

TAŤÁNA SOUČKOVÁ

**Ukrainians in Slovakia: Outlining the Reflection on Ethnic Identity and Autostereotypisation of the Ukrainian Minority**

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# **Ukrainians in Slovakia: Outlining the Reflection on Ethnic Identity and Autostereotypisation of the Ukrainian Minority**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper is based on the conclusions of ethnological research of Ukrainian minority carried out by the author on the territory of Slovakia between 2014 and 2016. Its main objective was the reflection of ethnic stereotypes of the Ukrainian minority towards the Slovak majority. An unavoidable element in research on stereotyping and reflection of "national character" was also an analysis of ethnic identity of the members of the minority group. How do they perceive themselves, what does it personally mean to them to be a Ukrainian and what practically fulfills an abstract category of "being Ukrainian". The author briefly summarizes key theoretical objectives of the concept of ethnic identity and then analyses its reflection within the Ukrainians in Slovakia with regard to its main characteristics. Ukrainian autostereotypisation in the broader context of Ukrainian-Russian relationship is also examined.

**KEY WORDS:** Ukrainian minority, Slovakia, ethnic identity, autosterotypes, symbolic ethnicity

## **Introduction**

Ukrainian minority represents a significant community in ethnic structure of Slovakia. The issue of ethnic self-identification and self-reflection of its members is connected with a whole

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range of topics, among which dominates the internal division of the minority into the Ukrainian and the Rusyn part. Another important factor influencing the current state of the minority is a new economic migration wave which is determined by seeking better economic and social conditions for life. New migration is often intertwined with the conflict in the eastern Ukraine, the loss of the Crimean Peninsula and overall bad economic and political situation of the country.

The following text is based on the conclusions of ethnological research carried out by the author in the territory of Slovakia between 2014 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> Its main objective was the reflection of ethnic stereotypes of the Ukrainian minority towards the Slovak majority. An unavoidable element in research on stereotyping and reflection of "national character" is an analysis of ethnic identity of the members of the minority group - how do they perceive themselves, what does it personally mean to them to be a Ukrainian and what practically fulfills an abstract category of "being Ukrainian".

Without the ambition to cover such a comprehensive topic in its entirety, we have come to the conclusion that, despite the inherent fragmentation of the members of the minority due to the diversity of their nature, socio-economic origin and differences in viewing the global cultural and political situation, it is possible for Ukrainians in Slovakia to follow some common tendencies and attitudes.

### **Research Methodology**

Ethnological research of the Ukrainian minority was designed as qualitative and based on face-to-face structured and semi-structured interviews. Non-formal questioning was also used, especially when the informant was familiar with the research goal, but for various reasons it appeared to be impossible to stick to the intended structure of the interview. Frequently this happened with the respondents who were not used to interacting with scientific research environment and some topics gave them an impression of confusion or not understanding the overall purpose of the interview. Moreover, the technique of an informal conversation was crucial as the author was in a position of an outsider within the Ukrainian

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<sup>1</sup> The research on Ukrainian ethnic stereotypes was originally carried out in the Slovak Republic and simultaneously in the Czech Republic as it had been designed as a comparison of the two potentially similar, yet different social backgrounds. Presented conclusions include only the data relevant for the Slovak part of the survey.

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community. Most often a combination of both types of interview was used depending on the particular communication situations and the capabilities of the respondents.

Due to the nature of the studied issue a number of refinements of the qualitative research method were required during the survey. A methodological alternative linking the qualitative method with the quantitative method was used in a form of a questionnaire survey. In scientific terminology this type of research is referred to as a complementary combination of qualitative and quantitative survey – a mixed research (HENDL 2016:56-59). In this way it was possible to reach out to more respondents, as there were informants who, for various reasons, were unwilling to engage in closer cooperation and contact with the researcher. However, they were able to contribute at least by filling in the questionnaires.

Basing on the framework defined in mixed research characteristics, the questionnaires have brought us relevant and valuable information. Questions in the questionnaire were designed as open in order to receive free associations of the respondents. The interviews and the findings of the questionnaires were evaluated separately, they were summarized only in the presentation of the overall results of the original research.

During the research the author repeatedly participated in the cultural events of the Ukrainian minority, where she applied a method of participant and non-participant observation. The author is a graduate of the academic specialization Ukrainian Language and Literature (Masaryk University in Brno, the Czech Republic), which enabled her to fully comprehend various customs and folk traditions presented at events.

Nevertheless, the research topic requires a lot of specific information that cannot be captured solely by a mere observation method and if so, it is only to a small extent. For this reason, the principle of selective observation focusing on certain "examples and evidence for types of behavior and processes" had been applied (HENDL 2016:199).

Qualitative research was carried out in Bratislava, Trnava, Košice, Prešov and Svidník. A sample of respondents was constituted from Ukrainian citizens permanently residing in the Slovak Republic. The basic criterion for participation in the survey was the ethnic self-identification of respondents as Ukrainians as well as claiming Ukrainian nationality.

Eight in-depth interviews were conducted and eleven completed questionnaires were collected. Three questionnaires had been filled in by the respondents, who subsequently participated also in the face-to-face structured and semi-structured interviews. The age range of respondents was from 18 to 77 years. The occupation of informants varied from college students, manual workers, administrative workers or medical staff members to people working in media, academic sphere and art. As for the origin the overall composition of the

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respondents was unbalanced in favor of the migrant component with most of the informants belonging to the older or the modern wave of migration. Only two respondents came from a family of autochthonous Ukrainians of northeastern Slovakia.<sup>2</sup>

Our participants did not have contacts based on organized migrant networks, although some of the respondents shared mutual friendly or working relationships. We had anticipated the Ukrainian minority to be internally heterogeneous. It has been split into subgroups depending on the form of residence, occupation and socio-economic conditions of their members and in particular on the willingness to publicly demonstrate or together experience their ethnic identity (SZALÓ 2007:114). Therefore, we decided not to include a methodological aspect which is nowadays widely discussed – the transnationalism, more precisely the concept of transnational migration (SZALÓ 2007). We believe that applying of the concept should be based on logically predefined research objectives. Knowing that most of our respondents do not necessarily maintain parallel life in both Slovakia and Ukraine (see for example HAMAR-SZALÓ 2007),<sup>3</sup> except natural, and predominantly online, contacts with their families or friends, we regarded the transnational approach as not suitable for our research. We would not be able to deliver solid evidence for at least basic generalization concerning the transnational aspect of our respondents' reflection of their Ukrainian ethnic identity. Our starting point was the reflection of minority ethnic identity in Slovak milieu, but most importantly the ethnic stereotypization and its manifestation. For the sake of the coherence of the final research output we have decided not to split the research objectives into too many concepts and subtopics. However, we perceive this concept to be highly inspirational. It should be applied with the next reinterpreting of the collected data, this time solely in the light of building and maintaining the transnational Ukrainian migrant identity within Slovakia.

### **Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity**

Ethnicity is one of the terms which has been outlined by a number of definitions and theoretical characterizations in the second half of the 20th century. Constructivism became the main conceptual framework for the characterization of ethnicity especially from the 1960s

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<sup>2</sup> One respondent was interviewed, the other one filled in a questionnaire.

