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SOCIAL IDENTITIES, SOCIETAL CHANGE AND MENTAL BORDERS

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Abstract: In this paper we investigate the relations between cross-border mobility, national categorization and intergroup relations in a changing Europe. It focuses on young adults (N=34) commuting on a regular basis between the city of Bratislava (the capital of Slovakia) and the city of Vienna (the capital of Austria). Our study draws on the social identity perspective, however, we consider social identity as a discourse of (not) belonging, similarity and difference, which is continually (re)negotiated within a given social context. Semi-structured qualitative interviews, focus groups and drawings of the border area were used as research instruments. We have identified different types of experience in various subgroups of participants framed by (1) age at the time of arrival in Austria; (2) different mobility motivations and goals; (3) interaction setting; (4) the political and economic situation in Slovakia at the time of arrival to Austria linked to perceived status differences. On the individual level, the motivation to integrate or its lack seems to be a crucial element in the ingroup construction and perception of intergroup relations.
Keywords: social identity, cross-border mobility, intergroup relations, mental borders, commuters, young adults.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate the relations between cross-border mobility, national categorization and intergroup relations in a changing Europe. It focuses on young adults commuting on a regular basis between the city of Bratislava (the capital of Slovakia) and the city of Vienna (the capital of Austria)[1].

We share Hopkins' and Dixon's (2006) conviction that social and political psychologists should pay more attention to places and spaces that "play a central part in the ways that large-scale and abstract social categories such as 'nation', 'class', and 'race' impact on lived experience and are reproduced through it" (*ibid.*, 174). Yet after an initial focus on attachment to places, our empirical material led us back to discursive constructions of social categories and their consequences for intergroup relations. We argue that place identities and the social categories that they embody cannot be studied separately. This is particularly true if entities

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[1] These cities are only 60 km apart.

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such as neighbouring nations, having had different economic and political statuses, are concerned[2].

Our study draws on the social identity perspective (Abrams, Hogg 2004) in social psychology. It emphasises that people have a range of social identities deriving from various categories, which they see themselves as belonging to, and that the salience of these identities is context-dependent (Tajfel, Turner 1986). However, we do not consider social identity to be solely a result of processes of social categorization, we understand it as a discourse of (not) belonging, similarity and difference, which is continually (re)negotiated within a given social context (Galasińska, Galasiński 2003), ranging from the micro level of the ongoing research interaction to the level of macro political processes. The use of identities is strategic and has consequences for what social action will be deemed possible (Reicher et al. 2006).

The processes of European integration entail changes in the social representations that people hold of their communities as well as of the Other, especially where the EU has (re)united countries/regions, which had been divided by Iron Curtain for several decades (Meinhof 2002). Moreover, the abolition of administrative barriers hindering cross border mobility does not necessarily result in the abolition of "mental" borders.

On the other hand, there are people with the resources and opportunities to cross the former East/West border on a regular basis, either to study or to work in the neighbouring country. Previous research suggests that people speaking foreign languages and having experience with another country are more likely to endorse a sense of a supranational identity (Boehnke, Fuss 2004) and, consequently, to overcome the "mental" border.

As far as the Slovak-Austrian border region is concerned, previous research has shown that before the Second World War there were intense cross-border interactions based on geographic proximity and family relations, but these were often interrupted by the Iron Curtain. Despite cooperation in the development of infrastructure and in the domains of culture, education, sport and tourism, cross-border interactions were not completely restored after the fall of the communist regime in the former Czechoslovakia (Falťan 2003). Although Austrians as well as current relations with them are perceived positively, only one fifth of respondents in a questionnaire survey carried out in Bratislava and Trnava border regions reported having frequent or very frequent contact with Austrians, with one third having no contact at all (Schrastetter, Schaller, Herzánová 2005). There are, however, specific groups with long-term personal experience with the Austrians—Slovaks working in Austria and a considerable number of Slovak students attending Austrian elementary schools, secondary schools and universities (Table 1).

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[2] Slovakia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy until 1918, when the Czechoslovak Republic was founded. After the Second World War, it had been separated from Austria by the Iron Curtain with barb wires, watch towers and trained Alsatians for 40 years. Only people living in the border region (including the capital - Bratislava) had some contact with Austria, mediated by the Austrian public TV, which was accessible in this part of Slovakia. When the communist regime in Czechoslovakia fell in November 1989, the border became permeable and the economic differences (manifested mainly by the variety of goods accessible in shops and by the differences in purchasing power) became immediately visible. After the EU accession of Austria (1995) the border checks became slightly stricter again until May 2004, when the Slovak Republic (independent since 1993) itself joined the European Union.

The following study focuses on these groups, in particular on Slovak students and employees from the Bratislava region commuting to Vienna. It explores discursive constructions of their social identities and partly also their social representations of Austrians.

