

MICHAL VAŠEČKA

RELATIONSHIP OF THE MAJORITY POPULATION TO THE ROMA

Summary: This chapter analyses the relationship of the majority population to the Roma in Slovakia, reflecting the results of public opinion polls. The author examines the considerable social gulf between the majority population and the Roma, and explains how these prejudices arose. The author analyzes the results of public opinion polls in explaining the social gap between the majority and the Roma, criticizes misleading studies of social distance, and examines perceptions of the social standing of the Roma in Slovakia. In conclusion, the author warns of a rise in tension between the majority and the Roma, and evaluates the danger of ethnic conflict as social chasms continue to deepen.

Key words: public opinion, social distance, prejudice, stereotypes, relationships, anti-discriminatory attitudes, empathy, inter-ethnic conflict, types and stages of conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

The different culture of the Roma and their different way of life are viewed negatively by the majority population, whose general opinion is that most Roma do not want or do not know how to adapt to social standards. This view of the Roma's "otherness" has led to a social gulf between the majority population and the Roma. According to all opinion polls concerning the relationship of the majority population to minorities, the social gulf, or

"social distance", is greatest between the majority and the Roma. Over the long term, the relationship and attitudes of the majority population to the Roma have been far worse than the majority's relationship to other groups of inhabitants. On scales of social distance the Roma usually rank first, even if respondents can also choose other typically rejected groups, such as homosexuals, alcoholics, and drug addicts (Vašečka, 2001a).

Every opinion poll dealing with this issue since 1990 has confirmed that the social gulf concerning the Roma in Slovakia is equally great among all classes of inhabitants, regardless of age, sex, education, nationality, political sympathies, or the size of the municipality in which the respondent lives, and that the size of this gulf has not changed over time. A large part of the majority population views the presence of the Roma in Slovakia as a burden, and this feeling intensifies when they are asked to imagine the presence of the Roma in their neighborhood or close proximity. The proportion of people who would reject having a Roma as a neighbor has remained steady throughout the 1990s at more than three quarters of respondents (Vašečka, 2001b).

A large part of the majority population forms its attitudes to the Roma under the influence of prejudice and stereotypes rooted in ethnocentrism. The high degree of rejection and the widespread prejudice directly influence the behavior of the Roma, who often just

fulfill the image the majority population has of them. The tension between the Roma and the majority population keeps rising, and poses a real threat for the future of the liberal-democratic regime in Slovakia.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ROMA AND THE REST

Is the rejection of the Roma in Slovakia the result of prejudices and stereotypes? Is it the result of the vicious circle described in the “Thomas theorem”, according to which prejudices that are believed to be true actually become true, and thus fuel new stereotypes? Or is this rejection the result of negative experiences that survey respondents have had with the Roma? Clearly, the answer is a mixture of all these factors. People’s experiences affect the formation of prejudices, which are then reflected in the production of stereotypes; fully 50% of the respondents in a 1995 opinion poll conducted in Slovakia by the GfK agency had had no negative experience with the Roma. The percentage of people who have had a negative experience with the Roma in Slovakia has not

changed much since 1995 – according to an opinion poll conducted by the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) in March 2000, 42% of respondents had had a bad or somewhat bad experience with the Roma, while only 17% had had a good or somewhat good experience. Some 27.4% of respondents had had both good and bad experiences, and almost 13% had had no personal experience with Roma at all (Vašečka, 2001a).

The negative relationship to the Roma and the social gap between the majority and the Roma is not the result of the cultural “otherness” of the Roma in our modern society – attitudes to the Roma were equally negative in the past. During the initial stages of communism, the majority generally thought that the Roma could only overcome their backwardness if they gave up their way of life and adapted to the majority population as much as possible. The Roma were perceived by the majority as a socially underdeveloped group of people with inadequate work habits. While there are no reliable data on the social gap between the majority and the Roma before 1989, we may assume that the Roma were fairly strongly rejected. This

Graph 1

Evaluation of the relationship between the Roma and the rest of population (in %)



Source: Center for the Research of Social Problems, October 1990; IVO, March 2000.

was fully displayed in the first opinion polls after 1989 (Vašečka, 2001a).

