



ANNALES SCIENTIA POLITICA

VOLUME 14, NUMBER 2, 2025

ANNALES SCIENTIA POLITICA

Vol. 14, No. 2, 2025

IŽÁK, Š.: The impact of emigration on the ethnicity of Slovaks in Transcarpathia. *Annales Scientia Politica*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2025), pp. 32–44.

ŠTEFAN IŽÁK

Department of Ethnology and Non-European Studies
Faculty of Arts
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
Slovak Republic
E-mail: stefan.izak@ucm.sk

Abstract:

The paper's aim is to analyse the impact of emigration abroad on the ethnicity of Slovaks in Transcarpathia. To address the research aim, field research was conducted in the Slovak-Ukrainian localities of Transcarpathia in 2024 and 2025. The research is theoretically anchored in the situational approach to ethnicity. The findings indicate that emigration posed a significant challenge for Slovaks even prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the conflict has exacerbated this trend. Emigration results in a notable decline in the Slovak population in Transcarpathia, thereby reinforcing assimilation into the Ukrainian majority.

Keywords:

Emigration, ethnicity, Slovakia, Slovaks, Transcarpathia, Ukraine.

THE IMPACT OF EMIGRATION ON THE ETHNICITY OF SLOVAKS IN TRANSCARPATHIA

ŠTEFAN IŽÁK

Department of Ethnology and Non-European Studies
Faculty of Arts
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
Slovak Republic
E-mail: stefan.izak@ucm.sk

Abstract:

The paper's aim is to analyse the impact of emigration abroad on the ethnicity of Slovaks in Transcarpathia. To address the research aim, field research was conducted in the Slovak-Ukrainian localities of Transcarpathia in 2024 and 2025. The research is theoretically anchored in the situational approach to ethnicity. The findings indicate that emigration posed a significant challenge for Slovaks even prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the conflict has exacerbated this trend. Emigration results in a notable decline in the Slovak population in Transcarpathia, thereby reinforcing assimilation into the Ukrainian majority.

Keywords:

Emigration, ethnicity, Slovakia, Slovaks, Transcarpathia, Ukraine.

Introduction

Transcarpathia is Ukraine's westernmost region, bordering the European Union's (EU) members – Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. The region thus has multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious character consisting of Ukrainians, Rusyns, Hungarians, Romanians, Russians, Roma, Germans, Jews, and Slovaks, etc. According to the last Ukrai-

ne's census in 2001, 5,695 people in Transcarpathia (0,45 % of the entire Transcarpathian population) declared themselves as Slovaks (Tyvodar, 2010, p. 54). Slovaks are localized in the west of the region. Stats of the 2001 census show that 75 % of them live in settlements of the Uzhhorod rayon which borders with Slovakia. It is difficult to anticipate the number of Slovaks today, because of ongoing emigration, assimilation, and revitalization processes, but according to our findings during the field research, the number is lower than in 2001. We found out that emigration abroad is one of the main factors that causes the decline of Slovaks in Transcarpathia. Emigration is interconnected with assimilation and efforts of preservation of the Slovak ethnicity. Emigration from Transcarpathia and its impact on the Slovaks remaining in the region was not the target of scientific research yet. Urgency of the research of the topic is multiplied by the Russian invasion of Ukraine which is crucial factor stepping into the migration and ethnicity of Slovaks.

Methodology

The paper's primary aim is to analyse impact of emigration on the ethnicity of Slovaks in Transcarpathia. To achieve this objective, we conducted field research in Transcarpathia from 11 March to 11 June 2024, which we supplemented with brief investigations in July,

August, October 2024, and another research from 5 to 30 May 2025. Field research aims to get data through unmediated, personal contact with the studied community (Soukup, 2014, p. 60). The primary research technique for data collection was unstructured and semi-structured individual and group interviews with individuals from the Slovak-Ukrainian localities using a pre-prepared questionnaire. In total, we interviewed 111 individuals, of whom 48 were Slovaks, 39 Ukrainians, and 24 people of Slovak origin who declared Ukrainian or mixed ethnicity. Of the individuals who identified themselves as Slovaks, 42 were Roman Catholics (5 were undetermined and 1 Orthodox). Including people of Slovak origin, 51 out of 72 such respondents were Roman Catholics. The interviews were conducted in literary and dialect forms of Slovak and Ukrainian.

In the empirical part of the paper, we do not incorporate quotations from every respondent; instead, we selectively utilize quotations from certain respondents that most effectively exemplify the research findings. Information about respondents is in the Appendix No 1. Since the topic of emigration, ethnicity and war could be sensitive, we anonymize respondents (for their protection) and present only their sex, year of birth, locality, ethnicity and language of the interview. Respondents were informed of the aims of our research and if they verbally agreed, we recorded the interviews on the phone. Because of our (researcher's) Slovak ethnicity and cultural background, we are aware of possible research or confirmation bias towards the Slovak minority in Transcarpathia. All possible effort to minimize our bias and subjectivity was done during the implementation and interpretation of the research.

In addition to the interview, the participant observation technique was applied at several cultural and religious events. We visited the cities of Uzhhorod, Mukachevo, Perechyn, and the villages of Velykyi Bereznyi, Turia Remeta, Huta, Onokivtsi, Storozhnytsia, Hlyboke, Serednie, Antalovtsi, Rodnykova Huta, Kolchyno, Klenovets, Dovhe, and Lysychovo. We also visited the Centre of Slovak Culture in the 4th Lyceum in Uzhhorod. The only school in Transcarpathia where Slovak is the teaching language. As a subject or voluntary course is taught in schools in Antalovtsi, Dovhe, Pere-

chyn, Mukachevo, Storozhnytsia, Turia Remeta, and Uzhhorod.

The active Slovak associations are based in Uzhhorod – Matica Slovenska in Ukraine, Uzhhorod Association of Slovaks, and The Transcarpathian Cultural and Educational Association of the Slovak Women “Dôvera”. Folklore ensembles with Slovak dance or singing repertoire are Liptaki (Velykyi Bereznyi), Turianska Dolyna and Paradnitse (Turia Remeta), Hutianochka (Huta), Arnika, Nasha Fayta, and Betiari (Storozhnytsia), Kamaratky and Antalovchanochka (Antalovtsi), Hutnitski Vechirky (Rodnykova Huta), and The Honoured Academic Transcarpathian Folk Choir in Uzhhorod performs folk songs and dances of all Transcarpathian ethnic minorities including Slovak one. Facebook page Slovaks of Ukraine informs about the activities within the minority.