Table 1: Number of Slovak students at major Viennese universities (Data from the summer term 2007 when the majority of participants were interviewed)[3]

University	All students	Foreign students	Slovak students
Vienna University of Technology	17 726	3911	105
University of Vienna	69 576	13 330	561
Vienna University of Economics and Business	20 060	4 707	383

Method

The empirical material analyzed in this paper comes from three different time periods. Originally, 32 young adults aged 18-24 living in the Bratislava and Záhorie border regions participated in a borderlands research project carried out in April-June 2004. We were interested in their perceptions of the Slovak-Austrian border, in their social representations of the Austrians and in their possible identification with a space that would go beyond the national border. We chose to focus on young people because they have little or no experience with the existence of the Iron Curtain and are supposed to—due to language skills and the new legal context[4]—fully benefit from Slovakia's EU membership, including cross-border labour mobility. In particular, we became interested in those who regularly cross the national border to study or work in Austria and we consider only them to be part of this research (N=8 out of 32). We expected that they would be more likely (than the non-commuters) to endorse a sense of supranational identity. However, at the end of this phase we concluded that this does not seem to be the case. Moreover, the commuters also endorsed much more negative representations of Austrians than the non-commuters. In order to better understand and (in)validate these findings; we carried out further research focusing on commuters only (phase 2 – 2005, phase 3 – 2007). Our aim was to find other participants, different in many aspects, with as heterogeneous experiences of commuting as possible (together N=34).

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[3] Sources: http://www.tuwien.ac.at/dienstleister/pr_und_kommunikation/publishing_web_print/corporate_design/praesentation/; http://studieren.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/studentpoint/statistik/studstat1_2007S.pdf; www.wu.ac.at, opened on June 19th, 2007.

[4] The transition period limiting free circulation of labour from the countries that joined the EU in 2004 is due to end in May 2011.

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Participants

The commuters that participated in our research are described in more detail in Table 2 and in the text that follows.

Table 2: Number and type of commuters 2004-2007

Year	Type of commuters								Total
	Student commuters		Working commuters		Former commuters who settled down in Austria		Former commuters who settled down in Slovakia		
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
2004	2	4	1	0	1	0	0	0	8
2005	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
2007	6	9	0	4	1	0	1	0	21
Total	13	13	1	4	2	0	1	0	34

The first group of participants (see Table 2) consists of young adults (aged 19-26) from Bratislava and its surroundings, studying at Viennese universities and commuting on average three times a week by train (focus groups A, B, C, D, individual interviews P1-P6). This group can be further divided according to the time they started studying in Austria. First, there are those who have been studying in Austria since the age of 9-12 (starting at the elementary schools in Kittsee and Vienna or the International Secondary School in Vienna). Second, there are those who had studied in Bratislava at the Slovak-Austrian bilingual secondary school specializing in business or at the Slovak-Austrian bilingual general secondary school and came to Vienna at the age of 18-19, to study at the university.

The second group of participants (see Table 2) consists of working commuters. They are older than the students (32-47), the majority of them commute to Vienna on an everyday basis by train or by car, and are employed mainly in the IT field (individual interviews P7, P9, P10, P12, P13). The working commuters we interviewed are not former student commuters, they graduated in Slovakia and learned German at school.

The third type of participants interviewed for the sake of comparison consisted of former commuters—young Slovaks who either had previously studied in Austria and are now living there (individual interviews P8, P14) or who decided to stop commuting and live in Bratislava (individual interview P11).

Research instruments

Semi-structured qualitative interviews, focus groups and drawings of the border area were used as research instruments. The interview/focus group schedule focused mainly on the participants' motivations for studying in Austria, on the community/place they feel they belong to, as well as on their perceptions of and experiences with the Austrians. At the end of the interview,

the participants were asked to draw the space between their place of residence, Bratislava and Vienna and everything they consider important in this space. The aim of the drawings was to grasp meanings and images that would be difficult to verbalize. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and coded in Atlas-ti, using thematic coding (Flick 2002).

Analysis

The analysis focused on different ingroup constructions in the participants' accounts as well as on their representations of Austrians. We were interested in explicit as well as implicit identity claims—in the content of utterances as well as in the strategic use of thematizations, attributions and deixis (personal pronouns, adverbs of place). For instance, we considered positive emotional and cognitive connotations associated with certain concepts as indicators of identification with groups and places (Abell, Condor, Stephenson 2006).

What kind of identity?

As already mentioned, in the first phase of our research, the commuters proved to be a special group at least in two respects: (1) the way they perceived the national border between Slovakia and Austria, and (2) the way they perceived the Austrians and constructed their own identity in respect to this outgroup. As illustrated by Picture 1, they did not realize the existence of the state border any longer (although the passport controls disappeared only with Slovakia's entry to the Schengen zone in December 2007) and described the journeys to Vienna simply as travelling "*back and forth*" to another (bigger) city. On the other hand, as we will show below, the symbolic "mental" border still remains.

Supranational identity?

