

The perception of potential ethnic tensions (The region of East Slovakia and Northeast Hungary)

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Introduction

In perception studies, the aim is to study particular instances of environmental perception so as to identify general principles, the assumption being that comprehension of the way in which an individual perceives the environment (both physical and social) helps in understanding that individual's behaviour.

This emphasis on peoples' views of the environment and resultant mental images encouraged human geographers, particularly in 1970s, to think in terms of „environmental perception”. Environmental perception became a part of the „behavioural revolution” in the discipline and suggested that research should focus on how people store environmental information and on the way in which they develop a preference for different activities within the environment.

The knowledge of the environment is something that is created in the mind of an individual as that individual interacts with the environment. The end product of the act of perception and cognition is an environmental image. Environmental images can be thought of as learned and stable mental conceptions that summarise an individual's environmental knowledge, evaluations, and preferences.

The concept of image proposed that a behaviour is dependent upon an image built up of information derived from social and physical milieu. In this sense an image can be thought of as part of the culture in which it develops. That is to say, an image is both an individual phenomenon and cultural phenomenon to the extent that individuals from similar milieux are likely to have similar images in their minds, and hence are likely to exhibit similar forms of behaviour. Images are particularly important in the development of stereotypes, and nowhere is this shown more clearly than in the way in which people develop stereotyped images of regions and their populations.

Region of East Slovakia and Northeast Hungary and its population

The regions of our interest (East Slovakia, Northeast Hungary) lie in Central Europe, precisely in the area which is a meeting place of great diversities and deep interpenetration (BAMFORT, C. G. and ROBINSON, H. 1993). The territories of the Central European states were highly variable and international boundaries have been shifted many times.

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The Central European population is of multiethnic character and its structure and dynamics were strongly affected by numerous political changes. A large scale migration took place just prior to the conclusion of World War I and II, which altered the ethnic structure of the region.

The region of our interest (in which the survey of images and perception of potential conflict was made) is part of a relatively deprived periphery of particular states.

The region studied covers an area of 35,605 km² within 2 states. Slovak part—East Slovakia region consists of 13 districts (Bardejov, Humenné, Košice-mesto, Košice-vidiek, Michalovce, Poprad, Prešov, Rožňava, Spišská Nová Ves, Stará Ľubovňa, Svidník, Trebišov and Vranov nad Topľou). Northeast Hungarian part consist of three administrative units — counties (megye): Borsod—Abaúj—Zemplén, Hajdú—Bihar and Szabolcs—Szatmár—Bereg.

The total population in the early 1990s is 3,422,000. *Table 1.* provides an outline of principal features of particular parts of the region. The population density is relatively compact but below the national average. The region has only 4 centres with more than a 100 thousand inhabitants (Košice — 235.2, Debrecen — 212.2, Miskolc — 196.4 and Nyíregyháza — 114.2). The centres are equally important large cities which are political and administrative centres with important economic, cultural, scientific, medical and transportation functions and which present a dominating influence reaching into the adjoining regions. The position within their region is historically based.

Table 1. Principle features of region

Region	Area (km ²)	Share of country area (%)	Population (1000s)	Share of country population (%)	Population density (persons/km ²)
East Slovakia	16 210	33.1	1 539	28.8	95
Northeast Hungary	19 395	29.9	1 883	18.2	97
<i>Total</i>	<i>35 605</i>	<i>—</i>	<i>34 22</i>	<i>—</i>	<i>96</i>

According to the 1990 census, the population of Northeast Hungary has 1.883 million people. Almost 96.3% of them declared themselves of Hungarian nationality. The only minority whose proportion exceeds one per cent are Romany people (3.4%), while the rest are ranked in proportion as follows: Germans (0.1%), Rumanians (0.1%), and Slovaks (0.1%). Only share of the Romany population significantly extends beyond the national average. The official census put Gypsies in Hungary at 143,000 but according to local administration records and expert estimation for 1986 (KOC SIS, K. and KOVÁCS, Z. 1991) as many as 405,000 could live in the country. This substantial difference between the estimates and census data originates from the fact that only part of them declare themselves Gypsy, while majority (part of them do not speak the Gypsy language) consider themselves to be Hungarian. Therefore Gypsies are usually identified by neighbours according to anthropological features and lifestyle. The ethnic structure of the population in the Northeast Hungary is shown in *Table 2.*

