

PERCEPTIONS OF THE USA IN SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN EAST SLOVAKIA

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Abstract: *“Anti-Americanism has emerged as a hostile response to America’s growing influence, but also to the spread of democracy and the global market” (Krastev 2004: 14) and has been strengthened by the intensive promotion of democracy by the US. Krastev differentiates between two types of anti-Americanism: one is the anti-Americanism of fanatical terrorists, while the other “is the anti-Americanism of those who take to the streets and the media to campaign against America but who do not seek its destruction” (idem: 5). In this study, I address this second form of anti-Americanism and investigate its roots and characteristics. The study also measures the extent to which it can be identified among young Slovaks in the 14-25 age cohort in the region of East Slovakia.*

Keywords: *anti-Americanism, cultural dominance, Slovak anti-Americanism, Slovak youth, values*

1. Introduction

Anti-Americanism became a more prominent aspect of public discourse in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA, but academic interest in the topic has since waxed and waned. The genesis of scholarly research into the issue can possibly be dated to the 1995 publication of Hollander’s work *Anti-Americanism: Irrational and Rational* (2005) which refers to the anti-Americanist phenomenon as an antagonistic opposition to American values. Hollander sees anti-American sentiments as being mostly grounded in prejudice and notes that it is often illogical and irrational in nature. The study also categorizes some of the main aspects of anti-Americanism as follows: “nationalism (political or cultural), the rejection of (or ambivalence toward) modernization, and anti-capitalism” (Hollander 2005:7). Opposition to core American values, such as diversity and inclusion, modernity and laissez-faire capitalism, evidently play a role, but this raises the question of how anti-American sentiments change in line with the observable shifts in American values. It is important to clarify what factors generate opposition and hostility towards the US: is it the value system itself or is it the aggressive promotion of those values springing from the myth of American exceptionalism? To date, much of the scholarly analysis of anti-Americanism has lacked consistency and has consequently left many questions unanswered. The objective of this paper is to offer a more adequate definition of contemporary anti-Americanism, which can serve as a framework for research in

the cultural realm. The study concentrates on the region of East Slovakia and deals exclusively with young Slovaks in the 14-25 age cohort, based on surveys conducted with undergraduate students in the Department of British and American Studies of the Faculty of Arts at the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice and students at East Slovak bilingual secondary schools, in which English is the language of instruction, either partly or fully. This group of respondents was chosen for three reasons. Firstly, members of this cohort show some sensitivity to the subject through their experience with the anglophone cultural realm and their relatively sound knowledge about the USA, and their responses would therefore be expected to reflect an elevated level of cultural knowledge about the country. Secondly, this age cohort is constantly exposed to a wide variety of media content which actively shapes their worldviews. Thirdly, many members of this age cohort are at risk of potential manipulation through fake news, targeted advertisements, or trolls, that can divert their attention towards anti-Americanist narratives.

The study was conducted as part of an ongoing small-scale research project at the Department of British and American Studies of the Faculty of Arts at the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice under Grant No. vvgs-2022-2435, with the title *Perception of the USA at Secondary and Higher Education Institutions in the Eastern Slovak Region through Local and Global Media*. The present paper is the final output of the project.

2. Theoretical framework

Slovakia and the USA have long enjoyed extraordinarily cordial relations. This is particularly apparent in political and economic cooperations, such as the large-scale investments made by American corporations in key Slovak industries, the most notable of which was the acquisition of the East Slovak Ironworks in Košice by US Steel Corporation in 2000. Furthermore, the US has long been a major destination of Slovak emigration, the result of which is the large communities of Slovaks who have settled permanently in the USA. An estimated 780,000 Slovaks currently live in the US (Brittingham and de la Cruz 2004), a population which constitutes the largest Slovak community abroad and which makes a permanent contribution to active cultural exchanges and the tightening of bilateral relations.

Given these positive impacts of Slovakia's successful integration into the western political and economic structures, it is not then wholly surprising that this small Central European nation has yet to experience active anti-Americanism in the form of street protests, boycotts of American goods, destruction of American property in Slovakia or the burning of flags, but anti-American rhetoric is undoubtedly present in contemporary Slovak political and public discourses.