<sup>3</sup> Most of our respondents, however, do keep in touch with their homeland, but these are rather somehow natural relationships with their friends or family, which are not conditioned or motivated by particular need (e. g. having left children in Ukraine, a remittance etc.).

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and the 1970s (BOTÍK 2007:9). Contemporary concept of ethnicity is briefly summarized by Petra Košťálová, who suggests that there is also an idea of the concept of ethnicity as a phenomenon which may include both instrumentalist and functionalist elements. According to her words, ethnicity can be understood as "a manifestation of belonging to a particular ethnic group, which de facto precedes the formation of the nation and which is characterized by objectively determined factors" – the primordial aspect (KOŠŤÁLOVÁ 2012:31-32).

Ethnicity is a very broad concept, generally defined as "cultural practices and opinions of a certain group of people which distinguish them from others" (GIDDENS 1999:228). Boundaries of ethnicity are very variable and flexible to the extent that in theoretical approaches to its definition there is currently a whole range of concepts starting with the emphasis on the importance of ethnicity in modern society to its more general characterization as one of the manifestations of collective identity (ŠATAVA 2009:16-17). Gabriela Kiliánová also adopts the broadest possible framework for the definition of ethnicity. She has come to the conclusion that ethnicity "can only be defined as a feeling by which one group of people distinguishes itself from another group. This feeling can often be difficult to explain, diffused and unclear both from the point of view of members and non-members of the group, hence from the perspective of emic and etic" (KILIÁNOVÁ 1998:21).

It can be concluded that ethnicity is a complex phenomenon and has many different forms. Thomas Hylland Eriksen in his classical work *Ethnicity and Nationalism* also avoids an unequivocal definition of ethnicity. Instead he analyzes the possible social contexts in which ethnicity is applied as the main principle of intergroup relations (ERIKSEN 2012:34-35). In Eriksen's words "we express the idea that groups and identities evolve in mutual contact rather than in isolation" (ERIKSEN 2012:34). He follows the concept of Fredrik Barth, who dealt with exploring social boundaries within ethnic groups. Barth stated that creating and maintaining boundaries between groups is an incentive to maintain ethnic identity and the uniqueness of a given group (BARTH 1969:15). Basic principles of ethnicity thus include the definition of "us" and "them". In the case of complementarity of relationships, where one ethnic group seeks to achieve an equal relationship (typically with ethnic minorities), the categorization is modified to "us" and "you" (ERIKSEN 2012:59).

In examining a particular aspect of interethnic relations, such as ethnic stereotypes, it is important to define the issue of ethnicity in the context of all its social, cultural and historical contexts. As for the Slovak majority, ethnicity can be relatively precisely delineated since it

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has relatively clearly defined ethnic boundaries.<sup>4</sup> However, while defining the Ukrainian ethnic group, it is necessary to take into account the complicated ethnic composition of the population of Ukrainians who constitute an ethnic minority in the Slovak Republic. Another fundamental element is the factor of subjective definition of ethnicity as a "variable phenomenon of the gradual constitution of the consciousness of belonging to a group" (KOŠŤÁLOVÁ 2012:30), including regional, religious and linguistic specificities that can be very diverse for the Ukrainians.<sup>5</sup> The basis for the understanding of ethnicity is thus not only the declaration of belonging to the Ukrainian ethnic group regardless of the question of a mother language as the language is not and cannot be a determining factor of ethnicity. A more important aspect is the ethnic identity that we believe to be a conscious subjective experience of ethnicity (KILIÁNOVÁ 1998:21). It is "a concept to a certain extent similar to the term identity" – it represents the perception of own ethnic identity; it is a way of self-presentation and ethnic self-classification" (KOŠŤÁLOVÁ 2012:28).

As part of the academic debate on ethnicity, the term "ethnic consciousness", which had been suggested by Michal Kaľavský, should also be mentioned. According to Kaľavský, ethnic consciousness is a sense of the group's originality, which includes "the common historical memory of the ethnic community, a set of common values of the ethnic community, ethnonym and a set of collective community aspirations" (KAĽAVSKÝ 2004:13). Ethnic consciousness, as characterized by Kaľavský, is conditioned, among other things, by a "set of collective aspirations of the community" (KAĽAVSKÝ 2004:13). In the Slovak milieu, however, it is unavoidable to take into account the dual nature of the Ukrainian minority – its autochthonous component and the Ukrainians who form the diaspora. As empirical findings show, it is not always possible to talk about sharing common aspirations or defining common goals. The interests and future headings of the new and constantly arriving migrants

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<sup>4</sup> Clearly defined boundaries are in the context of our research understood conditionally. We are aware of the fact that Slovak society is not internally homogeneous. In spite of that the way members of the Ukrainian minority perceive the Slovaks makes it possible to see the Slovaks as a relatively coherent community with clearly recognizable characteristics. This type of an emic approach has its own specific rules, which are particularly analyzed by folk sociology or ethnic (psychological) essentialization. Such research is the domain of cognitive psychology and cognitive anthropology. For more details see KANOVSKÝ 2009a:9-34; KANOVSKÝ 2009b:345-368.

On the topic of development of the process of understanding ethnicity and ethnic boundaries see ŠATAVA 2009:10-30.

<sup>5</sup> On the issue of ethnicity and issues of ethnic identity on the example of the Czechs living abroad see BROUČEK 2011:52-56.

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are often diametrically different from the Ukrainians who were born and have been living in the territory of today's Slovakia (autochthonous Rusyns-Ukrainians).

Therefore, we perceive the concept of ethnic identity as a more appropriate tool for describing experiencing or declaring ethnicity, since ethnic identity can represent a purely individual phenomenon. At the same time, resulting from an empirical survey, it can also have many overlaps towards collective experience and evaluation of the forms of demonstration of ethnic identity of others.

Ján Botík argues, that ethnic identity is "used as a theoretical category for creating an individual or group/collective self-image" (BOTÍK 2007:9). This aspect is particularly important in our research for the purpose of characterizing ethnic identity of the Ukrainians. Boundaries of collective awareness of the group's ethnic identity provide a platform for forming mental representations of characteristics and significant features of other ethnic groups. These limits subsequently create a space for mutual confrontation of the members of the studied ethnic minority group. The Ukrainians appear to be an ethnic group adjusting to the majority yet necessitating the creation of a space for declaring their own ethnic identity in confrontation with the ethnic identity of the majority. However, in a number of specific cultural and historical aspects, particular members of the group can seem similar or even identical to the Slovaks, which is particularly the case of some of the Rusyns-Ukrainians of northeastern Slovakia.

In accordance with G. Kiliánová we believe that ethnic identity is a constructed identity and represents a consciously experienced process of self-reflection and reflection of one's own relation to the ethnic group, whether it is to itself or to a group of "others" (KILIÁNOVÁ 1998:22).

For the sake of completeness, it is also necessary to point out the view of ethnic identity by the prism of cognitive anthropology formulated by Martin Kanovský, which suggests that the ethnic identity is "necessarily a combination of particular universal, innate psychological qualities and a socio-historical-political construction" (KANOVSKÝ 2009a:9).

