Attitudes Towards National Identity Among Slovak Youth

Marián Bušša[*]

Alexander Dubček University of Trenčín, Študentská 2, 91150, Trenčín, Slovakia

marian.bussa@tnuni.sk

Abstract:

Purpose and Originality: This article is dealing with attitudes of young people in North-Western Slovakia towards various intolerant or xenophobic ideas to other nationalities, ethnic groups and races. It also notices the possible differences between the answers of students in gymnasia and in professional high schools. It offers insight into attitudes of future voters in respect to currently very relevant questions of nationalism, tolerance and authoritarianism.

Method: Our research used questionnaire with 15 closed-ended questions as a technique of data gathering. It enabled us the initial insight into the researched attitudes of young people and the possible influencing factors. In this phase of the research we did not set hypotheses although we did have interest in the influence of education and the relation to the authoritarian attitudes.

Results: We found strong attitudes against Roma and immigrants, relatively high but not prevailing attitudes in favor of authoritarianism and Slovak State and relatively weak attitudes against Jews and international integration of Slovakia. These attitudes are all weaker among students of gymnasia.

Society: The attitudes towards tolerance among young Slovaks are of great importance to the future of the society. Today, as xenophobia and intolerance are on the rise, it is crucial to study how is the future generation of voters influenced by these events during their political socialization and how do these processes work.

Limitations / further research: The research is the first phase of wider ongoing research, the methodology of which we keep refined.

Keywords: youth, tolerance, attitudes, minority, immigrants, authoritarian, Slovakia, holocaust.

1   Introduction

This article is dealing with attitudes of young people in North-Western Slovakia towards various intolerant or xenophobic ideas to other nationalities, ethnic groups and races. It also notices the possible differences between the answers of students in gymnasia – offering general education and preparation for university – and in professional high schools – which usually offer less of civic education and history. The support for authoritarian views is also measured. The research is the first phase of wider ongoing research, the methodology of which is being continuously refined.

The research was conducted in Trenčín and Žilina Self-governing Regions in North-Western Slovakia. These are relatively accessible parts of Slovakia from the Trenčín University, but most relevantly these two regions have traditionally the highest proportion of inhabitants with Slovak nationality in Slovakia - over 97% (Statistical Office of the SR, 2019). So the measured data are almost entirely talking about views of Slovaks. Also, these are Slovaks with very little to no direct contact with national minorities or immigrants. This is noteworthy because

many of the questions we asked in our questionnaire concern attitudes towards these groups of people.

These two regions also are historically the stronghold of Slovak nationalism and authoritarianism (Krivý et al., 2011). Support for the Hlinka Slovak Peoples Party (HSĽS) in the 1930s and 1940s and for Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and Slovak National Party (SNS) since the 1990s has been significant in these two regions. This is one of the reasons why we chose to conduct research of related values of youth in these regions. To see if we could find the signs of continuity or change among the young generation.

The main goal of this paper is to measure the attitudes of young people in North-Western Slovakia towards various intolerant or xenophobic ideas to other nationalities, ethnic groups and races. It also has some secondary goals, namely to measure the support for authoritarian views, which can be connected to the xenophobic attitudes and to compare the views of students in gymnasia and in professional high schools to see how significant is the impact of education on these issues.

2   Method

Our research used questionnaire as a technique of data gathering. The questionnaire had 45 closed-ended questions in total, but only 15 of them concerned this particular research. The questions had mostly the form of "yes / no / do not know", in order to make them easy to work with for respondents. However that makes the questions harder and less informing to evaluate compared to, say, the Likert scale.

The population of our research were third year students of high schools in Žilina and Trenčín Regions in North-Western Slovakia. In order to get our data we constructed a stratified sample of the students (Disman, 2018). The sample was designed to represent every district in the Trenčín Region with nine districts and Žilina Region with 11 districts in total. We did however encountered negative response in schools in two districts in each of the regions and the sample does not cover them. The upside is that there is small chance that these missing students would create significant nonresponse bias, since it was the school that did not respond, not individual students. Among the rest of the respondents we had 100% response rate at individual level, since we asked entire classes of students while in school. In this respect we can be confident in reliability of our data.

In order to be able to compare the gymnasia students and the professional high schools students, we overrepresented the gymnasia students in the sample. We gave the questionnaire to classes at twenty gymnasia and twenty technical high schools, both regions represented by ten of each. The sample contained 601 high school third graders in total, 320 of which were male and 280 female. In Žilina Region there were 360 respondents – 4,91% of all third graders. And in Trenčín Region there were 241 respondents – 4,84% of all third graders.

There were 250 students of professional high schools – out of 4977 in total – and 351 students of gymnasia – out of 2179 in total.

