

Marija Jurić Pahor

Border as Method: Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Border Area between Italy and Slovenia and on the Slovene Minority in Italy

The first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that the “border as method” (Mezzarda & Neilson) is paradigmatically established and proliferates in the borderland of a nation-state. Analysing the prevailing political, media and public discourse and focusing on the border area between Italy and Slovenia, the article illustrates that borders are not located only on the edges of a territory, but also extend inside and outside such. They are part of broader social processes of border internalisation in the management of population movements. During the pandemic, the tendency to strengthen control of the Schengen border and of the border between Italy and Slovenia gained new impetus. The border was invoked in relation to the risk of infection, thus implying adiaforisation and exclusion (“We are not Italy!”), and also as the locus that – particularly among the Slovene minority and the people living along the border – raised awareness about the need for empathic, cross-border and European integration in the sense of transcending national borders.

Keywords: Covid-19, border area, Italy, Slovenia, illegal migration, Slovenes in Italy.

Meja kot metoda: vpliv pandemije covida-19 na mejno območje med Italijo in Slovenijo ter na slovensko manjšino v Italiji

V prvem valu pandemije covida-19 se je pokazalo, da se “meja kot metoda” (Mezzarda & Neilson) paradigmatično vzpostavlja in razrašča v obmejnih območjih nacionalnih držav. Članek na podlagi prevladujočega političnega, medijskega in javnega diskurza in s pogledom na mejno območje med Italijo in Slovenijo ponazarja, da se meje ne nahajajo le na obrobju ozemlja, temveč se razprostirajo znotraj in zunaj njega. So del širših družbenih procesov ponotranjenosti meja pri upravljanju gibanja prebivalstva. Težnja po zaostritvi nadzora schengenske in italijansko-slovenske meje je dobila nov zagon prav v času pandemije. Meja se je izpričevala v grozi pred okužbo, ki implicira adiaforizacijo in izključitev, a tudi kot locus, ki je – zlasti med predstavniki slovenske manjšine in ljudmi ob meji – v tek pognal ozaveščanje o nujnosti empatičnega, čez-mejnega in evropskega povezovanja v smislu preseganja nacionalnih meja.

Ključne besede: covid-19, mejno območje, Italija, Slovenija, nezakonite migracije, Slovenci v Italiji.

Correspondence address: Marija Jurić Pahor, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja / Institute for Ethnic Studies, Erjavčeva 26, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: juric.pahor@alice.it.

1. Introduction

The border – as Sandro Mezzarda and Brett Neilson point out in their book *Border as Method* (2013) – is becoming more and more a method. The days when theorists of the neoliberal globalisation discourse, in particular, predicted a “borderless world” (Ohmae 1990), one in which the nation-state would become nothing but an illusion and politicians would actually lose power, are long gone. It now seems that the power of the borders is not going to wane and that, contrary to even recent expectations, their role in the world economy and in our societies will grow further. This does not refer only to national or geopolitical borders, but also to complex social institutions marked by tensions between border control and border crossing. Tensions and conflicts as integral parts of any border are revealed, for example, by the results of a survey conducted in the border areas of Slovenia in 2015 before the refugee crisis. Contrary to the results of a similar survey conducted in 2007, the 2015 survey established the occurrence of self-closing, which is also observed elsewhere in the European Union “when people try to compensate for the perceived reduction in security due to the abolition of border controls by increasing their own, ‘mental’ barriers” (Bufon 2017a, 227; Bufon 2017b). The emergence of self-closing and mental barriers points, on the one hand, to the fact that borders are becoming fine-tuned tools for managing, calibrating and controlling the global flow of people, and, on the other, to their internalisation, “heterogeneity” and “polysemy” (Balibar 2002, 76). Mezzarda and Neilson (2013) also talk about the proliferation and multiplication of borders, pointing out that borders are experienced differently by different people, depending on their status, skin colour, country of origin, ethnicity, gender, or religion.

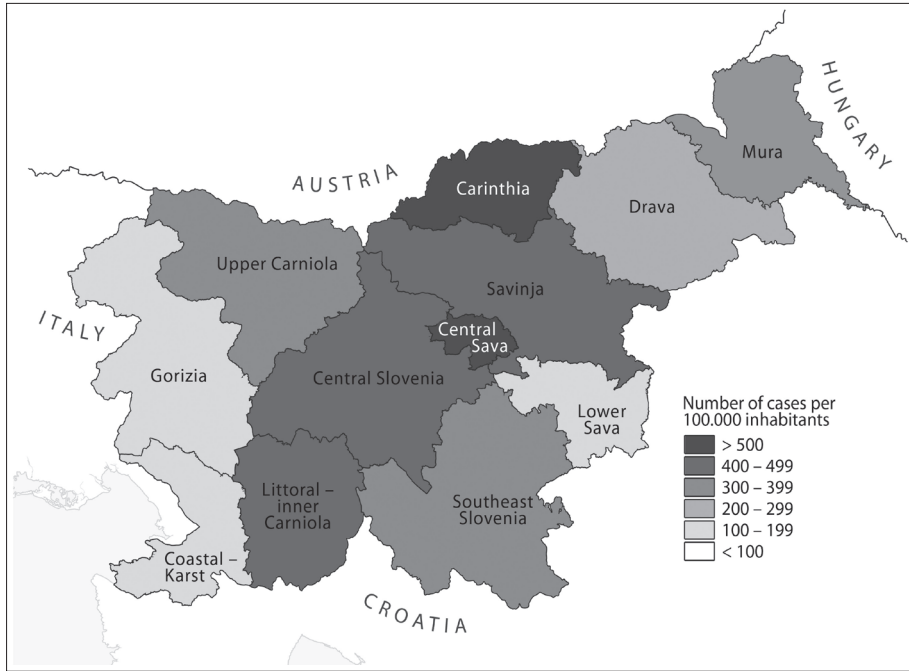
According to Mezzarda and Neilson, the phrase border as method cannot be reduced to some abstract mathematical formula separate from its material context. Quite the contrary: the method derives from material circumstances and, in the case of border, always has two sides that connect and separate, include and exclude, force into conflicts and into negotiations. Border as method tries to capture such constellations – which coincide with the establishment and reproduction of differences and, more specifically, with the processes of differential inclusion – both from a theoretical point of view and from the point of view of understanding empirical border regions. The core message of the authors is that border as a method is more than just methodological. The border can be a method precisely insofar as it is conceived of as a site of struggle – struggle fought on borders around the world – and as a reality that speaks of the “productive power of the border” (Mezzarda & Neilson 2013, vii) and of the strategic role it plays not only in routinizing border violence but also in the fabrication of the world.