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### **Ukrainians in Slovakia: Rusyns and Ukrainians**

Within the scope of Slovak scientific literature focused on the issue of minorities, which means including the treatise on the Rusyns and Ukrainians or Rusyns-Ukrainians,<sup>6</sup> in most cases there can be found a resigned conclusion stating that the minority is now divided into two irreconcilable branches – Rusyn and Ukrainian. More specifically, on one hand there is a group promoting autonomy of the Rusyn ethnic group and its independence (linguistic, cultural, ethnic and historical) on the Ukrainian nation and on the other hand stands a pro-Ukrainian opposition, which emphasizes the common origins of the Rusyns and Ukrainians and views them as one ethnic group with the same roots and ethnic background.

Disputes over whether it is one and identical ethnic group or whether the Rusyns have gone through a different ethnogenesis and thus they are not part of the Ukrainian nation have been filling and still are filling pages of scholarly monographs and periodicals as well as numerous conference proceedings. Recently the revival of Rusyn culture has been highly topical, at least for those who actively claim the Rusyn nationality. This fact has been strongly supported by official recognising of the Rusyn language as a one of the minority languages in the Slovak Republic since 1995 (PLÍŠKOVÁ 2004:114). In eastern Slovakia, especially in Prešov and Košice, several Rusyn institutions are actively working and there are folk ensembles regularly performing. Magazines, newsletters and books are being published, conferences are being held, moreover there is even a radio broadcast in the Rusyn language. However, it is important to stress, that there are also Ukrainian cultural associations and artistic ensembles, including the Ukrainian radio broadcast as well. Both the Rusyn and the Ukrainian associations operate simultaneously.

From the historical point of view the representatives of the Rusyns point out mainly the violent Ukrainianization during the totalitarian period, accentuating the denial of the right to Rusyn self-determination along with marginalization of the Rusyn language. This is subsequently supposed to having led to a process of strengthening the Rusyn ethnic self-identification. In 1991, 13 281 people declared the Ukrainian nationality and 17 197 people claimed the Rusyn nationality (SOPOLIGA 2006:21). The supporters of the Ukrainian nationality see the Rusyn ethnic revival as a very sensitive matter that ultimately weakens

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<sup>6</sup> The "Rusyns-Ukrainians" is a compromise term, which is not accepted by all minority representatives, but is widely used in current Slovak scholarly publications. By the pro-Rusyn movement the Rusyns are viewed as entirely independent ethnic group including the ethnonym, others claim the ethnonym Rusyn to be older, vernacular ethnonym for today's Ukrainians.

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the already fragmented minority and leads to an even faster and more intensive assimilation with the majority Slovak population. The trend of a gradual integration is visible in the censuses. Two decades after the first post-revolutionary census (2011) the number of citizens proclaiming the Ukrainian nationality dropped to 7 430. On the contrary the number of people declaring the Rusyn nationality increased to 33 482.<sup>7</sup>

Situation between the Rusyns and the Ukrainians in Slovakia is very complex and non-transparent. It is influenced by partial political and economic interests. Nevertheless, the scholars across the academic spectrum agree on the fact that for the Rusyns and Ukrainians/Rusyns-Ukrainians and their ordinary daily lives these issues represent rather abstract and not crucially important matter (PODOBA 2009:573; MUŠINKA 2005:203-207). In other words, academic disputes or debates have little to do with a real and practical life. Members of the minority often call themselves Rusyns or Rusnaks, which is by no means referring to the expression of internal agreement with the idea of the revival of the Rusyn ethnicity. They simply and naturally use the ethnonym which they have been using for years not regarding to its current political connotations.

As mentioned above, it is also necessary to emphasize that many cultural activities of both groups are parallel and often overlap completely. It is the logical consequence of the common roots which are most clearly evident in the folklore. As stated by Mikuláš Mušinka, folklore unifies its bearers but also the scholars with otherwise contradictory views. Mušinka in his essay on the issue of the Rusyns-Ukrainians suggests a conciliatory opinion based on the interest in folk traditions research as well as in passing on these traditions to future generations. He argues that it is the content and form of the traditions which is decisive for the people who maintain and develop them, not the fact the "these traditions will be considered Rusyn, Rusyn-Ukrainian or Ukrainian" (MUŠINKA 2005:207).

Given the current situation, there is a little chance that the emphasis on common things instead of those that divides the Rusyns-Ukrainian in northeastern Slovakia will represent sufficient motivation to calm the disputes which have been lasting for decades.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html> [cit. 2018-01-29].

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### **Ukrainian minority in Slovakia as a whole**

Besides the Rusyn-Ukrainians as autochthonous inhabitants of Slovakia there is another issue connected with Ukrainian minority, which has so far not been adequately analyzed in Slovak ethnological, sociological and demographic discourse. It is the modern migration wave from Ukraine. One reason for relative overlooking of the matter is that the Ukrainians are not perceived as distinctly and culturally different in Slovakia. They are seen as "domestic" because of their strong position on the ethnic map of Slovakia thanks to the autochthonous part of the ethnic group. Modern migration surveys accentuate other nationalities coming to Slovakia and although the Ukrainians are not represented among them, we can rely on their general knowledge that applies to all migrants from countries outside the European Union (GALLOVÁ KRIGLEROVÁ – KADLEČÍKOVÁ – LAJČÁKOVÁ 2009; FILADELFIOVÁ – GYARFÁŠOVÁ – HLINČÍKOVÁ – SEKULOVÁ 2010). Among research obstacles concerning the Ukrainians belongs also the unclear situation within the minority as well as the low number of people of Ukrainian nationality coming to Slovakia. However, as current surveys show, Slovakia is becoming an increasingly popular destination for Ukrainians.

In the Slovak Republic the labor and economic migration has been developing since the 90's pointing out that in the year 2015 10 000 stays were granted to citizens of Ukraine. Thus, they have ranked among the largest group of migrants from third countries in the Slovak territory. The trend of the arrival of economic migrants, but also for example the students, is rising despite a number of administrative problems. Authors of the publication on current Slovak migrants talk about the need for legislative adjustments and simplification of the process of legal and socio-economic integration of migrants (KRIGLEROVÁ – KADLEČÍKOVÁ – LAJČÁKOVÁ 2009:48-49).

### **New Ukrainian migration wave**

As a part of our research we focused largely on the Ukrainians who belong to the modern and current wave of migration. The only interconnection it has with the autochthonous Rusyn-Ukrainians is their ethnonym "the Ukrainians". The fact that current Ukrainian diaspora is being formed in Slovakia is an interesting starting point for further research, since it seems to lack deeper links to Rusyns-Ukrainian from the northeast of the country, but at the same time is increasingly active in public cultural life. This modern Ukrainian migration represents a kind of bridging of the issue of ethnic identification between Rusyns-Ukrainians and opens up new perspectives of the Ukrainian national minority as a whole. In many cases

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its members come from the regions of central, southern or eastern Ukraine and they are not so burdened with the issue of Rusyn versus Ukrainian ethnic self-identification. This also brings new challenges such as intense communication about potential problems or practical obstacles to life in Slovakia which are recently being largely shared and discussed on social networks. Modern digital communication is becoming an increasingly important tool for organizing the lives of the migrant community.

