

Slovakia's Image in British Dailies: Exploring the Depiction of Violence between 2010 and 2014

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Abstract

The paper presents findings from a research study that delves into how British dailies portrayed Slovakia in 2010 – 2014. The image of a country is to a large extent not easily influenced and relatively static, so we can consider the results from this period as relevant. Our focus was on examining the depiction of the central theme of violence within various contexts, spanning from the Velvet Divorce to incidents involving Slovak citizens in Great Britain. Our objective was to investigate whether Slovakia's image correlates with the broader depiction of Central and Eastern Europe, as proposed by N. Kaneva (2012) and R. Saunders (2012).

Keywords: image of Slovakia, violence, British dailies, content analysis.

Introduction

The article presents partial results of research on the media image of Slovakia in five British daily newspapers, three broadsheets – The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian and The Financial Times and two tabloids – the Daily Star and the Daily Mirror in 2010-2014. The research applied a combined – quantitative and qualitative content analysis of articles mentioning Slovakia. The sample consisted of 481 texts with diverse topics, we identified 16 of them, namely sport, EU economy, EU politics, Slovak politics, Slovak politics, world politics, Slovak economy, bailout crisis, migration, nationalism, tourism, Roma, crime, culture, health, education, and our coding book also included the topic of *other*. Among other aspects, we examined the article tones and the geographical classification of Slovakia into Central, Eastern, CEE, or a combination of these, and its correlation with the article tones. Here, we understand violence as a broader concept, including connotations of verbal violence, danger and conflict. Violence typically includes four characteristics; it is intentional, unwanted, nonessential, and harmful behaviour (Hamby 2017).

One of the significant and recurring narratives in our research sample was Slovakia as an unknown Eastern or Central European country, so we perceived the need to explore its image in the context of the whole region. Despite the dynamic development and socio-political and economic changes in the CEE region, its image in popular culture is stereotypical. N. Kaneva (2012) and R. Saunders (2012) identified the main characteristics of the image of Eastern Europe, namely - underdevelopment and poverty, mystery, nationalism, violence, migration, and the sexualisation of women.

Regarding the perception of violence in a political context, Eastern Europe has almost always been a politically unstable region. R. Saunders (2012, p. 55) characterised it as a “perpetual zone of conflict and unstable politics”. According to J. Rupnik (1996, in Kaneva 2012: 62), one of the most typical symptoms of developments in the former Ostbloc after 1989 is the sudden rise of nationalism caused by geopolitical and economic changes and the ideological void after the fall of communism.

The problem of nationalism has continuously appeared in articles about Slovakia since its establishment. For example, A. Burgess (1997) noted that the British media in 1993-94 primarily covered three topics in the context of Slovakia, namely the split of Czechoslovakia and its aftermaths, the construction of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam, and the rights of the Hungarian national minority. He perceived the image of Slovakia as predominantly negative, which he attributed to the fact that after the fall of communism, the British press reacted to the rise of nationalism in Eastern Europe. The British politologist K. Henderson (2002: xv – xvii) confirms the importance of this type of discourse, stating that the country became visible in the UK because of the nationalist demonstrations in 1991.

Another typical stereotype is population migration, which suggests conflict and problems in the structure of society from where people migrate. As specified by Korte et al (2012), after the fall of communism, Western Europe, including Britain, faced immigration from Eastern Europe, refugees from the Balkans, and economic migrants, which significantly influenced the British public debate on integration, human rights, citizenship, national identity, and cultural diversity. After the EU's major territorial expansion in 2004, the British press became very concerned about the flood of Eastern Europeans “flooding into cities and stealing local jobs”.

Another specific phenomenon is the exodus of Eastern European Roma to the UK. J. Krokusová (2007) states that after 2000, Slovakia was presented as a racist country in many European countries, such as Belgium or Finland, because of the departure of Roma. Their organised departures brought several problems related to crime - usury, document forgery, etc.

Methodology

Since we were primarily interested in the essential characteristics of the image of Slovakia in the British media, we decided to focus on the evaluative elements in the text. These elements encompass nouns, verbs, adjectives, participles, or adverbs. Many researchers, e.g. S. Schneiderová (2015) and L. Halamová (2017), confirmed the importance of adjectives in determining the article's tone and supporting the narrative. In our case, we studied adjectives and adjectival collocations referring to Slovakia, Slovaks, or various aspects of life in Slovakia, as adjectives most frequently convey meaning evaluations. Our analysis of these adjectives, along with the conclusions drawn from the qualitative analysis, has aided us in identifying the frames used in the articles about Slovakia, which define the perspective from which the subject is presented.

