

# PERCEPTION OF MIGRATION FROM NON-EU COUNTRIES IN SLOVAKIA: THE CASE OF NITRA REGION

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## **Abstract**

The results of Eurobarometer surveys in last two years shows that Slovaks have very negative perception of immigration from the non-EU countries. As suggested by Eurobarometer the attitude is influenced by factors such as education level, wealth, occupation, age and other socio-economic factors. The main aim of this contribution is to analyze Slovak attitude towards migration in relation to other EU countries and to search for possible causes of the negative attitude toward Slovak citizens with special focus on Nitra Region. To what degree people attitudes from Nitra Region differ from that of the Slovakia and the EU? The contribution will present research results dedicated to false assumptions and misunderstandings of citizens about migration which will be put in relation to migration in its deeper context. In this sense presented study will reveal discrepancy between Eurobarometer survey data and data collected on a local level in Nitra region. The main claim of the contribution is in line with existing literature and leads to the conclusion that negative attitude of citizens is mostly caused by lower level of education and lack of general knowledge about migrants.

**Key words:** *Migration, perception, non-EU countries, Slovakia, Nitra Region*

## INTRODUCTION

After the outbreak of the 2015 migration crisis the issue of migration started to play important role in Slovak politics and partially contributed to political earthquake after 2016 elections to the Slovak National Council. The issue of migration was communicated by all political actors including radical (neo)fascist party People's Party – Our Slovakia under the leadership of Marián Kotleba on one side and Slovak president Andrej Kiska with solidary attitude on the other [Mihálik 2017: 44]. The issue of migration polarized society and thus was used in the communication of political actors to mobilize popular support [Filipec, Mosneaga and Walter 2018: 199-200]. Public discourse about migration in Slovakia soon turned to be dominated by the issue of Muslims and Islam [Gigitashvili 2016: 8] and humanitarian reasons or solidarity become secondary issue to security.

The main aim of this article is to reveal the attitude of Slovaks towards migration and migrants from non-EU countries with special focus on Nitra region. While many researchers focus on EU or its member states level (including Eurobarometer), regional perspective is often missing and it might be expected that perception will vary due to great variability of regions across countries. From the methodological perspective this article presents exploratory case study aimed at exploring attitudes of Slovak citizens in Nitra region. The region has been selected as suitable for analysis due to its general characteristic: it is not region with Slovak capital nor periphery of the country, however the position is geographically central to the country with good connection to other regions and capital cities of Bratislava and Budapest. There are approx. 700 thousand people living in Nitra region, with population density very close to Slovak average 110 people per square kilometer.

There were several research questions behind the research which was divided into two parts. In the first part respondents were asked to rate migrants on the pictures presented on a scale from 0 to 10 according to sympathy. Second part deals with the task which required respondents to tell three words associated with „migration“. This task was followed by another task to estimate the number of Muslims living in Slovakia, Sweden, UK and Germany. Division of the research was focusing on three research questions or premises.

First, due to medialized issue of migration with reference to Muslim background of migrants researchers expected, that there will be low level of sympathy towards migrants with Muslim appearance. Based on Eurobarometer survey Researchers also expected,, that education will play significant role in the number of sympathy points given by individuals. However, the question was not whether Slovaks from Nitra Region under-evaluate immigrants with Muslim appearance, but how much this evaluation differ in relation to other groups which might be visually identified (Asian, Black and White). Is there some sort of “sympathy hierarchy” regarding the perception of various ethnic groups among Slovaks in Nitra region?

Second, what words are Slovaks in Nitra region associating with migration from non-EU countries? It was expected, that due to medial communication there will be present words such as Islam, Terrorism, Fear or War – words with negative connotation within Slovak society.

Third, regarding estimation of the Muslim populations researchers expected that in line with existing research respondents will over-estimate populations of Muslims living in selected countries. Also, that respondents will be more precise about

estimation of the size of Muslim community in the own country and that education will show up as the most important factor.