Members of the diaspora and the representatives of modern migration most intensively operate in the lucrative region of Bratislava. The second largest region with the highest number of employed people coming from Ukraine is the Košice Region.<sup>8</sup> Living in Bratislava is favourable for its geographical location in the vicinity of Vienna and the border with the Czech Republic. The Ukrainians are also present in other Slovak towns, albeit in smaller numbers. Some of our respondents have been living in Košice or Prešov for a long time. They have chosen to live in these cities because of various personal reasons or job offers. It has not been a targeted effort to stay in a place with a higher concentration of "compatriots", as for the autochthonous part of the community living there. Few Ukrainian artists also live in Trnava and its surroundings or in Považská Bystrica and other locations.

As some of our respondents have confirmed, various stereotypes have developed in Slovakia, not unlike those that are also evident in the Czech or Polish environment. It is particularly the image of the Ukrainians as "mafia men or women seeking a rich husband", or people who take the jobs from Slovaks, smuggle goods and are involved in the illegal drug trade.

An important breakthrough in the life of Ukrainian migration was the conflict in Ukraine. A need to actively raise awareness about Ukrainian culture and to draw attention to the need to support Ukraine as an independent and united country has led to founding new civic migration initiatives in the Slovak Republic. The most significant of them works in Bratislava: Ukraine – Slovakia – SOS has become a respected volunteer organization within a relatively short period of time (during the past four years).<sup>9</sup> Its members have been organizing charity collections for local residents and Ukrainian soldiers. Over the time its activities have been intertwined with the musical drama ensemble Shevchenkovci.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [http://cvek.sk/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/integracia\\_migrantov\\_2.pdf](http://cvek.sk/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/integracia_migrantov_2.pdf) [cit. 2018-01-30].

<sup>9</sup> <http://ukraine-slovakia-sos.org/> [cit. 2018-01-30].

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/%C5%A0ev%C4%8Denkovci-Hudobno-dramatick%C3%BD-s%C3%BAbor-Tarasa-%C5%A0ev%C4%8Denka-123551004375251/?fref=ts> (official social network profile).

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Furthermore particularly the female members of the initiative have made considerable efforts to establish the Ukrainian language course for children who attend Slovak schools or are from Russian-speaking families although their parents are of Ukrainian nationality (but do not actively use the Ukrainian language).

It has to be noticed that despite these tendencies the modern Ukrainian community in large cities is not homogeneous. Many Ukrainian citizens prefer an inconspicuous life without expressing their ethnicity or participating in Ukrainian cultural activities or other reverence gatherings for the victims of the war.

### **Ethnic identity of the Ukrainians in Slovakia**

National and ethnic symbolism of the Ukrainian minority in Slovakia is formed by the consciousness of belonging to Ukraine, which, as an independent country, is still undergoing a complex process of building and consolidating its own ethnic consciousness. Despite complexity of the problems of interpretation of Ukrainian history some elements can be defined combining both aspects of the myth of common historical origins, which is usually associated with the Slavic population of Kyivan Rus and the phenomenon of the Cossacks in the early modern period.

The most prominent cultural personality for the Ukrainians had become the writer and painter Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), the founder of modern Ukrainian literature. Modern history is commemorated in particular by the tragic famine ("holodomor") that broke out in Ukraine in 1932-1933 in the context of the violent Soviet collectivization of the land. Part of the Ukrainian society believes that the famine was a planned Russian genocide of the Ukrainian nation (KOROSTELINA 2014:87, 144).<sup>11</sup>

An important element of the ethnic self-identification of Ukrainians is above all a set of cultural codes based on the East Slavonic heritage of the Kyivan Rus, the Orthodox Church

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<sup>11</sup> In a comprehensive analysis of the Ukrainian national narrative, Karina V. Korostelina states that Ukrainian ethnic identity is developed and shaped in a constant confrontation with Russian national identity and Russian culture. Korostelina's research took place prior to the outbreak of the Donbass conflict and the loss of the Crimea, but its conclusions are fully consistent with the data we obtained from our informants after 2014. Korostelina describes the difficult definition of the Ukrainian in opposition to the Russian, which is far from valid for the whole spectrum of Ukrainian society. Particularly complicated is the case for Russian-speaking Ukrainians, who perceive nationalist tendencies in the expression of Ukrainian as a unity of language, culture and shared pro-European

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and the following moral values and attitudes. Karina V. Korostelina's research confirms that to a large extent the key paradigm of Ukrainian culture is based on delimitating itself from the Russian culture. Within this axiological opposition the Ukrainians regard themselves as a peace-loving nation with an independent and democratically manifested mentality. However, it has always been threatened and attacked by aggressive, imperial and authoritative Russian predominance (KOROSTELINA 2014:146-149).

The Ukrainians recognize a number of elements of folk material and spiritual culture, even in the form of colours, as ethnic symbols. The essential colours include yellow and blue representing the colours of the flag of Ukraine symbolizing yellow fields and the blue sky above them. It also includes national dishes, such as "borsch" or "varenky", as well as folk clothing elements such as "vyshyvanka", a national costume shirt decorated with typical embroidery. Ukrainians perceive various ethnic symbols as very important - from musical folklore, botanical elements (viburnum, poplar tree) to famous literary works. Therefore, the Ukrainians in Slovakia choose a similar repertoire of ethnic symbols as in Ukraine. A separate chapter is represented by the sphere of personal experience of interpersonal relationships, sharing values and attitudes. This highly abstract area is very important for Ukrainians as it delimitates symbolic differences from the Slovak society. Nevertheless, in the case of material and spiritual culture, careful differentiation is necessary due to the diversity of the ethnic composition of the Ukrainian population and thus different forms of ethnic identity drawing on diverse symbols that do not necessarily have to be universal for the whole country.

Generally speaking, ethnic identity which we understand as a subjective perception of "being Ukrainian" is usually clearly declared by the informants as a feeling of internal interconnection with the Ukrainian country, mentality, culture and in some cases very intensely also with the Ukrainian language. Our findings and the overall consistency and relevance of the gained narratives enable us to observe that Ukrainians, when asked about

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values as "aggressive patriotism" (KOROSTELINA 2014:214-224). The author, in her extensive analysis, points to a whole range of axiological opposition, which according to the Ukrainians divide these two nations. From an emic Ukrainian opinion, and it is necessary to point out that the Russian view of Korostelina's research is not included, the Ukrainians are the victims, while the Russians are characterized as aggressors. Ukrainians tend to be viewed as a pro-European, modern and democratically-minded society, while the Russians are characterized by imperial ambitions and are more like the Asians. Last but not least, the Ukrainians are free-minded and strive to live in a free country. On the contrary the Russians are characterized as a nation easily manipulated by a strong leader, inclined towards totalitarianism, autocracy and oppression both internal and external (KOROSTELINA 2014:146, 185).

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ethnic identity and the feeling of "being Ukrainian", usually operate with the division of their nation into sub-units due to the particular geographic areas. The differences between perception, reflection, experience, and eventually the public declaration of their ethnic identity is predominantly given by their place of origin in Ukraine. It also determines their regarding of the Slovak Republic and its society.