The fifteen questions in the questionnaire can be divided into several issue areas, concerning some aspect of our research. The first are attitudes towards international integration as opposed to independence of Slovakia. The second looks at the attitudes towards the place of minorities and foreigners in the Slovak society. The third measures authoritarian or liberal democratic attitudes. The fourth looks at attitudes toward Jews and their perceived place in Slovak society. And the last one concerns the war-time Slovak State and views of Slovak youth towards it as it is an important symbol of attitudes towards national minorities and authoritarianism.

At this point, our research does not have more precisely formulated methodological aim. It does not formulate hypotheses to be tested on the data. It could be done, since we do measure enough variables, but our goal at this point is just to gain initial data on a cluster of issues so that we can see which ones show promise in terms of being well measureable, getting clear answers and which answers show unexpected results. For this, our research at this stage could be criticized for theoretical malnutrition, because the research does not work with any particular theory and its outcomes are merely numerical values for basic questions on the issues of integration, attitudes towards minorities and migrants, authoritarianism and war-time Slovak State. However, because these data were missing so far, obtaining them is significant result. To test hypothesis at this point would tidy up the findings but would also limit the scope of questions and therefore information which we gain out of it. We are however planning to do this in later phases.

3   Results

We visualize the percentage share of different answers of students to each of the fifteen questions by graph, in most cases by a pie chart. In these questions answers are mutually exclusive. In two cases the questions were not mutually exclusive and the visualization uses a bar chart instead. These two questions were also not fully closed-ended and included the possibility of individual answer.

3.1   Attitudes towards international integration as opposed to independence of Slovakia

The results show that young Slovaks are generally in favor of European integration of Slovakia and are not opposed to NATO membership. It is a generation that does not remember Slovakia before joining these organizations fifteen years ago. It is a normal situation, which they accept, are used to, maybe even actively support it and advantages it brings. It does not seem to be in conflict with the national independence and identity for most young people. The share of students that spoke against membership in these organizations was between 15 and 24%.
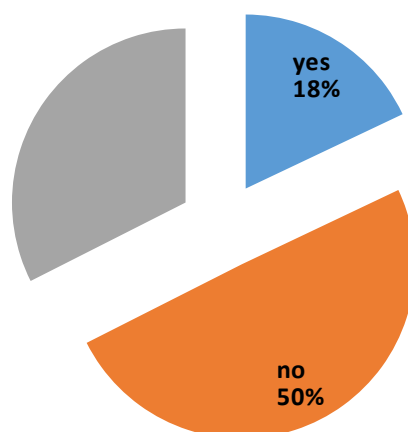
Figure 1. The response to "I would like the Slovak Republic to leave the EU" (source: research)

A somewhat less supportive were young people towards membership in Schengen area. This should be understood in the context of the refugee crisis which was still quite recent in the time of data gathering, which was at the end of the year 2017. In reaction to the crisis there were many radical public appeals, one of which was the proposal by some politicians to leave the Schengen area. This can explain the fact that out of the three integration projects we asked about, Schengen area had the most opponents, which seems counterintuitive among young people.
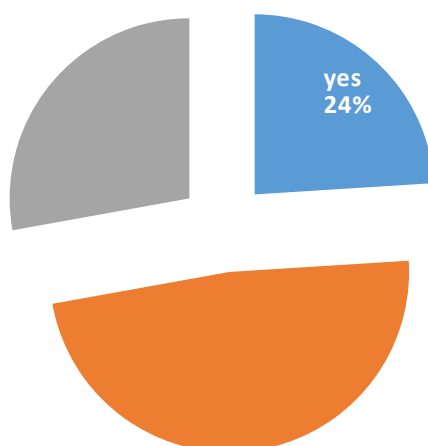

Figure 2. The response to "I would like the Slovak Republic to leave the Schengen area (close the borders and introduce border controls)" (source: research)

The least decisive response was in case of NATO. As this is a military organization, it would not have been unexpected if we found a significantly different reaction compared to that to the EU. But even membership in this organization did not have many open objectors among students, even though NATO has been strongly criticized by far right in Slovakia for many years now (Štefančík et al., 2013, Mesežnikov & Gyárfášová, 2016). But neither do the results show much enthusiasm for the North Atlantic Alliance. It is less popular than the

Schengen Zone or the European Union as a whole, but membership in it is accepted as a fact of life among the students.
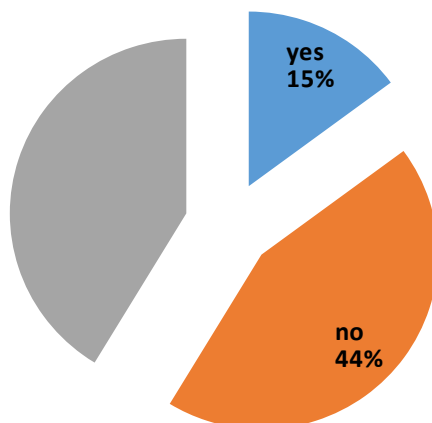

