Anamarija Kirinić, Mario Plenković: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION - IS PUBLIC PERCEPTION ABOUT CROATS CHANGING? Attitudes and opinions about Croats in Slovenia
Media, Culture and Public Relations, 7, 2016, 2, 161-170

161

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION - IS PUBLIC PERCEPTION ABOUT CROATS CHANGING?
Attitudes and opinions about Croats in Slovenia

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the results of public opinion research conducted among Slovenes about neighboring Croats across ten perceptive categories. These results are compared with related categories from a 1995 public opinion survey, conducted as part of the research project „Attitudes and opinions of Central European nations about their neighbors: a contribution to the development of intercultural communication". The research was conducted by Professor Mario Plenković on the attitudes and opinions of Slovenes about Croats. A comparative analysis of the results with those from 2015 showed that Slovenes evaluated neighboring Croats mostly positively in almost all of the measured categories, with the lowest scores being given in the categories of diligence and discipline, which is also associated with a perception of relatively high corruption that exists in relation to these categories. The categories in which greatest changes have occurred in the Slovenes' opinions in the past 20 years indicate a modest trend of a change in perception: Slovenes perceive Croats as being slightly more political, cultured, professional and disciplined, but somewhat less communicative, diligent and still prone to corruption.

Key words
intercultural communication, cultural diversity, stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the attitudes and opinions of Slovenes about Croats across different categories, which create a general image of Croatia as the totality of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have about a particular country /1/. The image of a country may be internal – an opinion that citizens have about their own country – and external – how inhabitants of other countries view a particular country /2/. This paper focuses on the attitudes of Slovene respondents regarding their subjective perception of Croats and on certain trends or changes in the development of intercultural communication.
The perception of Slovenes, i.e. their attitudes and opinions on particular topics, does not

directly reflect the actual situation in Croatia from the Slovenian perspective, but it is a reflection of opinions about the mentality of Croatian citizens. Stereotypes have an important role in forming such opinions, which – in the long-term process of encountering "others" and in the context of a common political history and cooperation that is characterized by non-conflict – express softer features that are free from strong stereotypes and deeply ingrained bias that is difficult to change. The most common associations and stereotypes of Slovenes about Croats are generally positive and testify in support of the development of intercultural communication as, among other things, the process of a peaceful encounter between different cultures and their value systems /3/. The notion of culture refers to the

Anamarija Kirinić, Mario Plenković: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION - IS PUBLIC PERCEPTION ABOUT CROATS CHANGING? Attitudes and opinions about Croats in Slovenia

162   Media, Culture and Public Relations, 7, 2016, 2, 161-170

comprehensive and strong spiritual framework that requires and perhaps imposes upon members of the culture a particular view of the world and on other cultures – as a social formation with unique structures and specific beliefs, as well as certain forms of internal communication among members of the culture in daily life /**4**/. However, France Vreg notes that culture characterizes the framework of human identity and that communication serves, from a functional point of view, to support tradition and renewal of cultural knowledge, from the perspective of coordination, to support social interaction and, from the perspective of socialization, to support the formation of personal identity /**5**/.

The circumstances of multiculturalism have to do with determining the circumstances of existence of a society with more than one culture, an interpersonal relationship that can be dealt with using model-based policies or policies of segregation of unwanted minorities and ethnic cleansing. The third possible concept is multiculturalism, which recognizes the legitimacy of a culture and social distinctiveness of ethnic minorities together with the model of incorporating various individuals and groups into society without losing their unique character and opportunities for their full participation in all of society /**6**/.