The basis of the territorial division is the axis formed by the Dnieper River which divides the country into the western and eastern part but the actual internal division of Ukraine is much more diverse.<sup>12</sup> From the point of view of declaring one's identity, there is a strong emphasis on the Zakarpattia origin, which has been significantly stressed by its bearers compared to the rest of Ukraine. The informants from the Zakarpattia region have reflected themselves somewhat ethnically specific and different from people from other parts of Ukraine. Reciprocally it has been recognised by the Ukrainians from other regions who spoke about certain specificity of Zakarpattia. In Slovakia this feature is enhanced by the fact that Zakarpattia lies on the Ukrainian-Slovak border which implies the natural proximity given by the common Carpathian culture, including the vernacular language dialects.

Zakarpattia is known to the inhabitants of other regions of Ukraine as the most western, and also probably the most distant part of the country. This is due to the mountainous geographical profile and the peculiarity of the local population. It is also necessary to mention the different historical development of the region that had been part of the Kingdom of Hungary and for centuries it had been outside the control of the powerful states influencing the geo-political situation of Ukraine (Poland, Russia, Austria). Ukrainians from other regions often have only a very superficial awareness of the Rusyn affairs and specifics of the region, but generally reflect the Zakarpattia as an area with an incomprehensible dialect. The differences between the Zakarpattia population, which is sometimes referred to by other

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<sup>12</sup> Markéta Bezoušková, who follows the concept of cultural areas according to Václav Soukup (BEZOUŠKOVÁ 2012:67-77) dealt with the question of ethnic identification of Ukrainians coming from the West and the East in her study on the mutual reflection of these two groups of Ukrainian migrants in Prague. Bezoušková draws a brief conclusion which focuses primarily on West-East or East-West discourse where there is a difference between the two groups of inhabitants but none of them perceives any differences as confrontational, apart for some exceptions. As Bezoušková states, the topic of internal division by the place of origin plays an important role in the ethnic identification of Ukrainians. Our research has also shown that this aspect plays an important role not only in the reflection of the Ukrainian self, but also of the others. We are trying to take into account the emic Ukrainian perspective, which particularly resonates with the accent on the distinctive character of the Zakarpattia region and its inhabitants.

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informants without further specifying as a part of western Ukraine, are also apparent in terms of people living in the central, eastern or southeastern parts of the country.

This is mainly related to the afore-mentioned division of the country to the west and east. This classification is based on the historical structure of the Ukrainian countries but has remained in a generalized form to this day. It is most likely to be heard about western Ukraine as the one which has preserved the Ukrainian traditions, language and national pride and is keeping them alive. The inhabitants of western Ukraine thus perceive themselves to be closer to European than to the Russian sphere of cultural and political influence. Some people of the central and eastern regions confront themselves with the definition of "being Ukrainian" as such and deal with its actual semantic as well as practical essence. However, this inner coping with self-identification does not necessarily imply supporting Russia on its political journey; it is mainly the confusion of having to choose between Ukrainian and Russian (language, family background, social milieu) which can be difficult to make.

For the most part the territory of eastern Ukraine is constituted from important industrial area where predominantly Russian is spoken. Formerly the "Soviet culture" has been much more entrenched here. This abstract concept was constantly used by the informants, even those from the east. In eastern Ukraine, the Soviet heritage is firmly embedded in collective human memory. Through this prism is commonly perceived the internal division of the whole country, into two halves – taking into account many different subregions.

In a given cultural and geographical context, it must be emphasized once again that Russian as a mother tongue does not in any way mean pro-Russian sympathy or national attachment. It does not mean that in the east of the country there would not be any living and publicly actively shared idea of being essentially Ukrainian, along with displaying patriotism and pride of Ukrainian origin. There definitely is.

**Internal inhomogeneity of the community as an aspect of Ukrainian ethnic identity**

Low cohesiveness within the groups of Ukrainians living abroad has often been referred to by informants as one of the typical features of the Ukrainian migrants. This entails the issue of Ukrainian self-image and autostereotype in general, but in order to understand the functioning of the Ukrainian minority in Slovakia it is important to define it as one of the constitutive elements of migrant community's collective identity. Its overall internal

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inhomogeneity and fragmentation is caused by what the Ukrainians themselves describe as "disunity".

Almost during all the interviews we have made, we were warned that the attitudes of Ukrainians living abroad are diametrically different from the opinions we would have heard directly in Ukraine. The reason for this difference is the fact that people who have decided to leave Ukraine for whatever reason perceive themselves as more determined, more progressive and free-minded. This is usually also associated with adopting strongly individual approach within the strategy they take in integrating into mainstream society. For many Ukrainians the only unifying element of the community, regardless of which part of the country the person comes from, is the Orthodox or Greek-Catholic temples. However, many Ukrainians visit them only at the time of important church holidays or on the occasion of weddings, baptisms or funerals.

Repeatedly there have occurred opinions confirming the existence of many closed communities of Ukrainians whose members speak only Ukrainian or Russian, not wanting to integrate in any way and unwilling to communicate openly even with other Ukrainians. In the words of the respondents, in the context of the current migrant community the principle applies that the Ukrainians overlook their compatriots, since they very often feel ashamed of them. Furthermore, they very negatively perceive the low support of the Ukrainian embassy in Slovakia.

The causes for not reaching to other Ukrainians are partly in the stereotypical view of the Ukrainians by the majority, when they are frequently being regarded as second-class economic migrants coming from the underdeveloped country. This also has an effect on the Ukrainians themselves. They can reluctantly communicate with others in order not to be negatively labelled. There are also examples when the Ukrainians share a negative view of the Slovak majority members concerning the Ukrainians and after personal negative experiences with communication with the compatriots, they are also somewhat ashamed for them. It should be noted that although this situation has begun to change slowly even in the course of our research and is likely to change into the future, the community remains fragmented and is generally rather small.

General piece of knowledge, which once again relates to experiencing the Ukrainian identity in connection with the place of origin in Ukraine, is a phenomenon that proved to be problematic with the outbreak of a war in the Donbass region. This tragic situation, in addition to fatal material impacts and losses on human lives, is serious in terms of the division of Ukrainian society both in Ukraine and outside Ukraine. The informants we had interviewed were united in the perception of the conflict as a national disaster, but individual

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views differed on issues related to its causes. The most prominent issue is the pro-Ukrainian versus pro-Russian orientation of Ukrainians, especially among those who are divided between their native language, which is often Russian, and Ukrainian, that is being increasingly promoted as a symbol of Ukrainian national identity.

Respondents who come from the Russian-speaking environment had in some cases the need to accentuate that they are actively claiming their Ukrainian identity in order to not to become suspected from extremely nationally-oriented compatriots, which might be prone to picture them as supporters of Russian military aggression. The contradictions of opinion that either had not existed before the outbreak of war or had not played a significant role in interpersonal relationships (which is usually expressed by the attitude stating that Ukrainians are one nation regardless of language as they commonly understand each other and make friends across the country) have obviously transferred to the functioning of the ethnic minority, its internal coherence and public presentation.