Figure 3. The response to "I would like the Slovak Republic to leave NATO" (source: research)

We also asked a question about an opinion on a proposed view that Slovaks are the only nation that has the right to live in Slovakia. This was offered as a radical exclusionist view of Slovak society to see what would be the reaction of the students to it. Great majority refused it. Only to 14% this was acceptable view, which is not negligible, but still small part of respondents in this part of Slovakia as for example Gyárfášová & Krivý (2013) or Rybář et al. (2017) can testify. Both regions had similar composition of answers to this question.
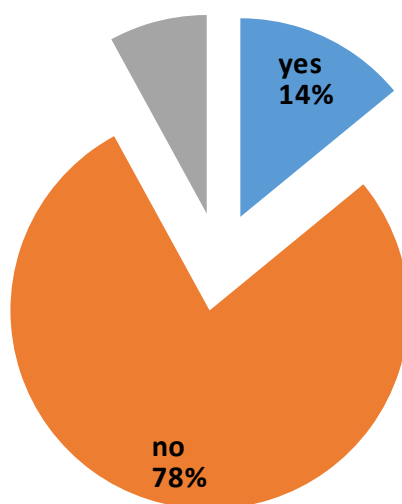

Figure 4. The response to "In my opinion, Slovaks are the only nation that has the right to live in Slovakia" (source: research)

3.2 Attitudes towards the place of minorities and foreigners in the Slovak society

Having said that most young Slovaks do not share the view that only Slovaks should be living in Slovakia does not mean that there is not a significant social distance, even hostility, towards members of national minorities, especially Roma, and refugees or other immigrants (

Štefančík et al., 2013). This is interesting because these are the two regions with hardly any minorities or immigrants present. So, personal experience with minorities is not very common here. These attitudes are mostly influenced by media image of these "other" groups, or by traditional local attitudes towards non-Slovaks (Gyárfášová & Krivý, 2013, Štefančík et al., 2013, Vašečka, 2009).
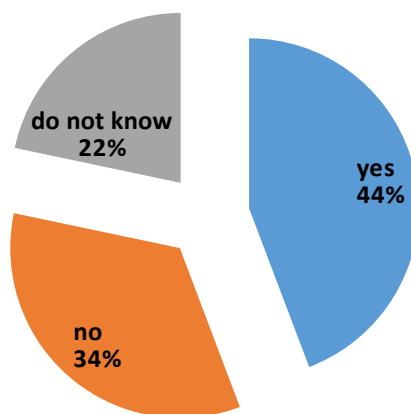

Figure 5. The response to "I think that minorities (homosexuals, Roma people, Hungarians) have too much rights and attention nowadays" (source: research)

This question has a form of provocative statement, in order to counter the socially desirable answer "no". The outcome shows some tendency towards agreeing with the statement, although it represents less than majority of responses. The weak point of the question is the fact that it asks about minorities in general and offers three different examples, to which respondents can have different attitudes. Therefore we will divide the question up in the future phases of research to gain more reliable data. But generally we can see significant tendency to view the place of minorities in Slovak societies as disproportionally high.

In the responses, there are some differences between regions and between types of schools. Žilina Region has lower level of "yes" answers compared to Trenčín. Type of school also generally shows some difference – answer "yes" was given by 52,8% of students in professional schools while only by 37,89% of students in gymnasia for "yes". This is quite a significant difference in attitudes depending on type of education and the extent of civic education in it and shows that it does have significant effect on answers.
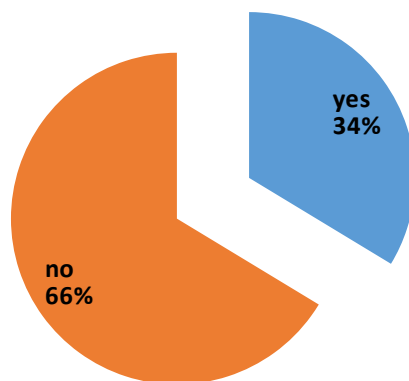
Figure 6. The response to "I have friends among the Roma people" (source: research)

The next question is specifically asking about Roma and friendly ties to them. Roma people are traditionally the only "visible" minority in Slovakia and are also strongly socially excluded. They became some of the first losers of economic transformation, mainly due to the stark reduction low skilled jobs, in which they were overrepresented. They then became scapegoats for many political representatives who blamed them for laziness, criminality and taking advantage of the social system. This became the general simplified image of Roma in Slovak society (Vašečka et al., 2002, Matlovičová et al., 2012). Their inclusion into society is one of the main tasks for the future.