The prediction that borders will strengthen and proliferate came true when a state of emergency due to the coronavirus pandemic was declared, which in Italy

lasted from 31 January to 29 July 2020 (with an extension until 15 October and further until 31 January 2021) and in Slovenia from 12 March to 15 May 2020 (the two countries have had a comparable epidemiological situation since May 2020; due to a sharp increase in the number of Covid-19 infections, the Slovene government declared a second wave epidemic on 18 October 2020). If more than a decade ago borders were falling and the world we lived in seemed borderless, it appears today that borders are multiplying and emerging even in places where no one would have expected them yesterday. In the first half of April, in the middle of the pandemic, new fences were erected on the southern border of Slovenia – in the municipalities of Kočevje and Dol and in the south of Primorska – to prevent illegal crossings. On 15 April 2020, some high representatives of the state, escorted by key members of the Police and the Army, visited the border area along the Kolpa river to send a message to the public about the importance of deploying soldiers with additional powers to the border due to the pandemic (STA 2020a). The granting of additional powers to the Army is provided by Article 37a of the Defence Act, but a two-thirds majority in parliament is required for its entry into force. As the journalist Ali Žerdin (2020) observed, the real motive to activate Article 37a was certainly not to contain the pandemic, as the men and a handful of women who gathered by the Kolpa river themselves evidently violated the recommendations of the public health authorities (engaging in a relaxed conversation, walking close to each other, not wearing face masks).

Despite their relaxed looks, it was clear that under the guise of concern for the well-being of the population there had been efforts to tighten border regimes and carry out activities related to illegal border crossings of migrants (migration routes, reception and accommodation centres, smuggling of refugees, etc.), also with the intention of developing a common European immigration and asylum policy focused on militarisation and border control. It is no coincidence that the representative of the Slovene minority in the Italian Parliament Senator Tatjana Rojc wrote to the Italian Minister of the Interior Luciana Lamorgese on 5 May 2020 to express the need to re-establish cross-border cooperation between Italian and Slovene security forces – known as joint mixed patrols – with the aim of controlling the Italian-Slovene and Schengen borders and preventing illegal migration along the Western Balkan route.¹ Shortly afterwards, the Minister talked with the Slovene Minister of the Interior Aleš Hojs by phone. The Slovene Minister of Foreign Affairs and his Italian counterpart also worked in this direction, emphasising the friendly relations between Italy and Slovenia (Gašperlin 2020). In this context, the Slovene Prime Minister Janez Janša said at the National Security Council (SNAV) meeting of 9 October 2020: “If Article 37a is not adopted [in Parliament], the Government can ask for assistance the police forces of partner states in the Schengen area and with their help consistently protect our southern border and the local population” (Mihajlović 2020).

Figure 1: Number of confirmed Covid-19 cases per 100,000 residents by statistical region of Slovenia until 7 October 2020



Source: NIJZ 2020.

In order to prevent infections, numerous European countries set up special regimes for crossing their national borders. Not only on the border with Croatia, but also on the internal Schengen borders (with Italy, Austria and Hungary) where border control was abolished upon Slovenia's entry into the Schengen area in 2007, certain (temporary) traffic restrictions came into force. In many places, also the conditions for the entry and exit of foreigners and Slovene citizens changed. On 18 March 2020, four checkpoints were set up at the border with Italy (there were six of them when the epidemic was declared in Slovenia on 12 March) at the following border crossings: Vrtojba – Štandrež/St. Andrea, Fernetiči/Ferneti, Škofije/Rabuese and Krvavi Potok – Pesek/Pese (Police RS 2020a). Between Gorizia and Nova Gorica, which solemnly merged into a conurbation after the fall of the borders and Slovenia's accession to the European Union in 2004, a "corona-border" or "pandemic border" with a wire fence re-emerged on 12 March 2020 on the common Square of Europe (Majovski 2020a, 3). On 9 May, two additional checkpoints were set up: Nova Gorica (Erjavčeva ulica) – Gorica (Via San Gabriele) and Neblo – Valico di Venco in Goriška Brda. A third checkpoint (Gorjansko – Šempolaj/San Pelagio) was added on 26 May (Police RS 2020b, c). These measures – which were revoked by government ordinance

on 14 May 2020 (Ordinance on the Revocation ... 2020) only to be re-enforced three days later (Ordinance on Imposing and Implementing ... 2020), after which on 15 June the crossing of the Italian-Slovene border was again possible (Police RS 2020d) – are not surprising and are even necessary – considering that Europe, with Italy and Spain at the forefront, became the global hotspot of the Covid-19 pandemic – provided that they are for the benefit of the population and not in the service of new forms of domination and politicisation. To some extent, border controls even appeared effective, although the Sars-CoV-2 virus knows no borders. From the very beginning, the lowest numbers of Covid-19 cases in Slovenia had been recorded – besides Posavska region – in the regions along the Italian border (the Goriška and the Obalno-Kraška regions).