The research was conducted in the centre of Nitra, the capital of Nitra region between 5th–18th February 2018. Out of 258 people 231 persons (89 %) agreed and replied on all questions asked by researchers. Despite relatively small sample all segments of the society were present in the research with respect to sex, age, socio-economic status and size of the place of residence.

From the methodological perspective there are some limits of the research, especially regarding its first part. First, it is hard to distinguish whether respondent is giving points of sympathy according to empathy with the person on the picture, or whether is influenced by the quality of the picture or by the presence of the researcher. Second, responses could have been influenced by the arbitrary selection of the pictures. Authors of the research tried to limit this shortcoming by selecting positive pictures on which persons are smiling. Third, the research did not worked with cultural bias which is very complex issue as perception is still developing and is strongly influenced by factors such as country history, personal experience, socio-cultural context etc. Also regarding second part of the research there are some controversial aspects as association of migration is influenced by media and topics communicated in the public sphere where negative topics are resonating more than positive news.

Despite above described limits of the research authors hope that the work will contribute to existing knowledge about perception of migration with adding regional perspective or at least with providing inspiration for further researchers. Finally, the results may serve as certain corrective despite the fact, that results of this case study and data are valid only for Nitra region and cannot be generalized on the whole Slovak public.

## **1. SYMPATHY AND NON-EU MIGRANTS**

Migration is perceived differently among nations and ethnic groups. Countries all around the world have different experience in dealing with migration and migrating ethnic or religious groups. However, this perception does not vary in between nations, but also within the nations itself based on belonging to socio-economic group and is influenced by variables including sex, level of education, class etc. For example Tito Boeri and Herbert Brücner (2005) based on long-term analysis found that in the EU15 migration is perceived as a threat mainly for people with primary or lower education, people with low income and for the older employees [Boeri and Brücner 2005]. This trend continues. For example Eurobarometer survey (2015) provides us some general idea how migrants from non-EU countries are perceived. On the question (QA 10.2): “Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you: Immigration of people from outside EU” Slovak scored on the third worst place with just 17 % responding “positive”, 77 % people “negative” and 6 % don’t know. More negative attitude was only in Latvia and the Czech Republic. Slovak negative perception is far under EU28 average (34 % people “positive”, 56 % “negative” and 10 % “don’t know” [Eurobarometr 2015: 154]. Survey thus indicates overall negative attitude among Slovaks. However, for the purposes of this study comparison in between countries is not so relevant as the study deals with perception of migration in the specific region. For this reason Eurobarometer provides also data related to five variables including gender, age, education, socio-professional category and class. “Total negative” attitude was equally divided between 57 % of man and 56 % of

woman. Much more important variable influencing perception is according to survey age as the attitude differs significantly. While 61 % of older people with 55+ years have “total negative” feeling in relation to migration from non-EU countries, the youngest age group (15-24 years) has relatively small proportion 46 %, followed by 25-39 years old with 52 % and 40-54 years old with 58 %. What matters is also education which seems to be much more important determinant. While 64 % of people with less than 15 years of education has “total negative” attitude, among students it is just 41 % of people [Eurobarometer 2015: 155]. In other words, education seems to be more important determinant than age.

Also other variables plays important role. Students (with 41 % “total negative” attitude) are associating migrants from non-EU countries with less negative feelings than retired (63 %), house persons (59 %) or unemployed, manual workers or other white collars (58 % in each category). They share almost same level of negativity as self-employed (57 %). The closest attitude to that of students is that of managers with 47 %. The socio-professional category as a variable indicates that also income will have some influence on the perception. While the working class has 60 % of “total negative” associations with increasing income negativity decreases to 58 % with the lower middle class, 54 % of the middle class, 50 % of the upper middle class and 36 % of the upper class [Eurobarometer 2015: 155]. These date, however, are aggregated at the EU level and in the individual EU countries may differ significantly due to specific culture, historic experience etc. On the other side, they are useful as points of reference including the distances between least “total negative” and most “total negative” within individual variables.

