

“We are Slovaks too, just not in that way”

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SLOVAK MINORITY YOUTH FROM HUNGARY STUDYING IN THE KIN-STATE

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Abstract:

The article is devoted to the study of national identity and ethnic minority – kin-nation relations, examined through the subjective lens of the Slovak minority youth from Hungary studying in the kin-state. Slovakia offers a government-funded scholarship programme for trans-border Slovak diasporas and autochthonous minorities, as part of the Slovak state policies towards Slovaks living abroad. The scholarship programme provides a framework in which ethnic minority – kin-nation relations are analysed, at an inter-personal and inter-group level. This framework has been chosen as a subject of study for 3 main reasons: 1) the field of education is considered by the Slovak government as one of the most prominent areas of kin-state engagement, 2) the Slovak community in Hungary relies heavily on the Slovak scholarship programme in developing the students' language competencies and professional skills, especially in the field of Humanities, i.e. in Pedagogy, especially, 3) the scholarship programme is also seen as an instrument facilitating a stronger connection to the Slovak nation and commitment towards Slovak identity; as a result of which students may consequently display a greater interest and engagement in the life of Slovaks in Hungary.

The main objective of the research is to uncover the minority students' personal narratives and interpretations about their experience of encountering the kin-nation, and their reflections on their own national identity. The empirical research, furthermore, focused on analysing perceived group-belonging, and the connection points between the members of the Slovak minority in Hungary and the Slovaks in Slovakia. The research was carried out through 11 in-depth interviews with the scholarship recipients, studying in Slovakia in the period of 2016 – 2019, over at least 6 months.

The research findings – according to which students reported hybrid [Slovak-Hungarian] national identity – show that respondents do not see nationality as a bounded, one dimensional category; their answers represented a wide variety of identification patterns, including the following combinations: ethnic Slovak+civic Hungarian, hybrid Local+civic Hungarian, civic Hungarian+European, ethnic Slovak+European, hybrid Local+European. Despite their multidimensional identity, minority students perceived that their environment often pressures them to choose between one of the two seemingly mutually exclusive national categories: being Slovak *or* Hungarian, in all social environments; in interactions with Slovaks from Slovakia, Hungarians from Slovakia, as well as Hungarians from Hungary.

Although the length of the scholarship programme would provide space for the incorporation of various nation-building and community-building practices, these aspects of the programme until now are largely underdeveloped. Slovak minority students from Hungary upon their arrival to the kin-state realize that Slovaks in Slovakia have little knowledge about the existence of Slovak autochthonous minorities, which are generally not seen by their peers as integral parts of the Slovak nation. The perception of the Slovak students from Hungary becomes even more complex, as they are often mistaken to be ethnic Hungarians from Slovakia, and their minority situation is compared to them. The lack of knowledge about Slovaks in Hungary from the kin-nationals, however, did not result in the devaluation of the students' minority identity, but conversely, it led to a strengthened appreciation of the distinctiveness of the minority culture's features. In the case of Slovak youth from Hungary, connection points

with Slovaks from the kin-state are not found in the contemporary Slovak culture, but primarily in attributes they experienced as part of the traditional Slovak culture in Hungary. The main boundaries between groups as perceived by the students were *language usage/competence* and *ethnic prejudice*.

The scholarship programme had positive outcomes concerning the connectedness between the Slovaks from Hungary and Slovaks from Slovakia on the individual level, and it contributed to a deeper knowledge about the Slovak state and the Slovak (modern) culture among minority students, as well as highly improving the students' language skills. Yet, as a group, the Slovak minority in Hungary generally remains unknown among their Slovak peers, and the programme carries untapped potential, especially in the areas of community building between the members of external minorities and the kin-nationals. As reported by the research participants, higher initial Slovak language competency, more familiarity with contemporary Slovak culture, politics, and art among minority students, and higher awareness about the situation and history of the Slovak minority in Hungary among kin-national peers would improve their experience.

Key words: Slovak Minority. Minority Youth. Minority Identity. Kin-State Engagement. Hungary. Slovakia. Education.

Introduction

The Slovak minority in Hungary, with its 35,208 members is a highly acculturated and assimilated, aging community, and is becoming more so with every subsequent generation.¹ Slovaks in Hungary can be characterized by having dual, or hybrid national identity; simultaneously with the feeling of Slovak ethnic belonging, Slovaks in Hungary express a strong sense of Hungarian national identity. Besides expressing certain elements of their Slovak ethnicity and culture, they also engage in Hungarian cultural traditions, and have a strong emotional connection to their homeland (Hungary) and its national symbols and high culture (Divičanová, 2002; Gyivicsán, 2001; Gyivicsán & Krupa, 1998; Szabó, 2007; Tóth, 2004).