2. “We Are not Italy” or Fear of “Infection”

Indeed, the statistics reported by the National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ) are also attributed to the fear unleashed by the awareness of many coronavirus infections and deaths in northern Italy: especially in Lombardy, followed by Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia. It was basically the fear of unrestricted contact, flow, and exchange – actually the fear of infection and mixing. When Covid-19 was first recognised as a disease and then as a global pandemic, a variety of theories on the origin of the disease and its spread developed, initially focusing on the Chinese city of Wuhan. After that, speculations emerged as to how the “Wuhan virus” (Reale 2020) – as Sars-CoV-2 was originally labelled by the US, to which the Chinese authorities responded with the assumption that the virus was brought to China by the US military (Kramžar 2020) – entered Italy. The eyes were on the frequent and not just business contacts between Italians and the Chinese. There was also a hypothesis about the dual origin of Sars-CoV-2: the Chinese and the Italian one, claiming that Italy was the Wuhan of Europe and also that Slovenes brought the virus to Slovenia upon their return from northern Italy ski resorts (Žužek 2020). Gradually, Italians were no longer allowed to enter an increasing number of countries, and flights to Italy were cut off. Also the EU was systematically isolating Italy until the beginning of April. When Italy asked for help under the European Crisis Mechanism, no Member State responded, as critically acknowledged by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2020) herself. Moreover, in their tendency towards self-closing, countries became the heralds of a trend that portrays the world beyond national borders as a source of dangerous diseases and all kinds of threats. Italy was an exception to such and did not close its state borders. Massimiliano Fedriga, President of the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region, answered a journalist’s question as to what was his response when the border was actually closed by Slovenia by saying that he understood Slovenia’s decision as “in a moment of crisis and fear, one uses any weapon at their disposal” and that “the government must protect citizens any

way it can”, but he was disturbed by the lack of dialogue: “We could have agreed on how to close the border together” (Hladnik-Milharčič 2020, 9).

Slovenia’s newspapers fuelled fear already in their headlines: the coronavirus is already “near our western border” (Domovina 2020), “dangerously close” (Regionalobala 2020a), “right outside” (Lovinčič 2020), “Coronavirus is killing in Italy” (Ekipa24 2020), “Italians increasingly undesirable” (Regionalobala 2020b). Vladimir Milošević (2020, 4), one of the leading European experts in psychodrama who works as a psychiatrist in the Idrija psychiatric hospital, told the journalist Vesna Milek: “Hearing someone say *buongiorno* on the street was already a sign of alarm.” The Slovene Human Rights Ombudsman received an initiative in which the initiator stated that he was stigmatised only for having been on holiday in Italy (Ferlič Žgajnar 2020). Ivana Hussu, a Slovene from Trieste studying at the Faculty of Medicine in Ljubljana, recalls that she managed to enter Slovenia despite the seven-day quarantine requirement. However, as she did not want to become a “victim of the stigma of being an Italian who spreads the infection”, she called her physician immediately upon arrival to Ljubljana who advised her to “stay home for a week” (in her temporary residence), after which she would be referred for Sars-CoV-2 testing (Verč 2020b, 3). Even the editorial board of Primorski Dnevnik in Trieste received several telephone calls during the pandemic about “stigmatisation experienced by Italian nationals living on the Slovene side” (Devetak 2020b, 3). In 2016, their number was around 750 (Regionalobala 2016) and many of them were members of the Slovene national community. On 24 April, Milan Krek, Head of the NIJZ regional unit of Koper, warned of the “great risk” of infection for 5,000 daily migrants, especially women, from Slovenia who went to work to Trieste on a daily basis (Arko 2020). A few days later, he was appointed Director of the NIJZ.

In the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, Slovenia’s border with Italy was closed even more hermetically than the borders with Croatia and Austria. At the beginning of May 2020, Slovenia and Croatia held intensive talks about facilitating border crossing for Slovene tourists and owners of holiday homes in Istria and Dalmatia (there are about 110,000 of them), but turned a deaf ear to the people living along the border (Tence 2020a). The mayors of Koper, Ankaran, Izola and Piran did not join the call of their counterparts from North Primorska addressed on the Interior Minister Aleš Hojs for a more open border with Slovenia’s western neighbour (Tence 2020a) – even more so, in the last week of April, they called for caution in loosening the conditions for the crossing of the Italian-Slovene border (Mezinec 2020). The Notranjska regional headquarters of the Civil Protection decided to strengthen control at the green border in order to prevent infections, as on a weekend in mid-May hundreds of Italian nationals were found crossing the border on foot or on bicycles in the territory of three border municipalities – Hrpelje-Kozina, Sežana and Komen (Majovski 2020b). The mayor of the Hrpelje-Kozina municipality, however, said in an in-

terview that she had not received any special notifications about the large number of crossings and that she found that people on both sides of the border were “observing the rules” (Majovski 2020b).