This is why we were interested in how big part of young people has a personal friendly connection to a member of this community. It is however methodologically problematic. The difference between self-identified Roma and people identified as Roma by others is significant as is well documented by Vašečka et al. (2002) and more recently studied by Matlovičová et al. (2012). We already mentioned that more than 97% of people in researched area self-identifies as Slovaks. But some 2 % of them would be identified as Roma by others, compared to roughly 0,5% self-reported Roma. This would be methodologically irrelevant, because only self-identification matters in matter of ethnicity. But it can be relevant for understanding the responses to our question. Otherwise it could be justifiably argued that 34% of students having a Roma friend is as big a share of them as can be expected given the size of Roma population in their regions. But when we take into account that these students would "see" 2 – 3% of Roma in their regions, the 34% actually shows some social distance towards them, although not vast.
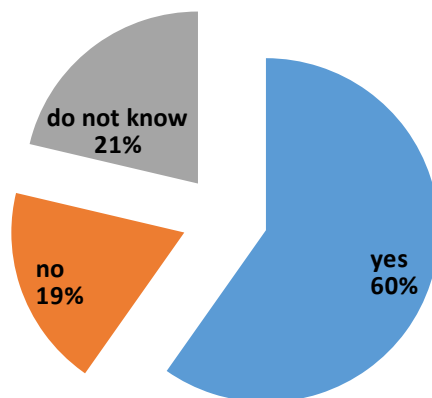
Figure 7. The response to "The Roma are nomadic from nature and thus have a problem to adapt to the way of life of the majority (most of the population)" (source: research)

In the next question we offer the students a provocative statement picturing Roma through a generalizing stereotype with some racial reasoning in it. This image of Roma people is very common in Slovakia and we wanted to measure how big part of young generation would agree with it and how many would refuse it. It says that Roma are nomadic from nature and thus have a problem to adapt to the way of life of the majority. The logical consequence would be that there is no point in helping the Roma since they are maladaptive by nature. It also vindicates the general population from any blame for ongoing social exclusion of large part of the Roma. Indeed, 60% of the respondents agreed to this statement. It was only unacceptable to a small part of youth – 19%, while another 21% did not know how to react to it. These two numbers roughly correspond to the share of students with friends among Roma and hints that the 66% of respondents without any Roma friends are not in this situation for the lack of opportunity.
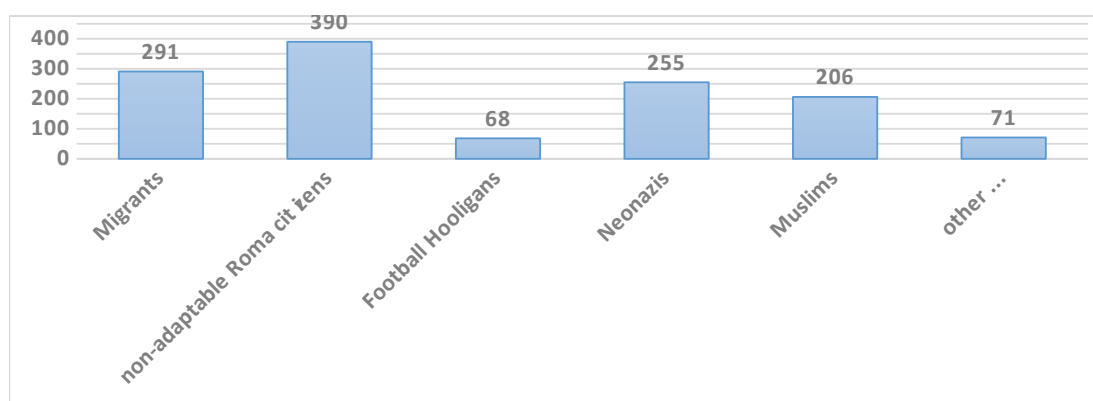

Figure 8. The response to "The security of Slovak citizens is threatened mainly by" (source: research)

We then tried to change the category from Roma in general to "non-adaptable Roma citizens". It was a media phrase used mainly in the 1990s, which since then became colloquially used. It represents the part of Roma connected to the problematic phenomena. This group was identified by 390 students, or 65,9%, as the main threat to the security of Slovak citizens. In this multiple answer questions it was the only answer agreed on by majority of the students.