Thus, frames create meaning in a media text by selecting and highlighting certain aspects of reality. A significant term by Z. Pan and G. Kosicky (1993, p. 59) is the theme - a central motif identical to the frame. Many authors rely on previously identified frames - they apply a deductive approach. Common frames include conflict, assignment of responsibility, economic consequences, human interest and morality, description of individuals or groups, powerlessness, loss and gain, moral value, and conflict struggle. Thus, we used previously identified frequent frames but have also left room for establishing new ones.

The research examined texts from the period of 2010 to 2014 that, while not immediately topical, remain highly relevant due to the enduring static nature of a country's image. As S. Anholt (2009) confirmed, a country's image cannot be easily shaped by branding campaigns as its modification requires sustained, long-term efforts.

Furthermore, some of the cultural stereotypes of Eastern Europe can be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment and travel diaries, where this region and the Balkans were the synonym of the Other Europe – mysterious, unknown, and dangerous (Todorova 1997).

Results and Discussion

The following part of the paper summarises the major findings, divided into most significant narratives, identified in our sample, related to conflicts and violence.

Velvet Divorce

In the context of political violence and perceptions of the country, the Velvet Divorce – the amicable partition of Czechoslovakia – emerges in our sample as a good practice and precedent, particularly in the context of the discourse on Scotland's separation from the UK and European separatist movements. The authors of analytical articles in *The Financial Times*, J. McDermott (2013, FT) and E. Moore (2014, FT), warn of the consequences of Scottish independence on the capital markets and highlight the economic implications of this decision. Analysing the economic impact of a possible separation of Scotland from the UK, E. Moore admits that the case of the break-up of Czechoslovakia is often used by Scottish nationalists as “proof that break-ups can be smooth“.

Articles in *The Guardian* in 2011, 2012 and 2014 touch not only on Scottish but also Catalan independence. In a reader's letter, John Murray (2011, *The Guardian*) accuses Václav Klaus of splitting Czechoslovakia, comparing him to the “ruthless Tories“. The letter writer also points out that the decision to split the country was not unanimously supported by ordinary citizens. K. Connolly (2012, *The Guardian*) presents a more positive view, assessing the amicable partition of Czechoslovakia as “the best example in post-war Europe of a relatively smooth parting of the ways“.

Ian Traynor (2012, *The Guardian*) has analysed the separatist movements in Europe - in Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland. He attributes the smooth course of partition to the more favourable economic conditions in the Czech Republic, which had no interest in remaining allied with the poorer Slovaks and was “better off without their poorer Slovak cousin“.

The position of the Czechs as the elder brother, the superior entity, is evident in the above articles, for example, in Jan Cieski's article in *The Financial Times* (2011), where the author notes that “the Czechs have long been accustomed to looking down on the Slovaks“, as “rural bumpkins from the wilder reaches of the Tatra mountains“.

Slovak politics and nationalism

The Slovak political landscape is often described as underdeveloped and plagued by various issues, including corruption, populism, and right-wing extremism. For instance, the Gorilla affair has been labeled a “devastating corruption scandal“ (Nicholson 2012, *The Guardian*). This scandal exposed the close ties between political and business elites, leading to allegations of

corruption in nearly every government since the country's independence in 1993.

Several articles addressed nationalist and extremist tendencies within Slovak politics. It is noteworthy that “the only party willing to cooperate with Mr. Fico is the ultra-nationalist Slovak National Party, which received only 5 percent of the vote, failing to capitalise on Slovak-Hungarian tensions leading up to the election” (Cienski 2010, FT). Nationalism primarily surfaced in the context of the rights of the Hungarian national minority in Slovakia. Both *The Financial Times* and *The Guardian* covered this issue. Slovakia's sensitivity towards Hungarian cultural symbols, the Patriot Act prohibiting dual citizenship, and longstanding historical disputes all contributed to this problem.

In 2011, articles in *The Financial Times* exclusively focused on the “carpet incident” during Hungary's presidency. The Hungarian side rolled out a carpet with a sticker depicting the Greater Hungary of 1848 in one of the European Union buildings. This act reportedly incited anger among Slovak and Romanian representatives, further straining relations with Hungary (Spiegel, 2011, FT).

In an article in *The Guardian*, A. LeBor (2010, *The Guardian*) attributed these frictions to the internal issues within the countries, serving as a distraction from domestic problems. Slovakia is referred to as “a teenage country with teenage complexes.” A major point of contention is the law on national minorities, which banned dual citizenship. The author acknowledged that these issues had deep historical roots. In this context, the European Union was portrayed as a mediator, like a parent dealing with immature and quarrelsome children.

