The importance of effective cross-cultural communication explained on the example of Slovakia and Generation Y

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Abstract

This article aims to provide a brief explanation how intercultural exposure and effective cross-cultural communication impact the future of countries, as well as individuals. As a basis for this explanation it uses the example of Slovak *Generation Y*, which represents a paradox of children and young people living in a relative freedom of thought, but in a continuing cross-cultural isolation throughout their whole formative years. It explores the influence of globalized market on requirements set on employees, and implications of cross-cultural society for individuals. Business-wise, having people, who can accommodate intercultural differences and communicate effectively despite them is becoming of utmost importance. Following the business, social and person point of view is explored. The research and conclusions stated in this article are based on quoted online resources, publications and author's personal experience gained in the field of intercultural communication and recruitment.

Key words: Generation Y, Slovakia, intercultural experience, cultural conflict, cross-cultural communication, recruitment

The aim of this article is to provide a brief explanation how exposure to foreign cultures impacts the future of countries, as well as individuals. To demonstrate the importance of international experience and effective cross-cultural communication, Slovakia and Slovak Generation Y is going to be used, because it provides an example of an entire generation

raised without sufficient intercultural stimuli. The influence of such isolation is explored in chapters dealing with the problematic from the business, social and personal point of view.

The research and conclusions stated in this article are based on research online, official statistics and author's work in intercultural environments.

Slovak Generation Y

The word generation has the following two meanings that correspond with the context of this article:

a) *a group of individuals born and living contemporaneously*
b) *a group of individuals having contemporaneously a status (as that of students in a school) which each one holds only for a limited period[1]*

Generation can be understood also as peer group or epoch.[2] However, people sharing the same epoch, experience or status do not have to be of the same age. This is true also for Generation Y, which doesn't have a precisely defined start or end.

Generation Y is a term that first appeared in August 1993 in editorial of Ad Age[3] and since then it has been used especially in connection to changing working habits and related social and economic challenges in the US.

In Slovakia, this term was taken over from English, but despite the fact that it is used for approximately the same generation, in the Slovak context, it represents a different set of economic, social and cultural issues, which are explored in greater depth later. This article uses this term solely in the Slovak context.[4]

In Slovakia, the term Generation Y refers to people, who grew up or started working after the Velvet revolution in 1989, meaning that these people experienced Communist regime

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[1] "Generation", *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, at http://www.merriam-

webster.com/dictionary/generation, 17 March 2015

[2] "Generation", *Collins Thesaurus*, at http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-thesaurus/generation, 17 March 2015

[3] "Generation y", *Advertising Age*, vol. 64, no. 36 (1993), p. 16

[4] Please, note, that Generation Y in Slovakia has not become the object of notable scientific exploring as the American counterparts, thus articles written by field experts have been used as basis.

only in a relatively young age and thus are not burdened by it.[5] In other words, it is the generation of people born approximately from 1980 to 1991.[6] Currently, it counts approximately 1,345,000 people[7], which is about 25% of the entire Slovak population, and in about 10 years it is going to constitute 40-60% of the entire Slovak workforce. If we consider the continually decreasing birth rate in Slovakia and the expected retirement age of prior generations, it is safe to say that Generation Y (as population majority) is going to have a strong impact on the country in the upcoming years. Due to its projected mass, it is very likely that this influence is going to encompass all aspects of the society and through political and economic control also extend into the social and cultural sphere.

Historical context of Slovak Generation Y[8]

In order to explain, what makes the Slovak Generation Y unique, it is necessary to explain the historical background leading to the current state explained in the subsequent chapters.

The roots of the current situation lie in the Communist regime that was present in Slovakia (former Czechoslovakia) since 1948 until 1989.[9] This regime is marked by erasing any political opposition and creating a single-party state. Ideas considered as revolutionary and aimed against the party/state were prosecuted and all layers of the society were penetrated by both voluntary and involuntary police informers. Throughout the years, the entire political climate deformed into one of fear and oppression limiting everyone's personal freedom - people were not allowed to leave the country freely, there was no freedom of expression and Western culture perceived as capitalist corruption was mostly forbidden.[10]

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[5] The reason why this is important is explained later in the part exploring historical background.