The second one were immigrants, chosen by nearly half of the respondents. We remind that the data represent quite secluded regions in a state with very little immigrants. In the context of these views the strong support for far right parties in the two regions is not surprising. However, the neo-Nazis were identified as the third most common threat by 42,4 respondents. The combination of seeing immigrants, non-adaptable Roma and Muslims as the main threat was chosen by 67 respondents or 11,1%.
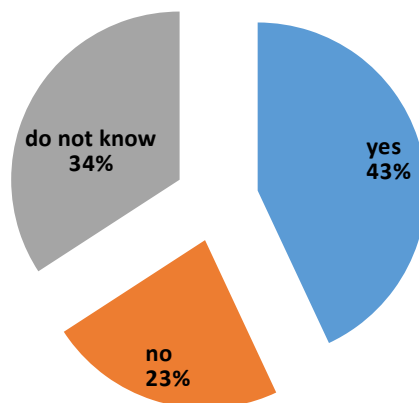

Figure 9. The response to "I distinguish between economic, political and life-saving immigrants" (source: research)

The fear of immigrants hints at likelihood that there are some misconceptions in their perceiving by the students. We wanted to know how many are willing and able to understand the difference between different kinds of migrants. We found that distinguishing among economic, political or life-saving immigrants was only limited. Those who did were the biggest group, but only represented 43% of total. The second most significant group did not know how to react to the question. This mainly shows lack of personal experience with immigrants and of serious information on the matter. All immigrants are often presented as economic in the media and by political elites. The 23% of people that did not distinguish between immigrants were the smallest group.

3.3 Attitudes toward authoritarianism

We were also interested to find out the share of authoritarian respectively democratic attitudes among the students. It is not the main issue of interest in this research but the connection to the attitudes towards minority groups in Slovakia seemed promising.
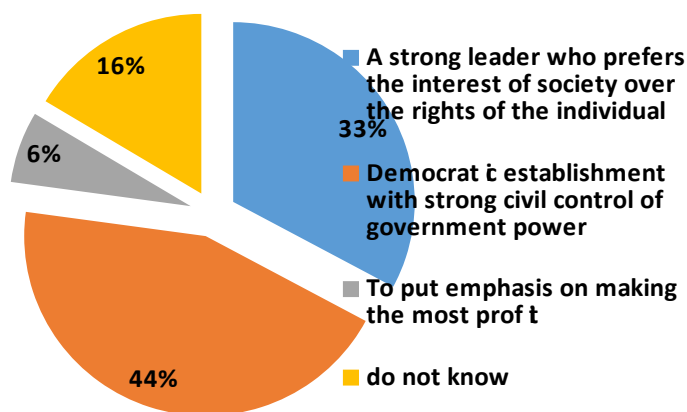
Figure 10. The response to "In order to move forward, society must have" (source: research)

This question was among those with significant difference between the gymnasia and other types of schools. In gymnasia 51% of students had democratic views, compared to 28,5 % of students with authoritarian. In the professional schools 32,8 % of students supported democratic views while 37,6 % supported authoritarian views. In general, the most common answer preferred democratic views, but alarming 33% opted for authoritarian views.
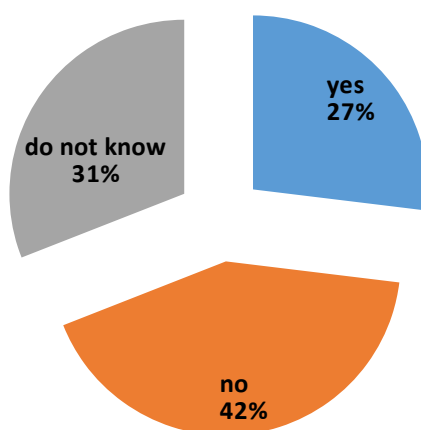

Figure 11. The response to "I think that a long-term government of one party or individual is more favorable to the country than a rotation of governments of different political parties" (source: research)

Similar support of for political plurality was shown in the next question. Rotation of governments of different political parties was favored by 42% of students, compared to 27% in favor of long-term government of one party or individual. This is also not very optimistic result, but the prevalence of attitudes preferring plurality is clearer. In neither of the questions did the attitudes in favor of liberal democratic political system gain majority. In both the authoritarian views were almost as common. These results are unsettling especially in context of high support of intolerant attitudes towards minority groups.