The social identity perspective (Tajfel, Turner 1986; Abrams, Hogg 2004) would predict that contact with foreigners is likely to trigger the use of a national level of categorization in Slovak commuters. On the other hand, it could also be expected that the experience of studying abroad as well as speaking foreign languages would make the use of a European realm of identification more meaningful (Boehnk, Fuss 2004).

The following participant studying in Vienna suggests that both these identification realms are indeed possible, but are used strategically and have different consequences for intergroup relations perception. His claim, that in everyday contact with the Austrians his sense of Slovak identity has been strengthened, goes in line with the social identity perspective. What seems striking at first, though, is the claim that his national pride is based on the fact that the Austrians consider Slovaks to be inferior. We suggest that this could be understood as an individual face saving strategy for achieving a positive social identity in the situation when one's ingroup—a minority—is perceived negatively by the majority. Yet this strategy in general only contributes to the strengthening of the boundaries between the ingroup (Slovaks) and the outgroup (Austrians).

Another strategy described by this participant, but devaluated by him and attributed only to his fellow students, is to adopt a supranational—European—realm of identification, which
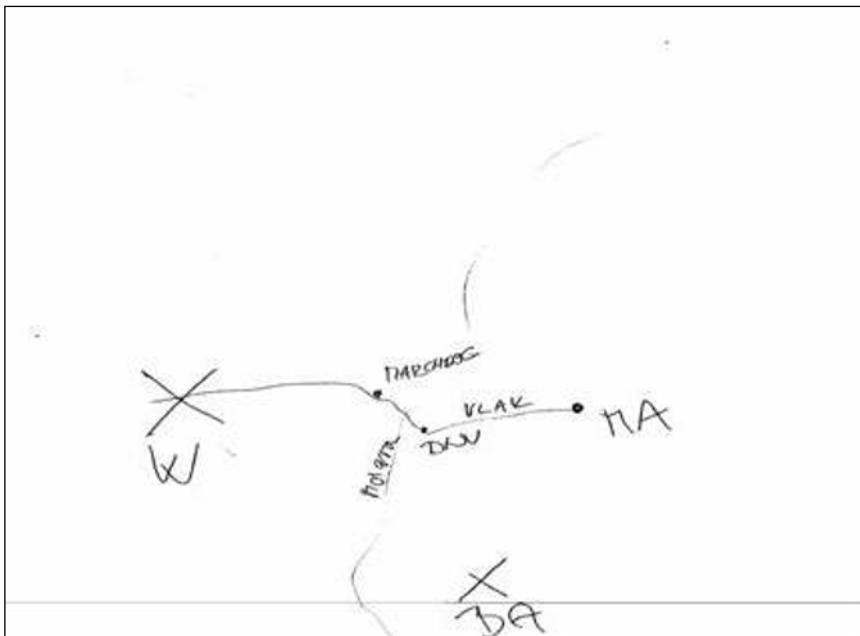
Picture 1: "There and back again". The border is symbolized only by the natural limit between Slovakia and Austria, the Morava river. The other important places are Vienna (W), Bratislava (BA), Malacky (MA) where this participant lives and Marchegg and Devinska Nova Ves (DNV) as the last Austrian and first Slovak train stops where the connectivity for mobile phones changes.

can provide a common ingroup and thus status equality between the Slovak students and their Austrian peers.

Extract 1: I feel this big pride; a kind of pride is growing in me.
P3: You know, it was exactly the opposite, the longer I am abroad, the more I am happy to be Slovak and the more I am proud of it. You know.
I: Yes?
P3: No, it is not for example like some fellow students, when you ask them, where they are from, or where they come from, they say: I am European, you know, to be Slovak means nothing to me. Exactly the opposite, the longer I am there and see how the Austrians view us and how they judge us, the more I am proud to be Slovak and I feel this big pride, a kind of pride is growing in me. (P3, male, aged 23, lines 356-363)

A community in between?

If the supranational identity claim does not seem to be relevant for our participants, what kind of other identification claims could we expect? As the commuters could be considered to be in the minority position both in Austria and in Slovakia (due to a relatively low number

of Slovaks working and studying in Austria), we might also presume that they see themselves as a community in between these nations. Indeed participants in focus groups A, B and C repeatedly claimed to see themselves as a distinctive group.

Extract 2: We would be lost among all these Austrians.
Mo1: You used the word subculture if I heard you correctly.
B4: Yes, well, if we did not have the Slovak group, we would be lost among all these Austrians.
Mo1: So you do see yourselves as a group?
B2: Surely. (B4, female, aged 19, B2, male, aged 24 and moderator 1, lines 405-411)

When asked directly what group they feel they belong to, the first answer is repeatedly "*the Viennese Slovaks*", "*the train community*", or "*our subculture*", all these labels referring to the group of commuters. Some participants even claim to feel different from Viennese in general, from the Austrian students, as well as from Slovak students in Bratislava. They mostly refer to Slovaks studying in Vienna as their ingroup. They know many other members of this group and interact with them in the train, at the university and sometimes also in Slovakia, in their leisure time. They also have an internet forum (www.vovlaku.sk—meaning "inthetrain" in Slovak), where they exchange information about exams as well as (rather rare) events such as snowboarding weekends or parties.