East Slovakia is a multiethnic area. Since Middle Ages the territory has been settled by Slovaks, Hungarians, Germans, later by Jews and in the twentieth century also by Czechs. The ethnic majority in East Slovakia is made up of Slovaks (86.8%). The 1991 census put the number of Hungarians, the largest ethnic minority in Slovakia, at 567,296 making up 10.8% of total population. The Hungarian minority in East Slovakia make up

Table 2. Ethnic structure of population in Northeast Hungary

Region	Volume	Total	Hungarian	German	Slovak	Rumanian	Romany
Borsod–Abauj–Zemplén	abs.	761,963	727,630	587	896	292	31,882
	%	100.0	95.5	0.1	0.1	0.0	4.2
Hajdú–Bihar	abs.	548,728	539,546	177	.50	950	7,584
	%	100.0	98.3	0.0	0.0	0.2	1.4
Szabolcs–Szatmár–Bereg	abs.	572,301	546,389	139	116	302	24,970
	%	100.0	95.5	0.0	0.0	0.1	4.4
Northeast Hungary	abs.	1,882,992	1,813,565	903	1,162	1,544	65,436
	%	100.0	96.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	3.4

only 6.5% of the total population (Table 3.). Hungarians dominate is in 28 communities of Trebišov district, 13 communities of Rožnava district and in 8 communities surrounding Košice-city. The percentage of Czechs in East Slovakia is below the national average (0.8%).

Table 3. Ethnic structure of population in East Slovakia

District	Slovak	Czech	Hungarian	Ukrainian	Russyn	Romany
Bardejov	91.1	0.3	0.1	1.9	2.4	3.9
Humenné	86.0	0.7	0.1	4.1	6.9	1.1
Košice-m.	90.4	1.7	4.6	0.4	0.3	1.8
Košice-v.	77.7	0.4	16.4	0.1	0.0	4.5
Michalovce	94.8	0.7	0.6	0.3	0.1	3.3
Poprad	93.9	1.1	0.2	0.1	0.0	4.3
Prešov	94.0	0.7	0.1	0.7	0.5	3.8
Rožnava	68.8	0.6	26.1	0.1	0.0	4.2
Spiš. N. Ves.	92.0	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.1	4.0
Stará Lubovna	91.3	0.4	0.1	1.5	2.2	4.0
Svidník	84.9	0.4	0.1	4.2	7.9	2.1
Trebišov	57.4	0.5	39.1	0.1	0.0	2.8
Vranov n/T	94.8	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.4	4.0
East Slovakia	86.8	0.8	6.5	0.8	1.1	3.6

According to the 1991 census 1.1% of East Slovakia's inhabitants declared themselves as Russyns. The highest percentage of Russyns lives in Svidník district (7.9) and in Humenné district (6.9). Geographical distribution of Ukrainians is very similar to the spatial distribution of Russyns. The majority of them inhabit the northern part of East Slovakia (Svidník – 4.2%, Humenné – 4.1%) and makes up 0.8% of regional population.

The Romany population (Gypsies) is a specific component of the mosaic of population groups that inhabit East Slovakia. They deviate considerably from the other population groups in their social, economic and cultural life and in demographic behaviour. According to the 1991 census, Slovakia was the home of about 76, 000 Romany people. They had the opportunity to declare their nationality as „Gypsy”, but the results of the census are rather surprising. Only a small number of Gypsies took advantage of this chance of ethnic identification and thus their share was only 1.4 per cent of the population. At a more regional level Gypsies have traditionally concentrated in East Slovakian districts (mostly Poprad, Spišská Nová Ves, Prešov). Here they were 3.6 per cent of the population in 1991.

Research aims and used methods

From the range of available techniques we have chosen the questionnaire which provides information for desegregate analysis (here the concern is with looking at behaviours and perceptions at an individual level). The data collection for desegregate analysis was organised within the transboundary region of East Slovakia, Northeast Hungary, Southeast Poland and the Transcarpathian oblast of Ukraine (in this study we use data only from East Slovakia and Northeast Hungary). The target population was people over 15 years, and primary target units individualas. The major objective of our research was to analyse the perception of potential conflict and image of the region held by the inhabitants of an ethnically heterogeneous area. The aim of the research was the following: to evaluate the population's awareness of the existing ethnic tensions, to evaluate the population's image of the potential conflict region, to evaluate the level of potential mobility/migration in the event of conflict and the alternative places to live, to compare the perception and image of the region of those residing in the different sub-regions and different environments (rural/urban, ethnically homogeneous or heterogeneous), and to asses the respondents' suggestions for solving ethnic problems.