The model is positive for as long as it advocates coexistence of minority and disadvantaged groups with the dominant society, rather than providing backward support to cultural confinement and, consequently, the isolation and segregation of these groups. Interculturalism is the opposite concept and it is aimed towards open culture models, facilitating mutual contacts and movements, and even transculturalism. As a dynamic concept that encompasses evolving relations between cultural groups, interculturalism was embraced by UNESCO, which defined it as the existence of and an equitable interaction between diverse cultures, including the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect /**7**/. Interculturalism – any dialogue with the other that contributes to learning about ourselves and others who are different from us, contributing to acceptance of other cultures, the development of intercultural skills, such as observation and comprehension of problems from the perspective of "the

other", the ability to cope with ambiguous and complex situations in society and the development of skills, verbal and nonverbal communication, critical, creative thinking and interaction /**8**/. Recognizing and taking into account the cultural diversity of its Member States, the European Union and its institutions promote the idea of interculturalism and intercultural dialogue among historical minorities and new immigrant groups, in particular, thereby supporting intercultural dialogue as an instrument of respect for diversity, but also to maintain social cohesion /**9**/. Therefore, integration in the European arena implies continuous social, political and cultural processes, which should take into account the impact of new media that are inexorably changing today's social and cultural values and standards, as well as communication concepts, thereby expanding the spheres of tolerance and adaptability /**10**/. Intercultural communication is a communication phenomenon in which participants of different cultural backgrounds come together into direct or indirect contact, developing their perceptions, attitudes and understandings /**11**/. Interculturality assumes the existence of dialogue between cultures that are in physical contact with each other and entails interaction, cooperation, acceptance, reciprocity and solidarity. Intercultural communication competence refers to successful communication between members of different cultures that, apart from linguistic and socio-linguistic skills, requires certain general knowledge about the world (*savoir*), practical skills and know-how (*savoir-faire*), and attitudes (the so-called existential competence, *savoir-être*). Productive intercultural exchange must take into account cultural differences, the diversity of values, different mechanisms of preserving cultural identities and social cohesion. The obstacles to understanding and communication do not just include language and alphabet, history, religion, customs and institutions, but also ethnocentrism (a negative opinion about other cultures and the view of one's own culture as being superior), stereotypes (a standardized image, negative or positive, about individuals, groups or nations) and prejudices (irrational distrust or hatred towards certain groups, races, religions or sexual orientations). Therefore, argues Vreg, intercultural communication is the ability to move through cultural barriers /**12**/.

Anamarija Kirinić, Mario Plenković: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION - IS PUBLIC PERCEPTION ABOUT CROATS CHANGING? Attitudes and opinions about Croats in Slovenia
Media, Culture and Public Relations, 7, 2016, 2, 161-170

163

The development of intercultural competence and sensitivity assumes the awareness of the existence of stereotypes and prejudices about oneself and others, so that one may find effective ways to get rid of them or to reduce their influence in the perception of "the other". Deficiencies in the knowledge of Croatian culture provide fertile ground for supporting various stereotypes that have been formed as a result of not only the innate psychological tendencies of people to generalize phenomena that surround them, thereby leading them to more rapidly and easily perceive events that are unfamiliar to them, but also as a result of ideologically determined stereotypes created by politics, the media, particular interest groups, etc. /**13**/. Communication between two nations that are historical neighbors, intercultural communication and, in the case of Croatia and Slovenia, communication without any major conflicts, should open the way towards good neighborly relations. This implies the ability to adapt to others and such relations occur in the context of opposing cultures, resulting from the ability to communicate interculturally – a form of interaction between social groups, nations, peoples and their cultures. Therefore, intercultural dialogue and good neighborly relations are interdependent, both for individuals and for nations and states /**14**/.

We should briefly touch upon the genesis of the relationship between Croatia and Slovenia, in the context of the background of this paper. Today's geopolitical perception is the result of a long-term geopolitical tradition and short-term geopolitical discourse, which lead to a positive or negative perception of one side towards the other. In the relations between two neighboring states and peoples, the traditional image and subjective perception of congeniality and solidarity of citizens towards each other, which one side formed about the other on the basis of historical experiences and heritage, play a very important role /**15**/. According to Klemenčić, the absence of conflict has been the most important geopolitical characteristic influencing the mutual perception of Croats and Slovenes. The two nations have never waged war against each other in history, both have experienced the political division of national territory and their politogenetic heritage has primarily been characterized by subordination and efforts towards national integ-