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2022 has further strengthened anti-American sentiments in the Slovak society, and these tropes have gradually leaked into public debates and infiltrated political discourse. Juraj Sýkora (2023) claims that the signing of the Defence Cooperation Agreement (2022) between Slovakia and the USA was a strong impetus which provoked a wave of anti-American sentiments among Slovaks and created a narrative about the possibility

of US nuclear weapons being deployed on Slovak territory. A further example of the linking of the USA with conspiratory actions against Slovakia is the oft-repeated accusation levelled at President Zuzana Čaputová that she is an “American agent”, a regular trope employed in the media by her political opponents. These attacks on the integrity of the head of state reached such a degree that President Čaputová announced in 2022 that she was considering legal action on the matter (Hudec 2022).

It is important to note that “the label [of anti-Americanism] cannot and should not be applied to any vocal criticism of U.S. values or policies” (Krastev 2004:7), and it is therefore necessary to clearly differentiate criticism of US domestic or foreign policy from real anti-Americanism. The case of Slovak anti-Americanism is complicated and reflects a certain type of national schizophrenia, which is characterized, on the one hand, by the admiration of the US as a role model, and, on the other, by a latent antipathy which is rooted in the willingness of the US to prioritize their own geopolitical and commercial interests, even at the expense of their supposed allies. Central and Eastern European countries have long been struggling with the burden of the post-communist heritage, which has significantly hindered the establishment of functional democracies throughout the region. Central European populations have often been witness to the uncritical subservience of their governments to pressure from Western powers in terms of the demand that they adapt their ways of life, values, and conduct to Western ideals, rather than allow the natural evolution of a democratic system. This has bred frustration in many, and, as Krastev (2004: 9) argues, “far from commitment to freedom, it was the instinct to the vassal whose behavior is motivated by carrots and sticks that explains the course taken by East European governments”. Slovakia is no exception in this respect, and it is difficult to disagree with Cabada’s (2021: 292) assertion that “civil society in Central and Eastern Europe often survived the Communist period in the form of a rather ‘bad civil society’ or uncivil society”, which has left a legacy of corruption, social tensions springing from economic inequality, lack of opportunity and disrupted moral behaviour. Possibly to compensate for these shortcomings, Slovaks have gradually built up a worldview and identity rooted both in a mythical past, characterized by the deeds of the great Slavic heroes of 19th century nationalist romanticism and in an adherence to conservative Catholic values, blended with a post-communist heritage, which masquerades as social democracy. This eclectic model represents an effort to amalgamate such disparate concepts as nationalism, social democracy (basically used as a euphemism for the outdated worldview of socialism), pan-Slavism, and religious conservatism.

Besides history, geographic factors also significantly affect the extent of this type of thinking among Slovaks. Urban-rural juxtaposition is marked in the Slovak public discourse, where urban areas display a greater inclination towards cosmopolitanism and progressivism, and in the 2024 presidential elections, urban electorates predominantly voted for the liberal candidate, in contrast to those of rural regions, which preferred the more explicitly patriotic nationalist candidate (volby.sk 2024). The situation, however, is more complex than a straightforward urban-rural opposition, and divisions can also be identified within the urban population itself. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have maintained a model in which “the

boundaries between the rural and the urban have remained porous” (Buzalka 2008: 760), and this approach is reflected in ways of thinking which have remained intact within the new context of city life. The massive migration of the rural population to the urban areas in the decades after World War II has led to the emergence of urban generations which have preserved “the ‘rural’ narratives, morality, imagery and ideology [...]”. With the exception of Czechia, such a ‘rural’ narrative is also strongly interconnected with religiosity” (Cabada 2021: 293). These new inhabitants of the cities remained strongly connected to the rural environment due to the popularity of weekend cottages in the 1970s and 1980s, a trend found across Central and Eastern Europe. This effect created a divided urban population, which is comprised of two major layers: a small inner circle of citizens who are the descendants of the original urban bourgeoisie and espouse liberal and cosmopolitan values, and the “newcomers”, more specifically the earlier generation or generations of rural inhabitants, who moved to the city in search of work, but who have maintained links with their rural origins.