Ethnicity and Slovaks abroad

Ethnicity constitutes a fundamental concept within the humanities and social sciences. Multiple theories and approaches offer divergent perspectives on this concept. This study adopts the situationalist approach, initially conceptualized by Fredrik Barth in the 1960s, as articulated in his introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference* (1969). Barth posits that ethnic groups are not static entities with inherent characteristics. Instead, he contends that ethnic groups and their boundaries emerge through mutual interactions and relationships. According to Barth, an ethnic group exists when individuals self-ascribe a particular ethnicity and when social environment similarly recognizes and perceives them as such. Both self-identification and external identification are pivotal in the formation of ethnicity (Barth, 1969, p. 13-14). Accepting this premise necessitates the inquiry: under what circumstances do individuals ascribe ethnicity to themselves and others, and act upon it? This leads to the conclusion that ethnicity is a situational status. The characteristics emphasized in social interactions are not predetermined, nor is the relevance of ethnicity in every situation. Ethnicity may hold significance across all social contexts, in select spheres, or not at all.

In the 1980s, Jonathan Y. Okamura introduced the concept of *situational ethnicity*, highlighting the considerable variability in ethnic declaration, contingent upon the prevailing social context and the individual's interpretation and perception of the situation. In certain contexts, ethnicity may be a pertinent factor influencing interaction, while in others, it may not. *Situational ethnicity* encompasses both cognitive and structural dimensions. The cognitive aspect pertains to the subjective interpretation of the situation and the subsequent ascription of ethnicity to oneself or others. However, this ascription is not entirely free choice, as it occurs within a specific social context, constituting the structural aspect, which is characterized by various constraints imposed on individuals, stemming from the societal structure of relations (Okamura, 1981, p. 454-456). Joana Nagel also discusses the situational, voluntary, and dynamic characteristics of ethnicity. She posits that ethnic boundaries, identities, and cultures are continuously negotiated and constructed through social interactions both within and beyond the ethnic group. Nagel further conceptualizes ethnicity as a product of both internal and external identification, wherein people select from a range of ethnicities defined by socially and politically constructed categories, which may confer various advantages or disadvantages (Nagel, 1994, p. 153).

We find the situationalist approach to ethnicity particularly advantageous for examining the Slovak minority in Transcarpathia. Throughout the 20th century, this region experienced shifts across several political systems, each with distinct policies regarding ethnic minorities, including Slovaks. These systems ranged from Magyarization (until 1914 and during 1939-1944), to the status of a state-forming nation during the Czechoslovakian period (1919-1939), to assimilation policies in the Soviet Union (1945-1991), and finally to the recognition of the Slovak minority and the guarantee of its minority rights in independent Ukraine post-1991. During these periods, identifying with the Slovak ethnicity could present advantages, disadvantages, or be of little relevance. Therefore, manifestation of the Slovak ethnicity depended on current situation. As noted by Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2019, p. 28), it is not feasible to homogenize ethnic groups, as not all members necessarily share all characteristics

deemed typical of a given group. Slovaks of Transcarpathia is not a homogeneous group; rather, they exhibit diverse manifestations. These range from a tepid attitude towards ethnicity, characterized by a lack of ethnic expressions beyond personal self-identification with Slovak ethnicity to active community members who endeavour to preserve and promote their ethnicity and its selected manifestations.

Ethnicity can be selectively activated or mobilized. Eriksen (2012, p. 117) posits that a group may activate ethnicity through internal activities (directed inside the group) related to shared language, religion, and the notion of common origin, as well as through external activities toward other groups such as competition, stereotypes, hostility, and boundary symbols. Boris Michalík (2012, p. 95-101) further elaborates on the activation of ethnicity within the ethnic minority's environments, identifying six key factors: family environment, mother tongue learning, associational life, commercialization of traditional culture, support from the mother country, and individual personal interest. These factors contribute to the stimulation of ethnicity, which is inherently based on differences from other ethnic groups. Ladislav Lenovský (2017, p. 247) asserts that elements of ethnicity that most distinctly represent differences from others are emphasized, particularly linguistic and cultural identity among Slovaks abroad. For Lenovský, the relations between language, culture, and identity forms the foundational pillar of the minority identity, which must remain robust to prevent assimilation due to external or internal pressures. National cultural institutions, such as schools, churches, and associations, play a crucial role in preserving ethnicity by conducting educational and social activities. According to Ján Botík (2011, p. 17-18), these institutions are vital as they symbolize the spiritual and cultural identity of Slovaks abroad, thereby reinforcing their sense of belonging.

Research on Slovaks in Transcarpathia, although before 2014, concurs that language, culture, and religion (Roman Catholicism, which distinguishes them from the Greek Catholic and Orthodox majority) are perceived as key attributes of their ethnicity (Boleráčzová, 2006, p. 84; Kokaisl – Štolfová – Zychová – Hanuš, 2014, p. 70). Based on our research, we

would also include self-identification with ethnicity, identification by others, and awareness of one's origin as essential attributes. The population of people in Transcarpathia identifying as Slovak has been experiencing a prolonged decline, despite concerted efforts by some members of the minority to counteract this trend. Mojmír Benža, who conducted ethnographic research among Slovaks in Transcarpathia during the late 1990s alongside other collaborators, asserts that Slovak ethnic consciousness was predominantly present among the middle-aged and older generations at that time, and it was closely associated with religious identity (Benža, 1998, p. 60). Post-1991, assimilation trends among Slovaks, which were established during the Soviet Union (USSR) era, persisted.¹ However, the 1990s witnessed a "renaissance" of ethnicity, akin to other post-socialist nations, where ethnicity emerged as a significant factor influencing social interactions. Following the USSR period, during which state policies sought to diminish the relevance of ethnicity, the 1990s saw a segment of Slovaks expressing increased interest in their heritage and articulating their ethnic interests (Makara, 1999, p. 69-70). Two contrasting trends are present among Slovaks in Transcarpathia: the assimilation and weakening of ethnicity, and conversely, the revitalization and efforts to preserve ethnicity and its perceived attributes. Our research findings suggest that assimilation is significantly exacerbated by the emigration of primarily young and middle-aged individuals abroad, particularly to Slovakia. Other scholars, such as Molnar and Molnar (2010, p. 490), also attribute the decline in the Slovak population in Transcarpathia to factors such as migration, assimilation, and low birth rates.