For measuring attitude towards immigrants from non-EU countries people in our research were asked to award points of sympathy from 0 to 10 to the people present on the group of pictures 1 (families) including Asian, Black, Arab and white family and group of pictures 2 (individuals) including Asian woman, Black man, covered Muslim woman and white Slovak representative. As noted before pictures were selected with the aim to find difference between evaluating families and individuals and how much points of sympathy differs between individual visually ethnically different migrants. Slovak representative and white family with western outlook were put into the group for serving as point of reference.

As research showed Women were slightly more hesitant to give points of sympathy than man. On average woman gave 4,58 to 4,81 given by man. As expected families has got slightly more points of sympathy than individuals. As expected, most points of sympathy were given to white family (8,02 on average) with much less given to Asian family (4,16 points), black family (3,92 points) and least points of sympathy were given to family with Arab appearance (3,39 points). The gap between white family and remaining families seems to be significant as it is 4 points lower. The relative low score of Arab family is not surprising and most probably the score is affected by medial presentation of migration. On the other side point difference between Arab family and other “non-white” families is not so significant<sup>1</sup>.

There were however considerable differences related to gender. Regarding families both men and woman gave on average same number points to Asian family and white family. The difference is most visible in the case of Arab family where men gave on average

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<sup>1</sup> Due to license and copyright restriction images are available from authors upon formal request.

3,72 points and women just 3,06 points. Similarly with lover significance there was difference in the case of black family: men gave on average 4,16 and women 3,69. Similar attitude is present in the case of individuals where woman gave on average just 2,62 points to Arab woman while men 3,11 and similarly to families black man got also higher rating among men. It is important to note that Arab women with covered face got on average lowest number of points. From certain perspective her evaluation is touching possible minimum as most people do not want to “look bad” or “with lack of empathy” and thus gave some “symbolic points” to Arab women and on the other side they do not want to look “preferable” towards own race and thus “under evaluated” the white man and white family. In this sense if we change the scale from 0 to 10 and deduce 2 points from each site, then Arab woman and white men are touching both far positions. Data are summarized in the following table 1.

**Table 1: Awarded points of sympathy according to gender**

	Asian Family	Black Family	Arab Family	White Family	Asian Wom.	Black Man	Arab woman	White Men	Total
Average	4,16	3,92	3,39	8,02	3,51	3,81	2,87	7,89	4,7
Av men	4,11	4,16	3,72	8,04	3,41	4,02	3,11	7,91	4,81
Av women	4,22	3,69	3,06	8	3,61	3,61	2,62	7,86	4,58

Source: Authors, own research.

The research showed that education matters, however with considerable differences in relation to individual groups. In order to show contrast only two groups were selected from data file: people with basic education and people with university education. Both groups gave on average similar number of points of sympathy: people with basic education gave 4,71 points, with university degree 4,75 points. What differs is preference of different groups.

While people university degree give in general more points to “non-white” families than people with basic education. For example to the Asian family people with university degree gave on average 4,54 points while people with basic education just 3,91 points and similar difference is in relation to Arab family: While university educated gave on average 3,63 points, people with basic education just 3,09. On the other side, white family is slightly more awarded by sympathy points by people with basic education 8,09 compared to 7,88 awarded by university educated. In relation to individuals basic educated people are giving more points to the black man (4,21 points compared to 3,77 points with university degree). However, data looks much more interesting if we consider type of the university education as the differences between technical and humanities are much more significant than between university and basic cleavage. People with technical university education had tendency to under evaluate Arab family (2,77 points to 3,88 points awarded by people with education in humanities). Compared to the people with education in humanities technically educated people under evaluated black man, Arab woman and have slightly better evaluation to Asian woman and more points of sympathy for the white man. In other words, there is tendency among technically educated people to give less points of sympathy to people with Arabic appearance and giving more points to white family and white man. Awarded points according to education are visible in the table 2.

**Table 2: Awarded points of sympathy according to education**

	<b>Asian Family</b>	<b>Black Family</b>	<b>Arab Family</b>	<b>White Family</b>	<b>Asian Wom.</b>	<b>Black Man</b>	<b>Arab wom.</b>	<b>White Men</b>	<b>Total</b>
Av. basic	3,91	4,09	3,09	8,09	3,22	4,21	3,09	8	4,71
Av. university	4,54	3,95	3,63	7,88	3,71	3,77	2,78	7,75	4,75
Av. uni. (hum.)	4,51	4,07	3,88	7,67	3,56	3,86	2,88	7,62	4,75
Av. uni. (tech.)	4,62	3,54	2,77	8,54	4,23	3,46	2,46	8,15	4,72

Source: Authors, own research.