ration. As two entities with similar historical experiences, they can understand each other well, they do not have ethnically disputed areas and Croatian and Slovenian are two separate, clearly defined languages that are sufficiently similar for purposes of mutual understanding and communication, but also adequately different to avoid pitfalls that can arise due to vague language boundaries /**16**/. The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia defines bilateral relations between the two countries as well developed at all levels, diverse, deep and mutually promoting as well as good-neighborly, politically friendly and well developed economically. In the past 20 years, Croatian society has changed at every level of relations and communications, and one can therefore expect that the attitudes and opinions about Croats in neighboring countries, in this case Slovenia, have changed at least to some extent. One can expect that the overall image and general impression of the Croatian mentality and society have changed, as well.

METHODOLOGY

This paper explores the attitudes and opinions of Slovenes about Croats across ten key categories in order to determine the current perception of Slovenes about Croats.

The main objective of the research was to determine how Slovenes perceive Croats and to detect the most common attitudes and opinions of Slovenes about Croats according to their level of agreement / disagreement across ten categories: diligence, professionalism, discipline, culture, communication, politics, corruption, religion, sports and media awareness.

A specific research task was to detect possible shifts in the perception of Slovenes about Croats by comparing the 2015 public opinion survey results with related categories from a survey conducted in 1995.

The hypotheses were formulated on the basis of stereotypes, trends in the assessment of another people and the influence of public and new media:

H1.) Slovenes will assess neighboring Croats mostly positively in almost all categories provided (culture, communication, politics, religion, sports, media awareness).

H2.) Slovenes will give neighboring Croats lowest scores in the work ethics categories (diligence, discipline, professionalism).

Research method: the public opinion survey was used as the basic research method, and the scaled questionnaire was selected as the fundamental research tool to assess the ten key categories according to: work ethics (diligence, professionalism, discipline), communicativeness, culture, politicalness, corruption, religiosity, sports and the media. In each one of the ten categories measured, five separate qualifiers were used according to the 5-point Likert scale, which express the level of agreement of the respondents pertaining to stated views about the Croats, based on their direct and indirect contact. In one question, respondents were asked to assess whether Slovene opinion about the Croats has changed or not in the past 20 years.

Research sample and timeframe – the survey was conducted on a representative sample: N=674 respondents, citizens of the Republic of Slovenia (maximum margin of sampling error, with a risk of 5%, amounted to +-3.77%). Gender: 48% of the respondents were female and 52% of the respondents were male. The age of respondents ranged from 15 to 65 years of age, with an average of 40.29 years. Educational structure: no schooling or uncompleted primary school, 0.30%; primary school, 4.61%; secondary school, 54.23%; higher education and above, 39.38%; no response, 1.49%. The sample was stratified in proportion to the size of settlements and reflects the population within each region of Slovenia included in the study.[1]

The obtained results were interpreted using content analysis across the research categories. The results were processed by using the SPSS statistical tool, which was used to test for the statistical significance between the mean results obtained on the 5-point Likert scale (t-test for independent gender samples, settlement types and ANOVA – analysis of variance for age and education). Those results for which

the aforementioned tests have revealed a statistically significant difference in the results were presented and analyzed. Pearson's correlation was used to determine the statistically significant correlation between several characteristics (stereotypes) tested, as a measure of linear interrelationship between variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study we singled out ten characteristics / stereotypes that may be associated with the Croats, as a people, and asked the respondents to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the presented views. In one question we asked them to assess whether Slovene opinion about the Croats has changed or not in the past 20 years.