Since the dissolution of the USSR and the establishment of independent Ukraine in 1991 its citizens have begun to migrate abroad. Unlike Ukrainians, for instance, Slovaks from Transcarpathia benefit from simplified entry into Slovakia if they possess a certificate (status) of a Slovak living abroad. Data from the Office for Slovaks Living Abroad (ÚSZZ) between 2012 and 2025 indicate that hundreds of applications for such certificates are submitted

from Ukraine annually, making it the second-highest country in terms of applications after Serbia (ÚSZZ, 2025). However, this does not imply that all individuals with a Slovak certificate have emigrated to Slovakia, nor that only those with this status migrate. Prior to the full-scale war in 2022, migration abroad was primarily economic, driven by work and study opportunities. Many people were migrating seasonally and were regularly returning to Transcarpathia. Post-2022, many individuals also migrated for security reasons, while economic migration persists.

Research results

The ethnicity and the activities of Slovaks

Unlike in the USSR, after 1991 Slovaks have had the opportunity to express their ethnicity in domains previously prohibited or significantly restricted by the state, such as education, associations, churches, and the media. Concurrently, previously unavailable opportunities for migration abroad emerged, which Slovaks began to utilize. According to respondents, Slovaks have had unrestricted options since 1991 to develop. Respondent No. 1 generally described it: "There are no obstacles, since the 90s, yes, since the times of Ukraine it has changed a lot, for the better, of course. We see it in television, we also have a school, it can be taught [the Slovak language: author's note], there are also associations. Even the Slovak philology at the university, they can go study the Slovak language. National minorities have received more rights, yes, because those events, that is normal, it can be organized normally, to participate in those folklore festivals."

The respondent primarily emphasized the benefits for the minority in terms of education, media, and association activities, also mentioning the Department of Slovak Philology at Uzhhorod National University, although the Slovak language was taught at the University since 1950s. For the preservation and development of the ethnic minority is democratic environment with guaranteed rights crucial, yet it is even more important that the minority actively utilizes these opportunities. The impetus must originate within the minority itself, as Šatava (2009, p. 49) notes, even the most democratic environment does not automatically

¹ About the Soviet ethnic policies, see, e.g.: Brubaker (1996), Kahanov (2019), or Lavrynenko (2019).

prevent the assimilation of an ethnic group if the group itself does not wish to utilize its opportunities. Slovaks continue to avail themselves of these opportunities today, yet they remain unable to fully prevent assimilation.

Associations have played a significant role in maintaining and shaping ethnicity, emerging almost immediately after the establishment of independent Ukraine. The folklore ensemble Liptaki was founded in 1991 and had its first performance in 1992, while the Matica Slovenská in Ukraine was established in 1993; both remain active today. Respondent No. 2 perceives the significance of associations primarily in the dissemination of the Slovak language and culture: "Thanks to the creation of Ukraine, we were able to establish our associations and promote our culture here, and as a result, we still speak some Slovak now, and the situation has changed." This respondent also underscores the change in the political system and the emergence of Ukraine, which enabled Slovaks to exercise the minority rights guaranteed by the newly formed state. According to respondent No. 3, the opportunities acquired had a positive impact on Slovaks, who were able to use them and cultivate a positive self-image: "All this had a positive impact on the development of Slovak culture and Slovak art. It was such an advertisement."

After 1991, the Slovak language classes were introduced in certain localities, and a school offering instruction in Slovak was established in Uzhhorod. On one hand, this initiative helps in preserving the language as a significant attribute of their ethnicity; on the other hand, it facilitates emigration to Slovakia for education, as children proficient in Slovak can more readily gain admission to Slovak secondary schools and universities. Despite the ambivalent consequences, respondents viewed the introduction of the Slovak language instruction in schools as a positive influence on ethnicity. Among Slovaks, language is perceived as a crucial ethno-identifying element, although it is not an unequivocal indicator of ethnicity. Respondent No. 1 recalls the inception of the Slovak language instruction in Turia Remeta: "Well, Slovak started to be taught at school, but as a course, three hours, and the teacher was Anton Peter, an honoured teacher of Ukraine, also a Slovak by nationality, ours from Turia

Remeta, so he started it at school. It was just a course, and the classes were so mixed that in those classes, in fact, there were tenth and eleventh and elementary school grades, different grades, whoever wanted Slovak."

Respondent No. 4, who instructs voluntary courses of the Slovak language, history, and culture in Serednie, also underscores the importance of transmitting the language and culture to future generations. She warns that failure to do so may result in the complete assimilation of the Slovak minority: "We give priority to the language, priority to traditions, preservation of all that and in addition to that, education, so we also educate those young Slovaks [...]. They have to learn those traditions, they not only should, but they have to, because if they will not pass them on, it will die. I say that if we do not preserve it now, in two years no one will need it."

In discussions concerning ethnicity, respondents frequently transitioned to topics such as the number of individuals who speak the language or attend the Roman Catholic Church, using these factors to infer the Slovak identity, despite their acknowledgment that this is not universally applicable. Beyond educational institutions, associations, and the church, family and its environment have been pivotal in preserving the language and ethnicity. All respondents concurred that activities within schools, associations, churches, and the media are vital; however, the primary impetus for sustaining the language and ethnicity must originate from the family. Respondent No. 5 noted that the language has been preserved primarily because it was spoken at home: "It has been preserved in a way that we spoke only with it in home with parents, just like I am doing now. With parents. We did not speak in Ukrainian or Russian."

Everyday communication among some Slovaks in Transcarpathia still occurs in standard or dialect forms of Slovak, predominantly among middle-aged or older individuals; the younger generation predominantly speaks Ukrainian, although some continue to use Slovak in specific contexts. According to the respondents, the number of such individuals is diminishing. Respondent No. 6 encapsulated this as follows: "All of us, when we meet like this, the locals, we all talk in dialect, but not the

children anymore, some children still talk with their parents like that, but most no longer do."