[6] Veronika Forentová, "Mladí z generácie Y menia trh prácu, chcú menej nadčasov a postup", *SME Ekonomika*, 30 November 2011, at http://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/7521991/mladi-z-generacie-y-menia-trh-prace-chcu-menej-nadcasov-a-postup.html, 17 March 2015

[7] Štefan Mesároš, "Generácia Y – strieda miesta a zadlžuje sa", *Pluska*, 3 October 2011, at http://www.pluska.sk/slovensko/spolocnost/generacia-y-strieda-miesta-zadlzuje-sa.html, 17 January 2015

[8] Karel Kaplan, *Komunistický režim a politické procesy v Československu*, Brno 2008, p. 62-65.

[9] "Project Oral History-Witnesses of the oppression period", *Nation's memory institute*, http://www.upn.gov.sk/en/project-oral-history-witnesses-of-the-oppression-period/, 17 March 2015

[10] Karel Kaplan, *Komunistický...,* p. 62-65.

The economic and cultural impact was significant too. There was no free trade and the whole economy was centralized and controlled by the government. Companies had 5-year plans they needed to follow and often business executive power was in the hands of political nominees with proven record of loyalty to the Communist party regardless of their professional suitability and personal capacity for the selected position.[11]

The isolation of the entire Czechoslovakia can be symbolized by the barbed wire that was on the borders. This wire was cut when the Communist regime fell in 1989 during the "Velvet revolution". Despite the name Revolution, it was a peaceful protest against the single-party government that was initiated by citizens. It is unique and remarkable by its non-violent nature, when masses of people met on large squares, listened to political speeches, sang songs and dangled their keys to show that they are ready to open the doors to a new era.

The revolution was followed by the first democratic elections and the federative Czechoslovakia started to transform into a parliamentary republic with two separate governments. On the Slovak side, power was seized by Vladimir Mečiar, who became the dominating political leader for the next ten years.[12]

The newly redefined democratic Czechoslovakia was from the start trying to open up to the world, as documented by the official visits of e.g. the Prime minister of UK Margaret Thatcher and the president of France Francois Mitterand in September 1990 or the US president George Bush in November 1990. However, the political directions of the two governments joined in the federation were soon becoming increasingly different.[13]

Despite the fact, that Slovakia from its beginning in 1990 officially presented the intention of entering international geo-political structures such as the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the elected (and later re-elected) Prime Minister Vladimir Mečiar was not convinced about these goals and his actions were slowly bringing the country into renewed political isolation even from its closest allies. In the wake of his actions, in 1992 the Velvet Divorce took place. It resulted in the peaceful separation of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak republic.[14]

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[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Marián Török, "Tri obdobia dvoch desaťročí zahraničnej politiky Slovenskej republiky", *Politické vedy*. vol. 17, no. 3 (2014), p. 112-151.

As mentioned, one of the government priorities was to become a member of the EU. In reality, however, Slovakia again started on the road of a single-political party. Mečiar's party was the strongest across the whole political spectrum and secretly opposed the EU and NATO membership. Thus, during Mečiar's governing, Slovakia was repeatedly reminded that the EU was concerned by the Slovak attitude and development, especially in relation to democratic leadership, freedom of press and rights of minorities. These reminders, however, were ignored.[15]

A significant change came 10 years after the Revolution in 1998, when the party of Vladimir Mečiar failed to secure enough votes to build the government by itself and other political parties refused co-operation with it. Mečiar was forced to step down and leave the creation of government in the hands of his political opposition.[16]

Thus, a government comprising of several opposing parties was born. It almost immediately started renewing proper political contact with the EU and foreign countries together with passing a large number of social and economic reforms. These changes later made it possible for Slovakia to fulfill strict rules set for joining the long-desired structures such as the EU (2004)[17] and NATO (2004)[18].