For those participants who have studied in Austria since elementary school, commuting represents an important part of their lives because they began there at an early age. Thus their narrative about commuting is very much linked to their life narrative. The commuters are repeatedly described as a "family", as a community sharing certain roles and rituals. The following participant describes this story in terms of a golden age that is nowadays over.

Extract 3: Going for a roundtrip
A4: There were only four trains a day. We called it going for a roundtrip. I took the train at six in the morning. We had our own compartment; it was the same thing every morning. We met there as a family meets in the living room. So, we left Bratislava Central Station at six in the morning, we went to Vienna where we did not get off, we went back to Bratislava, then to Vienna again and finally back to Bratislava while our parents thought we were in school. And we had really terrible rules. When someone had to prepare for a test or something, we were arguing whether the light should be switched on or off when it was still dark in the morning. It was an unwritten law that we couldn't study between Bratislava and Devínska [the last train station on the Slovak side of the border], *that it was Holy Ground. (...) And then K.* [a peer student] *got on the train and did the maths and French homework for all of us. It was really great…* (A4, female, aged 23, lines 481-501)

The idealized narrative is not about life in Austria in general, it concerns only the life shared with Slovak peers. Conversely, the frames the participants in this focus group used to speak about Austria and Austrians were usually rather negative. They spoke almost exclusively about the costs (commuting takes a lot of time, they have to get up very early to catch the train, etc.) and not about the benefits of studying in Vienna. Moreover, since there

are now many trains and buses to Vienna, and the former trainmates have different university schedules, they do not meet every day in the same carriage compartment. They travel back to Bratislava as soon as classes are over and usually do not spend any leisure time in Vienna ("*And I whiz back to Bratislava*" - A3, female, aged 23, line 580).

In spite of the reported costs, the commuters we interviewed chose to stay in Austrian schools. A reason for staying mentioned by several participants was that it was easier to stay than to come back to Slovakia, as they did not need to pass entry exams for secondary school and university in Austria, but would have to do so in Slovakia.

Although the subculture/community identity claims came easily as the first and immediate answer, they were not particularly strong and when further probed, the participants did not really insist on this kind of identification. For example, at some points there was no clear cut consensus about the very definition of the commuters' community.

Extract 4: I do not know what exactly characterizes a community, but maybe yes, we are one.

Mo1: O.K. so everybody agrees that you are… that you could be labelled a community? Because the two of you have just agreed...

C5: (interrupting) ...and what is the definition of a community?

Mo1: Well, whether you do feel like a group?

C (unidentified participant): No.

C5: Well, based on the fact that we meet also outside university, for example at these parties, and we have the internet forum through which we communicate, maybe yes, we do, even if I do not know what exactly characterizes a community, but maybe yes, we are one. (C5, male, aged 23, an unidentified participant and moderator 1, lines 431-438)

In spite of claiming that he does not exactly understand the concept suggested, the participant in extract 4 does not oppose the earlier partial group consensus and finally agrees, even if his agreement is weakened by the use of the adverb *maybe*. No other participant interferes at this point to further explain what a community is. The only argument for its existence was the difference to "*all these Austrians*" (extract 2). The only definition that is agreed on in both the first and second focus groups is that the discussion forum www.vovlaku.sk forms the core of this community/subculture and the commuters know more people from the train than from among their "*official schoolmates*" at the university.

The group holding together the strongest also during their leisure time consists of former classmates from the bilingual Slovak-Austrian secondary school in Bratislava who currently study at the University of Economics in Vienna. We can thus say that the relationships created at an earlier age are stronger than those created later at the university.

Extract 5: The University of Economics is this very hard core

C4: I have the impression that the University of Economics is this very hard core and the rest, law students, medical students and the Technical University students are like tentacles, we know each other more from earlier, from the secondary school. (C4, female, aged 23, lines 373-374)

Usually, when the participants were explicitly asked about social contacts with non-commuters, it came out that they had spent a lot of time with their non-commuting peers. We suggest that the train community/subculture/family identity claims seem to be a compensation for the downsides of studying in Austria because they offer a positive realm of identification to the commuters. Yet this "community" is rather functional, as it mainly serves to liven up the time lost during commuting.

Two separate worlds?