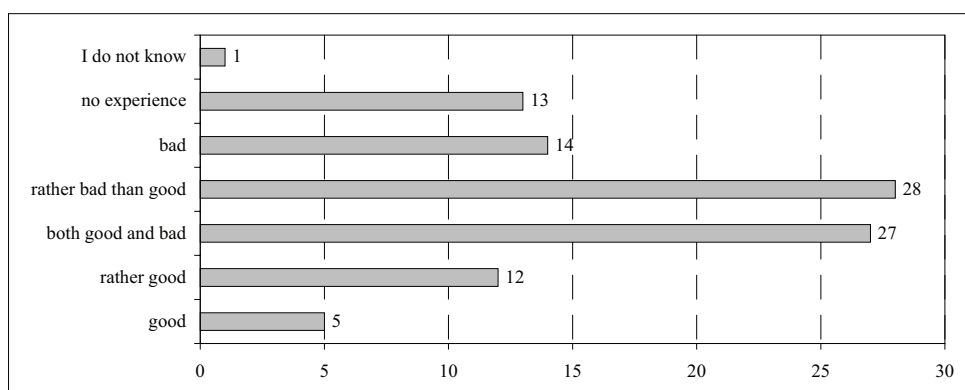
The declared relationship between the majority population and the Roma minority did not change much in the 1990s. An opinion poll conducted in November 1990 confirmed that the relationship between the Roma and the rest of population was very tense – over 90% of respondents assessed it as bad (somewhat bad or very bad) (*Aktuálne problémy...*, 1990).

Further opinion polls confirmed that the view of the relationship between the Roma and the rest of the population has not changed, and remains very negative. According to an opinion poll conducted by the IVO in March 2000, only 17% of respondents thought the relationship between the Roma and the majority population was good or somewhat good, while 80% called it bad or somewhat bad. The relationship between the Roma and the rest of population has not changed and the results are the same. Only 4% of respondents had relatives among the Roma; 13% had Roma colleagues at work; 21% had Roma friends; and 23% had some Roma living in their neighborhood. As for casual forms of contact with the Roma, 61% of respondents knew some Roma well

enough to greet them on the street and occasionally speak with them, while 93% encountered the Roma on the street, in the shops, or on the bus. Although most people assessed the relationship between the Roma and non-Roma as bad, only 43% of respondents said they had had a bad or somewhat bad experience with a Roma; 27% had had both good and bad experiences; 17% had had a good or somewhat good personal experience, and 13% had had no personal experience (Vašečka, 2001a).

People living in close contact with the Roma usually have fewer negative experiences with them than people without this kind of contact. For example, among those respondents who live next to a Roma family, 27% indicated they had had positive experiences, 32% mixed, and 39% negative experiences. On the other hand, among respondents not living near a Roma family, only 14% said they had had a positive experience, 26% mixed, and 43% a negative experience. Among people working with the Roma, 29% had had positive personal experiences with the Roma, 36% mixed experiences, and 33% negative experiences. The relationship between the Roma and the non-Roma population is assessed as poor not only by people who have

Graph 2
“What is your personal experience with the Roma?” (in %)



Source: IVO, March 2000.

had negative personal experiences with the Roma (91% of them state that the relationship is bad), but also by 78% of those who have had positive personal experiences with the Roma (Vašečka, 2001a).

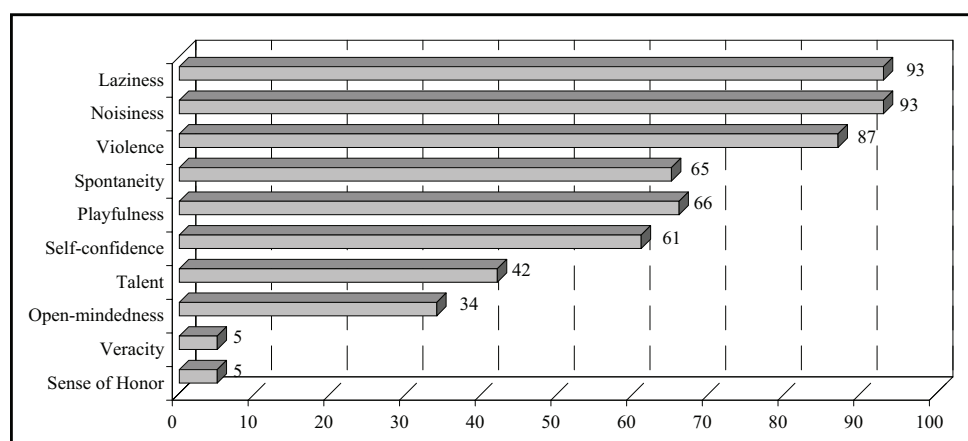
SOCIAL GAP BETWEEN THE MAJORITY AND THE ROMA

