

## **Strategies of Integration/Distancing in the Context of Czech-Slovak Relations, the Case of Slovak Students in Prague<sup>1</sup>**

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The current Czech-Slovak relations can be defined as being between past and future. There is both continuity as a consequence of the once common history and discontinuity as people have lived in different states. The interest of this paper is to understand the phenomenon of integration/distancing of Slovak students<sup>2</sup> in the new context of Czech-Slovak relations. The question of closeness and/or distancing of Czechs and Slovaks following the separation of the two states is at stake. The changes following the split of Czechoslovakia at the end of 1992 and the resulting unclear contours of today's state of Czech-Slovak relations are analysed taking the situation of Slovaks coming to study at university in the Czech Republic and their integration in to Czech society.

A qualitative research was realised among Slovak students in Prague. The findings provided a valuable insight into how Slovak students see the distancing of Czechs and Slovaks. Three patterns were found with respect to their integration. These were compared with the concept of "the stranger"<sup>3</sup> (Schutz 1976). The first pattern was in contrast with the concept of Schutz. It showed how the passage from Slovakia to the Czech Republic was (relatively) smooth as the students thought they were coming to a familiar environment. The second pattern, however, was similar to that of Schutz as the

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<sup>2</sup> Slovak students gained the same conditions for studying at Czech universities in 1999. This meant that they were no longer obliged to pay for their studies at public universities once they passed successfully the entrance exams. They could also use Slovak throughout their studies. This resulted in an increase in the number of Slovak students from 1,150 in the academic year 1998/1999 to 6,660 in 2002/2003 (data from [http://www.czso.cz/ciz/cizinci.nsf/i/cizinci\\_v\\_cr/](http://www.czso.cz/ciz/cizinci.nsf/i/cizinci_v_cr/)).

<sup>3</sup> Schutz operates with the concept of "the stranger" that could be referred to the situation of a Slovak coming to the Czech Republic. "The stranger" for Schutz is an immigrant. The defining feature of "the stranger" is that at home he generally understands and knows what to do without having to think too much about his behavior, while this is in contrast with his position abroad. The "stranger" is an individual who once in a foreign country has the feeling of having lost the sense of orientation and is in a "crisis" as he finds it difficult, if not unhelpful to fit the knowledge of his home culture to that of the host culture; in the words of Schutz: "thinking as usual becomes unthinkable" (Schutz 1976). The stranger, then, has to find ways to understand the values, traditions, morals of the new culture and how not to succumb to fulfilling expectations concerning his attitudes and behavior. With concern to our situation of the Slovak in the Czech Republic/Czechia, however, the assumption is a little different from that of Schutz. While the Schutzian stranger expects to be new to the environment, not to understand much of the local culture and starts learning, in our case, it is assumed that the Slovak is coming to quite a familiar environment and only later realises that he is in fact "a stranger".

Slovaks had the feeling that they were coming to a foreign country that they did not understand. The third pattern was a reversal of the Schutzean model, as some Slovak students realised their Slovakness and thought that in such a culturally similar environment they should emphasise that they are Slovaks.

### **Qualitative Research regarding Slovak students in Prague**

The data analysed here comes from twelve semi-structured interviews done with Slovak students in Prague in 2003. These students were enrolled in different years of Charles University (n=6), the University of Economics in Prague as well as the University of New York, Prague (n=2).

It was thought beneficial to use a qualitative method to uncover the complex strategies of integration used by the students as well as their views on Czech-Slovak relations, while not imposing too much of a priori categorisation.

The sampling had as its aim to uncover the meanings and patterns shared by the students. The objective was not representativeness but description and coverage of the whole phenomenon. The issue “is to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world. How many and what kinds of people hold these categories and assumptions is not, in fact, the compelling issue” (McCracken 1988: 17). Here there is a connection with the data analysis; this will be based on finding such categories. With the discovery of the patterns, or in other words with the complete filling of the categories as the grounded theory suggests (Glaser and Strauss 1967), it is not necessary to look for other respondents.

The method of data collection were semi-structured interviews. This means that a certain guideline with open-ended questions was prepared in advance, but its use was rather flexible according to the flow of the interview. Each interview lasted about one hour or less. The interviewer posed questions in Czech and the students replied in Slovak. Czech was used by only one student who had been in the country for the longest time, seven years. In some of the interviews some Czech words or phrases appeared on several occasions. The interviews began with questions about the student’s “life story,” his/her decision to come to study in Prague/the Czech Republic and his/her expectations and plans. Then, parts concerning their perception of the Czech Republic, their knowledge of the Czech language, free time, friends and study usually followed.