Regarding age groups there are also noticeable differences. For better contrast there will be three age groups analyzed including seniors with 65+ years, youth between 15 and 19 years old and young people between 20 and 26 years. It is interesting that youth is much closer to seniors than to the young people. This is possibly influenced by the level of education. Contrary to seniors young people gave on average more points of sympathy to the black family, Arab family, white family, black man and Arab woman. On the other side they awarded on average fewer points, than seniors to Asian family and Asian woman. In this sense this attitude reflects also level of education which is possibly main factor influencing difference to seniors and also to the youth. Points are visible in the table 3.

**Table 3: Awarded points of sympathy according to age group**

	<b>Asian Family</b>	<b>Black Family</b>	<b>Arab Family</b>	<b>White Family</b>	<b>Asian Wom.</b>	<b>Black Man</b>	<b>Arab wom.</b>	<b>White Men</b>
Average	4,16	3,92	3,39	8,02	3,51	3,81	2,87	7,89
Av. group 65+	4,27	3,8	2,86	7,52	4,22	3,8	2,72	7,91
Av. group 15-19	4,73	3,56	2,76	7,68	3,08	3,72	2,56	7,64
Av. group 20-26	3,3	4,5	4,25	8,5	2,8	4	3,65	7,6

Source: Authors, own research.

Above presented data are in line with existing Eurobarometer survey that Slovaks are rather negative in the attitude towards migrants from non-EU countries. All three families and individuals with non-white appearance are significantly under the white ethnic group. This finding is in line with existing research which claims that migration is perceived mainly in the context of cultural diversity which is less welcome among men, older people, less educated or unemployed. In this sense well overview is provided by Tüzin Baycan and Peter Nijkamp (2012: 189-190). In line with Eurobarometer education plays important role in perception. However, it shall be stressed that also type of education is significant as distinction between technical education and education in humanities may be much more significant than between university degree and basic education. However, this may be caused by the fact that among people with basic education are many high school students with attitudes similar to university students.

## 2. ASSOCIATION OF MIGRATION AND ESTIMATIONS

From the research it is evident that family with Arab appearance and Muslim woman scored worst in the terms of average points of sympathy given. Thus we can claim that perception of migration in Nitra region is influenced by medial communication and fear from Muslim immigration. For this reason it is worth to explore also other related factors as association produced in relation to immigration from non-EU countries or estimation.

During the research the respondents were asked to tell three words they associate with migration from non-EU countries and researchers recorded first words mentioned. It is important to note that this task come after giving points of sympathy and thus respondents might have been influenced by previous task. However from the answers summed up in the Table 4 it is evident that respondents had mainly negative associations. Among three words the highest frequency had the word “Islam” mentioned by 94 people or 40,7 % of respondents, then it was followed by “terrorism” with 73, “war” with 51, “fear” with 50 or “economic migration” with 45 mentions. First positive word “Help” is mentioned on the ninth place. It is also interesting that among first five words is “war” together with “economic migration” which reflects different and contradicting understanding of migrant motives. Nevertheless, some words would certainly need further explanation and context. For example it is hard to put “terrorism” into the context. Do the respondents mean terrorism as a cause of migration due to fight against so called Islamic state or do they have fear from migration as a potential driver for terrorism in Europe?

The men and women perceive immigration slightly differently regarding associations. From the results it seems to be evident that women are more perceptive to war (15) than men who mentioned war at the first place only in four cases. Among men, there is slightly higher association with “fear” in 13 cases or “rape”: 4 primary associations among men and missing association among woman. To sum up, perception of migration from non-EU countries is associated mainly with Islam, Terrorism, War and Fear certainly due to medial presentation of the topic. From certain perspective it is paradox as migration from non-EU countries to Slovakia has its roots mainly in post-Soviet states and most migrants to Slovakia came from Ukraine.