The role of Roman Catholicism as an ethno-identifying element for Slovaks has been previously discussed. Its significance lies not only in the conduct of masses (partly) in Slovak, providing the believers with opportunities to engage with the language, but also in the fact that masses represent one of the few remaining venues where the Slovak community regularly convenes and communicates. When inquiring about Slovaks, respondents typically referenced the number of Roman Catholics in the village and their church attendance as a basis for estimating their numbers. The Roman Catholic churches were often referred to as the Slovak churches, or when discussing Slovaks, they would refer to Roman Catholics. Respondent No. 7 described the situation of Slovaks in Dovhe: "There still are. They go to church, Slovak church." Similarly, respondent No. 8 commented on Antalovtsi, somewhat hyperbolically stating: "On Sunday there's mass there, at 11 Kyiv time, always. All the Slovaks are there together."

Respondent No. 8 evaluated the role of the church, asserting that it played a significant role in facilitating children's acquisition of the Slovak language through various courses and camps. The respondent acknowledged that learning solely within the church or school is insufficient, emphasizing the necessity of the family environment for the preservation of both language and ethnicity: "As long as people speak at home, the Slovak path is still followed. Because school is one thing, the church also provided a lot, because everything in the church was in Slovak, children had the camps in Slovak, so we learned a lot of Slovak there, that was really good, but now it is what it is."

In Velykyi Berezhnyi, respondents also recognized the ongoing benefits of the church to the Slovaks. Beyond masses as a gathering place for Slovaks, the church facilitated the formation of a folklore ensemble, which emerged among believers attending Roman Catholic masses. This is confirmed by a segment from a group interview involving three respondents:

Respondent No. 9: "Without church, we would not have ensemble, nothing would be done, no Slovak language in school."

Respondent No. 10: "All people gather here, around the church."

Respondent No. 11: "Until today."

Despite the efforts of Slovaks in various domains, that have positive effect on the Slovak ethnicity, according to respondents, their population in Transcarpathia is diminishing, as confirmed by respondents across all visited locations, irrespective of ethnicity or age: "Now there are fewer of them, fewer families, but I do not know how many" (respondent No. 12). The Slovak efforts are maybe slowing the assimilation but is not turning it back and ethnicity is eroding. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has significantly impacted the demographic composition in the surveyed areas. Ukrainian internally displaced persons have arrived in all locations, further increasing the Ukrainian population. Respondent No. 6 described the situation with internally displaced persons in Storozhnytsia: "The war has changed everything, because now we have a lot of people from the east in Storozhnytsia too, and that is a lot. They are buying houses. The needy have left where they can live, and some stayed here, you know, it is such a village of the rich. So those who can buy land and build a house in a year have stayed here." According to the Information and Computing Centre of the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity of Ukraine (ICC), 123,552 internally displaced persons from the other areas of Ukraine were registered in Transcarpathia as of 15 November 2025 (ICC, 2025).

Emigration

In all surveyed locations, respondents concurred that the primary challenge for the preservation of the Slovaks in Transcarpathia is emigration, predominantly to Slovakia, but also to a lesser extent to Czechia and other EU countries. All respondents knew people who emigrated to Slovakia and most of them has some emigrants in their families as well. Emigration subsequently leads to the assimilation and decline of those who remain. Therefore, situations to activate² the Slovak ethnicity are declining. Respondent No. 4 described the situation, noting that after the onset of the Russian invasion in 2022, she co-organized humanitarian aid from Slovakia for Slovak families and discovered that the Slovak population in

² By the terminology of Eriksen.

Serednie was smaller than anticipated. She attributes this decline to migration. It is noteworthy that she estimated their numbers based on church attendance: "We counted on there being 7,000 of them [in Transcarpathia: author's note], but now it is much smaller, who declares, the migration is quite large. Now it is not only Slovakia that is a priority, now the EU as well [...]. Well, we went to those families, based on how they go to church and to older people who do not go anywhere anymore, but we know about them that they are Slovaks, because some of them are those who do not have a family. Well, either the family is already somewhere beyond the border, and they are left alone and so on, so there are different social conditions for that [...]. Well, imagine that we were counting with 100 such families that remain in Serednie, because it was about Serednie, that remain in Serednie, that they, definitely, are Slovaks and there were no longer 100 households, 70 remained and that is very few."

Similar information regarding emigration to Slovakia and the EU was also provided by respondents from other locations. The issue for the minority is that, prior to the Russian invasion in 2022, some individuals migrated abroad seasonally and returned to Transcarpathia. However, following the Russian attack, many have emigrated permanently and do not return, or only do so occasionally. A significant factor is the ongoing mobilisation of men (between 25-60 years of age) into the army. This implies that men working in Slovakia, for instance, would not be permitted to return abroad if they return to Ukraine and they could be conscripted into the army, a scenario some wish to avoid. Consequently, entire families are leaving, and if they are unable to sell their homes, they leave them abandoned. Respondents in a group interview in Hlyboke summarized it as follows:

Respondent No. 13: "A lot of people have left. To work. We have just walked around village and there is empty house, there another one, another one, so many have left."

Respondent No. 14: "And young men are trying, maybe abroad, to Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, earn some money and buy something."

Respondent No. 15: "And the ones who have left do not want to come back because of mobilisation."

Respondents have identified several push factors (pushing people from Transcarpathia) contributing to migration, including Ukraine's challenging economic conditions, low salaries, and ongoing war. Pull factors in Slovakia and other EU countries (pulling people there)³ are superior educational opportunities, favourable labour market conditions, higher salaries, and enhanced social welfare. Notably, the most frequently cited motivations are the prospects of better education and better working conditions abroad. These factors predominantly influence young individuals to pursue studies in Slovakia and subsequently remain there for employment, or to migrate further within the EU. Respondent No. 2 articulated this sentiment: "They want to study at your place and then practically stay there [...]. In 10-20 years, there will be a small minority, smaller. If the economic situation here does not change for the better... There is a problem with work here."