Towards the end, the questions were about whether there was anything resembling “a Slovak community” in Prague, the student’s view of Czech-Slovak relations and of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. All the names of the interviewees have been changed.

What follows are the results of the analysis the students with respect to the decision to come to Prague, their familiarity of the Czech environment, the feeling of being foreign in the country and finally the issue of Slovakness.

### **To the Future in Prague and Beyond**

The circumstances and the reasons motivating Slovak students to come to Prague to study are varied and individualized. It is, however, possible to distinguish what seems to be an underlying drive for many. The Slovak students are future-oriented regarding the decision to study at a Prague university. They think that there are more economic but also cultural opportunities in Prague. In the future, they either envision staying in Prague or moving more westwards. For the time being most of them cannot imagine their return to Slovakia due to the economic situation there.

One of the students explains the choice of Prague:

I have an acquaintance from D. ((a town in Western Slovakia)) who’s been studying here already for three years. Prague was something tempting for me and I didn’t want to stay in Slovakia. This university has a higher standard than similar universities in Slovakia. (Jana)<sup>4</sup>

Some of the Slovak students interviewed stressed the quality or the reputation of some of the universities in Prague. Also, they wanted to go to a place different than Slovakia, and Prague was “tempting”. The potential of Prague is present in almost all of the interviews. Various adjectives such as a “big”, a “beautiful”, and a “cultural” town were used to describe “Prague”. Some students were fascinated by the “opportunities” it offered. For Milan, the term “opportunity” seems to have become almost a magic word as he used it nine times during the interview. He thinks that there are all kinds of opportunities in whatever field and “more than in any other town in Slovakia”. In response to the question, how he imagined life in Prague, he replied:

When there’re some social groups or some subcultures, so, you find one you’re looking for more developed or numerous. There is the subculture, more people, more clubs, some theater performances. So there’s simply the opportunity. (Milan)

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<sup>4</sup> The transcripts and translations were made by the author.

While some students wanted to go to Prague in the first place, there were also those respondents for whom the decision to study in Prague was not so straightforward. For these the application to a university was one of the many possibilities. Before they found out that the entrance exams were actually easier in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia some even doubted at first whether they would successfully pass the entrance exams:

I applied to Bratislava, Martin and to Prague mostly for fun so that I could come to visit Prague.  
(Vlado)

Sona repeated twice that it was more a matter of coincidence that she was admitted to Prague university:

It was almost by chance. The study advisor at our school got a book on Czech universities and based on that we submitted an application. I went to ((entrance)) exams to Bratislava and to Prague. I was accepted to both. In Prague it ((the entrance exam)) was incomparably easier. I chose Prague as it is a bigger town and that it is something else. It was almost by chance. It wasn't that I wanted to go to Prague.

Sometimes, the family members or friends were involved in the decision. A few respondents were persuaded that there were numerous advantages of going to Prague. The role of the environment was decisive for Jura who explained the details of his uneasy choice after having passed the entrance exams at several universities:

It was rather complicated.... I succeeded in four universities. Among them to Bratislava, to Comenius University, the Management ((Faculty)) and I very much wanted to go there and until the last moment I was convinced I would go there. But it was like that, everyone I told about it - why to Bratislava and not to Prague? ((I was told there was)) a lot of opportunities ((in Prague)). If I fight my way through here, it will be also easier in Slovakia. My mother played a big role ... I have relatives in Prague, too.

One of the students explains the support he received from his family:

My parents knew that if I went to Prague, it would be much better. Actually, it's Prague, it's further West. It's more developed here, everything's better here than in M. ((a big town in eastern Slovakia)). (Ivan)

In view of the future plans of the respondents the choice to go to Prague could be seen as mostly a pragmatic decision. As with Juro, many of the respondents who came to Prague had in view the prospects they might have during and after the studies. For Sona the criteria for the choice of future destination after the studies are the job

opportunities and flat availability and where her boyfriend will be. Now, in the third year of her studies of economics, she would like to stay in Prague:

For sure I don't want to ((return)) to T. ((her hometown)), maybe in Slovakia at most to Bratislava but rather not. I came here because I'd like to stay here. Otherwise I didn't have to come here to study.

There seems to be a connection between the decision to study in the Czech Republic and the idea to emigrate. This seems to be confirmed by research made by the Institute for Public Affairs: every third to fourth student thinks about emigrating from Slovakia (Marošiová 2000: 27) and a non-representative survey of Slovak students in Prague shows that thirty-two out of fifty are not considering returning to Slovakia (Odstreilová 2001).