**Table 4: Words associated with migration from non-EU countries**

Total (3 words)	Men (fist word)	Women (first word)
Islam (94)	Terrorism (14)	War (15)
Terrorism (73)	Different culture (14)	Terrorism (14)
War (51)	Economic migration (13)	Islam (12)
Fear (50)	Fear (13)	Economic migration (11)
Economic migration (45)	Islam (11)	Problem (10)
Different culture (31)	Different race (5)	Different culture (9)
Diseases (29)	...	Danger (6)
Non-adaptability (22)	War (4)	Job loss (5)
Help (22)	Rape (4)	Poverty (5)
Different mentality (22)	Chance (4)	...
...	Diseases (2)	Rape (1)
Burqa (1)		Diseases (0)
		Chance (0)

Source: Authors, own research.

In the third task people were asked to estimate Muslim population in Slovakia, Sweden, Germany and the UK. It was expected that Slovaks will estimate correctly Muslim population in Slovakia and will over estimate Muslim population in the remaining countries. While first part of the hypothesis proven to be correct, second part turned to be incorrect and Slovaks under evaluated Muslim population in the mentioned countries. There is empiric evidence in the research; however two important aspects shall be mentioned. First of all, several people on the question reacted spontaneously and tried to build estimation on estimating total population of the state first. However, already in this initial estimation people often made mistakes and under estimated total population. For example one respondent noted: “Well, in Germany there are approx. 40 million people, so Muslim population will be around 500 thousand”. Second, some people tried to estimate total population in the mentioned countries by estimating Slovak population first: “We are like 5,5 million people [Slovaks], so there are some 50 million Germans. There are many Muslims in Germany, so let say 1 million”. These spontaneous comments are providing certain rationale why Slovaks under estimated Muslim population in the referred countries.

According to Pew Research Center there was in 2016 in total 4,95 million Muslims in Germany, 4,13 million Muslims in the UK, 810 thousand Muslims in Sweden and less than 10 thousand in Slovakia<sup>2</sup> [Pew Research Center 2017: 29]. The response on the question: “How many Muslims do you think lives in...” are summarized in the table 5.

**Table 5: Estimation of Muslim Populations by Respondents**

	<b>Slovakia</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Sweden</b>	<b>UK</b>
Reality	Cca 5.000	Cca 5 mil.	Cca 810.000	Cca 4.1 mil.
Response min.	1.000	10.000	10.000	10.000
Response max.	8.000	2 mil.	2 mil.	2 mil.
Mod. (x)	6.000	60.000	70.000	80.000
Average (total)	3017	441.000	381.000	439.000

Source: Authors, own research.

From the table 5 it is evident that respondents were good in estimating Muslim population in the own country as the size between three and five thousand is appropriate. On the other side in all three remaining countries Muslim population was heavily under estimated and in the case of Germany almost 12 times. There are several interesting results. First, nobody was close enough to estimate population in Germany and the UK as maximal estimation was two million. Second, average estimations in all three states were very close despite relatively high differences in total populations (e. g. 10 million people living in Sweden and 81 million living in Germany).

There were no significant differences between estimations made by women and men. While women were closer to real numbers in the case of Germany (average estimation

<sup>2</sup>Variable resources claim that there are between 3 and 5 thousand Muslims living in Slovakia. For example while Foreign Policy pointed out, last census counted approx. 2 thousand Muslims in Slovakia, The New Arab reported that there are approx. 5 thousand Muslims living in Slovakia [Foreign Policy 2016; The New Arab 2018]. However, it seems that 5 thousand is the highest estimation with very inclusive approach.