It is necessary to keep in mind that these positive changes opening the country occurred almost 15 years after the Revolution, which means that even the youngest members of Generation Y are at least 13. Thus, we can say that Generation Y is a paradox of children and young people living in a relative freedom of thought, but in a continuing cross-cultural isolation throughout their whole formative years.

Communism and the subsequent political struggles and isolation drained the country economically; in 2011, the purchasing parity in Slovakia was 129 billion $. In comparison, in the neighboring Czech republic, it was 289 billion $.[19] Considering this, it is mostly not possible for young people to travel and study abroad without the financial aid of their parents.

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[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] "Slovensko a Európska únia", *Euractiv*, at http://www.euractiv.sk/rozsirovanie/zoznam_liniek/slovensko-a-europska-unia, 17 March 2015

[18] "Vstup do NATO", *Ministry of Defense*, at http://www.mosr.sk/vstup-do-nato/?mnu=288, 17 March 2015

[19] "GDP (purchasing power parity) - Europe", *Index mundi*, at http://www.indexmundi.com/map/?t=0&v=65&r=eu&l=en, 10 March 2015

Often even the paternal help is not sufficient and students are reliant on various funds and benefactors. It means that while the borders are open and people can theoretically go anywhere, practically, only a small number is able to go abroad and experience a different culture. Naturally, we could argue that this effect could be balanced by foreigners coming to Slovakia, however, is it really enough? The answer to this question might reveal the number of foreigners residing in Slovakia.

Foreigners in Slovakia

The number of people coming to Slovakia during and immediately after the Communism has been fairly low, but the situation changed significantly after the Slovak accession to the EU in 2004. The number of employed incoming immigrants surged dramatically from 2,761 in 2004 to 18,247 in 2010. This trend is visible in Table 1 expressing the development of Slovak net migration per 1,000 people from 1980 to 2015.[20]

Year	Net migration
2015	0,6
2010	1,1
2005	0,2
2000	-0,1
1995	-0,6
1990	-1,4
1985	-1,4
1980	-0,4

Table 1 Development of Slovak net migration per 1,000 people since 1980 to 2015

Nevertheless, the share of employed migrants on the overall population has been still very low – less than 1%.[21]

To give a more general view of the recent situation, in 2013 there were 33.5 million people born in a non-EU country, but living in an EU member state, and 17.3 million citizens of the EU decided to move to a different EU state.

In general, from 27 EU countries, only five (Slovakia, Ireland, Hungary, Luxembourg and Cyprus) have a higher number of immigrants from within the EU than from outside.[22] In case of Slovakia, the share of non-EU immigrants is 23% and they come mainly from Ukraine, Serbia, Russia, Vietnam and China.[23]

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[20] "Slovakia: Net migration rate, per 1000 people", *Factfish*, at http://www.factfish.com/statistic-country/slovakia/net%20migration%20rate, 10 March 2015

[21] "Migrants in the Slovak labour market. Problems and perspectives.", *Institute for Public Affairs*, at http://www.ivo.sk/6605/en/news/migrants-in-the-slovak-labor-market-problems-and-perspectives-, 17 January 2015

Due to intertwined historical development, cultural exchange in Europe has always been intensive and thus, Europe is relatively culturally homogenous. Therefore, the influx of European citizens does not have equally strong intercultural impact as immigration from e.g. Asia. This fact, together with under-average immigration and weak economy, are the reasons, why the exposure of (young) Slovaks to different cultural concepts is fairly limited. It needs to be said that the state is often strengthening this effect by legislation. For example, in 2011 the Ministry of Interior prepared a strategic document *Migration policy of the Slovak Republic – Perspective until the year 2020,* which prioritizes immigration of high-skilled workers with the emphasis on culturally related countries. In the same year there was also passed Act 404/2011 on Residence of Aliens, which poses more restrictive entry regulations and stricter conditions for granting temporary residence for non-EU nationals. All the aforementioned facts are the reason, why Slovakia remains for migrants from Eastern Europe and Asia primarily a country of transit and the portion of migrants within the population is the lowest in the EU (0.6 per cent). Currently, there are only about 63 000 foreigners and merely 13 800 of them are actually immigrants.[24]