The younger generations, however, express a rapidly decreasing connection to Slovak traditional culture, speak almost exclusively Hungarian among each other, and – as the transmission of the Slovak identity is no longer ensured in their family environment (Homišínová, 2006; Tóth, 2013; Tuska, 2016; Uhrin, 2008) – the Slovak community in Hungary is facing the challenge of complete assimilation within in the circle of youth, according to the latest census data (Official Census, 2011).

Since the transmission of Slovak identity and language is no longer ensured by the family environment, the role of the Slovak schools has been increasing in this aspect. Šenkár (2019) argues that students from a minority background "...must learn the language of their ancestors at school; one of the main tasks of the Slovak schools is to maintain, further develop, actively cultivate, and pass on Slovak culture to pupils; teachers should strive for their pupils to become aware of their Slovak origin, national identity, or at least consciously accept their double bond and bilingualism. Thus, education is becoming a decisive factor in the future life of Slovaks in Hungary." (Šenkár, 2019, p. 100).

The gradual weakening of Slovak identity among Slovak minority youth is not only a concern of the Slovak community in Hungary, but also of the kin-state, Slovakia. In the official Slovak rhetoric, external Slovak minorities are seen as an integral part of the nation; Slovakia offers professional, material and financial support for its trans-border co-ethnics, especially in the fields of education and culture, for helping them to preserve and develop their ethnic identity,

¹ The term 'assimilated' in this study refers to Slovaks who are *claiming* Hungarian ethnicity instead of Slovak ethnicity, despite their knowledge about their Slovak ancestors. The term 'assimilation' refers to the abandonment or rejection of one's Slovak identity and culture, in order to fully integrate into the majority nation.

culture and language (Concept of the State Policy of the Slovak Republic in Relation to Slovaks Living Abroad for the Period of 2016 – 2020).

One of the main methods that is perceived by the Slovak community in Hungary to be effective for strengthening the Slovak identity of minority youth is to encourage them to study in Slovakia, within the framework of a scholarship programme founded by the Slovak government.² Slovakia’s scholarship programme is considered to be efficient for improving the Slovak language competences of the minority youth, bringing them closer to the Slovak nation and culture, and for raising confidence in their Slovak national belonging (Concept of the Development of the Slovak Educational System in Hungary, 2017).

The main objective of this research is to explore and analyse the experience of Slovak minority youth who participated in the Slovak scholarship programme, with a special focus on the students’ personal narratives and interpretations about their experience of encountering the kin-nation, and reflections on their own national belonging and identity. The issue is studied from the perspective of the minority students (emic perspective), focusing at the inter-personal and inter-group level.

Theoretical Framework

Nationality, as membership in a political nation or ethnic community, is connected to the notions of solidarity, loyalty and deservingness that are nowadays one of the focal points of the discourses on immigrants and ethnic minorities. To be able to understand and study the feelings of national belonging, or the logic behind trans-border nation-building policies, first we should ask the question “*What makes a nation?*”

The question above has long been of interest to scholars, from Gans’ (1979) ‘*symbolic ethnicity*’, and Anderson’s (1983) ‘*imagined communities*’ to Smith’s (2003) ‘*Chosen Peoples*’, and beyond. These academic endeavours, although successfully capturing crucial aspects of national belonging, including the role of common ancestry, homeland, traditions, language, shared myths and symbols, heroes and traumas, sense of community, and solidarity among members, still fail to pinpoint the exact composition of the ingredients of nationhood.

Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) highlight a crucial aspect in the construction of national identity and culture: what elements are chosen to become part of the given nation’s identity is a result of social and political *power relations* and negotiation between actors that guide the selective remembering and forgetting, which is channelled among others through education and media, as well as maintained or emphasized through national rituals and symbols.