The questionnaires contained basic socio-demographic parameters (sex, age, education, ethnic origin, place of living) on 492 respondents from East Slovakia and 323 respondents from Northeast Hungary, in addition to a set of variables that related to their perception, attitudes, evaluations and their potential mobility. The sampling was based on the method of a multistage selection.

The obtained knowledge can refer in its full extent only to the studied set. Nonetheless, we depart, in the following analysis with the assumption that the pronounced, intensely structural specifics and trends will very probably indicate characteristics of the entire population of the region studied, and can therefore be widely applied.

Perception of potential conflict and images of region

With regard to the situation within the region, the analysis of the hierarchy of certain issues is quite interesting. Their hierarchy reflects their importance in the every day life of the population in the region. In our research, the respondents were asked to score six issues (unemployment, ethnic tensions, political instability, religious tensions and economic problems) on a scale from one to five (with 1 being the least important and 5 being the most important). The most important issue at present for respondents in the region studied is unemployment. For this issue, the index of importance (average score) in Northeast Hungary is 4.24. The importance given to this issue corresponds to the situation in that region. The worst situation in Hungary (in the area with the rate of unemployment more than 20%) is in the large conterminous zone along the northern and north-eastern borderline of the country (DÖVÉNYI, Z. 1994:396). The territories with the most serious unemployment coincide with the previously-formed under developed areas of Hungary. Unemployment in these regions may prove to be the last step in the disintegration of the local societies; a situation which currently poses a real threat.

In addition, the average rating of importance given unemployment is East Slovakia is 4.25. The spatial analysis of the unemployment rate in Slovakia shows that the situation in Eastern part of the country is not satisfactory. In 8 East Slovakian districts the unemployment rate was over 20%. The modal category is in this case represented by a score of 5 (56.0% in Northeast Hungary and 52.0% in East Slovakia).

The second most important issue according to the respondents is that of „economic problems”. In Northeast Hungary, the index of importance amounts to 4.42, while in East Slovakia it is below 4 (3.96). The importance of economic issues reflects the perception of worsening conditions of life in the regions in which mechanisms of restructuring do not function well. The modal category in case of economic problems is made up by a score of 5 (65.0% of respondents in Northeast Hungary and 38.9% in East Slovakia).

The index of importance of ethnic tensions reaches a higher level in Northeast Hungary (3.34); however, there the minorities comprise only 3.7% of the total population (9/10 of them are Gypsies), while in the East Slovakia is 1.96. The modal category in the case of ethnic tensions is score 1 in the East Slovakia, in the Northeast Hungary is represented by a score of 3.

The index of importance of religious tensions in the East Slovakia is 1.95 and in the Northeast Hungary reaches little bit higher level (2.11).

Some evidence of importance of particular issues for live in the region is provided by *Figure 1*.

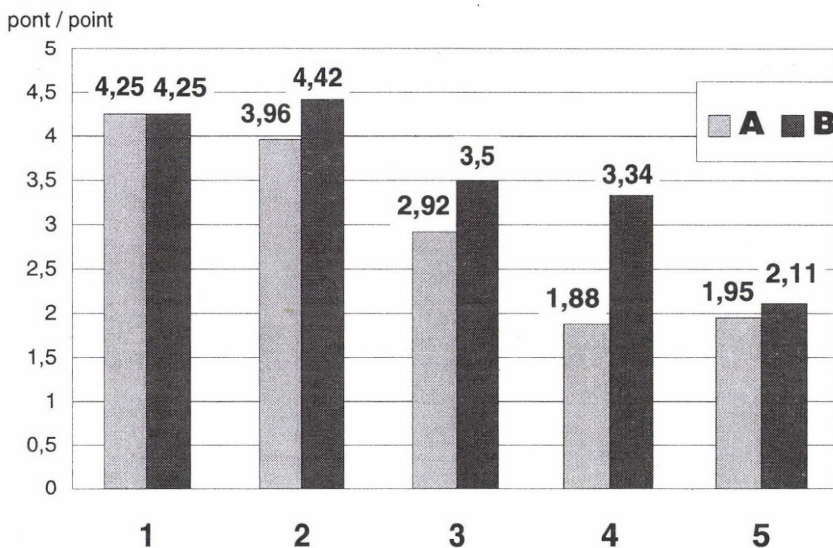


Figure 1. Importance of issues in East Slovakia (A) and Northeast Hungary (B) according to questionnaires. – 1 = unemployment; 2 = economic problems; 3 = political instability; 4 = ethnic tensions; 5 = religious tensions