In contrast to the claims about living in between the cities expressed in interviews and in focus groups, the drawings of the area between Bratislava and Vienna offer a different picture. The participants draw theses cities as two very distinctive places, as two separated
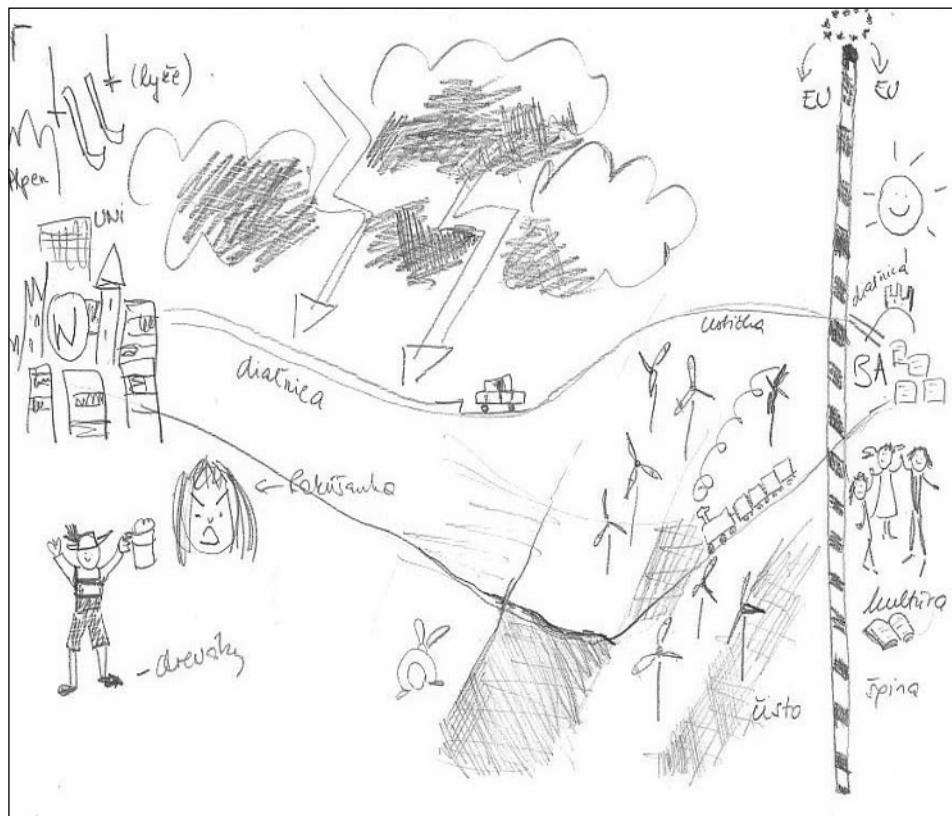
Picture 2: "Even the weather is better in Slovakia". This picture is quite untypical, because it concentrates mainly on the Austrian side of the border. Still the description it gives is mainly negative: rural Austrian males, unattractive Austrian females and bad weather. The only positive points are cleanliness and the Alps for skiing. In contrast, Slovakia features friends, culture and good weather, even if also dirtiness.

worlds, both in social and in spatial terms. While Bratislava is represented as a warm place for "emotional use" where there are friends, family, home, hobbies and fun in general; Vienna is represented as a cold place for "pragmatic use" where there is just the university, perhaps a job and some good shops, but no positively framed people at all. If any people figure in the pictures, these are Austrians, referred to negatively. The train journeys are described as a necessary evil, which must be endured in order to be able to benefit from both places (see Picture 2).

Extract 6: Here are the studies and duties, a sad face…

B3: Now when I look at what I drew, I have mixed feelings.
Mo2: And why?
B3: It's really polarized. Here [Vienna] *are the studies and duties, a sad face, everything good is here* [Bratislava] *and it is connected, it looks like, only by the train.*
Mo1: And does it only look like that?
B3: Perhaps it is really like that and this is the strange thing about it. I never… I never realized it was like this. Only now, when I am looking at it [his drawing]. (B3, male, aged 23 and both moderators, lines 1407-1414)

In fact, when asked about the effect of commuting on the self-percieved belonging of the participants, they repeatedly framed this question as a binary choice between Slovaks and Austrians or Slovakia and Austria. There were also clear and strong claims of not being in the middle, but being a Slovak and being committed to Slovakia, liking the life there, etc. Almost everybody answered the question of where he/she feels at home, clearly naming Slovakia because he/she is a Slovak. At this point a rich narrative usually followed, illustrated with stories about how Austrians are different from Slovaks, almost always explaining these differences in favour of the Slovak ingroup.

Extract 7: …you mean, whether I feel Austrian or Slovak?

Mo1: And now I will ask you more, because you touched on it already, you live here and study in Vienna and travel back and forth, so where do you belong, or how do you perceive it?
B1: To the train [several participants are laughing]. *I think* [longer pause] *you don't think about it so much, you start at the elementary school five metres from your house, then go to the secondary school which is at the other end of Bratislava, it takes you an hour to get there and when we travelled like this to Vienna, at the beginning it bothered us, but today I do not think about it (…) and I am still at home here, in Bratislava.*
B5: I would, you mean, whether I feel Austrian or Slovak or?
Mo1: For example.
Mo2: But not only. It could be whether you feel at home more in Bratislava, imagine, or in Vienna.
B5: Sure, I feel Slovak, sure, even when not in Bratislava. In Vienna, there's just the station and I run away as fast as I can. To the underground, to the university and from the university and away quickly [chuckling].
B1: I think we take Vienna rather for, hm, like, hm. For us it's something professional, functional. (B1, male, aged 24, B5, aged 20, and the moderator, lines 653-669)

As for the working commuters, they also construct a clear separation between the purposes that Vienna and their place of residence (Bratislava or surroundings) fulfil in their lives. They do not report any changes in their identifications with places and social groups, resulting from their long-term experience with Austria.