All opinion polls examining the social gap between the majority population and the Roma since 1990 have noticed that this social distance in Slovakia is equally pronounced in all classes of the population, and that it has remained constant over time. The ratio of people who said they would refuse to have a Roma as a neighbor remained constant during the 1990s at more than three-quarters of Slovak respondents. According to the opinion polls conducted by the FOCUS agency over the past decade, the degree of social distance (measured by the percentage of people who say they would refuse to live next to a Roma) developed as follows: 80% in October 1990, 80% in May 1991, 82% in January 1992, 94% in March 1993, 79% in October 1993, 78% in May 1994, 76% in

December 1994, 80% in October 1997, 76% in January 1999, and 78% in March 2000 (Vašečka, 2001a).

An opinion poll conducted by the Institute for Research of Public Opinion (IRPO, 1995) analyzed prejudices and stereotypes about the Roma by finding out which characteristics were attributed to the Roma by respondents. Among the positive traits were the following: musical talent (53%), talent for business (19%), carefree manner (16%), and love of children and family (10%). However, 32% of respondents in the IRPO poll could not think of any positive qualities. Among the negative characteristics were the following: crime-prone, work-shy, poor hygiene, alcoholism, noisiness, and deviousness. The various negative characteristics attributed to the Roma by the public are stated far more strongly and definitely than the positive ones. The IRPO researchers stated that this view of the Roma prevails among all inhabitants of Slovakia, and is very homogenous, not varying from one socio demographic group to another. Which traits are typical of the Roma from the viewpoint of Slovak respondents? According to a 1995 GfK Praha opin-

Graph 3
“Which properties are typical for the Roma?” (in %)



Source: GfK Praha, 1995.

ion poll, negative characteristics clearly prevail (see Graph 3).

Most Slovak respondents mentioned displays of antisocial behavior as the thing they disliked about the Roma the most, including especially abuse of welfare benefits (84%) and criminality (89%). Opinion polls are constantly pointing out that the social distance between the Roma and the majority is significant among all classes of people, regardless of age, education, sex, profession, religion, and economic or foreign policy orientation. The social gap is closely related to people's perception of the proper relationship between the majority and minorities: the gap is smaller among people who emphasize the need to respect minority rights. On the other hand, people who show a greater degree of distrust towards "the others", are also marked by a greater sense of social frustration and injustice; they tend to expect the state to use a paternalistic approach, they often reject democratic principles, they tend to favor the "strong hand" style of government, they believe that the majority should take decisions even at the expense of minorities, and they show greater tolerance for racial and national hatred (Bútorová, Gyárfášová and Velšic, 2000). Lower-than-average social distance between the majority and the Roma was found among the inhabitants of the smallest villages, and among respondents claiming Hungarian ethnicity (FOCUS, December 1994).

Opinion polls confirm that personal contact with members of a minority decreases social distance. For example, among those who work with the Roma, as many as 65% have no objection to the presence of the Roma in Slovakia, while 44% would not mind their presence in their village or town district, and 28% would be comfortable with the presence of Roma in their immediate neighborhood. On the other hand, the greatest social gap

between the majority and the Roma is among people with no close personal contact with the Roma. For example, among respondents who do not encounter the Roma at all, only 34% accepted their presence in Slovakia, only 23% would accept them in their municipality, and only 12% would not mind having a Roma as a neighbor (IVO, March 2000). According to this poll, 80% of respondents considered the relationship between the Roma and the non-Roma to be poor, but only 43% of respondents said they had had a bad experience with them (28% more bad than good, and 14% bad); 27% had had both good and bad experiences; 17% had had good experiences (5% good, 12% rather good); and 13% had had no personal experience with the Roma. Data on the frequency of contacts between the majority population and the Roma show that most Slovak people have had some contact with the Roma; thus, when people evaluate the Roma, both prejudice and practical experience play a role. Some 4% of respondents had relatives among the Roma, 21% friends, 13% colleagues, and 23% close neighbors; 61% said they knew some Roma personally, and 93% said they regularly encountered the Roma on the street, in the shops, on the bus, or elsewhere (Bútorová, Gyárfášová and Velšic, 2000).