A fő társadalmi gondok mértékének megítélése Kelet-Szlovákiában (A) és Északkelet-Magyarországon (B) kérdőíves felmérések alapján. – 1 = munkanélküliség; 2 = gazdasági problémák; 3 = bizonytalan politikai helyzet; 4 = etnikai feszültségek; 5 = vallási feszültségek

According to the responses in the analysed questionnaires, the identify and uniqueness of different ethnic groups for the most part are not a source of perceived tensions (*Figure 2*). The image in the region of inter-ethnic tensions is in the mind of 18.2% respondents in East Slovakia. Quite a different image summarising an individual's knowledge, evaluation and preferences is in Northeast Hungary. For more than 60% of respondents the identity and uniqueness of different ethnic groups are a source of tension in their part of the region. As mentioned above, according to the 1990 census the minorities there represent only 3.7% of the total population. The largest minority in the region, Gypsies, makes up 3.4% of the total population. In the last census, Gypsies had the opportunity to declare their nationality as Gypsies, but only a small number of them choose to accept this ethnic identification. According to the records of local authorities, experts estimate that from 1984 (KOC SIS, K. and KOVÁCS, Z. 1991), the percentage of Gypsies of the total population was higher (Borsod–Abaúj–Zemplén county – 7.1%). One possible explanation for why people in Northeast Hungary perceive ethnic identity to be a source of tension is that the region is home to Romany people who deviate considerably from the region's other groups in their social, economic and cultural life, as well as in their demographic behaviour. The present day-to-day relations between Gypsies and the rest of the society are characterised by fear. This fear is reflected in the relatively high percentage of those polled who perceived ethnicity to be a major source of tension in the region.

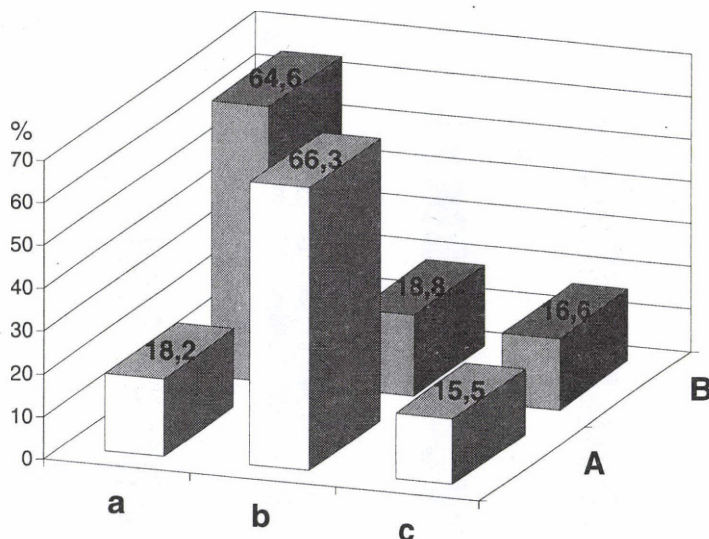


Figure 2. Ethnic identity as a source of tensions. Answers in % in East Slovakia (A) and Northeast Hungary (B). – a = yes; b = no; c = don't know

„Az etnikai hovatartozás társadalmi feszültségforrás.” c. állításra adott válaszok %-os aránya Kelet-Szlovákiában (A) és Északkelet-Magyarországon (B). – a = igen; b = nem; c = nem tudja

The statement „Very different religious, ethnic and language groups can live together in the same country, accept each other and respect each other's rights”, was accepted by 90.9% of the respondents of East Slovakia (*Figure 3*). In Northeast Hungary