at 444.428 vs. 405.247 that of man) and Sweden 409.250 vs. 341.256 that of men), men were closer in the case of the UK (466.110 vs. 416.250 that of women) and Slovakia (3.091 vs. 2922 that of women), but still far from the real numbers. Even education did not prove to be factor influencing quality of estimation. Contrary to expected results people with basic education had better sense for the real numbers. In the case of Germany there was average estimation of 491.500 Muslims (compared to estimation of 465.142 by people with university degree). In Sweden people with basic education estimated 374.909 compared to estimation of 266.535 by people with university degree and there was big difference in the case of the UK. While people with university degree estimated on average 345.178, people with basic education estimated higher number of 500.227. On the other side people with basic education under estimated Slovak Muslim population at 2.272 compared to people with university degree who guessed 3.071 people. In the various resources it was presented that there are approx. between 3 to 5 thousand Muslims living in Slovakia. Thus Slovaks in Nitra region does not overestimate domestic population which is not fully in line with existing research (see Sides and Citrin 2007).

As previously shown type of university degree plays important role in perceiving migration. This is also valid for estimation. People with education in humanities had closer estimation in the case of Slovakia (3.139 compared to 2.846 estimation by people holding degree in technical area) and in the case of Germany they estimated population at 535.930 compared to 274.076 estimated by technically educated. On the other side people with technical university education better estimated Muslim populations in Sweden and the UK. In other words, there is no visible pattern regarding variables but just certain tendency of people with basic education and technical university education to under estimate of domestic Muslim population and estimate higher numbers of foreign populations than people with university education in humanities.

Low estimation of Muslim population abroad is from certain perspective paradox as Slovak society was mobilized in the terms of migration policy during 2016 elections and perception of migration is associated with Islam. Above results shows that Slovaks in Nitra region have little idea about real numbers and trends in migration policy which may well explain potential for mobilization on the grounds of migration. Then the question is how people would react if they were confronted with the fact that in those countries is living 3 (in the case of Sweden) to 12 times more Muslims (in the case of Germany) that they on average estimate. Providing education in the field of migration policy and communicate facts may be the way how to improve the situation and undermine potential on radical parties, who build up their political capital on fear and lack of knowledge among people.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main aim of this article was to explore perception of migration from non-EU countries in Nitra region. The research was based on 231 interviews conducted between 5th –18th February 2018 in the city of Nitra. The research focused on three areas.

First, people were asked to give points of sympathy to families and individuals on the pictures. In general on average women were more hesitant and gave more points of sympathy than man. Obviously, family with Arab appearance and lady with covered face got least points. However research showed that there are not big differences in

perception of various groups as Arab, Asian and black family scored relatively close. The perceptions vary according to age and education as older people have greater tendency to give points of sympathy to family or woman with Asian appearance. Nevertheless, it is important what type of university education respondents have. Those with technical education were giving less points of sympathy to migrants with Arab appearance and made more preference to white male or family with western appearance.

Second focus was on words associated with migration from non-EU countries. Despite the fact that majority of migrants from non-EU countries come from the Ukraine, respondents associate migration with Islam, Terrorism, War, Fear, Economic migration, Different culture or disease. Positive words are almost missing. Migration is perceived slightly differently between men and women. While men focus primarily on terrorism, economic migration and different culture, women focused on war, terrorism and Islam. In this sense responses are dominated by negative associations.

Third, Slovaks were able to estimate own Muslim population but heavily under estimated Muslim populations in Sweden (almost 3 times), the UK (almost 10 times) and Germany (almost 12 times). There is no strong influence of variables such as sex or education. Moreover, people with basic education had better estimation closer to real numbers. Nevertheless, if we compare this segment with university educated (humanities) segment, we can claim that people with basic education have tendency to give higher numbers and in same characteristic is similar to the segment with university education in technical area. The general underestimation might be related to relative small size of Slovak population which might have served as reference value for estimations or incorrect initial estimation of overall population living in stressed countries.

Above research provided some view into regional perception of migration in Slovakia and discovered that public discourse is strongly influenced by medial reflection of immigration crises which was mainly visible on the words associated with migration from non-EU countries. Heavy under estimation of foreign Muslim population is on one hand surprising but on the other hand reveals information gap which might be exploited by radical parties for building political capital on the anti-immigration and anti-Muslim rhetoric. For this reason fact based communication and education in migration trends might help to fill out the gap and limit potential for radicalism and extremism not only in Nitra region.

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