This trend does not seem to concern the politicians, as migration is a marginal theme for them and the public. This is reflected in rather short and vague parts on migration policy in electoral programs of the main political parties.[25]

Based on these data, I believe it is safe to say that small numbers of foreigners together with relatively low income of citizens are the reason why many young Slovaks not only from generation Y, but also the next generations, are only rarely confronted with sufficient number of culturally challenging situations and concepts. The following chapters attempt to explain the consequences of this state.

Business Point of View

[22] "Migration and migrant population statistics", *Eurostat*, at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics&printable=yes, 17 January 2015

[23] "An overview of the migration policies and trends - Slovakia", *Migration Online*, September 2014, at http://www.migrationonline.cz/en/an-overview-of-the-migration-policies-and-trends-slovakia#_ftn5, 17 January 2015

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] "Slovakia", *International organization for Migration*, 3 September 2014, at https://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/where-we-work/europa/european-economic-area/slovakia.html, 17 January 2015

Going to a country with different values and culture for an extended period might be very challenging. Some people may suffer from *culture shock*, which is defined in the medical sense as "*a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation* "[26] Because of this possible adverse reaction people/students may put off a prolonged stay in a foreign country to a later point in life, when they feel they might be better prepared to face the challenge, or they hope to gain this experience later in the course of their professional life. However, delaying this might lead to disappointment before the professional career even starts, because not only employers require international experience. There is also a growing number of universities considering international studies as a selection criterion for their Master programs. [27]

Since the economic recession has started in 2009, the whole business world has been changing. Many businesses went bankrupt, leaving behind unemployed workers and decreasing number of open positions they could apply to. The following graph from 2013 shows the decline of employment rate in Slovakia and the future prognosis for 2014 and 2015.
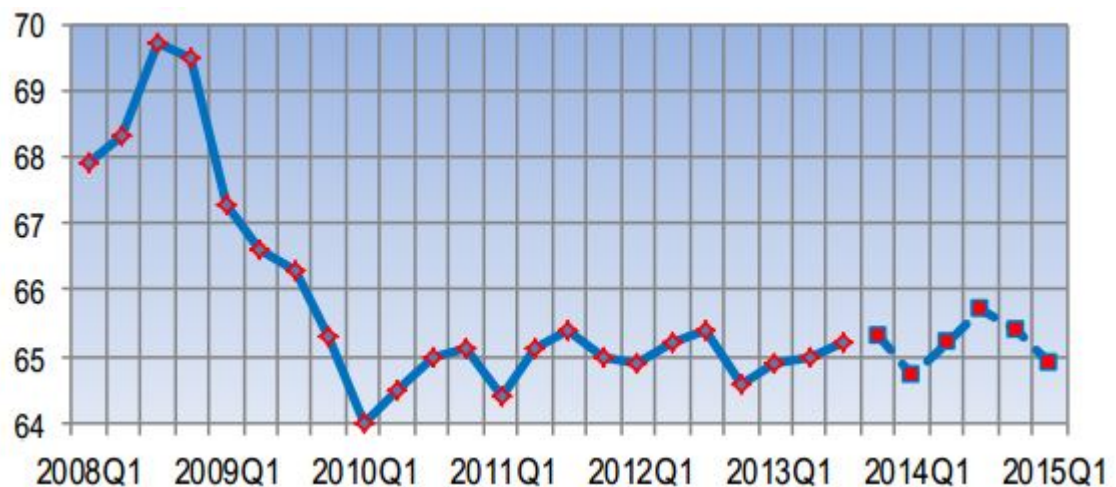
Picture 1 Slovak employment rate from 2008 to 2013 with projection for 2014-2015[28]