From the very beginning, the dominant public and expert discourse in Slovenia about the prevention of the Covid-19 pandemic revolved almost exclusively around hygiene, using concepts that evoke strong emotional responses as they build on dramatic descriptions of the situation and create the impression of an imminent catastrophe and high risk (especially for the border population): we must avoid contact, use protection, and think of borders as protective barriers. At the press conference of 26 March, the Slovene government’s spokesman for Covid-19 Jelko Kacin himself advocated Slovenia’s borders, emphasising: “We are not Italy and we do not want to be Italy. We can do it” (Regionalobala 2020c). He also recalled that there were less infections in the areas close to the border with Italy and stressed: “People there seem to be more aware of the importance of the measures due to the proximity of Italy. This should also be the case [...] everywhere, all over Slovenia” (Regionalobala 2020c). Thus, he made it clear that border regimes, although established “with a concern for health”, can also serve as a means of disciplining and implicitly stigmatizing people living on the other side. Those people should be avoided, excluded, delegated to the dark spaces of danger, infection, and taboo. Such segregation can provoke intolerance and hostility towards other nationals when one’s own (national) identity is endangered, which is evidenced by the event when an unknown driver stopped an Italian national in the middle of the road near Sežana (on the border with Italy), threatened him with a chainsaw and punched him several times in the face (Regionalobala 2020d). The incident occurred only a few days after the mayor of Sežana blocked five cross-border macadam roads because the road signs and the barriers did not stop Italian nationals from entering Slovenia (Kalc Furlanič 2020). After the pandemic was declared over in mid-May, borders across Europe opened and intercontinental ties were renewed. Soon after, however, it could be heard again from the authorities that Slovenia’s national security was at risk due to infections (although individual) coming from abroad. The Head of the Advisory Group on Covid-19 at the Ministry of Health Bojana Beović highlighted that “a very large-scale spread of the virus is possible”, which is why she expected from the country a “much greater concern for border control” (Vertačnik 2020). Prime Minister Janša agreed with her and pointed out the importance of consistent implementation of the measures to prevent infections, “otherwise new restrictions will be inevitable” (Vertačnik 2020).

When the pandemic returned for the second wave, the Slovene government again failed to align its measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 at the border crossings between Slovenia and Italy with the governments of the neighbouring country or of Friuli Venezia Giulia. “We were again faced with border closure before we could take action”, said the region’s President Fedriga, pointing out that

such lack of dialogue came at a time when Slovenia had “a significantly higher share of positive tests” on Covid-19 compared to Friuli Venezia Giulia (Primorski dnevnik 2020e). The lack of dialogue between the Slovene government and the authorities from Italy and the immediate neighbourhood was pointed out for the first time also by a representative of the Slovene state, Matjaž Nemec, a member of the Social Democrats party in the National Assembly and a connoisseur of the Italian-Slovene border area, originating from such area himself. In a parliamentary motion, he asked the government to establish dialogue with the Italian or Friuli Venezia Giulia authorities straightaway and agree on what measures to take in the border areas. He called on the government to refrain from unilateral measures in border areas that affect the lives of people on both sides of the border, but also create the possibility of “retaliatory measures” by the neighbouring country (Nemec 2020).

3. Adiaphorisation or Indifference towards the Other (People Living along/on the Border)

Although today, at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, the individual experiences the vulnerability and interdependence of the world he lives in, he/she does not seem to make any notable effort towards (ethical) responsibility which, in a face-to-face encounter, as Lévinas puts it, acknowledges and recognises the other. Lévinas’ face-to-face ethics builds on an irreversible ethical commitment to the other, which can only function if the individual accepts the other as a being for whom he is responsible (Bauman 1995, 78–97). Rather, it seems that adiaphorisation (still) prevails, causing social action to become adiaphoric,² indifferent towards the other, the neighbour. Particularly evident during a pandemic is the opportunistically cold attitude of society towards migrant workers, who often work in very precarious, slavery-like conditions. They are the ones on whom Europe – Italy and Slovenia alike – relied during the pandemic, but they still fail to recognise the positive side of migration. On the contrary, those migrants who do not come from Europe are subject to discrimination in the labour market, poverty, vulnerability, racist practices; sooner or later they are seen as a threat to national security and can be deported (Samaddar 2020; Tomažič 2020). In their case, it becomes clear that borders also mean boundaries: the boundaries of employment, housing (e.g. slums), the economy, and life. This focus also encompasses the crossings of international borders and the reflection of migration flows along the internal borders of nation-states and in urban centres, as well as the separation between autochthonous and non-autochthonous in the local environment. “The position on the superiority-inferiority axis is always determined by the contact with and attitude towards other ethnic minorities” (Sedmak 2018, 105). The Horizon 2020 project entitled Micreate – Migrant

Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe (Migrate 2019), led and coordinated by Mateja Sedmak and Barbara Gornik from the Institute for Social Studies of the Koper Science and Research Centre, finds that migrant children are particularly vulnerable during a pandemic and that social inequality between them will deepen.