Speaking about opinions, the autochthonous Ukrainians of Slovakia are as divided as the members of the migrant diaspora community. Among the older generation of Ukrainian respondents, who have been living and working in Slovakia for several decades, there were strong voices talking about the Slovak majority society as helping with their indifferent attitude to even more intense fragmentation of an already inhomogenous minority.

### **Symbols of Ukrainian ethnic identity**

According to the ethnosymbolic concept developed by Anthony D. Smith, a set of certain myths, symbols, values, memories, and rituals is the basis of ethnicity manifestation (SMITH 2009:24-25). The set of attributes of the material and spiritual culture of the nation is very diverse and wide in the case of the Ukrainians. In Ukrainian society, great emphasis is placed on moral values and specific features of a national character, which are naturally perceived as unique by Ukrainians and which could be put into the category of abstract symbolism.

In the interviews on this question with the respondents, the feeling of belonging to Ukraine in the sense of it as a native land with specific culture and traditions has been most commonly stressed. Such feeling has not weakened even after long years spent in emigration. Other typical Ukrainian symbols regularly used during meetings of Ukrainians outside their

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native country do not differ from those commonly displayed during holidays or various festive occasions directly in Ukraine.

The most important symbols include the flag of Ukraine, which is always on display when a specific event is taken, or the participants bring it with them and at least keep it in their hands. Together with the flag, there is often a coat of arms, the so-called "tryzub" (trident).<sup>13</sup> In connection with the coat of arms of Ukraine, its decoration is usually a "rushnyk", which is an embroidered ritual cloth of rectangular shape and it represents a typical part of the Eastern Slavic ceremonial traditions. From the garments it is primarily a "vyshyvanka" represented by a white or black shirt embroidered with traditional ornaments worn by both women and men. Women also add other parts of the national costume which are usually already very modernized. Girls and women often braid their hair and they add at least a symbolic floral headband. T-shirts with different national motifs and inscriptions dressed by women, men and children are also very popular today.

A crucial element of Ukrainian gatherings is food. Emphasis is put on tasty home-made food which is associated with hospitality and generosity. Features such as "hospitality along with offering the guests the best what we have" is expressed by the Ukrainians through meals and drinks, representing a self-portrayed view of Ukrainians as an open society that accepts without prejudices anybody who comes with the willingness to get to know Ukraine and Ukrainians. The most significant meal is Ukrainian borsch, which, especially as Ukrainian women like to emphasize, is a purely Ukrainian soup, not Russian, as the Slovaks often think.<sup>14</sup>

An integral part of celebrations that are usually held in Slovakia on the occasion of important holidays or events from recent history, such as the announcement of the Day of Independence of Ukraine (August 24th), is a musical production that represents strong relationship of the Ukrainians to songs and singing. The repertoire consists of national folk songs coming from across regions which eventually can be sung by anybody who feels like singing along with others.

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<sup>13</sup> The form of the current coat of arms of Ukraine comes from its early medieval pre-figure, when the tryzub was the emblem of the Rurikid princes of Kyievan Rus.

<sup>14</sup> On the topic of borsch and its place among the Ukrainian national symbols in confrontation with the general attitude of the majority that associates borsch with the Russian cuisine see SOUČKOVÁ 2015:76-79.

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It is no exception that in the occasion of the proclamation of independence of Ukraine, the commemoration of the birth or the death of the famous personality<sup>15</sup> or nowadays during the majority organized gatherings, including discussions and movie nights, the national anthem is sung. Especially after the events of the spring of 2014 when the conflict in the east of Ukraine has fully exploded, the events organized by the Ukrainians has had a very strong emotional character and the common singing of the anthem has turned into a manifestation and a symbol itself.

All the above-mentioned attributes of Ukrainian culture from the flag through the books of important authors to the various small items with folklore themes the Ukrainians keep also in their homes. Additionally, for people belonging to the church there can be icons or other different decorations with religious motives that have been brought from Ukraine. The extent of their use is directly dependent on individual preferences.

The last years since the outbreak of fighting in the east of the country have initiated the gradual development of so far unknown symbolic trends. Expressing opinions about the circumstances of the conflict as well as the sad remarks of bloody protests in Kiev have become a leitmotif of Ukrainian encounters and an impulse for the public protests and emotional debates on the internet. New symbols have begun to emerge and have expanded the variety of commemorated events from Ukrainian history, albeit quite recent. These include "Maidan", a place where resistance against the ruling régime had been concentrated. However, "Maidan" has not become a universally accepted symbol among the Ukrainian society, nor even within our sample of respondents, in the sense of its unconditional acceptance. "Maidan" has become a concept that has contributed to the division of the Ukrainian society, including the diaspora. Consent or disagreement with "Maidan" is a burning topic that leads to the polarization of the Ukrainians and many of them discourage from the public support of Ukrainian thoughts outside their motherland. In connection with the events of "Maidan" a new phenomenon has emerged concerning language. It is the language which is becoming more and more important, at least in the public appearance of the Ukrainians as one of the vital and promoted symbols of Ukraine.

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<sup>15</sup> The Ukrainians commemorate especially the writer Taras Shevchenko. At the time of our research, we had the opportunity to be present at two commemorative evenings devoted directly to Taras Shevchenko.

### **Symbolic ethnicity and its manifestations among members of the Ukrainian minority**

A number of members of the Ukrainian diaspora in the Slovak Republic, including the autochthonous Ukrainian population of northeastern Slovakia, stand in everyday life before deciding whether and how they want to demonstrate their Ukrainian nationality, or in which way they are going to display their different ethnicity. In line with our findings, based on the narratives of our informants describing the strategies of rapid integration, we have come to the conclusion that the Ukrainians actively demonstrating their ethnicity in a majority society, or in some Slovak cases a long-term life among the majority, do so on the basis of a conscious and voluntary decision. It is not obligatory for all the members of the minority. From a theoretical point of view, we follow the principle of symbolic ethnicity according to Herbert J. Gans (1979),<sup>16</sup> who argued that people from the minority environment feel the need to publicly declare their ethnicity in different forms. They choose to make their ethnicity "visible" if it otherwise would not be obvious at a first glance.

Emphasis on Ukrainian roots and public acceptance of Ukrainian ethnicity is particularly relevant for migrant children, people who have only one parent from Ukraine and who live permanently in Slovakia, autochthonous (often bilingual) Ukrainians in northeastern Slovakia, but also for Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine who in this way show the majority that they do not come from the Russian Federation and that they do not belong to the Russian cultural tradition.

We understand the Ukrainian symbolic ethnicity in a wider context as a form of anonymity, which is the conscious choice of a particular individual. The starting point of our consideration is the fact that Ukrainian citizens do not distinguish themselves from majority society and if they belong to those members of the community who have mastered the Slovak language at a high level, their nationality can be guessed only from their name (sometimes

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<sup>16</sup> Symbolic ethnicity is seemingly similar to the term "ethnosymbolism," but it is a different concept which, based on research into the social manifestation of the ethnic identity of minority members, has been elaborated in Herbert J. Gans's study of Symbolic Ethnicity: the future of ethnic groups and cultures in America (GANS 1979). It is an analysis of research among migrants in a diachronic perspective, when the subject of the study became the social phenomenon of situational ethnicity, respectively its public demonstration. In this context Gans speaks of "visibility of ethnicity" meaning simply a public presentation of specific ethnicity, a kind of return to the roots, and a proud declaration of the ancestors' origin. Symbolic ethnicity is an interesting concept especially because it accurately describes an important aspect of ethnic identity, which is its situational nature. In other words, it is a deliberate suppression or, on the contrary, an emphasis, one's own ethnic identity depending on a particular situation or social discourse.