Prague is a place where people with ambitions may make a career. Many of the respondents think that they can secure their future better there than in Slovakia. One student, who considers his future plans with his Czech girlfriend explains:

For the moment I would like to stay in Prague, find a job, settle and form a family in Prague. But I do not exclude another country, whether Slovakia or somewhere further away ... However, I would prefer most to settle in Prague. It does not mean that Prague is that close to my heart, it is a decision in the sense of securing myself and the family.... (Michal)

As for the others the individual's future in Slovakia is not an excluded option for him. Michal thinks that he could return to Slovakia if he found a well-paid job there with the possibility of professional growth. A few of the interviewed students stated that they would like to return because of an emotional tie to the country and/or they missed the family. They are, however, pessimistic about the possibility of coming back mainly because of the job market in Slovakia. Ivana explains:

I like Slovakia very much. So, after the studies the employment opportunity will be, of course, the most important ((matter)). For sure. If I get an interesting, very well-paid job in Slovakia I'm certainly willing to return home. No problem. However ((laughter)), I'm skeptical about this, so, I imagine it'll be Prague.

It will be noted here that sometimes coming to the Czech Republic is not considered as leaving Slovakia completely. The geographical and cultural distance in between the Czech and Slovak Republics is not perceived as large, meaning that one can sometimes live between the two places or that one can relatively easily keep in touch with his or her family in Slovakia while living in Prague as was experienced by some of the respondents. This, however, will be elaborated below.

So far, Prague and Slovakia have been discussed as possible destinations for the future. However, the future alternatives would not be complete without mentioning the possibility of going to a third country. Such an interest was present among some of the respondents. It happened either that Slovak students already came to Prague having in mind further travels and destinations in the West, or this idea occurred to them while being in Prague as their horizons enlarged there. Prague was described by one of the students as “a flying-off point”.

One of the students comments on his plans:

When I finish the university, I would very much like to be abroad. Maybe America does not attract me that much. Rather, here in Europe, I would like anything. But it is easy to talk about these plans... (Miro)

Another student represents the respondents who contemplate using Prague as a starting point for going abroad:

I don't know yet whether I will stay in Prague or go somewhere further away or return home. It's not possible to say now. There are two and a half years of studying ahead of me. As concerns the research, I surely want to go for a study trip to be able to prepare my dissertation. And I know for sure that I want to look at the world. I don't know if Prague is a transitory phase or if I will stay. (Lenka)

One of the important reasons for choosing Prague as the place to study was the concern of the Slovak students about the future. Predominantly, they imagine their future either in Prague or somewhere else abroad.

### **Entering the Familiar Czech Environment**

How close is Prague to Slovakia? If one looks at mere distance, it depends on what part of Slovakia one comes from. Its western part directly borders Czechia while the eastern part borders with Ukraine. The point here however, is not so much distance in kilometers as how the distance is perceived. Such an idea of distance becomes a more complex issue. It is concerned with among others culture, language, and knowledge of the place and history. With the latter element such dimensions as the past, the present and the future come into play. In this part the focus is on the perceptions of familiarity of the Czech environment.

On the one hand, a big part of respondents referred to the Czech Republic and Prague as places that are not foreign or strange to them. These are places according to

them which they understand, where they are understood and they can quite easily feel at home. On the other hand, there were also some respondents who felt like they were in a foreign country or did not feel completely “at home” in the Czech Republic. These feelings bring doubts about the perceived familiarity of the Czech environment. However, this division does not hold for everyone as among those who thought the Czech environment was familiar, there were some who thought the Czech Republic was a foreign country and/or were against the way Slovaks were seen by Czechs.

Attention will now be directed towards what constitutes familiarity and how it is explained by the Slovak students. One student replied in the following way when asked whether he also thought of applying to a university in a country different than the Czech Republic:

Before ((coming to Czechia)) no other country came into consideration ... Prague ((is)) closer from the point of view of the language, culture. Also the distance M.((a town in eastern Slovakia))- Prague is not so terrible, every second weekend I used to go home. I had a girlfriend in M. It is still as if I was still at home, in fact. (Michal)

Out of the messages one can find in this quote there are two that are of interest here. First, there is the issue of distance in terms of not losing contact with home in Slovakia and second, there is the question of the advantages of a rather close language and culture.