The inclination to study in Slovakia was also highlighted by younger respondents. They have numerous acquaintances, both Slovak and non-Slovak, who chose the secondary or tertiary education in Slovakia. Respondent No. 12 asserted that children from Slovak-speaking families predominantly choose to study in Slovakia: "There are people from the minority who speak, whose parents speak Slovak, they go to study to Slovakia immediately." Respondent No. 16 stated that many individuals from his social circle have also pursued education in Slovakia and intend to remain there. He further noted a prevalent trend among Ukrainians to learn Slovak, facilitating their relocation to Slovakia. Thus, proficiency in the Slovak language is also a pragmatic decision, driven not by ethnicity but by the desire to emigrate to Slovakia. "There are people of the Slovak origin who have emigrated to Slovakia, my classmates and it seems like they want to stay there. So many, many live in Slovakia, even non-Slovaks are learning Slovak, because they want to study in Prešov, Košice, Bratislava." Respondent No. 3 corroborates the testimony of respondent No. 16, indicating that individuals who pursue education in Slovakia often do not return to Transcarpathia, primarily due to economic factors. Since 2022, security concerns

³ By terminology of push and pull factors' concept of Lee (1966).

have also contributed to this trend: "Another thing is that hardly anyone wants to return here, even more so now when there is a war, but even before, because of the salaries, because over there, our student makes more money doing a part-time job than someone here who comes back and gets a starting salary after university, so it is only logical that they would rather look for work in Slovakia or even in Czechia or somewhere else."

The Russian invasion in 2022 has exacerbated this emigration trend, not only due to security risks in Ukraine but also because of the deteriorating economic conditions forcing people to emigrate. This situation has led to family separations, with some members emigrating while others remain, or in some cases, entire families relocating. Emigration decisions are made individually within families and are influenced by the prevailing circumstances and available opportunities, as not everyone who wishes to emigrate is able to do so. Respondent No. 6 illustrates the situation with an example from Storozhnytsia: "If there would not be war, people would not leave as whole families, it would hold together more, because again, they would talk at home, they would take their children to church. Everything would be alive, but the war sped everything up a lot."

A notable trend in emigration is the pragmatic use of ethnicity, as some individuals seek to obtain a certificate of Slovak living abroad from the Office for Slovaks Living Abroad. While individuals with genuine the Slovak ethnicity apply for this certificate, respondents indicate that many in Transcarpathia acquire it for pragmatic purposes. Respondents noted that some individuals technically qualify for the certificate due to Slovak ancestry, yet their ethnicity is no longer Slovak, and they have not engaged with the minority's cultural life. Respondents commented on this phenomenon, for instance: "The youth are already at your country. The older people. The younger ones come when they need to get that status of 'Slovak living abroad', it helps them" (Respondent No. 2). "Maybe some people want to know their roots, others maybe because they want to get a Slovak abroad status, that is also a motivation, yes" (Respondent No. 1).

Impact of emigration

One of the most frequently discussed consequences of emigration is the decrease of the youth who would otherwise participate in the cultural activities of the minority. In addition to the youth, respondents have noted a significant absence of men, as many have remained abroad and are either unwilling or unable to return, have enlisted in the military, or are avoiding conscription and thus limit their public appearances. It is not solely the youth and men who emigrated before and during the invasion, but these groups were most frequently mentioned by respondents. This situation is illustrated by the respondents' statements. The first statement pertains to the involvement of individuals in folklore groups, while the second is more general: "There is a war, and many kids have left abroad [...]. Now, with the war, there are no men to sing" (Respondent No. 17) and "Then many Slovaks, expatriate Slovaks, who had the opportunity to travel, work in Slovakia but also in other countries, so that is also the case, there are men missing from families" (Respondent No. 1).

The phenomenon of emigration and the decline in the Slovak population have led to increased assimilation. Assimilation is a common and often natural occurrence between ethnic majorities and minorities. During the USSR, the state actively promoted conditions conducive to assimilation and restricted the minority rights of Slovaks. This situation evolved with the advent of an independent Ukraine, where Slovaks were afforded greater freedom to travel and migrate, thereby facilitating the assimilation of those who remained. The cultural and linguistic closeness between Slovaks and Ukrainians in Transcarpathia easing social interactions and relationships, which, according to respondents, have historically been non-conflictual. All Slovaks are proficient in Ukrainian, and those socialized during the USSR era also speak Russian. Mixed marriages are common. Respondent No. 7 illustrates it: "Everything has mingled, you know? Slovak married Ukrainian, Ukrainian married Ukrainian. For example, I am Slovak, and I married Ukrainian. She was Greek-Catholic but converted to Slovak to Roman-Catholic." As noted by this respondent, religi-

ous conversion, particularly between Roman and Greek Catholics, is not uncommon.

Respondent No. 8 also highlights mixed marriages and the subsequent adoption of the Ukrainian ethnicity by descendants, which is apparently predominant trend in the mixed marriages and the Slovak ethnicity is being marginalized this way. The adaptation of Slovaks, as discussed by the respondent, appears to be common, although it cannot be generalized to all families or considered a definitive characteristic of Slovak behaviour. The respondent further associates the transmission of ethnicity with the use of the Slovak language: "Now, in my opinion, it is decreasing, but why? Because families are merging, well, not only Slovaks are marrying Slovaks. And when, for example, someone new comes to the family and does not speak Slovak, Slovaks adapt to him so that he understands, and what? And when the family does not speak, when the young children do not hear the Slovak language, so it disappears."

The Slovak language, perceived as a crucial attribute of ethnicity, is gradually vanishing from everyday communication in the Slovak-Ukrainian localities, particularly among the youth, who predominantly converse in Ukrainian and only occasionally in Slovak. In mixed marriages, it is common for a child to speak Slovak with one parent and Ukrainian with the other, while in public, at school, and in youth groups, where Ukrainians predominate, they converse in Ukrainian. Alternatively, a parent may speak Slovak, while the child, understanding Slovak, responds in Ukrainian. This is exemplified by Respondent No. 18: "For example, our group, all fathers, but mothers are Ukrainian, and fathers are, they are mingled and between each other do not speak Slovak. For example, my brother, my nephew and my son, I spoke to them in Yovra⁴ dialect but between each other, they speak Ukrainian."