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only surname). For Ukrainians who have a distinct accent when speaking, the imperfect mastery of language is a clear distinctive feature, but not always are the Slovaks able to identify that the individual is from Ukraine. Confusion usually occurs with Russian-speaking Ukrainians who are mistaken for the Russians.

The informants we have interviewed, as well as most other Ukrainians who actively participate in expatriate gatherings, manifest their ethnicity through the national symbols described above. For the majority of respondents the manifestation of Ukrainian ethnicity is a matter of situational ethnicity, it is not an integral part their daily rituals and every day life. Simply said, Ukrainians emphasize their "Ukrainian side" when they feel the inner need or urge to do so and, furthermore, they are willing publicly share it with others.

It has to be added that some respondents have suggested that the Ukrainian nationality, or Ukrainian citizenship, can be the trigger for discriminatory behavior by the majority. This, of course, does not necessarily lead to the concealment of the Ukrainian nationality. The feeling of discrimination is a very subjective matter and, as confirmed by our informants, it usually applies only to a particular situation, experience or negative experience. Respondents who have encountered some form of discriminatory behavior do not characterize it as a systematic phenomenon rather speaking of the occasional presumptive attitudes of the majority.

The counterpart of symbolic ethnicity is the effort not to deviate and not to unnecessarily accentuate ethnic identity. There is a number of reasons for such behavior. Primarily the lack of interest in devoting time to minority's activities, then the personal effort to assimilate as quickly as possible to the majority society and sometimes even the fear of being publicly in the eye, for example when expressing political attitude. According to our findings, as we have already mentioned in the context of the new challenges for Ukrainian migration, Ukrainian public activities have since the years 2013 and 2014 been focused on the subject of war, military aggression, the loss of the Crimea and, above all, the delimitation against the Russian Federation. It should be noted that the clash with "brotherly" Russia, as the Ukrainians frequently call it, is at the moment the most resonant and painfully experienced topic.

### **Language and Ukrainian ethnic identity**

In connection with the symbolism of the ethnic identity of the Ukrainians our research proved that the issue of language is rather problematic. According to generally accepted modern

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ethnological theories, language is not, and cannot, be a sign of ethnicity. This thesis was definitely proved in our research as we interviewed Ukrainians both speaking Ukrainian and Russian. However, at the same time, during the interviews has become evident that language is a kind of symbol of "being Ukrainian" or more precisely "being true Ukrainian". This element inevitably brings a number of obstacles, exceptions, sometimes contradictions and, in extreme cases, disruption of interpersonal relations caused by language orientation – whether Ukrainian or Russian. Language has become an apple of discord, or, on the contrary, it has started to represent absolute tolerance in attitudes to the nature of Ukrainian ethnicity. Russian speaking informants accentuated the inner experience of their own ethnic self-identification, which is based on a sense of belonging to Ukrainian culture regardless of the mother tongue.

The issue of bilingualism of Ukrainian society and the current complicated situation in Ukraine, which is often associated with a language, is a separate subject that deserves a special analysis. We will try to outline at least the main tendencies in the language perception that we have gained from the informants and which points to the changing status of language in relation to Ukrainian ethnic identity. It is a phenomenon so significant that it goes beyond the boundaries of Ukraine, as evidenced by respondents who spoke about their experiences from the life within the Ukrainian community.

First and foremost, there is a feeling of disillusionment and disappointment that language is becoming an imaginary wall amongst some Ukrainians despite the fact that most informants claim that they do not perceive language as a crucial problem in their day-to-day interpersonal interactions and they also do not confuse language with political orientation. People from Russian-speaking areas declare they understand Ukrainian without any difficulty and have friends who communicate with them exclusively in Ukrainian, but they do not use Ukrainian themselves actively. In the context of the diaspora, and with the tendencies to promote language as the constitutive symbol of Ukrainian nationality, the number of cases has increased when Russian-speaking Ukrainians express the need to communicate in Ukrainian in order to declare that, despite their native language being Russian, they respect the Ukrainian language as the only official language and thus they identify with the unity of all the Ukrainians. We do not believe that disputes about the language matter are a mass issue among the Ukrainians, but there definitely are cases, when interpersonal relations can be negatively affected.

From the experience and knowledge obtained during the field research, participant and non-participant observations and interviews, Ukrainian language is an example of a new, or more precisely, intensively emerging and publicly presented symbol of Ukrainian ethnic identity.

Nevertheless, the actual ethnic identity, which is purely personal and privately practiced among members of the diaspora, remains rather independent on the language used, though, as it is evident from information we have gained from the respondents, there are exceptions.

### **Ukrainians in their own self-reflection: describing ethnic autostereotype**

National stereotypes are defined within the framework of intercultural psychology as serving to "all members of society as a common value system of relationships, allowing the construction of the inner and outer world, strengthening the sense of solidarity of the members of society as well as the distinction: "our" society is different. They are used to demonstrate loyalty to own nation and justify building the role of the "scapegoat" in times of crisis. In conflict periods stereotypical signs are changed into strongly negatively colored images" (PRŮCHA 2007:116).

Basis of the closer characteristics of ethnic stereotypes lies in the contradiction of "us" and "them" and elementary division of stereotypes corresponds to the mutual correlation of two scopes. The first one, an autostereotype (self-image) represents the notion of "us". It is a summary of ideas and assessment opinions about ourselves and our group. Heterostereotype (image of others) is a set of ideas about "them", the others, other groups of inhabitants or other social categories.

Ethnic autostereotypes, as ideas of people's own ethnicity and its characteristics, are constructed in the process of comparing oneself with others implying that "every negative heterostereotype is simultaneously thought to be a positive autostereotype" (UHLÍKOVÁ 2001:50). At the same time ethnic stereotypes are understood in E. Krekovičová's interpretation to be a cognitive and procedural phenomenon, which can be characterized both by stability in time and by dynamic changes (KREKOVIČOVÁ 2005:8). Stereotypes, both ethnic and any other, are dynamic. Krekovičová argues that the process of their emergence can be very rapid, but once they are accepted by the community they tend to persist for a long time (KILIÁNOVÁ – KOWALSKÁ – KREKOVIČOVÁ 2009:475, footnote 412).

This indicates other important characteristics of stereotypes. On the one hand, there is a fast rise and an expansion of stereotypical ideas and opinions, on the other hand they tend to be rigid, immutable and irrefutable. Significant changes may occur in the context of a certain

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major turning point, such as war conflict, economic crisis or personal experience (both positive and negative) of an individual (KOŠŤÁLOVÁ 2012:48).