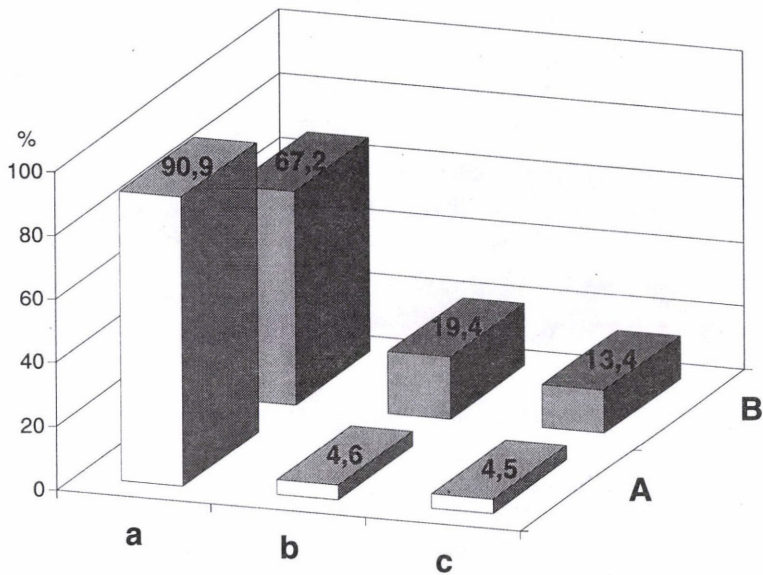


Figure 3. Different ethnic and religious groups can live together, accept and respect each other. Answers in % in East Slovakia (A) and Northeast Hungary (B). – a = yes; b = no; c = don't know

„Képesek együtt élni és egymást elfogadni a különféle etnikai és vallási közösségek.” c. állításra adott válaszok %-os aránya Kelet-Szlovákiában (A) és Északkelet-Magyarországon (B). – a = igen; b = nem; c = nem tudja

only 67.2% respondents identified themselves with this statement. In East Slovakia we have examined whether there are any differences between homogeneous and heterogeneous regions (from ethnic and religious point of view). No marked differences were found.

Agreement with the statement „Coexistence between different religious and ethnic communities would be easier if each community had its own religion”, was expressed by 15.9% of respondents in East Slovakia (in the large cities, ethnically homogenous and religiously heterogeneous areas the share was below the regional average). The percentage of those who prefer a sort of ethnic and religious segregation was remarkably high in Northeast Hungary (56.4%). Differences between particular subregions are shown in Figure 4.

In any consideration of migration, it is necessary to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary moves. The latter are more often than not associated with wars, famines and persecutions. The decision to migrate is an extremely complex process affected by individual and household demographic characteristics (including ethnicity and religiosity), societal and cultural norms (e.g. political climate and policies), personal traits (e.g. risk taking efficiency, adaptability to change), opportunity structure differentials between areas (e.g. economic opportunity), values of migration, expectancy of attaining values, and information level. Even so, in our research we tried to measure the potential mobility of individuals in the sampled regions. The respondents were given the question: „If the ethnic or religious conflict in your region changed in an open conflict, would you stay and not move?” According to the analysis of the questionnaires, the rate of potential mobility is in

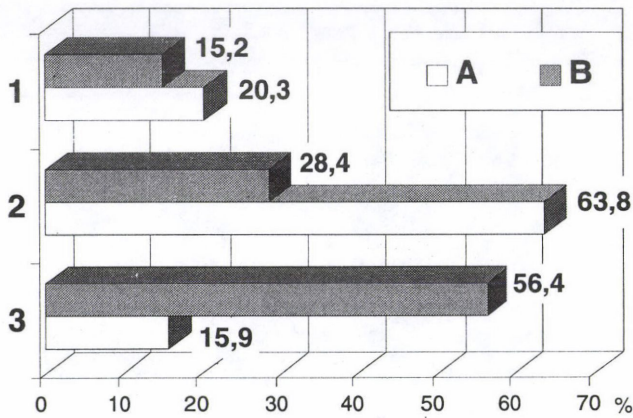


Figure 4. Coexistence of different communities would be easier if each community had its own region. Answers in % in East Slovakia (A) and Northeast Hungary (B). – 1 = don't know; 2 = no; 3 = yes

„A különböző közösségek együttélése könnyebb lenne, ha valamennyiüknek saját területe lenne.” c. állításra adott válaszok %-os aránya Kelet-Szlovákiában (A) és Északkelet-Magyarországon (B). – 1 = nem tudja; 2 = nem; 3 = igen