Phinney (1993) defines ethnic identity as a psychological attachment toward (an) ethnic group(s) that is one of the pillars of one’s overarching self-concept. He describes the development of ethnic identity as a process in the construction of identity (as self-understanding

² About Slovakia’s support of Slovaks living abroad and the governmental scholarship programme, see more information at:

Governmental Scholarships of the Slovak Republic [Website]. Available at: https://www.vladnestipendia.sk/en/Koncepcia_štátnej_politiky_Slovenskej_republiky_vo_vzťahu_k_Slovákom_žijúcim_v_zahraničí_na_obdobie_2016_2020. Available at: https://www.uszz.sk/data/2017/KONCEPCIA_2016-2020_final.pdf

Law 474/2005 on Slovaks Living Abroad. Available at: https://www.uszz.sk/data/2016/ZZ_2005_474_20160101.pdf

or self-image) over time due to a combination of experience and actions of the individual, and to the knowledge and understanding of in-group(s). Calhoun (2003) points out that nationhood is also a "commonality of understanding, access to the world, and mode of action that facilitates the construction of social relationships and provides a common rhetoric. [...] it is helpful to say people *participate* to varying degrees in ethnicity, rather than that they simply are or are not members of ethnic groups." (Calhoun, 2003, p. 560).

Contemporary studies on national identity, instead of trying to define criteria of nationhood, focus on relations between the individual and the (national) collective. Szarka (2004) emphasizes that national identity is not simply a sum of individual and collective ethnic characteristics, and when studying national identity, one must take into consideration the *relations* between the individual and the collective, as well as its determining ethnic and non-ethnic factors, such as the social, economic, ideological, and habitual relations, and also the socialization of the individual. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the *common experience* of the individual and the collective, the relations with other (ethnic) groups, and the *perception* of the collective and individual by others (Szarka, 2004, p. 193). Brubaker (2004) highlights that nations are not internally homogenous, externally bounded entities, in terms of their characteristics, motivations and interests. Moreover, different elements of national identity have different significance for members and have subjective interpretations.

Billig (1995) and Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) argue that besides studying the classical foundations of national identity, researchers should also devote attention to *when* and *how* nationhood is produced and reproduced in everyday life, by ways of talking, doing and consuming, through which a view of the 'world of nations' becomes the norm, and nations are seen as natural organising units of society. Brubaker et al. (2006) claim that nationhood (consciously or subconsciously) frames the choices ordinary people make every day; from choices of education and career, to relationships and socializing, consumed material and intellectual products, and place of residence. Šrajerová (1999) on the other hand, by examining national feeling among ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic, states that national consciousness, national identification, and inter-ethnic relations today do not play as significant a role in people's lives than during the previous decades; more pressing questions are that of a socio-economic character.

Kiliánová et al. (2009), argue that national identity gains special significance only when it is projected against other (national) identities. The establishment of ethnic boundaries is a crucial element of national identity construction. Ethnic boundaries, as defined by Fredrick Barth (1969), are best understood as cognitive boundaries that are a result of collective efforts of construction and maintenance, and which dichotomize insiders from outsiders – *Us vs Them* – and guide social interactions accordingly. Boundaries serve for creating a (at least superficial) homogeneity projected to the in-group and out-group(s). In Barth's understanding, ethnic boundaries are *situational*; "invoked for certain purposes against certain groups, but not in others" (Barth, 1969, p. 42). In opposing Barth, Cohen (1994), however, argues that this approach overlooks the importance of self-consciousness and the symbolic expression of ethnicity. In Cohen's critique, social scientists "have been largely content to assume the existence and integrity of *collective* boundaries. [...] Instead of dealing with the individual, we [social scientists] have restrained our ambition, and addressed ourselves instead to whole societies or to substantial parts of them. Yet, looking at individual's boundary transformations should alert us to the *qualitative* nature of collective boundaries" (Cohen, 1994, p. 54-55).

In this context, the study of ethnic minority – kin-nation relations becomes especially interesting: the kin-nation (often a reference point for the minority community) shares certain

aspects of national identification with the external minority, but in other aspects substantially differs from them (see Szabó, 2010). In this article national identity is studied on the above mentioned theoretical grounds: instead of seeking to identify 'objective' criteria for nationhood, the subject of the study is how national identity is shaped by the relations and the common experience of the individual and the (national) collective, by the perception of the individual's or the group's national belonging by others, and how national identity is informed by the perceived ethnic boundaries.