SOCIAL GAP BETWEEN THE MAJORITY AND "OTHER MINORITIES"

The relationship and attitudes of the majority population to the Roma have long been far worse than its relationship to other groups. On the scale of social distance the Roma always rank first, even when other rejected groups such as homosexuals, alcoholics or drug addicts are included. Compared to the Roma, even alcoholics and drug addicts are perceived more positively. Ac-

cording to research conducted by the IRPO in 1995, the inhabitants of Slovakia generally have the best attitude towards the Czechs, while the Roma top the other end of the scale. As many as 77% of Slovaks view their relationship with the Roma as hostile or somewhat hostile. This fact, and its constancy over time, has been confirmed by several ensuing opinion polls (FOCUS, 1999; IVO, 1999, 2000). The Roma are perceived as the ethnic group that most frequently evokes a negative reaction among the majority population. On the other end of the scale were the Jews (the Czechs were not included this time). Opinion polls conducted by the FOCUS agency and the Institute for Public Affairs repeatedly confirmed that respondents with a negative attitude towards one ethnic minority tend to reject other minorities as well. This was confirmed by an opinion poll conducted by the Institute for Social Analysis at Comenius University in May 1991 – respondents who were intolerant of the Hungarians were equally intolerant of the Roma, Jews, and foreigners (Vašečka, 2001a).

PERCEPTION OF THE ROMA'S POSITION IN SOCIETY

The huge social gap between the majority and the Roma is related to the lack of empathy that the majority show for the difficult situation the Roma are in. In 1999, according to IVO research, only 23% of respondents conceded that the social situation of the Roma had declined over the past two years, while 60% believed it had not (IVO, January 1999). In March 2000, as many as 49% of respondents stated that the Roma had equal conditions and chances for development as the rest of the Slovak population. Only 21% believed that the position of the Roma was worse; this opinion was more frequent among people with higher education

and those with friends, colleagues, and especially relatives among the Roma. Some 27% of respondents, on the other hand, were persuaded that the Roma were privileged in Slovakia. Several opinion polls looking at the relationship between the majority and the Roma have shown that even though respondents declare that all people in Slovakia should have equal rights (e.g. in the 1995 IRPO opinion poll, 80% of respondents held this opinion), this insistence on equality varies according to which national, racial, or religious group is in question (Vašečka, 2001a).

RESPONDENTS' OPINIONS ON HOW TO ADDRESS THE ROMA ISSUE

After 1989, the Slovak population began to realize that the "Roma issue" was becoming one of the greatest challenges Slovakia faced. According to research entitled *Slovakia Before the Elections*, conducted by the Center for Research of Social Problems established by the Coordination Center of the Public Against Violence party in May 1990, only 3.2% of respondents, when asked "What is the greatest problem Slovakia faces?" answered "the Roma issue", putting the Roma issue in 10th place at the time. The "rating" of the Roma issue gradually increased, however, and according to another opinion poll by the same Center in November 1990, the Roma issue ranked 7th (4.5% of respondents). This opinion poll warned that the intensity of the debate on coexistence between the Czechs and Slovaks was not warranted by the real state of the relationship between these two nations, and that far more serious issues remained in the background, open to abuse by irresponsible forces – the Center was especially concerned with the tense relationship between the Roma and the rest of Slovakia's inhabitants (Center for Research..., May 1990). According to the Center's May

1990 research, the political engagement and representation of the Roma (in 1990 it was through the Roma Civic Initiative – ROI) was viewed rather negatively by respondents, who regarded ROI as the political party with the lowest intellectual potential, as a party that was not trying to solve problems, and as an opportunistic party (it ranked immediately behind the Communist Party) that would cause an economic decline if it won the elections (Vašečka, 2001a).

The huge social gap between the majority and the Roma in Slovakia is accompanied by support for anti-Roma legislation and a widespread refusal to consider positive solutions. The issue of discriminatory measures against the Roma was dealt with in an opinion poll conducted by the IRPO in 1995, in which 52% of respondents agreed that stricter legislation and regulations should apply to the Roma than to the majority population, while 66% of respondents thought that the Roma should live isolated from other inhabitants, i.e. in separate settlements.

The predilection of Slovaks for repressive measures as solutions to the Roma issue was also confirmed by the 1995 GfK Praha opinion poll. Some 74% of respondents thought that welfare benefits should be capped, while 46% supported limiting the high Roma birth rate; 50% supported stricter legislation for the Roma, 25% their isolation from the rest of the population, and 25% their banishment from the country. Fully 21% said they would not hesitate to take the law into their own hands. On the other hand, only a small part of the population realizes the need to solve problems that have been accumulating over decades – only 25% of respondents called for increased tolerance in society, and 21% thought that more should be invested into the education of the Roma. It was encouraging that 50% of respondents supported harsher punishment for displays of racism.