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[1] Field research was conducted by the Ljubljana, Slovenia-based agency Valicon, for marketing consulting and research, LLC. A stratified sample of 674 respondents was polled in May 2015 using the survey method. Empirical data was weighted with respect to socio-demographic indicators during processing (gender, age, education, settlement type), in accordance with the 2013 census data

Anamarija Kirinić, Mario Plenković: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION - IS PUBLIC PERCEPTION ABOUT CROATS CHANGING? Attitudes and opinions about Croats in Slovenia
Media, Culture and Public Relations, 7, 2016, 2, 161-170

165

Table 1. Mean scores for all 11 characteristics examined in regard to Croats
Basic indicators

Extent to which Croats have / are	N	Mean	Std.dev.
A keenness for sports	673	4.36	0.71
Religious	673	4.08	0.76
Political	673	3.88	0.83
Communicative	673	3.86	0.76
Professional	673	3.69	0.72
A keenness for culture	673	3.63	0.79
Media awareness	673	3.57	0.69
Corrupt	673	3.52	0.78
Diligent	673	3.36	0.8
Disciplined	673	2.89	0.91
Change in the past 20 years	673	2.47	1.15

Slovene respondents assessed with the highest scores Croats' keenness for sports and the level of their religiosity and politicalness, while their level of discipline was given the lowest marks. These results can be partly explained in at least three ways: by how a people presents itself (in the media or other forms of communication); furthermore, in real terms, e.g. by the level of economic development, clear-cut everyday political interests, direct contacts and ultimately by fixed stereotypical beliefs arising as a result of cultural differences and specificities. Croats may more often present themselves as a sports nation (although this is not evident from our study), so it is not surprising that Slovenes experience Croatia distinctly as such. Longstanding successful results of Croatia in different sports clearly support this view and we believe that such a high score is based on exact observations and on an objective assessment. A high score regarding the religiosity of Croats was also expected and it is in line with the Croats' affiliation to the Mediterranean cultural and religious setting, whereby one should also take into account that following a half-century of restrictions on the right to a free expression of religion, traditional Christianity entered into the public light with full force. This is particularly the case, since one can expect that in times of upheaval (war and post-war events, civilian suffering, displacement, etc.) support, comfort and hope may be found in faith.

Furthermore, Croats were assessed as highly political, which is also not surprising in the context of the relatively recent and highly volatile period of the Homeland War and its aftermath, but also in the context of the more recent tensions with Slovenia and a number of incidents on the national level with the potential for culminating in scandals at the highest political and State levels, about which the Slovenes have certainly been well-informed. We have also observed that the Slovenes gave positive assessments in regard to the Croats' keenness for culture (3.63), which has the capacity to serve as a highly effective link in cultivating ties between the two nations, especially within the context of the common European framework and the concept of interculturalism. Media awareness of Croats was also highly rated, leading us to conclude that positive assessments in almost all categories presented confirm our first hypothesis.

The lowest scores can be found in the Slovenes' assessment of changes in their own opinion about the Croats in the past 20 years, as well as in regard to the characteristics of discipline and diligence. These results can be explained by actual economic indicators: Croatia is economically a less developed country, which has not reaped the benefits of its recent accession into the European Union; it has not fully adopted the widely-accepted business values as a result of a half-century of repression of the free market and competitive economy, combined with the indoctrination of communist ideology and a series of wrong economic assessments and decisions made in the period after its independence. Likewise, there is the possibility that the Slovenes – in attributing stereotypes of non-diligence, corruption and lack of discipline to Croats – are critical in their views due to their past experiences in relating with the Croats, including guest workers from Croatia and Bosnia

Anamarija Kirinić, Mario Plenković: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION - IS PUBLIC PERCEPTION ABOUT CROATS
CHANGING? Attitudes and opinions about Croats in Slovenia
166   Media, Culture and Public Relations, 7, 2016, 2, 161-170

and Herzegovina. The high corruption perception score corresponds to these assessments, for which one should not hold Slovene prejudices or stereotypes responsible, but rather the Croatian media that abound with corruption scandal news stories on a daily basis.

The lowest scores, given in the work ethics categories, confirm the second hypothesis.