Methodology

The empirical research³ is built on the following topics: 1) the minority students' experience of encountering the kin-nation, 2) the perceived effects of studying in Slovakia and 3) reflections on national belonging and identity. For conducting this analysis, the Slovak government's scholarship programme is considered as a framework, in which the national identification of the Slovak minority youth and their encounters with members of the kin-nation are examined. This framework is important to study for 3 main reasons: 1) The field of education is considered by the Slovak government as one of the most prominent areas of kin-state engagement, 2) the Slovak community in Hungary relies heavily on the success of the Slovak scholarship programme in developing the students' language competencies and professional skills, especially in the field of Humanities, i.e. in Pedagogy (see Tuska, 2016), 3) the scholarship programme is also seen as an instrument for facilitating a stronger connection to the Slovak nation and commitment towards Slovak identity, as a result of which students may consequently display a greater interest and engagement in the life of Slovaks in Hungary.

This article aims to study the student's experience and the minority - kin-nation relations through a subjective lens; the eyes of the scholarship recipients. The empirical research builds on 11 in-depth interviews⁴ with students who attended Slovak minority education in Hungary, and continued their studies in Slovakia. (For an overview of the research participants, see Table 1 below). The study includes interviews with students who in 2019, the time when the empirical research was carried out, were studying in Slovakia, as they would remember more accurately their everyday experiences and interactions, and could describe their encounters with Slovaks in more detail. The study contains interviews with students who spent at least 6 months in Slovakia in order to be able to analyse a more established position and well-rounded experience. According to the information obtained from Erika Lázár, the coordinator of the project at the National Slovak Self-Government in Hungary, in the period 2016-2019, 15 students were registered as studying in Slovakia through the scholarship programme at bachelor, master and doctoral levels. Students participating in the scholarship programme are graduates of one of the two Slovak high schools in Hungary (Budapest and Békéscsaba), and mainly study at universities in Bratislava, Nitra, and Košice. The sample includes 10 bachelor students and 1 doctoral student (currently there are no master's degree students receiving the scholarship).

³ The study is based on parts of the research that was carried out for my Master's thesis titled *Trans-Border Nation-Building or Trans-Border Nation-Deconstruction? The Experience of Slovak Minority Youth from Hungary Studying in Slovakia*, written under the supervision of Dr Luca Váradi at the Central European University in Budapest (CEU), defended in 2019.

⁴ The reason behind such a small sample size is that in the period of 2016 – 2019, 15 students were registered as studying in Slovakia through the scholarship programme at bachelor, master and doctoral levels. The yearly admission quota for the scholarship programme for Hungary is 5 students per academic year.

Research subjects have been reached by using the following techniques:

- 1) Reaching respondents through Slovak organizations, namely MASZFISZ – OSSM, the Organisation of Slovak Youth in Hungary
- 2) Reaching respondents through a snowball technique and a network of acquaintances
- 3) Reaching respondents through social media

The interviewing period lasted from April to May 2019. 7 in-depth interviews were conducted in person in Budapest and Békéscsaba, while 4 interviews were conducted via Skype for the convenience of the research participants. All data was obtained and used after clear and informed consent from the research participants.

Disclaimer: Some of the research participants attended the same Slovak minority high school as myself, the researcher, and I also have experience of studying in Slovakia (not within the framework of the governmental scholarship programme). Therefore, special attention has been devoted to aim to remain objective and not to influence the participants' answers. However, this distant acquaintance and knowledge of the environment abroad proved to be helpful to gain the interviewees' trust, and to encourage them to talk openly about their experience (both negative and positive) without the fear of judgment.

Table 1

Overview of the research participants

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Date Of Birth</i>	<i>Hometown</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Year of Starting University</i>
<i>resp. 1</i>	F	1998	Békéscsaba	Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa (Nitra)	Slovak Language and Literature - English Language and Literature (BA)	2018
<i>resp. 2</i>	M	1996	Szarvas	UKF (Nitra)	Slovak Language and Literature - History (BA)	2015
<i>resp. 3</i>	F	1997	Békéscsaba	UKF (Nitra)	Preschool Pedagogy (BA)	2016
<i>resp. 4</i>	M	2000	Békéscsaba	UKF (Nitra)	Slovak Language and Literature - History (BA)	2018
<i>resp. 5</i>	F	1997	Budapest	Univerzita Komenského (Bratislava)	Management (BA)	2015
<i>resp. 6</i>	F	1997	Békéscsaba	UKF (Nitra)	Preschool Pedagogy (BA)	2016
<i>resp. 7</i>	F	1999	Gyula	UKF (Nitra)	Slovak Language and Literature - English Language and Literature (BA)	2018
<i>resp. 8</i>	F	1997	Budapest	UKF (Nitra)	Culture and Tourism Management (BA)	2016
<i>resp. 9</i>	F	1998	Békéscsaba	UKF (Nitra)	Preschool Pedagogy (BA)	2016
<i>resp. 10</i>	F	1998	Tótkomlós	Univerzita Veterinárskeho Lekárstva (Košice)	Veterinary Medicine (BA)	2017
<i>resp. 11</i>	M	1992	Békéscsaba	UKF (Nitra)	Cultural Studies (PhD)	2011