3.4 Attitudes toward Jews and their perceived place in Slovak society

The view of the Jews is measured separately from other minorities, because it demands different set of questions. The Jews are, again, barely present in Slovakia today. That is mainly a consequence of the Holocaust, which wartime Slovak State took active participation in. The same Slovak State is often celebrated by far right politicians as the first Slovak state entity and a positive historic era. Part of this praise often is denial of Holocaust or some of its aspects. The insistence on Holocaust is then interpreted as a "Jewish complot" to cast blame on Slovak State and Slovaks as a people and to use this as a political weapon to dominate the world, Slovak Republic included. We tried to measure these views among the students.
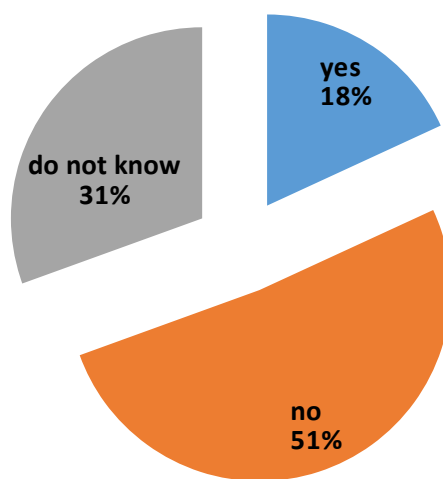

Figure 12. The response to "I agree that the Holocaust did not happen as described in the textbooks and as it is presented by commercial and public media" (source: research)

This was also one of the questions with significant difference depending on being educated at gymnasia or at professional high schools. Among students at gymnasia 14.5% did not agree with the official version of the Holocaust, compared to 58,1% agreeing with it. Among professional high schools 22,8 % did not agree with the official version of the Holocaust, while as few as 40,6% did. In general these numbers are not the most disturbing ones, although 18% of students were prepared to question educational institutions, media, historical research and survivors of the Holocaust. These are likely future voters of far right.
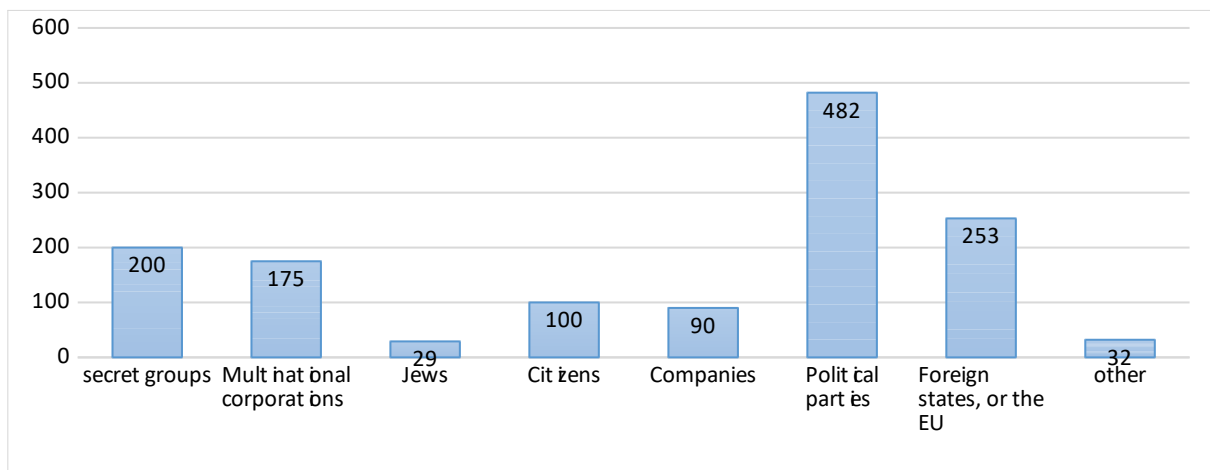
Figure 13. The response to "I think that the decisions about politics and economy in Slovakia are made by" (source: research)

The last question also offers conspiratorial answers. When asked who makes decisions about politics and economy in Slovakia, students could choose multiple answers. Among offered answers there were also "secret groups", "Jews" or "multinational corporations", but only very few students - 4,8% - took the bait and responded Jews to it. Multinationals and secret groups were more successful, being chosen by almost a third or respondents. 253 students responded "foreign states or the EU", which is interesting when we remember that much fewer students want to leave the EU or NATO. The most common answer, chosen by 80,2% of students, was political parties.

3.5 The war-time Slovak State and views of Slovak youth towards it

The last issue area is about attitudes towards the war-time Slovak State and towards its main political representative, Jozef Tiso, who was its only president and was executed after the end of the war.
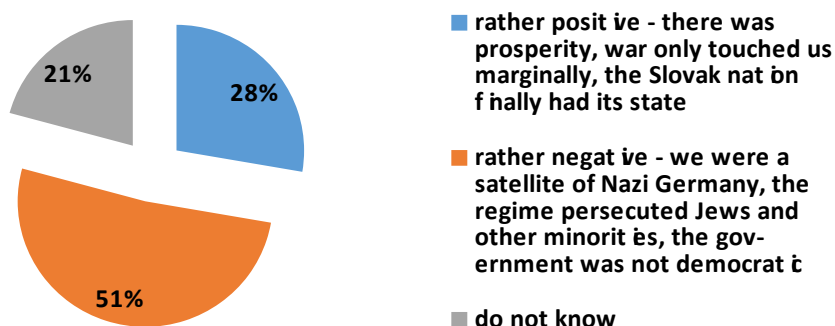
Figure 14. The response to "My view of the war-time Slovak State is" (source: research)