The Guardian's portrayal of Farage (2012) also mentioned other nationalist politicians in Europe, including J. Slota in the Slovak case, quoting his infamous remark about the Roma needing “a big whip and a small yard” (Harris, 2012, *The Guardian*). This discourse, framed as a conflict, emphasises immaturity, imbalance, and hypersensitivity. Notably, the majority of articles maintained a neutral tone, while 2 articles indicate a negative tone.

Migration and Roma

Migration is another prominent topic that garnered attention in various British newspapers. *The Financial Times* (2 mentions), *The Guardian* (5 mentions), *The Daily Telegraph* (3 mentions), and *The Daily Star* (7 mentions) all touched upon migration issues related to Slovakia. It is a particularly sensitive issue for the British public, as it raises concerns about job losses due to the

influx of cheaper labor from Eastern Europe. Notably, Slovaks were identified as the fastest-growing foreign-born group. In one analysis featured in *The Daily Telegraph*, a senior official from Migration Watch is quoted as saying that “the Eastern Europeans have been extremely good workers and therefore very welcome to employers.” However, he also acknowledges that they are often been paid less than their British counterparts and accept challenging working conditions (Bingham, 2011, *The Daily Telegraph*).

A similar perspective was presented in *The Financial Times*, which headlined that “employers like EU migrants for their commitment” (Odell, 2014, FT). Another article in *The Financial Times* suggested that these migrants contributed more in taxes than they received in welfare benefits and were less likely to receive welfare compared to native-born Britons (McDermott, 2014, FT).

Tabloid articles, on the other hand, were more critical. For example, a piece in the *Daily Star* warned that new laws may allow people from newly accessioned countries, including Slovakia, to claim welfare benefits after just 12 weeks, down from 12 months. Nevertheless, the article also included a statement from the Department for Work and Pensions stating that “most migrants do not claim benefits” (Coyle, 2010, *Daily Star*). An even more critical article from the *Daily Star* in 2011 attributed rising poverty in the UK to labor migrants, particularly those from Eastern Europe, and quoted an authority representative, Ian Duncan Smith, who claimed that “the wave of Eastern Europeans who flooded into the country from 2004 has led to poverty in adults being at its highest level in 50 years” (Coyle, 2011, *Daily Star*).

The issue of Slovak Roma was covered in 3 articles in *The Financial Times*, 2 in *The Guardian*, and 4 in the *Daily Star*. In 2013, there was a peak in coverage with 4 articles, 3 of which were more extensive and focused on the evolving situation of coexistence between the British population and Slovak Roma in Sheffield and its surrounding areas.

Articles addressing discrimination against Roma in Slovakia were highly critical. They often highlighted the segregation of Roma children in the school system, their overrepresentation in special schools, and difficulties in the labor market. However, the renewed strategies of the new Slovak government towards the Roma minority were viewed positively. The *Guardian* published 2 articles on the Roma, with the most critical one by S. Drakulić (2010, *The Guardian*) sparking a lively discussion among readers in the discussion forum (131 contributions). In this discourse, Slovakia is portrayed as one of the countries where you are likely to hear about violence against Roma individuals, with Roma being perceived as the most discriminated against and the poorest European minority.

We observed differences in the evaluation of Central and Eastern European migrants between broadsheets (2 positive, 2 negative, 2 neutral articles) and tabloids (4 negative, 3 neutral articles). The broadsheets often depict an image of hardworking migrants earning less than native Britons, with frames focusing on economic implications and populism. In contrast, tabloids frame the issue in terms of economic consequences and threats, often employing water-related metaphors. Negative tones dominated the coverage of Slovak Roma, with 8 negative articles and 1 neutral article. Reports in *The Guardian* and the *Daily Star* emphasized the escalating coexistence of Slovak Roma in and around Sheffield and highlighted concerns about the abuse of the British welfare system by Roma immigrants. The language used in these reports is often expressive, evoking feelings of danger, anger, and fear, with frames centered around the idea of a threat. These reports frequently draw unfavorable comparisons between Roma life in Slovakia and Britain, although they also express criticism of Roma behavior and dissatisfaction from local residents regarding the anti-social behavior of Roma immigrants (e.g. Pidd 2013, *The Guardian*).