As concerns the first point, it was a difficult decision for Michal to come to Prague as he felt strongly attached to his family and also had a girlfriend in Slovakia at that time. However, he managed to be both in Prague and to some extent in his hometown at the same time. When asked what the Czech Republic meant for him, whether he understood it as a foreign country or not, another student replied:

You know, not really as a foreign country. It is hard to take it as a foreign country when you're five days in Czechia, two days in Slovakia ... the language is similar, the history and everything. I personally don't take it as a foreign country. (Miro)

It is not like coming to a distant and foreign place, most of the respondents claim. By that they mean the language, culture and/or common history but also, in the case of Miro and some other students, that they can easily keep in touch with their hometowns, families and friends. They seem to go home regularly, especially in the first years of their study. Miro is an extreme case in this respect as he goes home every weekend and manages to be living between Prague and his hometown in Western Slovakia. The people he mostly hangs around with in Prague also come from his hometown. He seems

to be quite culturally integrated however, he has not had much close contact with Czechs so far. To some extent he is satisfied that he can combine the best of both worlds. At the same time, he would like to for example, find new friends in Prague. Anna, another student, thinks differently. She is at the end of her seven-year studies and has to make a decision regarding where to live in the future. She is from eastern Slovakia and is concerned about how far she is living from her family there.

I feel almost like at home here. I've settled here but I always ask this question also with my boyfriend, what will happen to the parents, when they'll be, now they are fifty, when they'll be seventy. It's basically over a thousand kilometers ((from Prague)). One sister is in America, I don't really know whether she could return and the second one has a Czech boyfriend and she'd rather get married and certainly not return. This is quite sad and I think a lot about it.

Now, it is possible to get into more detail concerning the second question, that of the closeness of Czech and Slovak languages and cultures raised in the first quote in this section. These are usually perceived as rather close. Almost all students have been to some degree in contact with the Czech language and have followed events in the Czech Republic. Interestingly, some of the students think it was important that they had lived in Czechoslovakia before 1993 as they spent about half of their lives in that state. These Slovak students explain their knowledge of the Czech language and culture as gained during both the period after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia but also before. Reference was made to Czechoslovakia as a space that still has some relevance today. There is thus a continuity from the past to the present mentioned or "no gap" as a student explains:

I knew very much about the Czech Republic. There's no gap whatsoever. Too few years have passed for it to ((emerge)). (Miro)

The connection between the knowledge gained in Slovakia and the life in Prague is repeated on many occasions by the respondents. For example, Milan elucidates when replying to the question if he already orients himself well in Prague:

What caused it is not only that I've been in Prague for half a year but it's also about ((the fact)) that when I switch the telly on at home, I have four channels there in Czech and in general there is a better program. And when I watch it, I learn a lot of things, so, I know a lot about the social life ((here)).

In the part of the interview about his knowledge of Czech, he explains:

And again it's the same thing. I was reading very many books which were either in the Czech original and when it was a translation I used to look for Czech, for example *The Lord of the Rings*

which is, I heard, absolutely unreadable. It is impossible ((to read it)) in Slovak. So, I had such an idea that I don't have any problem with Czech, to listen to, to read and I thought that to speak, too. Now I gradually learn to speak. (Milan)

The students usually say that they understand Czech very well apart from hearing new expressions from time to time. This is especially the case at faculties where they learn terminology in Czech. However, quite often they have difficulties speaking in Czech. The passage from the passive to the active usage of Czech was not as evident as Milan thought would be. There is one more point to be made about the last quote. At the beginning, the student is stressing the same pattern that he already mentioned previously in the interview. It is a pattern of continuity from the Slovak environment to the Czech one. This idea is elaborated in the next citation:

I don't know if I left ((Slovakia)) at all ... I didn't depart, I just came here to study. If it was Czechoslovakia I'd still be in one state, so, I do not take it that much as two countries which are absolutely different. (Milan)

Lenka, who is in her first year of doctoral studies, elaborated on the connection between the similarity of Czech and Slovak culture and how she felt in Czechia. Here she replied to the question "What does the Czech Republic mean to you?":

I don't know. I don't really take it as being in a different state. In fact I take it as ... as home. May be ((for)) a foreigner ... it is something new and strange. Actually for me Czech culture, which is very similar to ours, the language ((is)) very similar. I really feel here like at home. It's my second home, momentarily.

It is noticeable that Lenka has been in the country only for about seven months. However, she is quite integrated both culturally and structurally after this relatively short period of time. She could rely on a network of people in Prague composed mostly of Slovaks, centered around one webpage. At first she became acquainted with some Slovaks however, later she found some Czech friends too. Concerning the language she says that she understands everything. When asked about her knowledge of Czech it seemed the only problem was that of remembering particular words when she was talking in Czech. Unlike many others it was easier for her to start speaking Czech:

Concerning speaking it's harder, there's the uncertainty if I'll say the words correctly. But concerning the differences between the languages, my knowledge is very good. My uncle actually comes from Moravia. I've been exposed to Czech since I was little. "Polštár" and "vankúš" ((“a pillow” in Czech and Slovak)) are not a problem for me, as it's only to find the word quickly.