Rather irresponsible during the Covid-19 pandemic was the attitude towards the elderly, especially those in nursing homes (cf. MMC RTV SLO 2020), towards the sick and the marginalised. For example, Erika Bavec, who had been living with her husband – a Slovene from Italy – and two children in the municipality of Dolina/San Dorligo della Valle (Italy) for ten years, said that her father lived in the nearby village of Huje (Slovenia). Being a cancer patient with severe metastases, “we don’t really know if we’ll ever see him again” (Sternad 2020a, 5). She tried to cross the border several times, but was prevented from doing so. The Italian *carabinieri* “estimated that my case – sick father – could be considered an emergency” (Sternad 2020a, 5), but the Slovene police officers told her that visiting her father was not possible, or that it would be possible provided she remained in quarantine in Slovenia for seven days, after which she should get tested for Sars-CoV-2. Thus, she and her family could only communicate with the father by phone or video call: “Yesterday [11 May] my daughter cried because she wanted to visit her grandpa, whom she had been seeing regularly at least twice a week [...]. All of a sudden this is no longer possible and it is difficult to explain it to the children” (Sternad 2020a, 5). There were many similar family stories at the time and they were not tied exclusively to visiting the elderly, but had a transgenerational character. For example, the story of a Slovene couple from Trieste whose granddaughter was born in April 2020 in one of the hospitals in Slovenia. Although the grandparents had both Italian and Slovene nationality, this was of no help to them. “One-day visits are not allowed without [one-week] quarantine”, they were told by the police (Primorski dnevnik 2020b). Bauman (2006, 321–323) describes adiaphorisation also as “erasure of the face”, as it can be measured by technical values (focused on purpose or procedural) rather than by moral values or such that would arise from a moral impulse or general sensitivity to human pain and distress. In his commentary on the “corona-border” of 24 April 2020, the editor-in-chief of Primorski dnevnik, Igor Devetak, referred to the Slovene national community in Italy and wrote:

[S]ince then [since the closure of the Slovene-Italian ‘corona-border’] and to this day, no representative of the Slovene state has uttered a single word of support or sympathy with the ‘people in Italy’, with the Slovenes in Italy who believed – imagined? – that we are part of the Slovene national body. Because on the other side of the border we have sons, daughters, friends, jobs, business and cultural interests, property – because we feel to belong to the same nation. Will we still feel the same way? (Devetak 2020a, 3).

Also Felice Žiža, representative of the Italian national community in the Slovene parliament, would “expect from Slovenia greater concern for the border with Italy”, as it is not only about people working in neighbouring countries, “but also about families separated and divided by the coronavirus” (Tence 2020b). Devetak wondered whether the neighbours (Slovenia and Friuli Venezia Giulia, Italy) were truly unable to find common ground, taking the border population into consideration. They even have an institutionalised motive for such, namely the Joint Committee Slovenia – Friuli Venezia Giulia, which meets periodically. Its last meeting was in November 2019 and the pandemic could serve as an opportunity to meet again. Slovenia, according to Devetak (2020a, 3), also has a consulate general in Trieste and someone to speak with among the Slovene minority. In Slovenia, someone should have taken the initiative and shown “willingness to deal with the distress of the border population” (Devetak 2020a, 3).

Nataša Smotlak, who lives in Oreh/Noghere, remembers that she had never experienced such a complete and tight closure of the border between Italy and Slovenia. Ever since 1954, when the new border was drawn, people along the border could easily enter Yugoslavia and Slovenia with a *laissez-passer*. The pandemic border severely affected her family, not only because of the land she owns on the other side (the crossing would only be possible at the remote border crossing Fernetiči/Ferneti), but also because during the state of emergency she could only communicate with her husband, who works in Slovenia, online. Although the two had both Italian and Slovene nationality, it was worth nothing. “I have the feeling”, she said in an interview in mid-May, “that the people in Ljubljana and Rome are not interested in the situation we are experiencing along the border” (Sancin 2020). Bojana Vidmar, President of the Repentabor Development Association from Dol pri Vogljah (a place near the Italian border), made a similar statement: “They know nothing about us in Ljubljana, and they don’t care about us in Rome” (Sternad 2020b, 5). The mayor of Gorizia, Rodolfo Ziberna, noted that during the pandemic, the Italian government was “completely absent” in deciding on the (non)opening of the Slovene-Italian border (Primorski dnevnik 2020c). Similarly, political scientist Zaira Vidau (2020) said that the prevailing authority of the central governments in Rome and Ljubljana had ignored the words and the needs of local border communities.

Although the ban on border crossing due to the Covid-19 pandemic posed a depressing obstacle for the local population, the mind-set and the feeling of open borders developed over the last 15 years could not be suppressed. During these years, the people along the border became “a whole that in no way mirrors two separate states” (Bojana Vidmar cited in Sternad 2020b, 5). People missed free movement, restaurants, contacts with friends, participation in choirs, societies and associations gathering singers, actors and members from both sides of the border. During the pandemic, the general public also learned that as many as 25 children from Italy attended the Sežana kindergarten, namely its branches in

Tomaj, Povir, Lokev and Materija (Verč 2020c). Sixty Italian-speaking children from Milje/Muggia attended the Pier Paolo Vergerio primary school with Italian as the language of instruction in Koper, especially its branch in Hrvatini near the border and the branches of Bertoki and Semedela (Pahor 2020, 8). Approximately 300 students from Italy studied at Slovene universities (Verč 2020b, 3). Suzi from the village of Prebeneg/Prebenico (in the immediate vicinity of the Slovene border) said: “My territory is here and there, and now [during the pandemic] I’m missing a part” (Sternad 2020a, 5). She added that people were resourceful and would not just give up their habits. Also historian Kaja Širok, originally from Solkan, pointed out that no border in history, no matter how impermeable, had prevented the border population from tailoring it to their needs, at least to some extent (Bucik Ozebek 2020).