The standard Slovak, along with its dialects, is increasingly absent from everyday communication among the younger generation, as it is primarily spoken by their grandparents and occasionally their parents. Similarly, Ukrainian dialects are also diminishing as the youth increasingly adopt standard Ukrainian. As Respondent No. 16 observed: "The youth

factually do not preserve even Ukrainian dialects we speak, many pass to Ukrainian. So, it is a question. It is poorly preserved."

An example of the gradual erosion of the Slovak ethnicity is evident in religious life. Roman Catholicism has served as a significant ethno-identifying element for Slovaks; however, the form of religious practice is evolving due to the decline of Slovak believers and the rise of Ukrainian ones. In the Slovak-Ukrainian localities with Roman Catholic churches, a major issue is the gradual shift in the language of masses. The change arises from the increasing number of Ukrainian believers at the expense of Slovaks, with the youth, irrespective of their origin, primarily using Ukrainian. Consequently, Ukrainian is progressively becoming the dominant language of the liturgy. In practice, this results in parts of the mass being conducted in one language and parts in another. Some congregants, particularly Slovaks and the older and middle generations, wish to preserve Slovak, while Ukrainians and the younger generation favour Ukrainian. The promotion of Ukrainian is further facilitated by the deficit of Slovak priests. In the 1990s, masses in the research localities were conducted entirely in Slovak, as priests either came from Slovakia or were Slovak speaking. However, this situation has changed. At the time of the research, only two priests from Slovakia were serving in Transcarpathia, in Dovhe, Lysychovo, Storozhnytsia, and Uzhhorod. Predominantly, Ukrainian and Polish priests serve in the localities, attempting to conduct parts of the mass in Slovak. The example of liturgical language illustrates how emigration and assimilation are transforming the Slovak-Ukrainian localities. For instance, in the village of Onokivtsi, Slovak masses have ceased due to the dwindling Slovak population. Respondent No. 19 explained: "It does not have meaning, do you understand? If I and two more women understand and the youth, the youth does not understand what is going on, what is being talked about. So, all masses are in Ukrainian."

Respondent No. 6 highlighted the tensions in conducting religious services, noting that the younger generation predominantly speaks Ukrainian. Concurrently, she emphasizes the church's role in preserving the Slovak ethnicity in Storozhnytsia. She stated: "Currently, approximately half of the congregation prefers to

⁴ Old name of Storozhnytsia.

speaking Ukrainian, while the older members continue to speak Slovak. Although our children understand Slovak, they no longer use it at home or desire it in church services. Among the 15 young attendees, only three or four prefer a Slovak mass. However, without the church, Slovak would likely not persist in Storozhnytsia. Historically, we have had Slovak priests and sisters, maintaining this tradition."

The village residents have long advocated for a Slovak priest, a position unfilled since 2022, until the arrival of a Slovak priest in August 2025. The introduction of Ukrainian into the liturgy has faced resistance from some Slovak congregants across surveyed locations, underscoring the significance of faith for those wishing to retain Slovak elements in the mass. Concerns arise that the liturgy may gradually become Ukrainianized, as the youth predominantly speak Ukrainian, as noted by respondent No. 18: "We are resisting because they prefer Ukrainian, and we do not. This includes priests and all aspects. The children do not comprehend what they read during the masses. For instance, they read but do not understand the content, which is why some advocate for readings in Ukrainian. However, we fear it will start with one reading, then another, eventually leading to an entirely Ukrainian mass." Conversely, there is a determination to preserve Slovak in the church, as expressed by Respondent No. 1: "We conduct mass in Slovak. The liturgy is in Slovak, but sermons are in Ukrainian due to the presence of Ukrainian priests. Nonetheless, we have not encountered significant efforts to Ukrainianize the service. There was an attempt a few years ago, but it was unsuccessful as our Slovak community did not accept it."

Interviews with priests who have served or are currently serving in the studied localities offer a slightly different perspective. The priests whose statements are used in this analysis are Ukrainians, yet they endeavour to conduct portions of the masses in Slovak to accommodate their congregants. However, they emphasize that they cannot focus solely on the ethnicity of the believers and strive to cater to the majority. Typically, the Slovak-Ukrainian masses are held once a week; however, in Perechyn, biweekly, alternating with a Ukrainian, a pattern also observed in Dovhe. In Lysychovo, the mixed mass is conducted only once a

month. The decline in the use of Slovak as the liturgical language is attributed to the decreasing number of Slovak believers and the increasing number of Ukrainian ones, a trend further exacerbated by the influx of internally displaced persons. An illustrative case is Serednie, where, unlike in the villages of Antalovtsi and Hlyboke, the issue of the language of masses has reemerged. Respondent No. 20 noted: "There is a language issue in Serednie, because we are having two kinds of masses now. Not long ago, from the start of the war, because many internally displaced people have arrived. We have a group of kids, which has escaped from Mariupol here. Of course, they do not speak Slovak, only Ukrainian."

Another priest (Respondent No. 21), who served in the surveyed localities from 1987 to 2011 and remains in contact with the locals, expresses scepticism regarding the preservation of Slovak as the liturgical language in Transcarpathia. He attributed this to emigration, which has led to a decrease in the Slovak population, with those remaining gradually assimilating: "Whether you like it or not, this time brings about the fact that everything will be Ukrainian, minorities simply emigrated, what, for whom?"

Discussion

The emigration of Slovaks from Transcarpathia should be contextualized within the broader framework of migration from Ukraine to the EU countries. This phenomenon affects not only the Ukrainian ethnic majority but also Transcarpathian ethnic minorities, including Hungarians, Romanians, and Roma, among others. A comparative analysis of our research on the emigration of Slovaks and its impact on the ethnic identity of those remaining in Transcarpathia with studies on the migration of Hungarians or Ukrainians reveals several parallels.