Results of the Empirical Research

1) Perception of Self

In line with previous research findings on the national identity of Slovaks in Hungary, all minority students who participated in the research reported a kind of hybrid, or dual identity:

"I [pause] think I identify as Hungarian, but I have Slovak ancestors." resp. 6.

"I am Slovak-Hungarian." resp. 4.

"I am Hungarian of Slovak origin." resp. 1.

"I am a Slovak from Hungary." resp. 2.

Interestingly, students (consciously or subconsciously) often avoided direct national identification by positioning themselves to a local or global context:

"I consider myself a Lowland Slovak – more precisely Čabän [Slovak from Békéscsaba]." resp. 11.

"I always say I am from Békéscsaba. For me that means an identity which combines both Slovak and Hungarian elements." resp. 4.

"I feel European [pause]. If I had to narrow it down, I would say Central European." resp. 8.

Strong local identification (in line with Botík's, 2011 and Lenovský's, 2008 research results) was present in most participants' accounts of their national belonging, while the feeling of *Europeanness* was reported by nearly half of the research subjects.

The research findings – according to which students reported hybrid [Slovak-Hungarian] national identity, or Hungarian national identity with the full awareness of their Slovak/mixed ethnic origin, – show that respondents do not see nationality as a bounded, one dimensional category: their answers represented a wide variety of identification patterns, including the following combinations: ethnic Slovak + civic Hungarian, hybrid Local + civic Hungarian, civic Hungarian + European, ethnic Slovak + European, hybrid Local + European. What did not occur, however, is that a respondent would describe their national identification one-dimensionally: none of the students reported being only Slovak, or only Hungarian. These research results comply with the findings of Bošelová (2017) on Slovaks from Romania, and Surová (2016) on Slovaks from Serbia, who display simultaneously their ethnic Slovak identity, civic attachment to their homeland (Romania and Serbia), and local embeddedness in their settlements of origin [in the host states].

Despite their multidimensional identity, minority students perceived that their environment often pressures them to choose between one of the two *mutually exclusive* national categories: Slovak *or* Hungarian. Interestingly, they reported this feeling in all social environments: in interactions with Slovaks from Slovakia, Hungarians from Slovakia, as well as Hungarians from Hungary:

"I sometimes get pressured to choose an identity in situations where I don't feel the need for it at all. People often ask me: 'which country's politics do you agree with?' I don't even care about politics. The most absurd instance I had was when someone asked me who I would choose between Kossuth and Štúr. I refuse to choose. They don't understand it. Not that I mind, no point in arguing with those kind of people." resp. 2.

The vast majority of the research subjects defined national identity in civic terms and, in comparative terms, expressed strong attachment to Hungary, and a relatively weak attachment to Slovakia as a state. This aspect of the national identification of Slovak minority youth in Hungary is heavily influenced in a broader context by the 300-year history of Slovaks in Hungary, and their complete economic and social integration into Hungarian society, and on a personal level by Hungarian socialization, emotional attachment towards Hungary and the Hungarian nation – as well as the high degree of linguistic assimilation. Furthermore, the strong hegemony of “Hungarianness” over ethnic minority identities in the Hungarian political and media discourse might also play an influential role in the Slovak youth’s national identification.

National identity was first associated by nearly all of the respondents with mother tongue:

“I feel Slovak because I speak Slovak with my family. But I feel like a Hungarian citizen.”
resp. 5.

“I actually consider myself Hungarian. [pause] My friend, also from the scholarship programme, told me after 1 month of being in Slovakia, that he could not decide whether he feels Slovak or Hungarian. He has Slovak ancestors, and so do I.”

- What do you think makes someone a certain nationality?

“For me, it is that I think in Hungarian. Every word in my head formulates first in Hungarian.”
resp. 1.