4. Acts of Rapprochement in Border Areas

In the cross-border conurbation of Gorizia – Nova Gorica, rapprochement was promoted by the two mayors, Rodolfo Ziberna and Klemen Miklavčič, who at the end of February had celebrated together, embracing each other, the progress in the candidacy for the title of European Capital of Culture 2025 (the candidacy is coordinated by the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation of the municipalities of Gorizia, Nova Gorica and Sempeter-Vrtojba – EGTC GO). However, the two mayors who, despite the setting up of the pandemic border, continued to work together to overcome this common emergency (Tortul 2020), were not successful in their request to loosen the border restrictions (in order to allow urban movement of residents for justified reasons: life, housing, work and family in the other city). Slovenia rejected their request despite the support it received from the Italian government (Munih 2020a, 15). Also worth mentioning is that the mayors of Nova Gorica, Brda, Miren-Kostanjevica, Renče-Vogrsko and Šempeter-Vrtojba paid a minute of silence for all Covid-19 victims in Italy in front of their town halls at noon on 31 March, joining the mayors of Italian municipalities in this gesture (Marussig 2020). In doing so, they also protested – at least implicitly – against the restrictive measures of the Slovene state on the border with Italy, which found its extension in their appeal for solidarity with the Goriška region. Thereby, they reminded the Slovene government that the measures would have dramatic consequences for the economic and social situation of the entire northern Primorska region (Munih 2020b, 14). This became very evident on 4 May 2020, during the visit of the Interior Minister Aleš Hojs to the Goriška region. The mayor of Nova Gorica, Miklavčič, told him that the region, which was strongly linked to Italy due to its highly developed gaming tourism, would be “hit by an economic disaster of unimaginable proportions”, which was why they were calling on Slovenia for help. According to him, the health situation on both sides of the border was not that problematic thanks to

good cooperation with the mayor of Gorizia, who warned them about the pandemic long before the Slovene authorities reacted. At the outbreak of Covid-19, says the mayor, “Nova Gorica’s casinos were full of visitors from Veneto – the European hotspot of the pandemic”, but together they “managed to prevent the worst [...] on both sides of the border” (Čepar 2020). The mayor of Gorizia, Rodolfo Ziberna, told the Minister that cooperation in the Goriška region originated among the people and the mayors only upgraded it, emphasising that Gorizia and Nova Gorica were one common city: “When my daughter goes to Nova Gorica, she tells me that she goes to this or that bar or shop, as if it were one city with several quarters” (cited in Munih 2020b, 14).

A positive attitude towards the people living along the border and crossing it on a daily or otherwise frequent basis was also shown by diplomatic representatives of the Republic of Slovenia operating in the border area in Italy or in Slovenia itself and somehow connected to or fond of this area, especially if they grew up in or near it. At the outbreak of Covid-19 in northern Italy, they soon realised that no cash nexus (in the sense of unhindered border crossings within the Schengen area) was immanent to the borders, quite the opposite: the borders seemed besieged, closed, and therewith also the population living along such. The idea that people on this or that side of the border would become separated again, that they would by-pass each other because of the pandemic, evoked fears of Orwellian proportions. Representatives of diplomatic services in particular consider themselves to be translators, someone who fosters the best possible relations between countries, but also act as some kind of connective tissue in the environment in which they work.

The Consul General in Trieste, Vojko Volk, a native from Primorska, was asked whether Slovenes in Italy felt concern when the Slovene authorities on 11 March 2020 started to set up barricades (rocks, lockgates and fences) at the border crossings without previous notice. He said that “it was a big shock” seeing Italy being declared a red zone, but they “understood that Italy was in a difficult situation and did not panic, we were understanding and tried to act accordingly” (Verč 2020a) He himself was “unpleasantly surprised by those rocks”. He and the President of the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia Massimiliano Fedrigo agreed that at a time when “Schengen is collapsing before our eyes and the whole of the EU is wobbly”, every effort should be made to preserve “border life” as much as possible (Verč 2020a). Two weeks later, Volk wrote that the “lesson” on the border was very simple:

The solution is not closing the borders, but vice versa! Open borders protect our lives and our interests much better than closed borders, and we can only hope that this lesson will get to those who would close the borders and put soldiers on such in any true or imaginary crisis (Volk 2020, 3).

“In these difficult crisis situations, in the relations with Italy and our minority there, we must also think of tomorrow” (Primorski dnevnik 2020a), said Iztok Mirošič, a diplomat born and raised in Sežana and former Ambassador to Rome, just like Vojko Volk. During the pandemic, Mirošič was critical of Slovenia which, in view of “internal problems”, did not pay sufficient attention to Italy and the Slovene minority there, as well as to proper communication with them. He perceived the border areas as a space of dialogue and social closeness. He suggested to his country to show solidarity with Italy, perhaps by admitting a few patients from the neighbouring country for treatment to an Istrian hospital, with doctors and staff who speak Italian. It would be a “sensitive gesture”, also considering the public opinion in Slovenia, but it would be useful: “Italy is our neighbour, our minority lives there and Italians live in our country [...] and, of course, our act of solidarity would be properly presented at the EU level” (Primorski dnevnik 2020a). When Mirošič attended the Udine Forum of the Aquileia Euroregion in October 2020 representing the Slovene Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he expressed hope that “Europe has actually learned something from the first, spring wave of the pandemic and that there will be no closure of borders between countries, in our case between Italy and Slovenia”. “When the Italian-Slovene border was closed, the dialogue between the two countries stopped, and confusion arose”, added the diplomat who sees the solution to the problems in regular cooperation and prompt communication between Rome and Ljubljana. “No more closed borders, Mirošič underlined” (cited in Tence 2020c, 3).