Contrary to the commuting students, they do not refer to themselves as members of a "*subculture*" or a "*community*". They claim to work or watch a film on their laptop while travelling by train, instead of interacting with other commuting Slovaks. The student commuters are a clear outgroup for them, probably mainly because of the age difference—they refer to them as to "*the young ones*".

The working commuters repeatedly refer to their family at home as their only ingroup. Only one of them considered moving the whole family to Austria (here the general consensus of according a high value to living in Slovakia could again be seen, the only reasons for possible emigration given were political), but they finally decided not to do it because of the perceived threat the new life would mean for the compactness of the family. It is worth noting that this participant explains being-an-Austrian solely in enculturation and socialization terms, and (unlike some student commuters) not in terms of mentality or essence.

Extract 8: Our children would become Austrians
I: And where are you then [at home]*?*
P13: Back then, I was flirting with the idea of putting down roots there [in Vienna] *because here with* [former Prime Minister] *Mečiar it was uncertain, wild and I don't know what.* [short pause] *And we always knew it would be a final decision, and that our children would become then* [short pause] *they would be* [short pause] *they would become Austrians and we* [the parents] *are not Austrians, yes, and perhaps it would* [short pause] *then there would be a bigger distance between us and the children, just a kind of alienation or something like that.* (P13, male, aged 47 and interviewer, lines 457-464)

Of all the participants, only two—the male working commuter cited below in extract 21 (working in Austria since 1990) and a female resident interviewed for the sake of comparison—were ready to identify at least partly with Slovaks as well as with Austrians. The working commuter explains this in terms of his understanding of the Austrian mentality (which makes him a little similar to them) and, interestingly, he attributes this understanding to the fact that he had been watching Austrian TV for years, and not to his long-term personal experience. The female resident, who decided, after finishing her studies in Vienna, to move to Austria and live there with her Slovak husband and their child, also explains in length that she learned to understand Austrians (their special German language as well as their mentality) and now feels at ease communicating with them.

Extract 9: There is no problem
P8: Well, and there is no, there is no problem, because I have been living there for so long, and because I started learning German so early, I was in contact with it, because I am fluent and we had it as children already, I have no problem with the culture, with understanding jokes and such things…
I: Mm.
P8: … with perceiving myself as strongly different. (P8, female, aged 29, lines 601-606)

Representations of Austrians

Intergroup settings

As shown in the first phase of our research, unlike the non-commuters, the commuters mainly perceived Austrians negatively. Some even reported that these negative representations were transmitted as peer stories from "*older generations*" of commuters (Spannring et al., 2005; Lášticová, Petrjánošová, Bianchi 2007). Even if some commuters speak about the importance of contact with Austrians in fighting prejudice, they do not mention the fact that they themselves did not develop more positive attitudes despite being in regular contact with them; they describe their interactions in school as insufficient. They often do not know the city of Vienna either, as they take the first train home once classes are over.

Speaking negatively about Austrians seems to be a solid consensual terrain on which a long discussion can be developed. In fact, the topic of what Austrians are like was spontaneously opened by one of the participants only a couple of minutes after the beginning of the focus group A, using rough wording such as "*I hate these Austrians*" (A1, female, aged 24). Other participants quickly adopted this topic and elaborated on it in length. If someone did not conform to this general representation (being described as kind, or even as a friend); s/he was claimed to be not a typical Austrian, but an exception to the rule.

While in some focus groups (A and B, formed mainly by the students from the Vienna University of Economy and Business) the explanations for bad relationships with Austrians were consequently attributed to their negative personal characteristics; in other groups (C and D) similar experiences were (in a conspicuously politically correct way) explained by situational circumstances. Our participants offered at least four categories of reasons for persistence of strict intergroup boundaries. We labelled them *structural, social, psychological*, and *motivational factors on the commuters' side* and they will be described in the text that follows.

Structural reasons for intergroup boundaries concerned mainly the economic inequality of Austrians and Slovaks that was still pronounced in the 1990s and both sides were aware of it. This inequality was perceived negatively in some cases—"*the poorest of them is a rich man in comparison to us*" (focus group A), and positively in others—"*we had nothing, so we learned to improvise, to be creative; they are the opposite of creativity*" (focus group A). In fact the Slovaks and the Austrians wore different clothes and the Slovaks ate different food from the Austrians in the school canteen (brought in from Slovakia as it was less expensive). On the other hand, the Slovak pupils in Kittsee were from a big city, while their Austrian classmates were perceived as peasants, some parents even explicitly telling their children that the village people are "*dumb*" (focus group A).