A large portion of the non-Roma population realizes the need to improve the education of the Roma and to allow them to form their own intellectual elite. According to an opinion poll by the IVO in March 2000, 65% of respondents agreed that “the state should ensure that more Roma acquire higher education and work as teachers, lawyers, doctors, and priests”. It is encouraging that compared to the previous year the proportion of people who realized this need grew by nine percentage points. Many people in Slovakia view the insufficient preparedness of Roma youth to join the labor process as a handicap. In 1999, 76% of respondents opined that “the state should ensure that many more Roma children acquire vocational education”. Allowing Roma children to study in their mother tongue had less support among the majority population: 39% supported it and 53% rejected it. Even fewer people thought it could aid the educational and cultural emancipation of the Roma if some TV and radio programs were broadcast in Romany: 34% of respondents supported this idea, 53% were against (Bútorová, Gyárfášová and Velšic, 2000).

In the opinion poll conducted by the Institute for Public Affairs in January 1999, 89% of respondents agreed that the state was obliged to ensure that the Roma stopped avoiding work and abusing welfare benefits. One of the key ways to achieve this goal is to reduce unemployment among the Roma, and many people realize this. In the same research, 58% of respondents agreed that greater efforts should be made to lower Roma unemployment. Many people who accuse the Roma of abusing welfare benefits see the solution as taking an undefined “individual approach” to the Roma. The discriminatory opinion that “different principles for the payment of welfare benefits should apply for the Roma than for others” was supported in March 2000 by 50% of respondents and rejected by 44% of

them (Bútorová, Gyárfášová and Velšic, 2000).

The lower engagement of the Roma in the labor process is only one of several reservations the non Roma have against the Roma. An even stronger component of the negative stereotype of the Roma in Slovakia is their “thieving and criminal activity”, which according to the IRPO opinion poll is attributed to the Roma by three-quarters of the majority population (74%). This is one of the key reasons that more majority population members (53%) in March 2000 agreed with the (clearly discriminatory) opinion that “special, stricter laws should be applied to the Roma” than rejected it (42%). This trend was present in Slovakia at the beginning of the 1990s: for example, in October 1993 in the FOCUS agency’s opinion poll, 48% of respondents agreed and 49% disagreed that “the Roma are a different group to which special, stricter laws should apply”. It is thus easy to understand why Slovak political parties keep offering repressive solutions to the Roma issue. Accommodating and positive solutions would require a better social atmosphere, and Slovak politicians know it (Bútorová, Gyárfášová and Velšic, 2000).

ANTIDISCRIMINATORY ATTITUDES OF RESPONDENTS AND THE DEGREE OF EMPATHY TOWARDS THE ROMA

Most people in Slovakia do not approve of displays of racial and ethnic hatred, the target of which are most often the Roma. Some 65% of respondents in research conducted in March 2000 demanded that displays of racial hatred be punished more harshly than they had been in the past. The IVO opinion poll from January 1999 also showed that the majority of people condemn displays of racism from skinheads – as many as 70% agreed

that skinheads are dangerous (I agree entirely – 40%, I somewhat agree – 30%), while only 14% thought that skinheads were “doing the right thing” (I disagree entirely – 4%, I somewhat disagree – 10%) (Bútorová, Gyárfášová and Velšic, 2000).

It would be wrong to say that Slovak society is intolerant on the basis of data showing a rejection of the Roma only. According to the 1995 GfK opinion poll, respondents would be willing to support a protest against displays of racial hatred in the following ways: 11% would take part in a protest march, 43% would be willing to participate in a legal demonstration, and 70% would sign a petition. The majority population does not think that racial conflict and violence between skinheads and the Roma can be stopped or limited – only 16% think it is possible, while 65% of respondents think the opposite. The 1995 GfK Praha opinion poll also brought some interesting opinions to light on what should be tolerated. It is clear that Slovak inhabitants are not willing to tolerate any behavior from the Roma that reflects their level of integration into (or segregation from) society (Vašečka, 2001a).

CONCLUSION

The relationship of the majority population to the Roma is poor, and is staying that way. The Slovak Roma are one of the most rejected and despised groups in society. The fact that solutions to the issues affecting the Roma minority that might alleviate the conflicts between them and the majority are not moving forward is increasing impatience on both sides. The level of frustration keeps rising, and could take dangerous forms in the future. There is certain reason for optimism in the relationship of the Roma to the majority – despite being frustrated by the failure to solve the problems that are collectively

referred to as the Roma issue, and despite permanent displays of discrimination against them, the Roma view the majority society in a much better light than the majority population does the Roma. Given the crisis in Roma identity, the Roma are beginning to show a much higher level of identification with the majority population. Although the Roma seem to get the rough end of the pineapple in the mutual relationship, there is still less of a threat that the Roma would start a serious conflict than the majority. The majority should realize this, because this situation could quickly change, which is rather ominous for Slovakia's future as a democratic and prosperous society.