Despite the presence of anti-American phenomena, the US remains popular in Slovakia, and this generally positive stance is reflected in the mushrooming of bilingual and international schools and the widespread use of English, with the country ranking on the 13th place among 113 countries for English proficiency (EF English Proficiency Index 2024). “The democratic and market changes that Eastern Europe experienced over the past decade came wrapped in the American flag. When democracy came to Eastern Europe, it was singing in English, it was in love with the U.S. Constitution, and it was promoted by American foundations” (Krastev 2004: 10). As a result, the type of anti-Americanism which we will investigate in this study is one which “...is a protest not against America itself but against its apparent failure to live up to its own ideals” (idem: 8).

3. Methodology

My research uses sociological data collection methods in the form of an online anonymous questionnaire. The objective of the research was to investigate the acceptance of selected American values promoted on media platforms, accessible to young Slovaks in the 14-25 age cohort. This was done by using a questionnaire containing 30 items which enabled both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The survey incorporates a minimum level of demographical data, including independent variables, such as age, biological sex, place of residence or travelling experiences in the USA. It concentrates on measuring opinions, feelings, and attitudes in relation to selected American values through semantic differential scales and Likert scales. These data collection tools provide reliable information about people’s attitudes, opinions, or perceptions. Semantic differential scales use pairs of opposite adjectives and ask respondents to rate their feelings and opinions along a continuum, for example *true–falls*, *acceptable–unacceptable*. In Likert scale questions, respondents are presented with a statement or question related to the topic being studied. Respondents are given a set of pre-defined response options that indicate different levels of agreement or disagreement on a scale which typically represents a continuum from strong agreement to strong disagreement.

The selection of values is based on Neal and Youngelson-Neal's *Core Values in American Life: Living with Contradictions* (2014), which depicts many attitudes which are widely discussed in the contemporary USA. As the webpage of the publisher (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group 2024) states, "the authors identify individualism, the pursuit of happiness, freedom, consumerism, materialism, equality of opportunity, technology, mastery of the environment, quality of marriage, and national unity as the core American values". The goal of this research is not to investigate the extent to which these values are present in the Slovak mindset, but rather to map the overlaps between the American and Slovak worldviews and identify the specific values which are acceptable to or considered praiseworthy by our Slovak target group.

The hypothesis is as follows: *If young Slovaks are willing to accept core American values either fully or partially, this may prove that pro-American attitudes can predominate over anti-Americanism.*

My questionnaire aimed to identify conflicting worldviews and point out values which may be less acceptable among those in the 14-25 age cohort and to clarify any possible sources of latent or open anti-American attitudes among young Slovaks.

The first three questions collected demographic data about the respondents, including their age, biological sex, and place of residence. Geographical location was investigated separately in order to examine possible rural-urban differences. Given the fact that the Slovak urban structure is somewhat homogenous, with a predominance of medium-sized towns, we differentiated between four categories of settlement: villages with up to 1000 inhabitants, towns with up to 5000 inhabitants, larger towns up to 10,000 inhabitants, and lastly large urban areas of over 10,000 inhabitants. We hypothesize that the urban mindset described by Cabada (2021) would only be apparent in the case of respondents who are permanent residents of large urban areas of over 10,000 inhabitants.

Question 4 was composed of a single main item accompanied by eight sub-questions, all designed uniformly, according to the semantic differential model, offering the respondents the opportunity to express their attitude on a seven-level scale. The first sub-question was formulated in a straightforward manner, to coach the respondents on what was expected from them: "How would you describe your feelings towards the USA?" Possible answers ranged across a Negative-Positive scale. The sub-question "How would you describe the USA?" was followed by eight semantic differential options: Dangerous-Friendly, Exploitative-Helpful, Oppressive-Democratic, Selfish-Fair, Liar-Trustworthy, Corrupt-Honest, Excluding-Accepting, and Poor-Rich.

Question 5 investigated the personal experiences of the respondents by asking about their opportunities of travelling to the USA.

Question 6 was designed to create a cross-reference with the sub-questions in Question 4. In this question, respondents were asked to choose three qualitative statements that they believed best described the US, from the following options: Family loving, Consumerist, Equal, Environmentalist, Educated, Independent, Individualistic, Materialistic, Free, Developed, Religious and Influential.