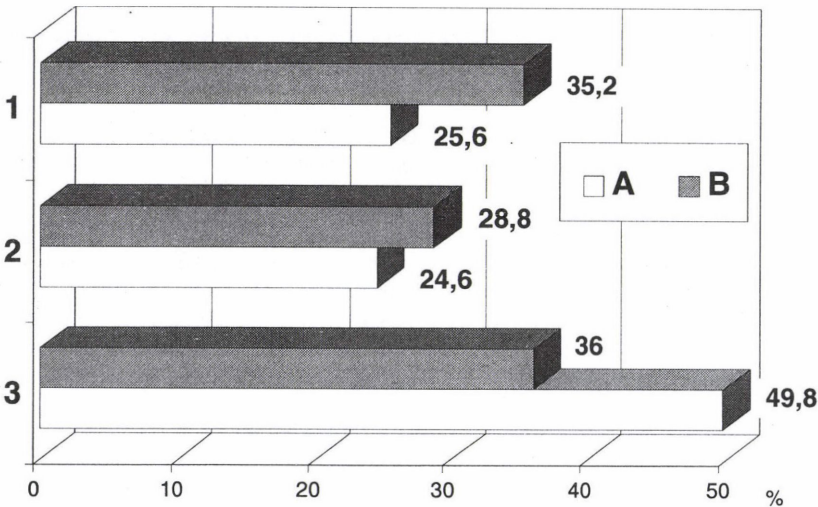


Figure 5. Potential mobility in the regions investigated. Willingness to move or not in % in East Slovakia (A) and Northeast Hungary (B). – 1 = don't know; 2 = move; 3 = stay

Potenciális mobilitás a vizsgált régióban. Elköltözési hajlandóság a megkérdezettek körében, %-ban Kelet-Szlovákiában (A) és Északkelet-Magyarországon (B). – 1 = nem tudja; 2 = elköltözne; 3 = maradna

Northeast Hungary (28.8 points) and in East Slovakia almost one quarter (24.6%) of respondents admitted to the likelihood that they would leave their region in the case of open conflict. More than one quarter of Northeast Hungarian respondents would move abroad

(about one third of them would emigrate outside Europe) and 4.3% of them would move to another region of the country. As is shown in *Figure 5*, there are small differences between the situation in the above mentioned subregions.

Conclusions

The region of our interest is an arena in which many changes have taken place during this short century. Changes in the international boundaries and extensive international migrations have strongly affected the structure and dynamism of the Central Eastern European population. The complexity of the region and behaviour of its population inspired us to research the issues of how people develop simplified images of the region and its population that are too big and too complex to be known in their entirety, how the knowledge of social environment and environmental images can influence the way in which individuals make decisions about where to go and what to do (potential for migration) and how parts of the social environment take on meaning for people who interact with that environment.

The analyses within our research have shown that in spite of long term experience of interethnic, and in some parts of the region, sectarian tensions, people do not perceive them as being the most important issues in their present-day life. Symptomatic features of modern societies in transition such as unemployment and economic problems, are what they deem to be the more important issues affecting their every day life. For most people living in the transboundary region of East Slovakia and Northeast Hungary, the identity and uniqueness of different ethnic groups are not a source of tensions in the region. Such an image of the region is reflected in the low potential mobility of the population in the region. Respondents' replies to the question „If the ethnic or religious tensions in your region changed into an open conflict, would you stay and not move?“ were mostly positive.

A considerable part of the questioned population believed that very different religious, ethnic and language groups can live together in the same country, accept each other and respect each other's rights. Statistically, a more or less insignificant portion of the respondents believe that coexistence between different religious or ethnic communities would be easier if each community had its own region.

Comparative analysis of interregional differences showed some variations in perception, attitude, image, and evaluation determined by the character of social environment, even though part of these differences was caused by different cultural factors, personal motivations and emotions, as well as the effect of subjective decision-making and filters through which information was received and processed.

POTENCIÁLIS ETNIKAI FESZÜLTSEGEK ÉRZÉKELÉSE A KELET-SZLOVÁKIAI ÉS
ÉSZAKKELET-MAGYARORSZÁGI RÉGIÓKBAN

V. Ira

Ö s s z e f o g l a l ó

Kelet-Szlovákia és Északkelet-Magyarország olyan régiók, amelyekben számos változás ment végbe a 20. század folyamán. Az államhatárok változása és a jelentős nemzetközi vándorlás a kelet-közép-európai népesség szerkezetét és dinamikáját alaposan átforgatta. A régió bonyolult szerkezete és a népesség viselkedése készítette a szerzőt arra, hogy megvizsgálja: a térség lakossága milyen egyszerűsített képet alakít ki a régióról és annak népességéről, továbbá a társadalmi környezet ismerete, ill. az arról alkotott elképzelések hogyan befolyásolják az egyéni döntések meghozatalát.

A kutatás fő célkitűzése a lehetséges konfliktusról és az etnikailag sokszínű régióról a lakosság által kialakított kép elemzése volt. A vizsgálati szempontok: a meglévő etnikai feszültségek a népesség tudatában, a népesség elképzelése a potenciális konfliktust hordozó régióról, a konfliktus esetén felmerülő lehetséges vándorlás/népességmozgás szintje, és a potenciális új lakóhelyek, a különböző alrégiókban és vidékeken élőknek a régió egészéről alkotott elképzeléseinek összevetése.

Fordította: BASSA L.

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