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[26] "Culture shock", *Merriam-Webster*, at http://www.merriam-

webster.com/dictionary/culture%20shock, 12 March 2015

[27] "International Experience Initiative", *Texas Tech University*, at http://www.depts.ttu.edu/coe/careers/students/iep/initiative.php, 17 January 2015

[28] "Trh práce: zamestnanosť, nezamestnanosť, voľné pracovné miesta", Bulletin *Prognostického ústavu SAV*, 2014, at http://ce-cesta.eu/uploads/media/Bulletin_PU_SAV_cislo_1-2014_jan.pdf, 12 March 2015

Slovak employment rate was lower than European average in all monitored groups.[29] It means that more people are applying to a small number of jobs. In other words, the competition for open positions grew harsher. Therefore, employers can afford to have increased requirements from their future employees, making job-hunting particularly difficult for young graduates without work experience. In Slovakia, the unemployment rate of youngsters is 37%.[30] In comparison, in Japan it is 6-7%.[31] However, job-seeking is difficult in other countries too, as expressed by Ms. Jessica McKinven from Doncaster in England.

"I graduated last year with a first class master's degree in civil and structural engineering from the University of Liverpool. Following graduation I decided to take a gap year and spent the winter working in a ski resort in France. Having returned from France, I found the graduate job market in a far worse state than when I left. This is a terrible time to be a graduate. If the situation does not change for the better soon, I will be looking for greener pastures abroad."[32]

Similarly to her, also another student, Marc Atherton, sees his chance abroad. He said:

"Considering the domestic economic climate, the amount of students now going to university in the UK and the increasing emergence of a global labour market, it is not surprising that employers are demanding more and more from graduates. I have decided to move to China on completion of my masters in September, gain industry experience (where there are opportunities) and learn Mandarin to further differentiate my CV from my competitors."[33]

Indeed, if there are many applicants for one job, probably the best way to increase the chances is to stand out, for instance by having a unique international experience. Nowadays, it can happen that graduates with a year of work/study experience abroad have more valid know-how than a seasoned worker, who never left the country. It applies to developed countries too.

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[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Tomáš Meravý, "Ako Ficova vláda „rieši" problém nezamestnanosti mladých", *SME Blog*, 25 July 2014, at [30] http://tomasmeravy.blog.sme.sk/c/361625/ako-ficova-vlada-riesi-problem-nezamestnanosti-mladych.html, 17 January 2015

[31] 前田裕之, "若者の失業率　なぜ高い", Nikkei, 18 November 2014, at http://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXKZO79818480X11C14A1TJP001/, 17 January 2015

[32] Sean Coughlan, "Three quarters of employers 'require 2:1 degree'", *BBC*, September 2014, at

http://www.bbc.com/news/10506798, 17 January 2015

[33] *Ibid.*

For example, in America, only around 33% of people have a passport, thus having an intercultural experience is likely to be a notable point for recruiters and managers.[34]

Recently, Healthy Companies International concluded a research concentrating on common points in the resumes of the best chief executive officers (CEO) in Fortune 100 companies. While the CEOs set themselves apart from their peers by things that are to be expected, such as intelligence, strong communication and organizational skills, etc., another thing they had all in common was the fact that 75% of them have spent at least two years working in a senior position overseas.[35] Considering that 10 years ago it was only about 48%, we see a dramatic increase in their number, which proves the importance of cultural understanding and training on today's business.