Question 7 repeated the pattern in Question 6, but asked the respondents to freely choose a single word which they believed best described the US. This question was designed to eliminate any unintentional bias which may have arisen in Question 6 due to the limited range of available options.

Questions 8-22 offered statements about the US with hidden references to selected values. The answers provided information on the respondents' attitudes towards these values on a seven-level scale on the Agree-Disagree range. The selected values and their associated questions were as follows: a series of questions relating to environmental protection Q8) "The USA is able to solve environmental problems because it is technologically advanced"; Q9) "The USA manipulates people and therefore they generate environmental anxiety"; Q10) "Global warming is a scientifically proven fact"; Q11) "I am concerned that the food I eat, the water I drink and the air I breathe are contaminated"; Q12) "The collapse of human society and a global catastrophe are inevitable and unavoidable"; Q13) "Americans live in harmony with the natural environment"; Q14) "American companies can be trusted to do everything possible to adapt their technologies to be more environmentally friendly"; Q15) "The USA is a good example and we should follow in their footsteps". A series of questions relating to issues of personal freedom and individualism followed: Q16) "My opinion is more important than my parents'/friends'/communities' preferences"; Q17) "Personal freedom must be restricted to ensure the smooth functioning of society"; the next five questions were related to personal accountability and independence: Q18) "People largely get what they deserve out of life"; Q19) "If people work hard enough, they will become successful"; Q20) "A strong individual has the right to rebellion against authority"; Q21) "Everybody has the right to enjoy a lifestyle that he/she considers to be the best, regardless of the opinions of others"; Q22) "We cannot know what is true and reliable because truth is relative".

In an effort to interrupt the monotony of the survey, Question 23 requested respondents to choose from a series of four statements that described how they see the possibility of influencing events through responsible decision-making: A) "History deals only with the past and has little relevance to contemporary life", B) "Knowing the past helps us improve our lives now", C) "The future is unknowable, so I do not care about it. I concentrate on the here and now", and D) "The future is predictable, so I try to prepare for it".

Statements 24-27 investigated the possible dominance of American culture over local traditions: Q24) "American films are great, and I like the topics and heroes in Hollywood productions"; Q25) "I mostly listen to American music"; Q26) "Slovak traditions are boring"; Q27) "Real freedom consists of being alone and living without commitments".

Question 28 investigated the personal preferences of the respondents by asking them to choose three life goals from the following: build a career, get rich, have children, become famous, be normal, become respected, be useful, be loved, be happy, be clever, become experienced or have a clear conscience.

Question 29 and Question 30 investigated the extent to which the respondents were under the influence of anti-American conspiracy theories by asking whether

they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: Q29) “Democracy is just a tool with which to manipulate people” and Q30) “This world is run by a few people and there is not much that the little guy can do about it”.

4. Discussions and results

A total of 451 responses were received between 14 September 2023 and 21 November 2023. The demographic data shows that the distribution of the informants’ age groups was relatively even, with no single age group predominating, although there was a two-thirds overrepresentation of females to male respondents; this bias should be taken into account, and we acknowledge that it may have had a considerable impact on the survey results. This effect may spring from gender differences in perceptions and life experiences or perspectives that shape human attitudes. Cultural norms or different communications styles between female and male respondents may lead to differing results which might also be influenced by the actual subject matter or hidden biases and stereotypes. In terms of urban-rural distribution, approximately 49% of respondents indicated permanent residence in an urban area i.e., a settlement of more than 10,000 inhabitants.

The results of the semantic differential section of the survey showed that our respondents held a fairly balanced view of the US as partner. They perceived the US as a somewhat dangerous, inclusive, selfish and untrustworthy country, which was rich, but also largely corrupt. It is interesting to contrast this result with that of Q5 which investigated personal experiences of travelling in the US. Only 30 respondents indicated that they had visited the US on at least one occasion, and this allows us to infer that the results collected through the semantic differential test are probably not rooted in real-life experiences, but are formed by media narratives or personal prejudices. The choice of adjectives selected in Q6 supports this view, with three adjectives – Materialistic, Influential and Consumerist – being selected most often, a finding which can be seen as a reflection of the strong influence of media narratives rather than firsthand experience. In Q7, the respondents were asked to write down the first word that popped into their minds when they heard the term “the USA”. The most common words were “guns” (24 times), “freedom” (20 times), “New York” (13 times), “eagle” (10 times), “shooting” (10 times), “flag” (9 times) and “money” (9 times). These choices also indicate that the respondents displayed a strong tendency to echo social media narratives or media clichés and to think in simplified stereotypical terms, which have little basis on the real issues facing America.