While the share of positive views of the Slovak State is almost the same in both gymnasia (27,6%) and professional high schools (28,8 %), negative views show some difference. In gymnasia, 55,3% of students expressed negative view while in professional high schools it

was only 46,8 %. In general, 51% of students expressed negative attitudes to the Slovak State, which is rather high share when we consider the support this historical era sometimes gets from political leaders, representatives of the church and oral history within Slovak families. Positive view of the State was expressed by 28% of students, which is not surprising, given some of the earlier answers. There was no difference between answers of students in the two regions, which is consistent with virtually all other questions in the research.
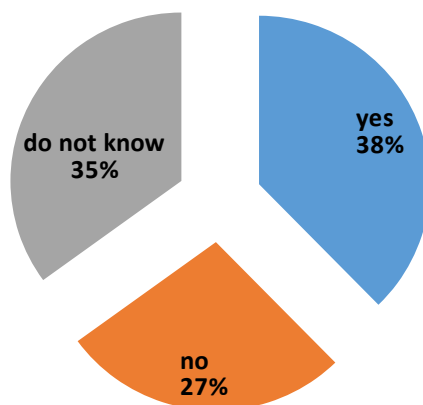

Figure 15. The response to "ThDr. Jozef Tiso is one of the most important personalities in the history of Slovakia" (source: research)

The last question concerns the leading representative of the Slovak State, priest Jozef Tiso. This figure is viewed significantly more favorably than the state itself. It however could have been the consequence of wording of our question, which enables alternative explanations. 38% of students sees him as one of the most significant historical figures of Slovakia, while 27% of students does not.

4   Discussion

The attitudes towards international integration as opposed to independence of Slovakia turned out to be fairly in favor of integration. Better yet, there does not seem to be any such dichotomy. Young people are not much opposed to membership in the EU or NATO, even if their views in other issues seem convincingly nationalistic. There is a minority that would prefer leaving the organizations, but it is limited to 15 – 24%. The most significant inclination towards leaving was in case of Schengen Area. Slovakia is viewed as part of the world and other people than Slovaks belong there as well.

Attitudes towards the place of minorities and foreigners in the Slovak society were less encouraging. Especially in case of Roma population of Slovakia. Approximately two thirds of the students did not have friends among Roma, considered them maladaptive from the nature, and viewed those among Roma who would not adapt as the main threat to the safety of Slovak society. Second to Roma in posing a threat were considered immigrants, even though opportunities to gain personal experience with actual immigrants are scarce in these regions.

The third group of questions measured authoritarian against liberal democratic attitudes. The findings were less alarming than attitudes to Roma and immigrants, but still far from satisfying. Only 42 to 44% of students were expressing attitudes supporting liberal democratic political system. Even though this was the most frequent answer, it was not too greater than the group of students expressing authoritarian attitudes, which ranged between 27 and 33%. This is significant part of population being in favor of changing the basic principles according to which political system works. Together with previous cluster of questions they show huge electoral potential for the extreme right among youth in the studied regions.

The fourth battery of questions looked at attitudes towards Jews and their perceived place in Slovak society. We found out that 18% of students do not believe that they are being told the truth about the Holocaust. Some 11% considers Jews to be making decisions in Slovak politics and economy. These numbers correspond to the regional support for the extreme right, so they are not a surprise.

The last small group of questions concerned the war-time Slovak State and views of Slovak youth towards it. Some 51 percent of students stated a negative view of this part of Slovak history, while 28% did the opposite. The picture was different when it came to evaluation of president Tiso as one of the most significant personalities in Slovak history – 38% agreed, while 27 disagreed. The first question, however, is more reliable. It shows that majority of students can be critical even to problematic and controversial parts of national history.

We found general tendency towards greater tolerance, democratic values, critical view of the Slovak State and its role in the Holocaust of Jews among the students in gymnasia when compared to other kinds of high schools. This suggests that emphasis on education of history and civic education, which is greater in gymnasia does have significant and measureable influence on attitudes of young people in these areas.

The regional differences turned out to be very weak and inconsistent across different issues. These small differences are easy to explain by structural similarity of Trenčín and Žilina regions.

5   Conclusion

In this article we studied attitudes of students of the third year of high school in North-Western Slovakia towards different groups of national minorities, our own national history, and integration to international organizations. National identity and its many aspects are formed during political socialization. This is also the time of high risk of radicalization for young people. That is why research of these attitudes is important, especially in turbulent political times such as these.