Although many scholars found minority identity to be situational and context-dependent (Kiliánová et al., 2009), these results were only partially reflected in this study: research subjects with stronger Hungarian belonging indeed expressed that whether they feel “Hungarian” or as a “Slovak from Hungary” depends on the situation: such contexts include whether the students are in Slovakia or in Hungary, the ethnic composition of their social setting, and the language they are using at the given situation. Those students, however, who claimed a stronger Slovak identification, described a much more stable national identity. Regardless of their place of residence, social environment, and language usage, they reported themselves as claiming to be “Slovaks from Hungary”. One of the possible reasons behind this pattern, as reflected in the conducted interviews, might be that as members of the Slovak minority youth they experience their status to be either questioned or simply ignored in both Slovakia and Hungary, and so they emphasize it intentionally and purposefully, not only to show emotional attachment towards the Slovak minority in Hungary, but also to raise awareness about it in the majority environment.

On the other hand, more research participants also expressed a certain rejection of the principle of ethnic or national categorization:

“I simply decided to introduce myself by just saying my hometown, not the country or ethnicity. Some people think it is in Slovakia. Most never heard of it. Most never heard about the Slovak minority abroad itself. I don’t explain. If they are truly interested, they will ask questions.”
resp. 2.

“Oh just not this question! I feel like I had been forced to explain my nationality my whole life.”
resp. 1.

“I think national identities are outdated.” resp. 3.

2) Perception by Others

Although the vast majority of respondents clearly stated that they do not want to be put in bounded national categories, the question arises whether they can avoid it. To study this issue, the research addressed how the students have been perceived by others, and whether or not this is in line with their own national self-perception.

All research participants unanimously reported that the first reaction they experience from their environment is surprise, both in Slovakia and in Hungary:

"People I meet for the first time are very confused about where I am from, because I speak Slovak differently, and I speak Hungarian differently to them. Then the long explanation begins. They are mostly surprised and say they had no idea such thing exists." resp. 6.

"Teachers would ask, with a sceptical tone: [Are you] from Hungary? Why did you come here? Why to study Slovak major? Oh, are you those Slovaks from abroad? And we say yes, we are. But to our classmates we are still the Hungarians." resp. 4.

Nearly all interviewees reported that they are seen as Hungarians in nearly all social encounters both in Slovakia and in Hungary.⁵ All students explicitly expressed, that they are seen through the lens of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, both by Slovaks and Hungarians alike:

"Slovaks cannot imagine what it is like [being a member of the Slovak minority in Hungary]. They think about it like a Hungarian town in Slovakia, where everyone speaks the minority language. They do not know the history of our community [the Slovaks in Hungary]. The Hungarians [in Slovakia] even less so. The imagination they have about Hungary is as a homeland, as it was composed only of ethnic Hungarians. I think that's the message they get through the media and politics." resp. 4.

a) Feelings of Group Belonging

In the case of the Slovaks from Hungary, connection points with Slovaks from the kin-state are not found in contemporary Slovak culture, but in attributes they experienced as part of the traditional Slovak culture back in Hungary:

"I did not feel anything in common with the Slovaks. I could not get any of their references to music or movies. I felt like an outsider." resp. 1.

"Sometimes I could not get involved in discussions about topics, which seemed very important to them, but were completely unfamiliar to me, for example, most recently the nostalgia surrounding the anniversary of Czechoslovakia." resp. 4.

"During one class, we learnt about cultural traditions for religious holidays, and it was a good feeling to see that they [Slovaks in Slovakia] actually have them the same way as we learnt about it at home." resp. 6.

"I remember one specific moment of connection: I was walking home through the subway and I suddenly heard a folk song, played by a street musician. It was a song I used to do folk dance to in my town back in Hungary. It was a very particular feeling of connection." resp. 8.

⁵ Those students who did not experience being perceived as Hungarians, previously reported near-native or a native level of Slovak language proficiency.

A few minority students also experienced very personal notions of national connectedness:

"I had an internship in a school in a small town, and while I was there, I got to know that many people have the same surname as I do. I never met anyone in Hungary with the same surname. That was a moment I realized my family actually belonged here." resp. 6.

More interviewees reported feeling most disconnected from the kin-nation during national holidays: they did not perceive Slovak holidays meaningful, but celebrated – even from distance – the Hungarian holidays. Minority students often reported connection to the Slovak nation and culture in Slovakia on the level of symbolic ethnicity. This symbolic ethnicity is reflected in the fondness of Slovak national heroes (e.g. Ľudovít Štúr), artists (Ján Kollár), and sportsmen (Peter Sagan), as well as Slovak food and drinks (bryndzové halušky, Kofola).