The second section of the survey investigated the degree to which respondents accepted or refused selected American values, more specifically those related to environmental protection, personal freedom and individualism, and personal accountability. In terms of environmental issues, the respondents indicated that they trusted the US as a leading power with the capacity to combat environmental problems effectively, with 198 answers agreeing with this opinion, in contrast to 168 answers showing sceptical or highly sceptical stances. Q9 showed that 241 respondents trusted the US as a dependable actor in environmental questions and rejected the idea that the US manipulates people to generate environmental anxiety.

A similar result is reflected by the answers to Q10, where 375 respondents clearly indicated that they accepted the scientific argument for the reality of global warming. Q11, which investigated environmental anxiety, displayed an even distribution of responses, with a slight majority of 232 respondents stating that they were concerned about the quality of food, water, air and soil. Q12 revealed that the respondents had a somewhat ambiguous perception of the future; a narrow majority of 201 respondents believed that we could solve environmental issues, while 180 indicated that they did not believe that there was a reliable solution to an unavoidable environmental catastrophe. These results form a stark contrast with the results of Q13, which asked the respondents whether they believed or not that Americans lived in harmony with nature. A total of 355 respondents were of the opinion that Americans were separated from nature, with 144 of them stating that this separation was extreme; in contrast, less than 10% of the respondents believed that Americans lived in harmony with nature. Q14 followed the same trend as far as trust in American companies was concerned. A total of 336 respondents were extremely sceptical or just sceptical that American companies would be willing to adapt their technologies to become more environmentally friendly, while less than 10% of respondents saw a willingness to do so on the part of American industry in this respect. Q15 asked whether the US was a good example in general and whether we should follow the American way. An overwhelming majority of 328 negative or extremely negative responses rejected the idea of accepting the US as a role model.

Q16 investigated the value of individualism and its acceptance or rejection among the members of the studied age cohort. The respondents were relatively equally distributed in their individual opinions of the value, with 161 respondents rejecting individualism as a value, 122 expressing a neutral stance and 168 indicating that individualism is seen as a rather positive or extremely positive trait. The control question, Q17, investigating the possibility of restricting personal freedom in order to enable the creation of a more stable society also showed that the respondents still accepted individualism slightly more positively than collectivism, but the respondents were far from benevolent towards the concept of personal freedom, with 218 respondents stating that they did not approve of restrictions on personal freedom in favour of social peace and stability. A total of 81 respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, whereas 152 respondents could justify limitations on personal freedom for the benefit of peace and stability in society.

Q18, which investigated personal responsibility for the consequences of individuals' decisions showed an equal distribution of responses, and the results suggest that young Slovaks evidently do not perceive a strong relationship between hard work and quality of life. It should be noted, however, that the statement "People largely get what they deserve out of life" can be interpreted in various ways and that not all respondents linked the statement with the idea of merit arising from hard work and a responsible lifestyle. This ambiguity is addressed in Q19, which clearly referred to the respondents' opinion about the relationship between merit and hard work. A total of 286 respondents indicated that they believed that better standards of living and an enhanced social status could be achieved through hard work.

Q20 addressed the respondents' view on individualism from a slightly different angle, asking if the struggle for individual rights could justify rebellion and protests. The results were mixed, with 178 respondents expressing disagreement and 164 showing agreement with the statement. A further 109 respondents had no opinion on the matter. These results indicate a lack of bias and demonstrate the low level of assertiveness when personal rights are threatened. In contrast, the answers to Q21 show that a large majority of the respondents (343) agreed to the right of the individual to live freely without restrictions; nonetheless, it is clear that this is seen as a benefit granted freely by society and not a right for which an individual should fight and struggle.