For Hungarians, Hungary serves as the primary destination for emigration, analogous to Slovakia for Slovaks. However, a notable distinction is that Hungary actively implements measures to encourage this migration. According to Erőss – Kovály – Tártai, who examined migration from Transcarpathia to Hungary, the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 intensified migration to Hun-

gary, which continues to promote it through specific kin-state policies. The authors highlight, for instance, a relatively lenient citizenship policy that facilitates access not only to Hungary but also to the entire EU for people of Hungarian descent in Transcarpathia (Eröss – Kovály – Tártai, 2016, p. 24-25). It is important to note that the status of a Slovak living abroad does not equate to Slovak citizenship, although individuals with this status can acquire it through a simplified procedure. This has motivated Transcarpathian Hungarians to emigrate over the past decade, particularly after 2022, when security concerns, including military conscription, were added to economic motivations.

According to Eröss – Kovály – Molnár – Tártai, emigration is the primary factor contributing to the decline in the Hungarian population in Transcarpathia from 151,516 in 2001 to an estimated 131,000 in 2017 (Tártai – Molnár – Kovály – Eröss, 2018, p. 113, 118, 121).⁵ Political scientist Sándor Bertolon projects that by 2025, the Hungarian population in Transcarpathia could number only around 70,000-80,000 (Bertolon, 2025, p. 268). This reduction, coupled with the influx of Ukrainians (especially post-2022), exacerbates assimilation trends among the Hungarian minority, despite their numbers being significantly higher than those of the Slovaks. Furthermore, a distinct linguistic boundary between Hungarians and Ukrainians impedes assimilation, although it continues.

The population of Ukrainians in Transcarpathia is not diminishing; rather, it is relatively increasing due to internal migration within Ukraine. Nonetheless, Ukrainians are also migrating to the EU. Matúš Žac examines migration trends between Ukraine and Slovakia through the lens of classical migration theories. Our research findings on Slovak migration indicate that they can also be conceptualized within the framework of these theories, as part of the migration from Ukraine to Slovakia and other EU countries. Žac analyses migration from Ukraine to Slovakia through various theoretical perspectives, including the theory of push and pull factors, the theory of social networks, the theory of dual labour markets, the

theory of the new economy of labour migration, the theory of the world system, and the theory of cumulative causes (Žac, 2024, p. 23-25).

Our research contributes not only to the discussion on migration and its implications between Ukraine and Slovakia but also to the broader context of migration and the existence of the Slovak diaspora abroad. Similar migration processes are occurring in other European countries with an autochthonous Slovak minority, such as Serbia, Romania, Croatia, and Hungary. Juraj Marušiak and Sanja Zlatanovič, are engaged in research on migration abroad and its impact on the Slovak community in Vojvodina, Serbia. Their findings align with ours. The emigration of Slovaks from Serbia to Slovakia has analogous consequences for the minority remaining in Serbia as the emigration of Slovaks from Transcarpathia. According to them, migration renders the Slovak community in Vojvodina a transnational community, divided between those residing in Slovakia and those in Serbia. This is also true for families that frequently migrate between the two countries (living there and there). In Bački Petrovac, the number of abandoned Slovak houses is increasing, often purchased by Serbs, which gradually raises the proportion of Serbs in the city. Consequently, the ethnic composition of this city is changing, as evidenced by the prevalence of Serbian signs on streets, in shops, and other public buildings instead of Slovak. Emigration, like the case of Slovaks in Transcarpathia, predominantly affects the younger generation, educated individuals, and people of working age, who could potentially lead the organization of minority life. The decline in youth also poses a challenge for classes and schools where the Slovak language is taught, which are decreasing in Serbia, thereby intensifying assimilation (Marušiak – Zlatanovič, 2025, p. 572).

When the population of an ethnic group within a specific territory diminishes, the pressure for assimilation on the remaining members intensifies. The decrease often leads to a decline in the group's activities and their impact (although this is not universally the case) between the minority and the majority. This dynamic facilitates assimilation. Ethnologist Leoš Šatava posits that ethnic minorities frequently need to assert their ethno-

⁵ In addition to emigration, the authors also mention secondary causes: assimilation, the arrival of Ukrainians from other areas, low natural increase). So those causes are practically identical to the Slovaks of Transcarpathia.

identifying characteristics to affirm their distinction from the majority (Šatava, 2009, p. 47). A decrease in individuals demonstrating these characteristics weakens the group's cohesion. Consequently, opportunities for expressing minority ethnicity diminish, as motivation wanes, potentially leading to the complete disappearance of such expressions and a shift towards majority ethnicity. The smaller the minority relative to the majority, the greater the necessity to engage with the majority's language and cultural norms, thereby marginalizing minority ethnic attributes.

These processes are currently expedited by emigration of Transcarpathian Slovaks, resulting in secondary consequences of assimilation, which concurrently alters the situational expression of the minority's ethnicity. In essence, individuals cease to identify as Slovaks and lose awareness of their Slovak heritage, with the Ukrainian element becoming predominant. Some individuals of Slovak descent now identify as Ukrainians, while others strive to maintain their Slovak ethnicity, expressing it situationally despite the decreasing opportunities in Transcarpathia. However, the process of assimilation is not inherently linear, and the trend may change in the future.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to identify and analyse the consequences of emigration on the ethnicity of Slovaks in Transcarpathia. The study is based on the *situational ethnicity* concept. The research results are composed of statements from respondents we interviewed during the field research in Transcarpathia in 2024 and 2025. Emigration of Slovaks, primarily to Slovakia, Czechia, and to other EU countries, has been a persistent phenomenon since the 1990s and continues to the present day. Individuals capitalize on the opportunity to study and work abroad due to the more favourable and stable economic conditions compared to Ukraine. Predominantly, individuals from the younger and middle generations emigrate for educational and employment purposes. Prior to the Russian invasion in 2022, migration was often seasonal or shift-based. However, post-2022, migration has become more permanent, with entire families relocating, as the war has exacerbated Ukraine's economic situation. Many men are

reluctant to return to Ukraine from abroad due to the risk of mobilisation.

Emigration is not exclusive to Slovaks but also affects other ethnic groups in Transcarpathia. Migration and the acquisition of residence in Slovakia are facilitated for those holding the status of Slovaks living abroad. Consequently, individuals apply for this status, either out of a sense of identity or for pragmatic reasons. These motivations are not mutually exclusive, nor are they universally present. Individuals with Slovak ancestry, who predominantly identify as Ukrainians in most contexts, also apply for certificate. However, they may also situationally recognize their Slovak ethnicity.