Crime

Crime resonated in both the tabloids and the broadsheets - *The Guardian* (n=1), *The Daily Telegraph* (n=11), *Daily Mirror* (n=9) and the *Daily Star* (n=11). The crimes mentioned were of a grave nature - murder, marriage fraud, human trafficking and sexual offences. The majority of the articles related to crimes committed by Slovaks in Britain, although some articles also covered crimes committed in Slovakia, but these were particularly severe, brutal or unusual. Given the sensitivity of the British public to the abuse of welfare benefits by foreigners, we assume that articles reporting on this issue have a high potential to arouse negative sentiment. For example, an article in the *Daily Mirror* about people being smuggled out of Slovakia to collect welfare brings images of modern slaves being “beaten and repeatedly raped” (Anon 2012, *Daily Mirror*).

The case of the murder of a British businessman by a young Slovak woman in Spain in 2014 received a lot of coverage in the tabloids. The perpetrator was portrayed as a jealous and unstable, physically attractive woman; the reports were supplemented by rich graphic material, mainly photographs on the beach, etc. (e.g. Anon, 2014, *Daily Star*). The incident was framed as a crime of passion, and we assume that the story and circumstances contributed to the high number of articles (n=10) that covered it.

Articles on fake marriages were also relatively common. As previously mentioned, articles about crimes committed in Slovakia touched on serious crimes, for example, the mass murder committed by Ľ. Harman in Devínská Nová Ves, where a racist motive was hinted at, the case of the murder of the little girl L. Luknárová, and also the Slovak cannibal M. Čurko. An investigative article in *The Guardian* about low-quality joint implants was a unique one.

The perpetrator of a robbery in Britain - Slovak M. Stojka, whose victim was a senior citizen, was described as having “dangerous and threatening behaviour“. A 2014 *Daily Star* article quoted a Tory MP who claimed that Stojka is “a prime example of why Britain should leave the EU“ (McDermott, 2014, *Daily Star*).

We believe that despite their relatively low frequency, these articles have the potential to negatively affect the country's image.

Conclusions

We were interested in the extent to which the stereotypes identified by N. Kaneva (2012) and R. Saunders (2012), with connotations of conflict and violence, occurred in the research sample.

In the given period, nationalism was associated with Slovak-Hungarian relations. In a sense, stereotypes from the 1990s about nationalist and extremist Eastern European politicians persist here. Expressive terms like fascist state, teenage country, etc. appear. However, the problem of Slovak-Hungarian relations also resonated on other topics, such as the debate on recognising Kosovo's independence.

An interesting phenomenon was the emergence of the subtopic of velvet divorce with an overlap into economic issues, which was prompted by the then-current discourse on Scottish independence. The velvet divorce was often used in terms of good practice and as an admirable example. We suggest that the (negative) majority attitude of the periodicals towards the separation of Scotland from the UK can explain why the articles tend to mention the negatives of the event, although there is an attempt at an even-handed, balanced analysis. The relationship between the Czech Republic and Slovakia is assessed as unproblematic, although framed as that of an older, wiser, richer Czech Republic and its younger, less experienced and poorer relative Slovakia.

Migration is one of the other stereotypes observed. The topic of migration and migrants was present in our research sample, although we noticed a marked difference between the image of a migrant abusing the UK welfare

system in tabloids and the dominant image of the hard-working Eastern European migrant in the broadsheets. Migration also touched on the issue of Roma and Roma migration, where Slovakia was portrayed highly negatively as the articles in the research sample included images of the country discriminating against its fellow Roma, and Roma living in the UK were described as displaying anti-social behaviour and sometimes abusing welfare benefits.

We believe that, based on the examination of our research sample, it is not possible to generally perceive Slovakia as a country that has a problem with violence and crime rate. The number of crime-related articles is relatively low, and there were no explicitly stated concerns about crime or violence in Slovakia. On the contrary, the narrative framework of a country that has peacefully parted ways with the Czech Republic, albeit in a non-standard way, evokes an image of a country whose leaders know how to solve problems non-violently, by agreement. Reporting on the mass shooting in Devínská Nová Ves, The Daily Telegraph (2010) noted that Slovakia had experienced gang shootings in the 1990s but no large-scale shootings in the present (Anon, 2010, The Daily Telegraph).

A notable exception is the article by T. Nicholson's article in The Financial Times (2010) that presents the first Gay Pride march in Slovakia. The images present evoke primitive violence directed at a peaceful crowd with families and children, including neo-Nazis throwing rocks and tear gas canisters and shouting hate slogans. According to the article, the police underestimated the situation. The article quotes statements by two foreign participants in the march, Austrian politician Ulrike Lunacek and Dutch MEP Marija Cornelis, who attribute such reactions to the conservative religious society in former communist countries (she mentions Lithuania).

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