What was helpful for the development of her Czech language skills was the experience with the language in her childhood. More Slovak students had the same opportunity as they either had a Czech relative or lived in the Czech Lands for a shorter period of time.

There are some limits to familiarity noticed by the students. A few of them mentioned that in Prague they had to learn how to be more assertive as the people there are “more cheeky”, one of the students claimed. Another student explains:

I had such a character, nothing mattered to me. I was friendly with everyone, I was somewhat open. Here I learn how to close a little and oppose if something isn't just. (Ivan)

Coming from a more religious environment, one of the students complained about some of the Christian traditions not being kept in Prague. He goes regularly to church. The student commented on it in the following way:

As the year goes there isn't anything that I'd mind. What I mind is that at the time of the feasts, the Christian ones that took place now - the Easter, they aren't celebrated much. (Vlado)

It was shown in this part that for some students the Czech environment in which they live is quite familiar to them. Most Slovak students know Czech culture and language quite well before coming to the country. Thus, they have an advantage over “the stranger” that Schutz writes about. The Schutzean immigrant has to try to understand the meanings of the immigrant culture and what is the appropriate behavior in particular situations (Schutz 1976). Many of the Slovak students do not have such difficulties as their preparation from home as well as the acceptance of Slovaks and their language in the Czech Republic facilitates their integration. There is a certain smoothness of passage from Slovakia to the Czech Republic for the students who think that the Czech environment is close and familiar. After getting acquainted with Prague they orientate themselves quite well in the new place and country. Some things may be new for these students such as the “more cheeky” way of behavior of the people in Prague, however, in general they tend to understand the place and the people quite well. They acquire a degree of sureness in behavior that the Schutzean immigrant may only dream of.

### **The Czech Republic: A (Possibly) Foreign Country**

Our attention will turn now to those Slovak students who either do not think that the Czech Republic is so similar or familiar and (or) who consider it a foreign country. In

the sample, there were also some who expressed problems with getting used to the Czech environment or claimed this environment to be unfamiliar. Most Slovak students in the sample read in Czech or watched Czech television channels substantially and thus they have not lost contact with the language and the communicated reality of their western neighbor. Juro is one of those who rather lost contact with the Czech language:

In 93 I was 11 years old. From 11 I got a minimal contact with Czech ... I was learning French in Czech. It was in fact a French book with translations into Czech and I was having big difficulties with Czech in the book. Because, imagine, you have a French word that you don't know what it means, you have a Czech word that you don't know what it means and now you have to study it.

Since the separation of Czechoslovakia this student has not experienced the Czech language much. In light of the previous experiences of some of the other Slovak students, they would not consider it strange to be using a French textbook with Czech translations. However, Juro had problems understanding it. It is not only that he did not understand but "they", Czechs, did not understand him either. In his eyes Slovaks are foreigners in the Czech Republic. His situation resembles more the concept of the stranger of Schutz. The next quote is a reply to the question how he imagined his life and study in Prague/the Czech Republic and how this idea corresponded with the reality:

At first I have to say the reality. So, when I came here I realised that we're in fact already foreigners. Slovaks in Czechia are in fact foreigners and one can quite feel it. First, as concerns economics, culture, one can feel it in all aspects that we're not from one country anymore. This was a surprise for me. I thought there wouldn't be such a difference. It happened to me a few times, especially in the first months, ((that)) I didn't understand them, they didn't understand me. (Juro)

He had quite an opposite experience with the exposure to the Czech language and culture as compared with some of the accounts quoted above:

I didn't like Czech. I wasn't able to read books in Czech. All TV serials in Czech seemed strange to me, I wasn't able to orientate myself in the plot ... When I came here, so after some time I picked it up and it became normal to me. (Juro)

The feeling of rupture of such a closeness between the Slovak and Czech culture was experienced by more students. Another student explains how after having arrived to Prague her perceptions of Czech-Slovak relations did not materialise:

Of course, I imagined it as a big hero. That I actually come here round the corner to Prague, that everything will be normal, that I'm not going to any foreign country. However, when I came to

Prague I found out that it isn't really like that, that Prague and people from Prague, I don't mean this in a nasty way. But that they're not so close as I thought, that it isn't such a brotherhood. The people here are really different and more foreign to us ... So, it took me some time to get used to it.  
(Ivana)

Today, having lived in the Czech Republic for almost three years already she feels at home here. However, when she started studying in Prague the place was foreign to her. The same surprise was with the language. She could understand well but expected that she could learn how to speak from the very beginning which did not happen. As in the above-mentioned case, there was a connection between the unrealised perceptions of closeness and familiarity of the Czech environment. This resulted in seeing the Czech Republic as a foreign country (although after some time Ivana changed her opinions).