Table 2. Socio-demographic differences among respondents, according to assessments of characteristics of Croats

Diligence	Female	Male
N	323	349
Mean	3.46	3.26
Std Dev	0.7	0.87
Communicativeness		
N	323	350
Mean	3.98	3.76
Std Dev	0.68	0.81
Discipline		
N	323	350
Mean	3.05	2.73
Std Dev	0.87	0.92
Corruption		
N	323	350
Mean	3.38	3.65
Std Dev	0.72	0.81
Politicalness		
N	323	350
Mean	3.79	3.97
Std Dev	0.82	0.83

After conducting t-tests for independent samples (gender and settlement type) and an analysis of variance for age and education, we can conclude that Slovene women, on average, consider Croats to be more diligent, communicative and disciplined, and less corrupt and political.

Table 3. Pearson's correlation

Correlations (r)		*Communicativeness*	*Discipline*	*Sports*
Diligence	**Pearson's correlation**	0.3	0.34	
	Sig. (2tailed)	0.000	0.000	
	N	672	672	
Politicalness	**Pearson's correlation**			0.34
	Sig. (2tailed)			0.000
	N			673
Corruption	**Pearson's correlation**		-0.33	
	Sig. (2tailed)		0.000	
	N		673	

The results show that there is a statistically significant correlation between several of the investigated characteristics (stereotypes) about the Croats, as seen by respondents in 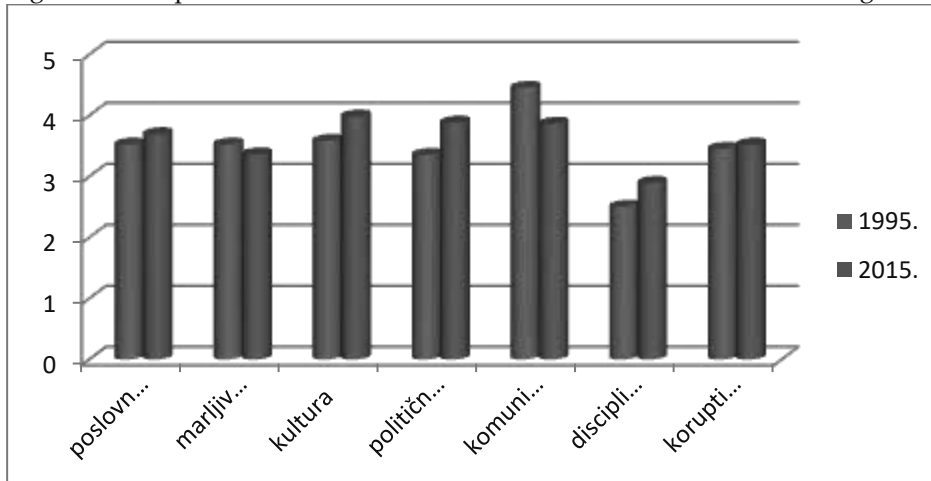Slovenia, but the correlation coefficient was less than 0.3 in all cases, indicating a very low correlation among these variables. The selected correlation matrix reveals isolated correlations where r = 0.3 or greater. These are still very low coefficients, which do not indicate a strong connection

Anamarija Kirinić, Mario Plenković: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION - IS PUBLIC PERCEPTION ABOUT CROATS
CHANGING? Attitudes and opinions about Croats in Slovenia
Media, Culture and Public Relations, 7, 2016, 2, 161-170

167

between these variables and they cannot, therefore, be interpreted in this way. We can conclude that in this particular study we cannot use a linear correlation between variables to predict high scores for a variable, based upon the high score of some other variable. Table 3 displays Pearson's correlations, with the significance at 1% error and N (number of respondents). The results, therefore, reveal a statistically significant, but low positive correlation between: diligence and communicativeness; diligence and discipline; politicalness and keenness for sports; corruption and discipline (if the Slovenes, on average, assess Croats as a highly corrupt people, they will give lower scores on the Croats' discipline level scale). It should, however, be highlighted once more that all of these correlations are merely trend indicators and that they are too low to be perceived as strongly interrelated.