A logical consequence of emigration is the reduction of Slovaks in Transcarpathia, which in turn affects the ethnicity of those who remain. This often results in a loss of perceived ethnic attributes and a subsequent shift towards the Ukrainian ethnicity – assimilation. Assimilation becomes more challenging to resist as the Slovak population diminishes and the Ukrainian majority increases. Another adverse consequence of the Russian invasion is the influx of internally displaced Ukrainians into the Slovak-Ukrainian localities, further altering the ethnic composition in favour of Ukrainians. The Slovak ethnicity is predominantly maintained among the older and middle-aged generations, with minimal presence among the younger generation across all studied localities. Among the younger generation, the Slovak ethnicity is often a pragmatic means to obtain the status of a Slovak living abroad.

Signs of the gradual erosion of the Slovak ethnicity are evident in various domains significant to Slovaks in Transcarpathia, such as education, religious institutions, community life, and family. Emigration thus exacerbates pre-existing assimilation trends between Slovaks and Ukrainians in Transcarpathia. Respondents of both the Slovak and Ukrainian ethnicity perceive emigration as the primary challenge to Slovaks in Transcarpathia, as increased emigration complicates efforts to counteract assimilation.

References

- Barth, F. (Ed.). (1969). *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*. Universitetsforlaget.
- Benža, M. (1998). Príspevok k štúdiu tradičnej kultúry ukrajinských Slovákov. In L. Čáni (Ed.), *Slováci na Zakarpatskej Ukrajine* (pp. 59–64). Dom zahraničných Slovákov.
- Bertolon, S. (2025). Vplyv rosijsko-ukrajinskej vojny na demografickú situáciu v uhorskej národnej menšine Zakarpattia. In O. Shumovska & M. Tokar (Eds.), *Naukovyi visnyk Zakarpatskoho oblasnoho kraieznavchoho muzeiu imeni T. Lehotskoho* (pp. 265–268). Tov Rik-U.
- Boleráčová, Z. (2006). *História a kultúra Slovákov na Zakarpatskej Ukrajine*. Mystetska Linia.
- Botík, J. (2011). *Dolnozemskí Slováci: Tri storočia vysťahovaleckých osudov, spôsobu života a identity Slovákov v Maďarsku, Rumunsku, Srbsku a Bulharsku*. Vydavateľstvo Ivan Krasko.
- Brubaker, R. (1996). *Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the new Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Eriksen, T. H. (2012). *Etnicita a nacionalismus: Antropologické perspektivy*. SLON.
- Eriksen, T. H. (2019). The epistemological status of the concept of ethnicity. *Anthropological Notebooks*, 25(1), 27–36.
- Erőss, Á., Kovály, K., & Tátrai, P. (2016). *Effects of the Ukrainian crisis in Transcarpathia: The Hungarian perspective*. Centre of Migration Research.
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2025). Internally displaced people. <https://www.ioc.gov.ua/en/analytics/dashboard-vpo>
- Kahanov, Y. (2019). *Konstruiuvannia "radiansko-yi liudyny" (1953–1991): Ukrayinska versia*. Inter-M.
- Kokaisl, P., Štolfová, A., Zychová, J., & Hanuš, P. (Eds.). (2014). *Po stopách Slovákov ve východní Evropě: Polsko, Ukrajina, Maďarsko, Rumunsko, Srbsko, Chorvatsko a Černá Hora*. Nostalgie.
- Lavrynenko, H. (2019). Spilnist "radianskyi narod" yak universalna politychna identychnist hromadian SRSR. *Grani*, 22(11), 5–14.
- Lee, E. S. (1966). A theory of migration. *Demography*, 3(1), 47–57.
- Lenovský, L. (2017). Vzťah jazyka, kultúry a identity v prostredí etnických minorít. *Slavica Slovaca*, 53(3–4), 243–251.
- Makara, M. (1999). I radoshchi, i boli navpil. In M. Makara & I. Myhovich (Eds.), *Karpatamy poridneni: Istorychny narys ukrayinsko-slovatskykh etnopolitychnykh ta etnokulturnykh vidnosyn* (pp. 65–80). Vat Patent.
- Marušák, J., & Zlatanovič, S. (2025). Co-ethnic migration of Vojvodina Slovaks to Slovakia: Institutional frameworks and everyday practices of interaction. *Nationalities Papers*, 53(3), 554–577.
- Michalík, B. (2012). Etnická identita a jej stimulácia v prostredí etnických minorít. In D. Bittnerová & M. Moravcová (Eds.), *Etnické komunity: Kontinuita kulturní reprodukce* (pp. 93–102). UK FHS.
- Molnar, Y., & Molnar, S. (2010). Natsionalnyi sklad naselennia. In M. Vehesh & Ch. Fedynets (Eds.), *Zakarpattia 1919–2009 rokiv: Istoriia, polityka, kultura* (pp. 488–492). Lira.
- Nagel, J. (1994). Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture. *Social Problems*, 41(1), 152–176.
- Okamura, J. Y. (1994). Situational ethnicity. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 17(4), 452–465.
- Soukup, M. (2014). *Terénny výzkum v sociální a kulturní antropologii*. Karolinum.
- Šatava, L. (2009). *Jazyk a identita etnických menšín: Možnosti zachování a revitalizace*. SLON.
- Tátrai, P., Molnár, J., Kovály, K., & Erőss, Á. (2018). Changes in the number of Hungarians in Transcarpathia based on the survey 'SUMMA 2017'. *Hungarian Journal of Minority Studies*, 2, 103–135.
- Tyvodar, M. (2010). *Etnografiia Zakarpattia: Istorychno-etnografichny narys*. Grazhda.
- Úrad pre Slovákov žijúcich v zahraničí (ÚSZZ). (2025). Štatistika prijatých žiadostí a vydaných ÚSZZ podľa štátnej príslušnosti žiadateľov od roku 2012 do januára 2025. <https://www.uszz.sk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/statistika-2012-az-januar-2025-podla-statnej-prislusnosti.pdf>
- Žac, M. (2024). Analýza ukrajinskej migračnej krízy z perspektívy súčasných migračných teórií. *Annales Scientia Politica*, 13(2), 15–27.