This trend is visible also in the Fortune 700 list, which lists a bigger number of companies and thus might provide a more representative sample. Survey done in 2003 noted that the percentage of top 700 CEOs with international experience rose from 21 to 30 % in just a year. *"The value is clear: For CEOs, an experience overseas can provide a real competitive edge,"* says Tom Neff, U.S. chairman of Spencer Stuart, one of the world's leading global executive search and leadership consulting firms, specializing in chief executive, board director and senior employees.[36]

Reporter Liz Wolgemuth summed it up as follows: *"The trend toward international experience may signal how much companies now value employees who understand the differences."*[37]

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[34] Lindasy Hartfiel, "3 Situations Where International Experiences Distinguish You From the Crowd", *Native foreigner magazine*, 7 March 2012, at http://www.nativeforeignermag.com/2012/07/3-situations-international-experiences-distinguish-you-from-the-crowd/, 17 January 2015

[35] Liz Wolgemuth, "What the Résumés of Top CEOs Have in Common", *U.S. News*, 21 May 2010, at http://money.usnews.com/money/careers/articles/2010/05/21/what-the-rsums-of-top-ceos-have-in-common, 17 January 2015

[36] Justin Martin, "The Global CEO", *Chief Executive*, 1 February 2014, at

http://chiefexecutive.net/the-global-ceo, 17 January 2015

[37] Liz Wolgemuth, "International Experience Required!", *Kulturtolk*, 22 May 2010, at

http://www.kulturtolk.no/en/international-experience-required, 17 January 2015

Why has the trend of leaning towards internationalism gotten so strong in such a short span? The answer to this question can give us Randall Stephenson (AT&T CEO), who spent several years working in Mexico City and talked about his experience in relation to embracing different models of foreign countries. He presented his opinion, that if you are going to serve a diverse market, you need to have on your leadership-team people, who know those markets, and not just from a numerical, or demographics standpoint, but people, who have actually lived and breathed and operated in those markets.[38]

Under the influence of globalization, companies with headquarters separated from the production are a common occurrence, sometimes they are even on different continents. In such circumstances, companies are becoming increasingly aware of cultural differences, because these might be even crucial for functioning of the whole business. People, who can make international teams work effectively by accommodating these differences, are becoming of utmost importance.

In the recent years, production units of many large companies (e.g. KIA, Volkswagen, Gabor, Dallmayr, etc.) have settled in Slovakia because of relatively cheap, but skilled work force. However, in the global economy, it is always necessary to remember that other possibilities with lower production-costs may appear any day. Consequently, if you want to keep the business, but the price can't be lowered anymore, it is necessary to offer something on top, such as unique skills. As mentioned before, such skills can for example include the ability to facilitate effective communication in culturally and nationally diverse teams. In order to have as many skilled workers as possible, it is essential to start with their very soon. In fact, the sooner, the better. Large companies with a constant need of employees are also aware of this and therefore many of them have talent development/onboarding programs in place. Since the talent selection is usually done around the globe, the competition is quite strict.

From my experience as a recruiter, these programs have similar requirements. The first selection criterion is almost universal: excellent academic results preferably (but not necessarily) from a renowned university. Good command of English on a level that guarantees flawless business communication with international partners is also a must. Many European students often improve their language skills in English-speaking countries such as

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[38] Liz Wolgemuth, "What... ", 17 January 2015

Britain, America or even Australia. These are commonly their first foreign experiences, but they are also considered fairly standard in recruitment. Therefore, candidates with experience from a (culturally) more removed region really stand out. In the case of Slovakia or Europe, the desired experience would be from countries such as Japan, China, Korea, etc.

As mentioned previously, Slovak students do not have the financial means to study abroad, therefore their chances on the international market are lower. In order to even out this discrepancy, many Slovak universities are preparing their students for the international challenges by providing training concerning intercultural communication, especially by majors, where there is a high probability of students coming into contact with foreigners. For instance, during my studies of English and German language and literature our curriculum included one year of social studies for each country. Since these countries are geographically and culturally not very removed, this portion can be viewed as adequate. However, in the curriculum for Japanese language, intercultural communication training is present from the beginning to the end (6 years) and it is even one of the main subjects on the state exam on both the Bachelor and Master level, because it is considered as crucial for further professional life.