Social reasons for intergroup boundaries include an intergroup and not an interindividual setting—the *a priori* division into two groups that "forced" our participants to interact with Slovaks and to ignore the Austrians. The social identification can be expressed also in the use of personal and possessive pronouns and adverbs. *They/them* systematically refer to the Austrians and *we/us* refer to the Slovaks.

Extract 10: Nobody understood us there; we did not understand them…
A3: Well, I think the relationships were quite influenced by, in Kittsee, in my case; they were influenced by the fact that since the very beginning my friends were Slovak. It was really

divided like that, in my opinion, and it was not possible to approach the Austrians somehow. There were two communities there. They didn't really accept us in Austria. I mean in Kittsee. They perceived us like, that there are too many Slovaks there and nobody understood us there, we did not understand them, so they closed themselves off, we closed ourselves off. (A3, female, aged 23, lines 319-321)

When speaking about the *psychological reasons* for intergroup boundaries, the participants usually evoked an interesting mixture of *nature* and *culture* related arguments when explaining why it is impossible to come together with their Austrian peers. For example, they maintained that the Austrians are of a completely different and incompatible mentality, nature, and upbringing. Essential "innate" qualities and qualities acquired in the process of socialisation and enculturation were put together in the participants' accounts (e.g. "*In general I think they have no natural prerequisites for establishing social contact*" A4, female, 23, lines 778-779). Understanding the Austrian mentality was introduced as a crucial aspect for feeling at home in Austria, for willingness to spend more time there or even to move there.

Unlike in the narratives of those commuters who had started their Austrian experience in their early teens at the Kittsee elementary school, different and rather tolerant explanations about the situational reasons for bad or nonexistent relationships with Austrians were offered by some participants in other focus groups, often mentioning *motivational factors on the commuters' side* and a lack of motivation to integrate. First, they suggested that the Slovaks would also act unfriendly if a lot of foreigners came to their country and started studying at Slovak universities. Second, they argued that also the Slovaks have friends from secondary school and do not try too hard to make new friends at the university. Third, it was repeatedly pointed out that the University of Economics (where the majority of participants study) is too big and anonymous, which hinders the formation of closer interpersonal relationships in general. Another explanation was simply a lack of trying on both sides.

Interindividual settings

Two young women (aged 19 and 20) participated in the focus groups B and C, whom we can consider a special case among the student commuters. They went to the university after having completed the International European Secondary School in Vienna. At this school they had studied together with Austrians, Czechs and Hungarians since the age of 10-11. Unlike the participants from the Kittsee elementary school, these young women did not describe the situation at the International School as the co-existence of two (or more) clearly delimited groups based on nationality, but rather as a mix of nations and nationalities. Such a situation is more likely to promote a considerably better experience with Austria and a better perception of Austrians. One of these young women (author of Picture 3) currently studies at the University of Economics and Business and could be supposed to have the same negative opinions about the Austrians as the other members of the economy students group. But it seems that her previous experience from the International Secondary School acquired earlier is more important than the current one.

Similarly, the following participant used to interact more with Slovaks who studied the same subjects she did. Later she chose a new subject where there were no Slovak students
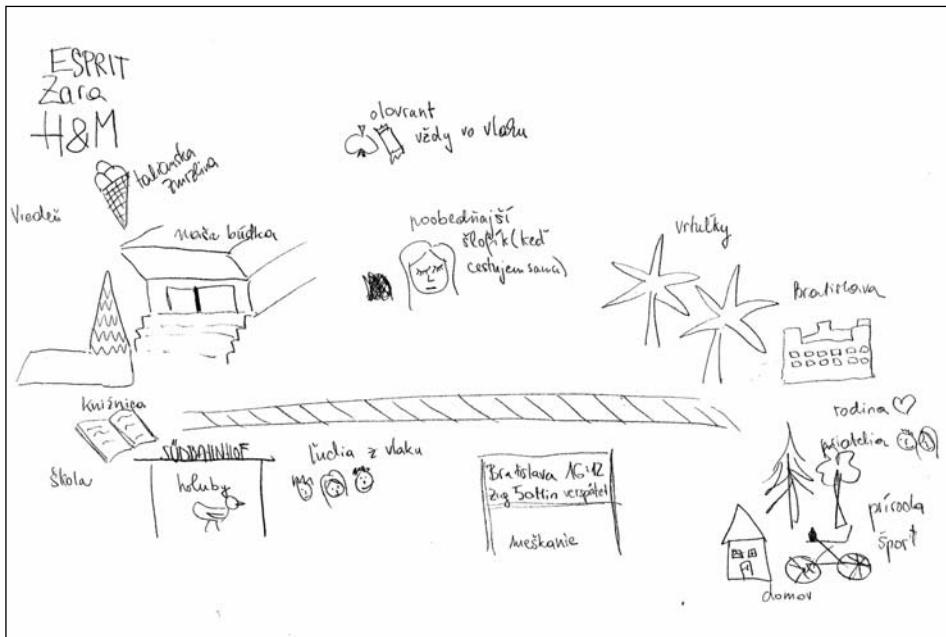
Picture 3: My world: Home, friends and family are on the Bratislava side, as well as nature and sports, but the Vienna side seems to be important and positively framed as well—there is the university and its library, the studying, Italian ice cream and some shops she likes.

and started to interact with the Austrians only. However, she explicitly mentions that this strategy was a matter of deliberate choice. She also realizes that it is a strategy chosen only by a minority of Slovak commuters.

