to regional context significantly dominate. Such spatial imaginary can be described as transborder regionalism, since it is an image of a region, or rather a micro-region, which includes the borderland on the Polish side and (sometimes) north Slovakia. In the statements of the interlocutors, the concrete name of a micro-region appears very rarely (only once *Pogórze, Podkarpacie*), its borders are marked out differently, and sometimes its multiculturalism is emphasised. This description of the area “near Gorlice” is often considered as a component of a larger region – Małopolska, Galicia or the Carpathians in general. The image of a micro-region as a part of a bigger region assuredly influenced the quite open perception of the territory. It includes neighbourhood connections and incorporates broader images of the region, but also the state and Europe. In this imaginary system the direct connections with the Slovakian borderland are either a part of a broader region of inhabitation (Carpathians), or perceived as the most experienced component of a wide European network of connections which also defines the local context.

The first case described a situation when the national neighbourhood gets an inclusive character. It is worth noting that just as in A. Fiń’s research (2013) it is not a result of the sole interethnic relations, but of the local community. It is Bardejov, not Slovakia in general, that belongs to the dominating imaginary of the micro-region in Gorlice. As a consequence, places, institutions, events and “recognisable” people are present as Slovak, or the Slovak in numerous life contexts, especially in the local one. As in the research of M. Tamaska, where some parts of Cieszyn belong to the common Polish-Czech *milieu* (Głęboka str. And Rynek; cf. 2017: 386-387), Bardejov is a part of the Polish local *milieu*. In this context the micro-region is recognised as a space of the co-presence of the Polish and the Slovaks, also because the life activity (including the professional activity) of both communities exceeds the state border. In the second case – when the European context is indicated – transborder relations and local experiences of cooperation are treated differently than in other towns, and it is seen as a benchmark for thinking about Europeanism. This is the reason why Slovakia is significantly more often mentioned in the European context in Gorlice than in Sanok and Nowy Targ.

The regional context also dominates spatial imaginary in Nowy Targ, but it is more concrete – it refers to Podhale. The regionalism of Podhale strongly accentuates the autonomic status of the region, which translates to the fact that it subordinates all other spatial imaginaries in narrations. The image of Poland, Europe, and Slovakia (also the United States) is juxtaposed mostly with the notion of the region as a centre of the activities of the interlocutors and their interpretations. In Gorlice, the region is perceived in the context of other territorial unities, whereas in Nowy Targ the other places are perceived in the

context of the region. It is hard to tell whether this image is totally exclusive, but it does have the trait of isolationism. The domination of such a regional imaginary is an explanation of the specific perception of the Slovaks by respondents from Nowy Targ. They paid more attention to their presence in the region, while they presented no interest in the other side of the border. Even though the Slovaks and Slovakia are localised within the inhabitants' cultural space, the region of Podhale, the inclusion of neighbours is quite different than in Gorlice. The Slovaks are present in Podhale every day, but only as economic tourists and a national minority. The presence of these groups does not translate to an interest in Slovakia in general. They are treated just as the sociology of nations describes: as close, but different, neither friends nor foes (Cf. Dębicki – Makaro 2016: 44-45), so there is no feeling of inclusion or spatial community.

Conclusions

The image of Slovakia and Slovaks in Poland has been paradoxical in recent years. On the one hand, Slovaks are the second most popular nation. (57 % of sympathy declarations, CBOS 2017: 2) Other research shows that 63 % of respondents are not able to point out any characteristic of the Slovaks, and the other ones describe them in very general categories, such as cheerful, nice or friendly people. (CBOS 2015: 3) The stereotype of the Slovaks is, in that sense, “empty” and unstructured, although it should be noted that since 2008 the position of the Polish southern neighbours has grown in the structure of national sympathy. In 2008 – the year of the research analyzed here – the declaration of sympathy for Slovaks was 51 %. (CBOS 2017: 3)

Qualitative research allows us to reflect on this paradox. The presented analysis contrasts with the empty stereotype of the Slovaks which appears in Polish society, the images of Slovakia and the Slovaks of those Poles who are particularly connected with the southern neighbour by spatial proximity and social and professional contacts with the Slovaks. In this compilation what happens in the gap between our respondents and the whole society is particularly interesting. The analysis shows that local politicians and cultural activists are evidently more cognitively engaged in relations with Slovakia than journalists and teachers. It is probably a constant situation, because the new qualitative research shows that cultural cooperation is the main field of the international activity of Polish local communities. (Nijander-Dudzińska et al. 2016: 13) In southern Poland almost 50 % of such projects are realized with Slovakia. (Ibidem: 14) Other fields of cooperation are less popular, but the presence of Polish-Slovak cooperation takes an even the bigger part of it. There is infrastructure cooperation (79 %), cooperation in sport and tourism (in both cases 60 % of Polish projects are in cooperation with a Slovakian partner). Only in education is the amount of Polish-Slovakian cooperation visibly

smaller, and takes only 20 % of projects in this field. (Ibidem: 14-15)²⁷ Comparing this with the evidently greater social distance of journalists and teachers toward Slovakia, it may be assumed that people who are particularly responsible for the popularisation of the image of Slovakia are not really interested to do it even in the borderlands. The gap between the low indications of knowledge of Slovakia in general in Polish society and the large cooperation and contacts of local elites with Slovak partners, may be connected with the lack of communication between those elites and local society. It is possible that the neighbourhood distance of local elites who popularises cultural content noticed in the analysis is a factor that has an impact on the situation.

Another important conclusion from the analysis of local images of Slovakia is that the intensive contacts with the neighbours may be the crucial element to construct that image, but is not enough to make this image an important part of people's own spatial imagination.

This importance of the picture of others is connected mainly with how they are incorporated into the dominant spatial imagination. In the case of Gorlice, the weak, ambiguous ties with the administrative region are likely to make it easier to construct such a borderscape (Brambilla et al. 2015), which integrates into their local neighbourhoods of directly neighbouring Slovakia (Bardejov). For those respondents, the relations with Slovakia are becoming an important reference point in the perception of their own town or the European community. In the case of Nowy Targ, the regional bonds are so strong that the Slovak partners are interesting mainly as the actors appearing on Polish regional territory – tourists, customers and a national minority. The image of Slovaks is “moved” from the transborder relations to the internal regional ones. In Sanok, relations with Slovakia compete with Polish-Ukrainian (and even Polish-German) relations. Neither the intensity of cooperation, nor the ease of communication on the Polish-Slovak border can compete with the range of the imagination of Poland as the mediator in the European East-West orientation, which is very popular in Sanok. This dominant spatial imagination diminishes the significance of the present relations with Slovakia, which unfortunately seem to be a popular imaginary in Polish public discourse (cf. Zarycki 2016), highly influenced the Polish relations with its neighbours.

Dariusz Wojakowski is a professor of sociology at the University of Rzeszów, Poland; Head of the Department of Central European Studies. His research issues concern: ethnic minorities, local community's studies, anthropology, borderland and state borders studies. Currently he is concerned with problems

²⁷ Cooperation in the media was not isolated as a significant percentage of all international projects. The research report appears in the other category, which contains 11 % of the entire cases of cooperation.

of Europeanisation of local communities, local self-government and civic awareness.

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