5. European Union, Slovenia and the Slovene National Community

On 9 May 2020, during the coronavirus crisis, the European Union (EU) celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, which launched the process of European integration with a view to creating a single market. The declaration was intended to help European economies that were on their knees after the Second World War, but also presented a desire to improve the lives of European citizens and to maintain transnational, solidarity and peaceful ties. The Covid-19 pandemic has made it clear that the EU remains an unfinished project. The aspirations for a Union capable of responding to people’s needs came to the fore. One of the key criticisms of the EU was (and partly still is) that the countries – also due to border closure – were separated from each other as they had not been for a long time. At the beginning of the fight against the pandemic, each EU Member State acted on its own and rather than the EU flags that people were supposed to display on Europe Day, the flags of individual countries were hung. The exclusive nature of the nation-state, symbolised and implemented by the border, was strongly present during the pandemic, as were nationalisms and populisms.

Notwithstanding the above, there was a growing belief that all-European solutions were indispensable to cope with the demanding challenges that no country could address on its own. This is also reflected in the criticisms that the EU was quite unsuccessful and uncoordinated in curbing the Covid-19 pandemic and that – due to some countries, especially Hungary, slipping into authoritarianism and the strengthening of far-right parties and movements – the European values were at risk. Guillaume Klossa, founder of the EuropaNova think-tank and initiator and co-president of the transnational CIVICO Europa movement, was asking himself: “Are we going to co-shape history also in the future and thus provide new impetus for the European project, or will we maintain the status quo or even move backwards under the pressures of populism?” (Podkrižnik 2020). He linked his thoughts to US President Franklin Roosevelt, who in the 1930s succeeded in protecting the United States from fascism at the federal level with his New Deal. “It’s time to provide a New Deal for the European Union as well”, and this new deal must be economic, developmental, cultural, environmental, democratic and inclusive. If it will be all that, populisms will undoubtedly weaken, as “they are unable to offer collective answers in a time of crisis” (Podkrižnik 2020).

The fact that crises (should) raise awareness of the importance of the common EU institutions was highlighted also in the appeal for a greater EU response to the pandemic crisis, launched by philosophers Roberto Castaldi and Daniel Innerarity and signed by many important European personalities, including Romano Prodi (former President of the European Commission and Prime Minister of Italy), Enrico Letta (former Prime Minister of Italy), José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (former Prime Minister of Spain) and thousands of others. The appeal was also supported by the umbrella organisations of the Slovene national community in Italy, the Slovene Cultural and Economic Association (SKGZ) and the Council of Slovene Organizations (SSO), as well as by the Italian national communities in Slovenia and Croatia (Italian Union). In their trilingual Slovene-Italian-Croatian letter of 26 March, addressed to the Prime Ministers of Italy, Slovenia and Croatia, they expressed concern over the lack of coordination between the countries with regard to measures, especially at border crossings, “since we have not had a situation like this for seventy years” (SSO 2020). They have always considered the border area “as an open space, but such has been put into question by the current emergency situation”, and the EU as an instance called to support “the efforts we have invested over the past decades in breaking down physical and mental boundaries” (SSO 2020). The letter closes with a quote from the above mentioned appeal, which ends with the sentence: “It is time for European unity, not for national division” (SSO 2020). During a video conference on 29 April, the Presidents of the two umbrella organisations of Slovenes in Italy presented to the Slovene Minister for Slovenes Abroad Helena Jaklitsch a document containing the main open issues for the Slovene national community, highlighting that the loosening of the measures to curb Covid-19 should

include “local border crossings” (SKGZ 2020, 2). This complies with the words of Zaira Vidau (2020), who says that the representatives of the Slovene national community in Italy might have accepted the closure of the border, but did not agree therewith.

5. 1 Cross-Border Integration and Nationalism

It should be emphasised that members of the Slovene national community in Italy considered Slovenia’s accession to the EU in 2004 and its entry into the Schengen area in December 2007 as extremely important historical milestones imbued with great expectations. This also derives from the interviews with distinguished representatives of Slovenes in Italy. One of them described the reasons for such expectations as follows: “[B]ecause the free crossing of the border will be an important aspect of the movement of culture, exchanges, integration, [...] especially in those cities and places where people live close to each other [...]” (cited in Mezgec 2008, 170). A considerable share of border crossing and cross-border integration was and is kept by members of minorities, in this case Slovenes in Italy, who live along the entire Slovene-Italian border (cf. Bogatec & Vidau 2020), but also other “border crossers” (Anzaldúa 1987). These include children, pupils and students (see the last paragraph of Section 3), as well as a large part of cross-border migrants from Trieste who found home (bought land, a house or other real estate)³ in the Slovene Karst region upon the release of European integration flows and the gradual abolition of border controls, but continued to maintain an “elastic” relationship with Trieste where they still worked, had social and friendly ties, and spent part of their free time (Jagodic 2011).

The emergence of border crossers also implies that, in the context of European integration, borders no longer denote a limited territory, but are increasingly often a space of connectivity and interaction between neighbours; instead of dividing, they open up to different nations, languages, cultures and ways of life. Cross-border integration is no longer an exception, but is becoming a rule. This is confirmed by the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC GO), which consists of the municipalities of Gorizia (IT), Nova Gorica (SI) and Šempeter-Vrtojba (SI). The EGTC GO runs, for example, the health project Salute-Zdravstvo, which seeks to establish a network of cross-border health services (Interreg Italija-Slovenija 2020). In the light of Gorizia’s and Nova Gorica’s candidacy for the European Capital of Culture, the GO!2025 team organised a free online course of Italian and Slovene during the Covid-19 pandemic with the desire to bring the cross-border population closer. The organisers were surprised by the great response, as in late May the virtual course, which had been launched on 30 March, had over a thousand participants. It was not only about learning a language, but also about “preserving the idea of coexistence, compassion and solidarity” (GECT GO / EZTS GO 2020; Primorski dnevnik 2020d).