**Comparison of results from 1995 and 2015**

In the 1995 study "Attitudes and opinions of Central European nations about their neigh-

bors: a contribution to the development of intercultural communication" performed as part of an international research project, in the section related to research conducted in Slovenia from November 6 until December 6, 1995, a public opinion survey was conducted across nine categories: attitude towards diligence/assiduousness, liberty, foreigners, culture, professionalism, discipline, communication, politics and corruption. The results were presented by professor Mario Plenković, Ph. D., in his work „Attitudes of Slovenes towards Croats and other neighboring nations: a contribution to the development of good neighborly relations".

Through a comparison of arithmetic medians of related categories, it was determined that statistically significant differences in attitudes and opinions of Slovenes about Croats occurred in four out of a total of seven evaluated and related categories. The results are displayed in Table 5.

Figure 1. Comparison of results from 1995 and 2015 in seven related categories

Valid Percent
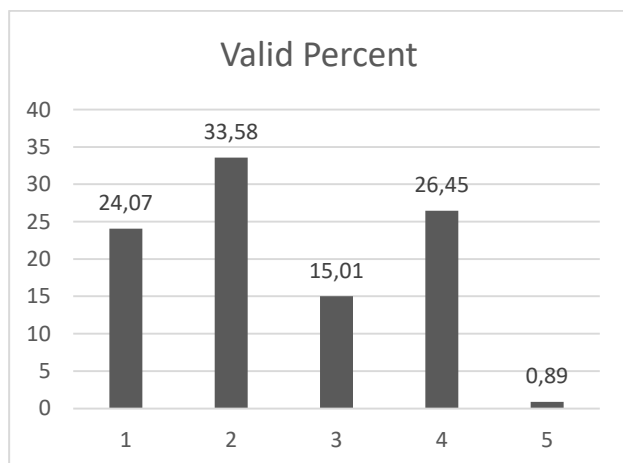
When comparing the results of this study with the results from research conducted in 1995, we can observe a modest trend of a change in perception: Slovenes perceive Croats as being slightly more political (3.35-3.88), cultured (3.58-3.98), disciplined (2.50-2.89) and professional (3.52-3.69), but somewhat less communicative (4.45-3.86), diligent (3.52-3.36) and still prone to corruption (3.45-3.52).

Table 4. Opinion changes in the past 20 years

Value	Frequency	Valid Percent
1	162	24.07
2	226	33.58
3	101	15.01
4	178	26.45
5	6	0.89
.	1	Missing
Total	674	100
N	673	
Mean	2.47	
Std Dev	1.15	

Table 6 and the relevant graph show the distribution of responses given by the subjects when asked to assess the extent to which they believe that attitudes of Slovenes towards Croats have changed / improved in the past 20 years. The largest number of respondents gave a score of 2 (33.58%), expressing a view that attitudes of Slovenes towards Croats have not improved in the past 20 years. A high proportion of respondents believe that attitudes have not improved at all (24.07%) and 58% of respondents replied by providing either score 1 or 2. The percentage of those who believe that attitudes have improved (giving a score of 4) stood at 26.45%, but very few of the respondents gave a score of 5 (less than 1%). The average score was M = 2.47, with a standard deviation of 1.15.

Perception changes in 20 yrs.	15 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 65
N	117	137	200	219
Mean	2.7	2.63	2.42	2.28
Std Dev	1.14	1.1	1.15	1.14

The results show that respondents differ in average scores according to age (F = 4.68, df = 3, p <0.01). The average score of the improvement in attitude of Slovenes towards Croats is

Anamarija Kirinić, Mario Plenković: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION - IS PUBLIC PERCEPTION ABOUT CROATS CHANGING? Attitudes and opinions about Croats in Slovenia
Media, Culture and Public Relations, 7, 2016, 2, 161-170

169

higher in the two younger age groups, than in the older age groups.