The term "autostereotype" was mentioned in the context of the non-scientific term "national character" (RÁKOS 2001:10), which is not officially established in the academic vocabulary.<sup>17</sup> However, in terms of access to respondents, it better describes the essence of the subject under consideration. As stated by Petr Rákos, any theory of national character is confirmed in confrontation with another national character (RÁKOS 2001:67), which we demonstrated in the case of a mutual relationship between the Ukrainians and the Russians, respectively the Ukrainian reflection of this relationship and its impact on the self-image of the Ukrainian nation. When communicating with our informants, the concept of autostereotype proved to be difficult to use because most informants did not understand the content behind it, so it was necessary to approach the issue with various descriptive formulations such as "nationality", "mentality" or "typical characteristics, features of the character", which eventually led to desired reactions.

The characteristics of autostereotypes in our interviews usually overlapped with ethnic self-reflection and self-identification. If possible, we tried to lead the respondents to firstly try to define what does it mean "to be Ukrainian" for them and how they are subjectively experiencing their own ethnic identity. Subsequently we switched to what according to their opinions "being or feeling Ukrainian" represents and what is generally typical for the Ukrainians. In practice, however, it has clearly been shown that the elements of ethnic self-identification, such as local patriotism, the language question, or the strongly reflected need to define themselves against Russian ethnicity, are organically interlinked and intertwined. In some cases, as we have outlined in the reflection of the Russians and Russia, Ukrainian autostereotypes are often determined by what the Ukrainians do not feel to be – politically passive, non-free, manipulable or lazy.

The construction of the concept of Ukrainian "us" in the interviews is often related to defining the Russian "them". The topic of Russia, the Russians and their role in the current war conflict in Ukraine, undoubtedly leads to a strongly negative experience of the relationship with the Russians. For many Ukrainians is this relationship going through the crisis and leads them to confusion. It seems to be particularly significant with the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine who feels different from the Russians. However, the common language is a strong

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony D. Smith states, using inverted commas, that "The nation must have a distinctive identity, a definite 'national character'" (Smith 2009:189).

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mental bond. For many Russian speaking Ukrainians is the Ukrainian language de facto a foreign language.

The key paradigm of the Ukrainian-Russian opposition is the perspective stating "what is in our eyes Russians" equals what "we, Ukrainians, are definitely not". From this point of view, the Ukrainians regard themselves as broadminded, open, democratic and aspiring to live in a democratic regime. Ukrainians feel competent to decide about their fate, while the Russians, according to their opinions, need to feel the power of one authority (president, formerly tsar), tend to live in totalitarianism and accept imperial tendencies. In addition the Russians are said to be lazy while the Ukrainians are hardworking and diligent. One of the fundamental parts of the texts describing the current Ukrainian-Russian relations from Karina V. Korostelina tracked binational axiological opposition in the Ukraine – Russian context directly in Ukraine. We fully agree with its conclusions, and we believe that the defining of "Ukrainian" in opposition to "Russian" continues to be a major problem for the Ukrainians in Ukraine as well as abroad. It is identical both for a group that supports the utter difference of Ukrainians from the Russians as for the group holding the point of view of the Ukrainian-Russian similarity and their specific kind of "unity" (historical, cultural, religious). When questioning the typical features of Ukrainians, regardless of the Russian element in the interviews obtained, we can say that Ukrainians regard themselves especially as very hospitable, even in a metaphorical sense – they feel they accept anyone with open arms and are always willing to help. Some respondents spoke nearly about altruism.

From the negative aspects the inconsistency and incoherence which, according to some, are reflected in the current crisis in Ukraine, are significant, but more obvious are with Ukrainians living abroad. People who are living and working long-term in the Slovak Republic talk about mutual dismissiveness and generally about poor communication and mistrust. For newcomers, deliberate detachment represents an adaptation strategy in new conditions, especially for those who are planning to remain in the country for a long time or permanently. After a time when they are sure of their position in the majority, they slowly start to get back to their old Ukrainian friends or they are not afraid to get acquainted with the new ones. The general incoherence is also reflected in the Slovak Ukrainian minority, where the links and contacts between the autochthonous Ukrainians in northeastern Slovakia are influenced by the fragmentation of the community into the Rusyn and Ukrainian parts. Moreover, there is an overall intensive process of assimilation going on causing difficult search for a joint approach of individual compatriots from different parts of Slovakia in order to work altogether.

## Conclusion

Our text is based on the conclusions of qualitative field research among members of the ethnic minority of the Ukrainians in Slovakia and it is an attempt to outline selected trends that have been recently reflected in experiencing and declaring of their ethnic identity.

There are two main groups in Slovakia into which the minority is divided. It is the autochthonous inhabitants, the Rusyn-Ukrainians, and the migrants who had came to Slovakia in the past as well as those who are still coming. Due to its geographic proximity, relatively good economic conditions and good accessibility, the Slovak Republic is increasingly becoming the target of economic Ukrainian migration.

The first topic to be analyzed was the ethnic identification of the Ukrainians in relation to the region from which they come from. The subjective axis of the west-east of the country, which stems from historical and political developments, is evident. However, it is rather typical that for Ukrainians living in the Slovak Republic the differences between their geographical origins are gradually being suppressed. Most notably, our respondents declared the opposition of Zakarpattia and the rest of Ukraine. For the migrants from Zakarpattia region, this is due to the mental perception of the common Ukrainian-Slovak border. People coming from this area naturally feel being closer to Slovakia and reflect themselves as the westernmost outpost of Ukraine, especially in terms of cultural and mental settings.

The second topic was the inconsistency of the Ukrainian minority and its internal incoherence. Of the many factors that are the cause of this situation, we mentioned the effort of a large majority of newly arrived Ukrainians to merge quickly with the majority Slovak society, which some respondents identified as a typical general characteristics of Ukrainians. Other factors include the lack of interest, since many working people do not have time for joint activities and do not show the need to actively engage in the life of the diaspora.

In the last part we focused on the symbols connected with the declaration of ethnic identity in the majority milieu, which can be divided into a material and non-material sphere. Based on our field observations we suggest that many publicly active Ukrainians manifest their Ukrainian ethnicity in a style consistent with the principle of symbolic ethnicity described by H. J. Gans. Ethnic identification of the Ukrainians and the declaration of "being Ukrainian" is, in our opinion, often situational including the use of Ukrainian or Russian language. The language that was previously a minority issue within the Ukrainian minority is becoming an

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important topic and is coming to life as a rediscovered symbol of Ukrainian national identity, both in Ukraine and among Ukrainians living beyond the borders of the country.

When describing the Ukrainian-Russian relations, we have followed the findings of Karina V. Korostelina's empirical qualitative research on axiological opposition in Ukrainian-Russian context. We fully agree with its conclusions and we believe that the definition of "Ukrainian" and "Russian" continues to be a major problem as the conflict in the east of Ukraine is still in progress.

Ukrainians in their own reflection tend to stress the peaceful, free-minded, hospitable nature of their "national mentality". They see themselves as people devoted to helping others, with a strong sense of humanism. Important aspect which has been repeatedly emphasized by the respondents is striving for living in truly democratic system with no totalitarian reminiscences. As for the migrant community in Slovakia, the informants have accentuated its inner inhomogeneity and general unwillingness (or fear) of compatriots to communicate more intensively. From the negative characteristics have the Ukrainians distinguished indifference and sometimes bad manners of behaviour.

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