Interestingly, this is in contrast with their perception of the Slovak culture in Hungary which they describe not as associated with certain symbols or events, but in much more abstract terms as "a feeling of community", "part of my identity" or "part of my town's history".

"For me being Slovak from Hungary means belonging to a community that is unique in its kind. The less people identify with it, the more special and precious it becomes." resp. 11.

The elements which the Slovak minority youth in Hungary considered important for symbolic connection with the Slovak nation, and as significant attributes of Slovak culture, were often not perceived as such by the Slovaks from Slovakia:

"I tried to impress my friends with how much I know about Slovak literature. But they were not impressed, they were just confused how and why I know this." resp. 8.

In other cases, attributes of symbolic ethnicity found resonance with the kin-nationals:

"My friends were joking that I cannot be a real Slovak, until I make bryndzové halušky at home." resp 3.

b) Group Boundaries

The research participants expressed attitudes and described behaviours from which it could be concluded that the main boundary perceived by students to be standing between groups is the *language*. And it is not the difference in language as such [Slovak, Hungarian], but the difference in language *competence*. 7 out of 11 students expressed that they lack confidence in their language skills, which influences their social interactions:

"I just don't think my Slovak is good enough. I do not know how to conjugate words properly. That's why at first I barely talked in Slovakia, I was too afraid to speak..."

The perception of language as a boundary was not only present in social interactions but in the perception of national identity as well:

"I think they [Slovaks] cannot really imagine, how a town can, where the Slovak language is not commonly spoken anymore, identify itself as being Slovak. But we are Slovaks too, just not in that way." resp. 11.

The vast majority of the students, however, reported that the Slovaks they encountered [classmates, flatmates, teachers, strangers] were very patient and helpful in overcoming linguistic barriers as soon as they found out they come from Hungary, not from Slovakia.

Moreover, the role of language as a boundary is ambivalent, as language is perceived not only as a dividing line but often the exact opposite; as a source of connection and a means to access the Slovak nation and culture, where higher language competence facilitated feelings of closer group connection. The other main observable boundary in the process of othering between the minority and the kin-nation was *ethnic prejudice*, which students registered to be present between Slovaks and Hungarians (in general terms), and occasionally experienced themselves.

3) Effects of Studying in the Kin-State on the National Self-Perception of the Slovak Minority Youth

Having in mind the expectations of the representatives of the Slovak minority in Hungary towards the scholarship programme (such as the strengthening of the students' Slovak identity, and evoking interest in the Slovak community in Hungary), I considered it important to study the possible influence of the scholarship programme concerning the national self-perception of the minority youth. To analyse the possible effects of studying in the kin-state on the national identification of the Slovak minority youth, it would be necessary to study a larger research sample in a wider time frame. A longitudinal study to map the Slovak minority youth's national identification processes is a possible direction for further research. However, even this one-time research sample provides interesting insights to the subject, which can help us trace some common identification-patterns expressed by the Slovak minority youth.

Based on the research results, we can categorise Slovak minority students from Hungary into two groups: 1) students whose identification with the Hungarian nationality is more dominant, and 2) students whose identification with the Slovak nationality is more salient. This difference in national self-understanding shapes the student's whole experience in the kin-state: those who expressed more salient Hungarian belonging, reported having mostly positive outcomes from the scholarship programme regarding their national self-perception: they felt more connected to Slovakia, the Slovak culture, and the Slovaks, from whom they experienced positive reception:

"They were very appreciative that we, as Hungarians show interest in their culture and language. My friends often expressed how impressed they are." resp. 1.

"I felt like they are a bit surprised, but nevertheless proud that Hungarians go there to study Slovak." resp. 8.

On the other hand, those who reported stronger Slovak identification also expressed some negative feelings about their experience, including disappointment and frustration:

„I was telling them in vain that Békéscsaba has been the centre of the Slovaks of the Lowland, I was telling them in vain 1,000 reasons why we are Slovaks, but they will always consider me as Hungarian." resp. 11.

"I was disappointed that they did not know anything about us, as we learnt so much about them." resp. 4.

This perceived lack of acceptance from the kin-nation, however, did not result in the devaluation of the students' minority identity, but conversely, the strengthening of the appreciation of the distinctiveness of its features:

“As I started to study in Slovakia, I suddenly realized how different our identity is, with elements of both traditional Slovak and Hungarian cultures. I started to value it more and it felt closer to me, than this “pure” Slovak version.” resp. 11.