Extract 11: In general I rather tried to avoid other Slovaks
P8: … those people I was friends with also at the secondary school, I hung out with them also in Vienna, but in general, and that is a paradox, I really rather tried to avoid other Slovaks... I am more that kind of person, who tries to integrate, to lean towards the natives... not only towards one's own people, because it only results in creating a closed group. (P8, woman, aged 30, r. 127-137)

She is currently about to buy a house in the Austrian countryside, as the real estate prices are lower than in Bratislava and the surrounding area. She will live there with her Slovak husband who will commute to work in Bratislava. She plans on raising their child bilingually and after maternity leave she will be looking for a job in Austria.

As far as the working commuters are concerned, their representations of Austrians are not as bad as in the majority of students. It seems that while the students are trying to make friends and are unhappy if it does not work (as suggested by one working commuter),

the working commuters do not expect to form closer interpersonal relationships in the professional environment. They use, for example, the term "*normal relationships among colleagues*", meaning appropriate contact during working hours and almost no interaction during leisure time.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to investigate the relations between cross-border mobility, national categorization and intergroup relations in the context of the changing political map of Europe. It focused on Slovak commuters studying or working in Vienna and addressed the questions about their belonging to places, their ingroup(s) construction and their representations of Austrians. Our empirical material suggests that the cross-border mobility experience as such is insufficient for the emergence of a supranational identity or for erasing the "mental" borders between the nations.

As every discourse about (national) identification implies the use of linguistic construction of (international) intergroup differences (Wodak et al. 2009), it is not surprising that our participants extensively use the distinction between the two most salient national groups. However, whilst national identity may be relevant for self-definition in some contexts, in different contexts other identities could be more relevant, such as age or profession, as shown also by the accounts of our working commuters.

We suggest that the different types of experience with Austria and Austrians as identified in various subgroups of participants at least partially explain different ingroup identifications and representations of Austrians in the participants' accounts. First, different experiences and interaction settings can have as a consequence different constructions of in- and out-groups. Secondly, the type of experience the participants chose to report is interconnected in a complex way with the identities they strategically decided to claim and the outgroup descriptions they decided to evoke. These decisions are part of the meaning-making work done by the participants at the time of re-constructing their experience in the research setting, either in a dialogue with the researcher or in a collective co-construction in a focus group. In this process the participants are constructing their narratives following the norms of internal logic, plausibility and non-contradiction.

Thus the different types of experiences are framed by (1) age at the time of arrival in Austria (developmental aspects concerning life span phase such as having an established circle of friends, a long-term romantic relationship, children); (2) different mobility motivations and goals (for example integration vs. pragmatism); (3) interaction setting (interpersonal vs. intergroup, where the ingroup is a minority and the outgroup is a majority); (4) the political and economic situation in Slovakia at the time of arrival to Austria linked to perceived status differences.

On the individual level, the motivation to integrate or its lack seems to be a crucial element in the ingroup construction and perception of intergroup relations. The predominant strategy is separation (Berry 2001), which results in limited contact with Austrians. This strategy is accompanied by negative representations of Austrians, perception of the language barrier, negative framing of the experience of studying in Austria and unwillingness to participate in public life there.

The qualitative interviews and focus groups allowed us to explore several different kinds of experience that are multileveled and often contradictory. In fact, the meaning ascribed to the same experience or theme can vary according to strategic considerations of participants, depending also on interaction in a particular research setting. For example, in a focus group, individual utterances cannot be understood as isolated events, because the group situation encourages the participants to work on a common project, to negotiate the meanings (Wodak et al. 2009, op. cit.) and co-construct a common story. This could result in a group pressure effect that distorts or inhibits statements not in accordance with the (explicitly expressed or presupposed) majority opinion.

To conclude, we can say that the changing political situation in Europe since the fall of the Iron Curtain has been influencing not only the representations of others and of one's national ingroup, but also the possibility for action of individuals and groups. Although the state border between Slovakia and Austria was abolished after Slovakia's EU accession, the "mental" border still exists. Even if border crossing is more frequent than in the past, the border region is used asymmetrically, pragmatically and less than its potential would allow. The commuters benefit from both countries, but are not willing to enlarge the space where they would participate in social, public and political life to both sides of the border.[5]

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