There is another interesting case of a student who experienced the course of events in a different way: from familiarity to estrangement. It illustrates the problem of closeness and similarity from a different point of view: not as something facilitating the integration but as a threat to one's national identity. Maja had no difficulties with the language and learnt to speak fast and used Czech substantially with her Czech boyfriend in the first year of her studies. She explains what the Czech Republic means to her:

It's true that we are close to each other - Slovakia and Czechia - but I think that there's a difference. I still feel here as abroad. It isn't a home country for me. When I hear the Czech anthem it doesn't fill me with emotions as some Czechs. Unfortunately may be abroad I'm realising more that I'm a Slovak, I try to show it a little that I'm someone else, that I'm not you, that I'm not your citizen. However, on the other hand one has to adapt in some way, to somehow place oneself in the crowd, into the state. But ((what is)) for me the Czech Republic? May be the easiest version of abroad that we Slovaks may have. This concerns culture, ( ), language and other barriers are erased. But it is still a foreign country. May be unfortunately. In the European Union the conditions for getting a flat may change, maybe, I don't know also the health insurance is also a little barrier ... These are the kind of details but matter much. (Maja)

This student seems to have gone quite far in being like a Czech. At a different point of the interview, she admitted that she was able to pretend to be Czech and nobody was able to find out. Now, she regrets speaking that much Czech during her first year of studies. What makes the difference of not being Czech is that she does not identify with for example the Czech anthem. It was in the Czech Republic that her Slovakness became more apparent. This issue will be elaborated further on.

So far in this part there have been two main situations in which Slovak students found themselves in relation to Czechs. The first one was about being a foreigner in the

sense of not understanding well and/or not being understood. The second situation was about stressing that one was a foreigner in a somewhat too much similar environment.

There also was a third situation about those students who perceived the Czech environment as familiar and not foreign. There were some students in this group who see that there is a possibility of change as concerns the familiarity. The third situation was then about understanding the Czech language but probably not being understood in the future or even today by younger generations.

Many of the Slovak students interviewed thought the knowledge and understanding of Slovak language by younger generations of Czechs was much lower than that of Slovaks understanding Czech as these individuals have not had much contact with the Slovak language since the end of Czechoslovakia. There were some students who had the experience of talking to Czech children:

My girlfriend has a thirteen year-old sister and she already has sometimes quite a few problems with Slovak. I don't speak Czech there but I speak Slovak. However, sometimes I have to translate a word. (Michal)

Having such an experience he explains how he sees the Czech-Slovak relations:

Quite good, it depends on age. People of a certain age, people who're now over 18 or more, so, they still perceive Slovaks as part or as, not as foreigners. They have some positive relation to them or a closer relation than to other nationalities ... People who are younger, they, I think, have no relation to Slovaks. It is already, I don't want to say cold but there is no more the close relation, the special tie which was, which exists with the older generation. (Michal)

The estrangement between Czechs and Slovaks could then become stronger with new generations who have not lived in Czechoslovakia and do not see much reason to feel a special tie to Slovaks. The language also plays a role as at some point Slovaks speakers in the Czech Republic may have greater difficulty being understood. When talking about this issue there was already a feeling of a possible change in the future in many interviews. Such words as "still" or "yet" were commonly used. This feeling of change corresponds to comments in the Czech media about the knowledge of Slovak by Czech children. Nábelková puts the comments in the context of "uncertainty" (Nábelková in print).

## **Realising Slovakness**

What will be explored now is how the ethnic boundary is maintained (Barth 1969) between Slovaks and Czechs studied regarding the example of Slovak students. As will be shown, what stood out in the interviews was mainly the relation of the Slovak students to the Slovak and Czech language. To use the Slovak language means to be different from Czechs. It helps maintain the difference between “us” and “them”, Slovaks and Czechs.

It is with the help of the Slovak language that many of the Slovak students realised and also maintained their Slovakness. One of the students who thought from the beginning that the Czech Republic was a foreign country explained in the following quote the function of the language in terms of dividing Czechs and Slovaks. He even saw it as discriminatory:

You realise all the time that you´re Slovak. ((During the counting of presence at a French lesson)) all Czechs say “tady” ((“here” in Czech)) and I don´t say “tady” when I´m a Slovak. I say “tu” ((“here” in Slovak)). It seems to me that I´m somehow an outcast, that I´m simply of a different national origin. (Juro)

Many of the respondents who have been in the country from two to four years have been speaking Slovak mostly. The passage from Slovak to some usage of Czech has been quite troublesome for some. The problem lies not so much in the knowledge and ability to use Czech but in being Slovak and use Czech at the same time. What follows are two cases that further illustrate the relation between Slovak and Czech. Both students belong to those who do not consider the Czech Republic as foreign. The first, Michal, has been in the country for four years. He has never spoken Czech although he claims he does not have any difficulties speaking it. He was asked by some of his classmates why he did not use Czech:

Why I don´t speak Czech when it isn´t a problem for me. Why do I speak Slovak? However, I think, it ((the question)) was more like fun and then on the other hand an interest, why I stayed with Slovak, if I didn´t feel any drive to speak Czech because I was talking Czech sometimes ((with some foreigners)). And it´s then that one realises that I have no reason to speak Czech and I won´t change in any way like this, that I´m still a Slovak.