We found that attitudes of young people can vary a great deal even across issues which seem close and interconnected. Some of these attitudes are so widespread, they are not far from being a social norm among young people – such as attitudes towards Roma people.

Approximately two thirds of the students did not have friends among Roma, considered them naturally maladaptive, and viewed those among Roma who would not adapt as the main threat to the safety of the Slovak society.

But few attitudes are so widespread. In case of authoritarian vs. democratic views, or in case of attitude to the war-time Slovak State, the two opposing views are being comparably strong. Students are more in favor of democratic values compared to authoritarian ones, but even the democratic ones are only held by 42 – 44% of them. In case of Slovak State, 51% has a negative view of it, while 28% is viewing it positively. These attitudes show that while greater part of students supports the liberal democratic order of Slovakia, another part – and not much smaller - would gladly change it for stricter regime and looks favorably on historical instances when such a thing happened. All of these data demand further study and research, since they are signaling a serious problems in how great part of young people percepts their society and the values it stands on.

The third cluster of issues are the ones in which attitudes do not cause alarm. These are issues such as membership in international organizations or the attitudes towards Jews in the society. In the first, there is a group of students, that would prefer leaving the organizations, but it is limited to 15 – 24%. In the second, 18% of students do not believe that they are being told the truth about the Holocaust by the schools and the media and some 11% considers Jews to be making decisions in Slovak politics and economy. These numbers are not ideal but look far less alarming when compared to attitudes towards Roma or immigrants.

There was only so much that we hoped to found out at this stage of our research. We formulated our research design respectively. We did not formulate hypotheses, although we did have some defined areas of interest. Other than the attitudes we measured in each of the fifteen questions, we were also able to evaluate the influence of education and region. In case of regional differences we found no conclusive influence, since the results in both regions were close and did not vary in any systematic way. In case of different types of high schools we could however recognize a clear pattern. Among the students in gymnasia we found general tendency towards greater tolerance, democratic values, critical view of the Slovak State and its role in the Jewish Holocaust, when compared to other kinds of high schools. Emphasis on education of history and civic education, which is greater in gymnasia seems to have significant and measureable influence on attitudes of young people in these areas.

We did identify several ways in which to improve our research in its later phases. Most of all - there is still much room for improvement in formulation of questions in the questionnaire. We are also adding other techniques of data gathering into our research, to make our findings more robust and informative. And finally, we do aim to create a stricter research design built around testable hypotheses and more firmly set in a theoretical framework.

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Marián Bušša is an assistant professor at the Department of Political Science at Alexander Dubček University of Trenčín. He gained a Magister degree at the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava, studied political theory at Prešov University and received a political science PhD. at Alexander Dubček University of Trenčín. His main focus is political culture research.

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Povzetek:
Odnost do nacionalne identitete med Slovaško mladino

Namenin izvirnost: Članek obravnava odnos mladih na severo-zahodu Slovapke do različnih ksenfobnih in netolerantnih idej v razmerju do drugih nacijonalnosti, etničnih skupin in ras. Zaznava tudi možne razlike med dijaki gimnazij in drugih srednjih šol terponuje uvid v razmišljanje bodočih volilcev v odnosu do trenutno aktualnih vprašanj vezanih na cionallizem, strpnost in avtoritarnost.
Metoda: Raziskava temelji na vprašalniku s 15 zaprtimi vprašanji. To nam je mogočilo osnovni uvid v odnos mladih in razumevanje potencialnih faktorjev, ki na to vplivajo. V tej fazi raziskovanja hipoteze niso bile zastavljene, čeprav smo se osredotočali na vpliv izobrazbe in odnos do avtoritarnosti.

Rezultati: Rezultati kažejo na močan negativen odnos do Romov in imigrantov, relativno visok, vendar ne prevladujoč odnos v korist avtoritativnosti in in Slovaške države ter relativno šibek negativen odnos do Židov in mednarodne ingracije Slovaške. Vsi ti odnosi so šibkejši med dijaki gimanzij.

Družba: Odnos do tolerantnosti med slovaško mladino je izjemnega pomena za prihodnost družbe. V času, ko sta ksenofobija in netolerantnost v porastu je ključno proučevanje vpliva preteklosti na bodočo generacijo volilcev, ter na njihovo politično socializacijo.

Omejitve/nadaljnje raziskovanje: Raziskava je v začetni fazi ter del širšega raziskovalnega projekta, katerega metodologija je še v fazi prilagajanja.

Ključne besede: mladi, tolerantnost, odnos, manjšina, imigrantje, avtoritarnost, Slovaška, holokavst.