Social Point of View

Apart from the business world, intercultural communication is also important for peaceful cohabitation. With globalized world, people migrating to new locations do not bring only their skills, but also their culture, which may be entirely different than the culture prevalent in the target country.

There are many bases, on which cultural groups may be created, such as race, ethnicity, or nationality, but also generation (such as Generation Y), socio-economic class, sexual orientation, ability/disability, political and religious affiliation, language, gender, etc.[39] When problems surface between or within cultures, (cultural) conflict is often a response to difficulties in dealing with differences.[40] Jonathan Turner defines cultural conflict as a conflict stemming from "*differences in cultural values and beliefs that place people at odds with one*

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[39] "Culture and Conflict", *Beyond Intractability*, Michelle LeBaron, July 2003, at http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture-conflict, 10 March 2015

[40] Michelle Lebaron, *Bridging Cultural Conflicts: A New Approach for a Changing World,* San Francisco 2003.

another".[41] One of the most extreme results of cultural conflict is an attempt to annihilate the other group. An example from the European history is the attempted genocide of Jews by Nazi Germany. Naturally, not all conflicts end in violence; the more common responses count e.g. segregation, discrimination, and exclusion. Unheeded cultural tensions can lead to deterioration of relations (as shown below).

To solve the cultural conflict, it is often necessary to find the source, which may actually be a whole complex of issues that are connected to specific historic, political, and social contexts. Understanding the foreign concepts requires expanding and challenging preconceived assumptions, which is particularly challenging when viewed from different cultural context.[42]

In Slovakia, increased intercultural tension manifests e.g. in the form of "Hungarian" card, which is regularly used in local and governmental elections and leads to increased local and international tension.

The term *Hungarian card* refers to politicians stirring Slovak nationalistic tendencies to gain votes, but also to distract from other issues.[43] This behavior has roots in complicated historical relations.

In the past (app. 970-1918), Slovakia was a part of the Hungarian Kingdom, which was a multiethnic kingdom. At the beginning of the 18th century, the usage of minority languages was almost entirely banished from administration and even justice.[44] Minorities underwent so called magyarization (sometimes also called Hungarization). It was a process of assimilation or acculturation in order to force the minorities to adopt the Hungarian culture and language. If met with refusal, the process was enforced through social pressure or even coercive policy, but also through appeal.[45] The results were questionable, as Jaszi writes: *But from the point of view of Magyar assimilation there was no advantage in this process because the non-Magyar youth, recruited from these schools, became the most ardent supporters of the claims of their*

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[41]Jonathan H. Turner, *Sociology*, Prentice Hall 2005, p.87.

[42] Amanda Fortier, "Culture and Conflict: Introduction", *The Power of Culture*, July 2008, at http://www.powerofculture.nl/en/specials/culture-and-conflict/Introduction, 10 March 2015

[43] Judit Hamberger , "On the Causes of the Tense Slovak-Hungarian Relations", *Slovensko-Maďarské Európske Fórum*, July 2008, at http://www.sfpa.sk/sk-hu-euroforum/doc/09_hamberger.pdf, 10 March 2015, p 60.

[44] Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the two World Wars*, Washington 1974, p. 193

[45] Philip Lyon, *After Empire: Ethnic Germans and Minority Nationalism in Interwar Yugoslavia*, 30 November 2008, http://hdl.handle.net/1903/8910

races, and the mechanical drill of Magyarization had as its result the embittered fight of these "Magyarized" elements against the school system of assimilation and sometimes against the Hungarian state itself which they identified with the system of forcible Magyarization.[46] Slovak traditional poems and songs are strongly marked by the resistance against Magyarization, and Slovak-Hungarian relations are very sensitive even nowadays.