There are at least three factors that lead us to suspect that the relatively positive relationship of the Roma to the majority might change. First, the majority's changing requirements of the Roma have the potential to increase frustration among the minority, and possibly to create conflict (Barša, 1999). Opinion polls keep showing that the Roma are viewed as inadaptible and unable to assimilate – despite that, they are permanently forced to do so. This inconsistent approach is like moving the goalposts – the requirements of the majority keep increasing, which allows the majority to keep postponing its acceptance of the assimilating Roma. This naturally increases frustration and breeds radical social and political attitudes.

Unless the approach of the majority to the Roma changes, the potential for conflict will increase, as indicated by Arend Lijphart's theory of the "horizontalization" of vertical ethnic structures in post-industrial countries with large ethnic minorities (Lijphart, 1977). Lijphart wrote that conflicts intensify due to sensitivity over the inequality between ethnic groups. Conflict may erupt when an ethnic group (which otherwise has a vertical structure of different income and status

groups) becomes horizontal – usually at the bottom of the social ladder. Loss of status and total deprivation can lead to serious conflict triggered by the ethnic group.

The potential for conflict was increased by the wave of democratization at the end of the 20th century. This endeavor to change the Leviathan and turn it into a "new democratic Leviathan" (Dahl) triggered radical attempts by many – often repressed – groups to bring about major social change. The question remains whether Slovak society will be able to respond to the cold smile of the "new" Leviathan.

REFERENCES

1. *Aktuálne problémy Česko-Slovenska* [Current Issues in Czechoslovakia], (Bratislava: Center for the Research of Social Problems, 1990).
2. *Aktuálne problémy Slovenska – december 1994* [Current Issues in Slovakia – December 1994], (Bratislava: FOCUS, 1995)
3. *Aktuálne problémy Slovenska – január 1999*. [Current Issues in Slovakia – January 1999], (Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 1999).
4. *Aktuálne problémy Slovenska – marec 2000* [Current Issues in Slovakia – March 2000], (Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 1999).
5. Barša, Pavel: *Politická teória multikulturalizmu* [The Political Theory of Multiculturalism], (Brno: Center for the Study of Democratic Cultures, 1999).
6. Bútorová, Zora, Gyarfášová, Oľga and Velšic, Marián: "Public Opinion" in Mesežnikov, Grigorij and Kollár, Miroslav: *Slovakia 2000: A Global Report on the State of Society*, (Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 2000).
7. Lijphart, Arend: "Political Theories and the Explanation of Ethnic Conflict in the Western World" in Esman, Milton (ed.): *Ethnic Conflict in the Western World*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 55 – 60).
8. *Problémy tolerance a intolerance v České a Slovenské republice* [Problems of Tolerance and Intolerance in the Czech and Slovak Republics], (Prague: GfK Praha, 1995).

9. *Rasizmus, xenofóbia, antisemitizmus a intolerancia vo vedomí obyvateľov Slovenskej republiky* [Racism, Xenophobia, Anti-Semitism and Intolerance in the Consciousness of the Slovak People], (Bratislava: Institute for the Research of Public Opinion at the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 1995).
10. *Slovensko pred voľbami II* [Slovakia before the Elections II], (Bratislava: Center for the Research of Social Problems, KC VPN, 1990).
11. *Spomienky a vedomosti o holocauste na Slovensku* [Memories and Knowledge of the Holocaust in Slovakia], (Bratislava: FOCUS, September 1999).
12. Vašečka, Michal: "Vzťah majoritnej populácie k Rómom" ['Relationship of the Majority Population to the Roma'] in Gyarfášová, Olga, Krivý, Vladimír and Velšic, Marián (eds.): *Krajina v pohybe. Správa o politických názoroch a hodnotách ľudí na Slovensku* [Country on the Move: A Report on the Political Opinions and Values of People in Slovakia], (Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 2001a).
13. Vašečka, Michal: "The Roma" in Mesežnikov, Grigorij and Kollár, Miroslav (eds.): *Slovakia 2001: A Global Report on the State of Society*, (Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 2001b).