The primary areas in which greatest changes have occurred in the opinion of Slovenes about Croats include politicalness: according to the results compared, Slovenes perceive Croats as being more political, indicating that they view Croats as a people to whom the political dimension plays an important role – as expected – since Croatia fought hard for its freedom and independence in the Homeland War, and paid for its entry into the EU by spending a full decade in the waiting room of the "European family". A comparison of scores related to culture also reveals a slight increase, which points to a shift from a stereotypical perception of Croats as a Balkan people to a more advanced level of intercultural communication. In this context, a surprisingly lower score was recorded in the area of communicativeness, in comparison with the results from 1995. Discipline and professionalism scores are slightly higher, although this is discordant with the lower diligence score, as well as with the corruption score. Namely, Slovenes continue to perceive Croats as highly corrupt, confirming the identical view from 1995. The perception of Croats as a people prone to or more tolerant towards corruption probably has a foothold as a result of ubiquitous themes of corruption and organized crime in the Croatian media, and corruption scandals that permeate deep inside political and economic structures of Croatian society.

CONCLUSION

Good mutual understanding of Slovenes and Croats is self-explanatory: language is the key that opens cultural doors and in this case does not act as a barrier to the understanding of cultural patterns and stereotypes, and to strong intercultural communication – i.e. a willingness to relativize one's own views and values, the acceptance of other cultures and one's own culture, the resolution of potential conflicts without prejudice, the discarding of stereotypes. The results of research conducted in 2015 reveal that Slovenes gave the highest scores to the Croats' keenness for sports and their religiosity, politicalness and communicativeness, with high scores also being given in the categories of professionalism, culture and

media awareness. Lower scores were given in the areas of diligence and discipline, and Slovenes still perceive Croats as being highly corruption-prone.

In comparing the results of this study with related categories from the 1995 survey, it is interesting to observe the modest trends of changes in perception: Slovenes perceive Croats as more political, cultured, professional and disciplined, but less communicative and diligent, and still prone to corruption. We can conclude that this comparison points to the evolution and changes of stereotypes in the perception of Croats by the Slovenes, as equals in the European cultural sphere, as well as their desire for the stronger development of quality dialogue and good neighborly relations based on cooperation, both economic and intercultural, in tourism, sports and communication – ultimately leading to the further advancement of intercultural communication without prejudices and stereotypes.

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INTERKULTURALNA KOMUNIKACIJA – MIJENJA LI SE PERCEPCIJA O HRVATIMA?
Stavovi i mišljenja Slovenaca o Hrvatima

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Sažetak

U radu se analiziraju rezultati istraživanja iskazanih stavova Slovenaca o susjednim Hrvatima kroz deset perceptivnih kategorija. Rezultati se uspoređuju, u komparabilnim relacijama, s rezultatima istraživanja iz 1995. godine provedenog u sklopu međunarodnog znanstvenog projekta „Stavovi i mišljenja srednjoeuropskih naroda o svojim susjedima: Prilog razvoju interkulturalne komunikacije" voditelja prof. dr. sc. Marija Plenkovića, u dijelu u kojem se odnose na stavove i mišljenja Slovenaca o Hrvatima. Komparativna analiza dobivenih rezultata iz 2015. godine pokazala je kako Slovenci susjedne Hrvate ocjenjuju pretežito pozitivno u gotovo svim ponuđenim relacijama, a najniže ocjene dane su u kategorijama radinosti i discipliniranosti i s ovim relacijama povezanom relativno visokom koruptivnošću.

Utvrđeno je kako sadržaji kod kojih je došlo do najvećih promjena u proteklih 20 godina u mišljenjima Slovenaca ukazuju na diskretan trend u promjeni percepcije: Slovenci doživljavaju Hrvate nešto političnijima, kulturnijima, poslovnijima, discipliniranijim, ali manje komunikativnima, marljivijima te i dalje sklonim koruptivnosti.

Ključne riječi

interkulturalna komunikacija, kulturne različitosti, stereotipi