Also for the other student it is a question of being a Slovak that makes him use this language:

I consider speaking my native tongue a question of my national pride. When I speak Czech, this is only to make it easier for the listeners. (Vlado)

These two students just as others, had to find ways how to deal with some situations that require the usage of Czech. Michal found out that he could speak Slovak and when his communication partner encountered difficulties, he could translate or use some Czech words in a Slovak sentence when he expected a listener not to understand. Another possibility is to use mostly Slovak but to speak entirely Czech when the listener does not understand. The other student came to the following conclusion. However, it was not easy for him:

How I used to (detest) it ((Czech)). But it started ... It must have been some kind of a dispute when I didn't feel like asking, explaining four times the same thing. So, I said it once in Czech and the thing was settled because ... If you have five Slovaks and four Czechs and Slovaks start speaking very fast among themselves and Czechs don't understand, I prefer to say it in Czech. (Vlado)

The explanations usually used by Slovaks to explain the usage of Czech are about practicality, easier flow of conversation or employment where Czech is sometimes required in such jobs as a barman or secretary. Another student also became tired of explaining some things several times so he started using Czech in shops or at work. His explanation, or what looks rather a like a justification, is based on a more widespread reasoning among Slovak students that in a different country than Slovakia one usually speaks the language of the country. The question he answered here was about whether he spoke Czech in a shop:

Now in a shop generally already yes. Again it's easier to explain in Czech than a few times in Slovak. I don't take it that I'm losing my face that I'm not speaking in Slovak. I'm adapting. I'd be doing the same thing everywhere. If I lived in Poland, ((I would speak)) in Polish. When in the Netherlands, in Dutch. It's probably normal.

There are however, those who oppose such a view as they think that one can speak Slovak easily in the Czech Republic:

I have these friends who are Slovak but speak Czech. I don't understand it why. They argue that "if you were in America, you'd be speaking with them in English". But this is something completely different, Czechs understand Slovak. This seems strange to me. (Jana)

There are two points that need to be mentioned. First, it is clear from the quotes above that there is still not a feeling of certainty or an agreement among the Slovak students as to what kind of country they are in. Is it to some extent a foreign country, a country of immigration? Or is it a country quite close to Slovakia where the border is only a formality and where one can come and start speaking Slovak? Second, the choice of the usage of language in particular situations is not only an individual matter. There is on

the one hand pressure from the side of some of the Slovak students to continue speaking Slovak and on the other hand, some of the students themselves expressed that the language was an important part of their national identity. The next case illustrates how the choice of language is not always a free individual choice. As was already mentioned above, Maja was sorry about speaking Czech at the beginning of her studies. The student elaborates:

I was speaking to shop assistants and they thought I was Czech. It started to matter to me: this isn't possible anymore, I can't leave it like this. So, I returned to Slovak ... and then when I was sometimes phoning with a Czech, they ((Slovaks at the dormitory)) heard that I was talking in Czech with him ... They were a little annoyed: "How come you're speaking in Czech to them? You're Slovak, they understand you" and such opinions. So, then I got it that Czechs understand Slovak, there isn't such a big difference and if there is, I can translate a word or two for them. Well, it's like that - I still feel sometimes tempted, this is true, that I still feel sometimes tempted to speak Czech with Czechs. So, (sometimes) I have to ((tell myself)): you have to speak Slovak, he'll understand. (Maja)

Another student, Anna, who has been in the Czech Republic for seven years already settled the issue of the languages for herself in such a way that depending in what language one starts talking to her, she replies. She also experienced some suggestions concerning the use of Slovak from a friend. He told her "You must keep the Slovak in you " but she thinks:

... this is stupid. It isn't really nationalistic but I'm here and I can talk with Czechs in Czech and with Slovaks in Slovak. He's not tolerant in this.