On the other hand, some effects of the scholarship programme that strengthened Slovak national belonging are notable regardless of the students’ initial national identification:

“One year ago, for sure I would have said that I am Hungarian. But now I feel like I am in a process of a change, I also feel more and more Slovak.” resp. 4.

“Now I know much more about, and feel much more connected to the Slovak culture.” resp. 6.

“I feel proud of my origin and that I study in Slovakia. My family is proud of me too. When Slovaks wrap their head around the situation [of Slovaks in Hungary] I think they feel proud of me too, that we kept this language and culture alive, and now we want to learn more about it.” resp. 3.

Another important outcome of the scholarship programme, which may have a significant impact on national identification, is the strengthened language competence, which was highlighted by all interviewees – especially if they would then transmit the Slovak language to the subsequent generations.

Discussion and Conclusions

The article has been devoted to the study of the experience of the Slovak minority youth from Hungary studying in the kin-state, within the framework of Slovakia’s government-funded scholarship programme. The main objective of the research was to examine the student’s personal narratives and interpretation about their experience of encountering the kin-nation, and their reflections on their own national identity. The empirical research, furthermore, focused on analysing perceived group-belonging and connection points between the members of the Slovak minority in Hungary and the Slovaks in Slovakia. The research was carried out through 11 in-depth interviews with the scholarship recipients, studying in Slovakia in the period of 2016-2019, for at least 6 months.

Research findings reveal a discrepancy between the self-perception of Slovak minority students from Hungary, and the perception of them by their environment. Students from Hungary upon their arrival to the kin-state realize that Slovaks in Slovakia have little knowledge about the existence of Slovak autochthonous minorities, and find their Slovak identity questioned – often being labelled as Hungarians. This perceived lack of acceptance from the kin-nationals, however, did not result in the devaluation of the students’ minority identity, but, conversely, it led to the strengthened appreciation of the distinctiveness of the minority culture’s features. In line with previous research, members of the Slovak minority in Hungary expressed variations of hybrid (Slovak-Hungarian) identity, exhibiting elements of local, national and European identification.

As the research results show, national identity is certainly more than the sum of relatively objective factors, such as territory of origin or a certain linguistic toolkit – its essence is found in various forms of emotional attachment: a sense of belonging, solidarity, pride, nostalgia, etc. In the case of the Slovaks from Hungary, these connection points with Slovaks from the kin-state are not found in the contemporary Slovak culture, but primarily in attributes they experienced as part of the traditional Slovak culture back in Hungary. Main boundaries between groups as perceived by the students were *language usage/competence* and *ethnic prejudice*.

However, research findings proved Cohen's (1994) thesis, based on which he warns for caution when talking about 'collective boundaries', as boundaries are interpreted through the individual's perception.

The scholarship programme certainly had positive outcomes concerning the connectedness between Slovaks from Hungary and the Slovaks from Slovakia at the individual level, and it contributed to a deeper knowledge about Slovakia and the Slovak (modern) culture, as well as highly improved Slovak language skills. Yet, as a group, the Slovak minority in Hungary generally remains unknown among their Slovak peers, and the programme carries untapped potential, especially in the areas of community-building between the members of the external minorities and the kin-nationals. As reported by the research participants, a higher initial Slovak language competency, more familiarity with contemporary Slovak culture, politics, and art among minority students, and higher awareness about the situation and history of the Slovak minority in Hungary among kin-national peers would improve their experience, and better facilitate the development of a 'commonality of understanding' (Calhoun, 2003).

However, building stronger ties is not only the responsibility of the two groups, but also of the political actors, the media and education in both states, especially when it comes to raising awareness of the Slovak external minorities, and combatting ethnic prejudice. Close relations between the members of external minorities and their kin-nationals may prove to be especially important if political actors in their host-states do not incorporate ethnic minority identities and cultures sufficiently to the majority state's nation concept, or these identities and cultures are not adequately represented.

Overall, we can conclude that studying in Slovakia and contact with kin-nationals resulted in strengthened Slovak identification among the Slovak minority youth. Therefore, the scholarship programme remains an important opportunity for both the Slovak youth in Hungary and the Slovaks in Slovakia to learn more about each other, and about the diversity of the Slovak language and culture.

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