Q22, investigating the respondents' views on absolute truth, revealed a slightly biased distribution of answers, with 232 responses agreeing to the existence of objective truth and 114 answers indicating that truth is a relative quality. Q23 served as a control question for Q22 by emphasizing the importance of historical experiences in decision making. 301 respondents believed a deeper knowledge of the past could help improve our lives in the present, while 61 indicated that it is a person's individual responsibility to use their knowledge and experiences of history to prepare for the future. Once again, this indicates a slight bias towards individual freedom and responsibility, albeit with some reservations.

Q24 analysed preferences in cultural consumption patterns and cultural dominance, more specifically the relationship between the cultural differences existing between America and Slovakia. The responses revealed that the majority of the young people have a strong or relatively positive attitude towards American cultural products. Hollywood productions were seen as high quality and enjoyable according to 282 respondents, although 98 respondents rejected or strongly rejected American cinema as a symbol of quality. A similar situation was observed in terms of attitudes towards American music, with 258 respondents stating that they liked or very much liked American music, more than twice as many as the 126 who disliked or strongly disliked American music. Q26 indicated that Slovak traditions remained important for young Slovaks, as 334 respondents considered them important or extremely important compared to American traditions. Less than 15% of the respondents displayed some degree of Americanization and a preference for American culture over Slovak culture. Q27 provided a cross reference in connection with the notion of individual freedom and the answers showed considerable disagreement with the statement that real freedom consists of living alone without commitments. Q28 reinforced the findings provided by Q27, as two of the most dominant life goals were to be happy and to be loved, with respondents choosing these values over materialistic goals, such as becoming rich or building a career. 67% of the respondents wanted to be happy and 61% wanted to be loved whereas just 40% perceived success in terms of the context of career and 38% thought that getting rich was an important life goal.

The answers to Q29 indicated that Slovak young people believe overwhelmingly in the advantages of democracy and showed no signs of being influenced by conspiracy theories about shadowy groups controlling the world, the new world order or other hoaxes. A total of 213 responses indicated a strong or very

strong belief in democratic values, while 112 responses showed scepticism or strong scepticism towards democracy as a social system.

This finding is in sharp contrast with that of Q30, which explored the respondents' views about the actual condition of democratic institutions and processes by referring to a widespread conspiracy which posits that a handful of very powerful families control the world. 272 respondents stated that they strongly believed or believed to a certain degree in this conspiracy theory, more than the double of the 123 respondents who rejected this idea.

5. Conclusion

My original hypothesis stated that: *If young Slovaks are willing to accept core American values either fully or partially, this may prove that pro-American attitudes predominate over anti-Americanism.* The results of the survey clearly show that this hypothesis is correct.

The US is still dominantly seen as a positive role model by the target group, the 14-25 age cohort. The type of anti-Americanism which was identified in the survey results was neither political, nor aggressive, but corresponded with Krastev's (2004: 8) perception of "a protest not against America itself but against its apparent failure to live up to its own ideals". The results of the semantic differential analysis show that our respondents hold a generally balanced view of the US as a partner. Young Slovaks lack personal experiences in and with the US and therefore tend to echo opinions (both negative and positive) which they have obtained from different media sources in an uncritical manner. Concerning the acceptance or rejection of selected American values, the responses revealed a relatively strong pro-American attitude combined with some degree of Slovak patriotism. When placed in conflict with certain American values, such as individualism, individual responsibility, meritocracy, free competition, or the struggle for individual freedom even by means of force, the informants revealed a preference for Slovak attitudes over American influence; for example, they stated that Slovak traditions were still important (Q26) even though a large majority showed a preference for American popular culture over Slovak cultural products. Despite the admiration and high expectations which many hold regarding the US, young Slovaks do not fully trust the US, especially in the context of its corporate culture, in which environmental issues are seen as being overlooked, and many hold rather negative views about the state of democracy in the US. Although some slight differences were observed in the opinions of rural and urban Slovak young people, this was not significant, and we can agree with Buzalka (2008) that the new urban generations have successfully retained a great deal of the traditional rural worldview and morality.

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