It is noticeable that the Slovak students do not inform about almost any pressure to speak Czech from the Czech side. Some of the respondents might have been only asked to speak Czech in some jobs or to use terminology in Czech at universities. Sometimes the Slovak students were even encouraged to speak Slovak which their Czech colleagues found charming and nice to listen to. One of the students explained the special place Slovaks have:

Some want ((to speak Czech)), some don't want it. At the faculty everybody takes it the way that we're Slovaks and so we don't have to speak Czech. Everybody understands. There's no problem with that at all. (Ivan)

From what many of the respondents said one gets the image of a relative tolerance and friendliness of Czechs towards Slovaks. Also, the issues of the number of Slovak students and the dormitories seemed not to be pressing issues for many of the

respondents, apart from some of the students at the University of Economics and a few other students. The categorization was perceived as follows: Slovaks are as foreigners or “as if foreigners”, a student said. Another student mentioned the matter in connection with how he perceived the Czech Republic. He thought that it “was still not foreign”. However,

They take us as workers that take jobs and that we take the places of Czech students. (Vlado)

There are two more points to be made about realising and stressing Slovakness as it was explained in this part. Firstly, it does not apply to all the respondents. The picture would not be complete without mentioning those respondents who for example felt relatively free in using Czech and Slovak, sometimes mixing the two on different occasions. A student explains:

Sometimes I don't almost realise it, I start in Czech then I find out that I can't find a word and I switch to Slovak. It's very funny. But in general in shops, when I greet and to my Czech acquaintances, I speak in Czech to them as if out of joy. (Lenka)

Secondly, most of the students thought that it did not make sense to distinguish Czechs from Slovaks as concerns for example friendship. Also, it should be clarified that stressing Slovakness did not lead to an interest in isolating from Czechs and forming any kind of Slovak community excluding Czechs. If the students had many Slovak friends and not too many Czech ones, they usually expressed their wish that they would like to have more of the latter ones.

The ethnic boundary maintenance (Barth 1969) functions for some Slovak students along the issue of language. It could be seen here how Slovakness is realised through the use of Slovak language. There is a tendency among some students to oppose cultural assimilation by hesitating or being against the use of the Czech language for fear of losing their Slovakness.

## **Findings**

It was shown in this paper that the decision of Slovak students to study in Prague could be described as mostly pragmatic and future-oriented. The usual pattern is that the students expected that after completing their studies they could make a career in Prague or continue to a third country in the West. Their return to Slovakia is not excluded, however, for the time being many students in the sample expressed skepticism about

Slovak economy. Coming back to Slovakia at some point in time may be facilitated by the fact that in the Czech Republic the students do not seem to lose touch with their home country. Also, some expressed the view that there was no point of talking about “a return to Slovakia” because by coming to Czechia they did not have the feeling of leaving Slovakia for a foreign country anyway.

What kind of a country they arrived at was a question that ran through most of the interviews and only partially was it caused by the interest of the interviewer. There is no clear definition that the Slovak students would share. The meanings expressed oscillated between on the one hand, “not foreign” or “not really foreign” to the statements claiming that “this is a foreign country”. Also, the students introduced a time dimension by stressing the uncertainty of how long the current state will last. Thus, some of those who shared the view of the Czech Republic being familiar and not foreign thought that this country could possibly become foreign for younger generations. The reality of vague contours of the Czech-Slovak relations is composed of the still vivid common past and the new situation after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia.

The concept of “the stranger” (Schutz 1976) proved to be insufficient for explaining the variants of patterns of integration of Slovak students. Three major patterns were recognized. First, there were those who could be described in terms of “a smoothness of passage” from Slovakia to Czechia. In contrast to the Schutzian stranger they mostly found the Czech environment familiar and relatively easy to understand almost from the very beginning. Second, the Czech reality was deemed strange and foreign by some students and it came as a surprise to them. This pattern resembled the classical situation of a disorientated immigrant as described by Schutz in his concept of “the stranger”. Third, there was a tendency among some students to stress their Slovakness. Those that try to stress their Slovakness match with those who think the Czech Republic is a foreign country. Anyway, one can also find those deliberately showing their Slovakness in the Czech Republic among those who do not feel like foreigners there.

The Slovak language was identified as functioning in the process of ethnic boundary maintenance (see Barth 1969). For some respondents the similarity of the Czech and Slovak languages and cultures, the relative easiness found by some Slovak students not to be recognized as Slovaks together with the possibility to speak Slovak everywhere in Prague led to the emphasis of the differences between Slovaks and

Czechs. The pattern in this situation operates then in a reversed direction than Schutz indicated for his model of “the stranger”. Some Slovak students found the differences between the languages and cultures rather small and tried not only to retain them but also to make them more noticeable. There was thus, a perceptible opposition against a complete cultural assimilation and pressure from Slovak peers not to abandon the Slovakness and Slovak language. However, there was not an interest in isolation of Slovaks from Czechs.

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