Due to historical development, in the southern Slovakia there is a strong Hungarian community, where the locals often do not speak Slovak. The existence of this community and the fact that the delegates of Hungarian Slovaks Pál Csáky and Miklós Duray had repeatedly mentioned the question of autonomy of these southern regions are another source of tension. However, it manifests mainly in symbolic acts on the level of high politics, but conflicts between the cohabitating citizens themselves are extremely rare.[47]

Since 2012, the relations between the two countries became less publically violent. Leading Slovak politologist Grigorij Mesežnikov analyzed the situation and came to the conclusion, that the improvement in the relations is not a result of political dialogue, but rather a combination of external factors such as difficult internal political situation in Hungary, as well as absolute security of the Slovak Prime Minister Róbert Fico in his political power. Simply put, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has more pressing internal concerns and the Slovak prime minister does not need to use the Hungarian card to gain votes of nationalist voters as his political party SMER is currently the strongest across the whole political spectrum.[48]

I also believe that a part of the reason is also the fact that with opening to the world, Slovaks gain more confidence and better understanding of their own identity. The fact that both nations are able to peacefully cohabitate on personal level is a proof that cultural conflicts can be overcome despite differences and previous difficulties. In a world where everybody can move to almost any place of the world, cross cultural communication and the ability accept new influences is more important than ever. For example, in the US, where one third of the entire population consists of minorities, there was created a plan (1987) to develop a set of strategies that would help ensure the continuous flow of minority students through the

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[46] Oscar Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, Chicago 1929, p. 330-331.
[47] Judit Hamberger, "On the Causes... ", 10 March 2015, p 60.
[48] Grigorij Mesežnikov, "Vyhliadky slovensko-maďarských vzťahov po slovenských parlamentných voľbách 2012", *Inštitút pre verejné otázky,* 30. March 2012, at http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/publicistika/subor/Mesez_Boell_30_3_12.pdf, 10 March 2015

educational pipeline.[49] I believe that with the decline of birth rate in modern states, immigrants/minorities are going to be an important source of workforce. It is necessary to offer them the same chances, as well as help them to overcome their differences, so they are able to fulfill their potential. Similarly to the case of Hungarian-Slovak relations, sometimes history can make the cohabitation difficult, but as much as should be heritage valued, it should not stand in the way of successful future.

Personal Point of View

The following chapter is trying to explain the positive influences of intercultural communication on personal development. The positives and negatives of intercultural education, relationships and experience have been well documented by researchers, nevertheless, every person feels and perceives things differently based on their own experience and background; therefore, I will allow myself not to quote the research done in relation to this topic, but talk about my own personal experience.

As a student of Japanese studies, I have had the great honor to be one of students awarded Japanese governmental scholarship to study one year at a Japanese university.

Despite the fact that I had already visited Japan as a tourist and I also had had 3 years of intercultural training at university, I still suffered from mild stages of cultural shock and several times during my stay I even had doubts about my choice. Now, after I have had time to process the experience, I realized that it was the most enriching experience in my life. I have been meeting daily with other exchange students various countries such as Japan, China, Indonesia, Russia, Vietnam, Australia and Korea, who had different religious, social and political backgrounds. Despite that, our common activities proceeded smoothly and with time we got close enough to talk about sensitive topics such as problematic geo-political relationships between our countries, different religious beliefs, gender equality, etc. As could be expected, during these discussions, big differences between our values and opinions came to light, but our exchanges remained friendly and enriching. I believe it was because of our mutual respect that we held for each other. This experience taught me that despite the fact that different opinions can be sometimes painful to hear, exhausting to process and can even appear to one's system of beliefs, they also give a unique opportunity to look at our own set of values from a different perspective – the good points, but also points that might be a source of

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[49] Shirley M. McBay, Improving Education for Minorities, *Science and technology*, 2003, http://www.issues.org/19.4/updated/mcbay.pdf. p.36

tension or lack of progress. Conscious realization of principles that negatively impact one's life may be the first step to changing them for the better. Therefore, I believe that in the end, meeting new people and experiencing new cultures can also make you into a better person.

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In the future, she would like to continue studying languages and explore their use in various cultural and business contexts.

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