Notwithstanding the above, the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic made it clear that the EU was under-equipped to properly carry out its mission, which includes ensuring the free movement of goods, services and people, albeit in line with preventive health measures to contain the pandemic. At the Italian-Slovene border, there was a complete absence of mechanisms that would go beyond the logic of national frameworks and take into account the specifics of cross-border areas. This is also due to the limited competences of the EU and the fact that the EU has many state-like features modelled on the nation-state (Sweeney 2005, 240–241), with border control playing a key role. In the relationship between state and migrations, it seems most important that the state has a monopoly over the legitimate control of the movement of people across borders (Pajnik & Zavrtnik Zimic 2003, 23). This was especially evident during the Covid-19 crisis, when the Schengen border in the south of Slovenia and the Italian-Slovene border became the key sites of security investment in both political rhetoric and the actual control policy. Also, the crisis clearly showed that life at the border is not exactly comfortable for members of minorities, as they, too, are likely to be subject to control.

The media widely reported the story of Daniel Malalan, a Slovene from Trieste stopped on the Italian-Slovene border by two Slovene soldiers, one of which thought that Malalan was a migrant and pointed a gun at him. The Italian MP and former President of the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia Debora Serracchiani reported to the Italian Foreign Minister on alarming and internationally unacceptable events on the border between Italy and Slovenia, mistakenly believing that the soldier was not a regular soldier, but rather “an armed member of paramilitary structures” (Informatrieste 2020). When it was confirmed that the event actually happened, Nova24TV, as well as the Slovene Prime Minister Janez Janša in his tweet, stated that “the possibility of a planned provocation of the Slovenian Army and thus the government with the intention of staging the incident cannot be ruled out” (STA 2020b). The Slovene Interior Minister Aleš Hojs shared this view and defended the soldier, rather than Malalan: “If the soldier had grounds to believe that there was a case of organised crime, human trafficking, he – as any of us should – basically had to react and prevent crime” (STA 2020b). The quotation implies the prejudice that migrants are criminogenic, which further leads to the belief that the autochthonous population (i.e. the majority population of Slovenia) is at risk. Likewise, it implies that members of minorities and other people living along the border could be linked to refugees and migrants.

It needs to be taken into account that, from the point of view of the national centres of power, members of minorities are traditionally perceived as suspicious, insufficiently loyal and therefore dangerous. In this sense, Slovenes in Italy are still treated as a kind of foreign object within the majority social environment. Malalan was described as a “radical Titoist and defender of the Antifa” (STA

2020b), an “antifa Slovene from Italy” (Nova24TV 2020), a “Trieste resident with dual nationality” (Lenardič 2020), a “leftist”, someone who “at first glance resembles an illegal migrant” (Demokracija 2020), etc. The arguments created the impression that there was an irreducible cultural difference – “impurity” – between him and the majority Slovene population (Douglas 2010), which implied protective barriers or measures to prevent contamination or mixing. In particular, national ideologies, which are institutionalised in state apparatuses and acts, are characterised by treating cultural blending as inauthentic, immoral or even treacherous (Pušnik 2011, 158), which is one of the main reasons why members of minorities resort to ethnic mimicry or “hidden identity” (Jurić Pahor 2009; Jurić Pahor 2014, 204–206). It is significant that in Slovenia there has not yet been a public or political debate on “mixedness” (Sedmak 2020), although members of national minorities in border and cross-border areas are in constant interaction with members of the majority culture and other (immigrant) cultures, attend minority or bilingual kindergartens, schools and universities on this and the other side of the border, and are often also members of ethnically mixed families (e.g. Jagodic 2008; Jurić Pahor 2008, 2010; Čok & Pertot 2010; Sedmak 2018; Mezgec 2019; Zorčič 2019). The prevailing understanding of national communities is based on the definition that sees them as culturally homogeneous, clearly demarcated, and separated from one another. There is a large gap between national rhetoric and the characteristics of border areas (e.g. contact of two or more cultures and languages that intertwine and interchange). The residents of such areas, especially members of national and immigrant minorities, are largely bearers of transcultural or hybrid identities (e.g. Pertot 2011; Jurić Pahor 2012, 2017, 2020; Sedmak & Zadel 2015; Zadel 2020). It seems, however, that the all-encompassing ideology of nationalism is still strong enough to overshadow or interfere with this reality, forcing the (actually transcultural) members of national minorities to occasionally perceive themselves as culturally unambiguous. In this sense, Maja Zadel (2020) offers a nice play of words: “transculture in the embrace of nationalism”. It is no coincidence that the role of the Slovene national community in Italy in the efforts for cross-border cooperation during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020 was not recognised and encouraged – neither by Italy nor by Slovenia, which also applies to the beginnings of the second wave of the pandemic (which is still ongoing at the end of this discussion in late October). On 30 May 2020, Saša Vidmajer (2020, 7) wrote about Slovenia and its government representatives: “We like to declare that the Slovenes from Italy are part of the Slovene national body, but in difficult moments like this, not one word was said about them”. At the round table for the presentation of the book *A community at the Heart of Europe. Slovenes in Italy and the Challenges of the Third Millennium* (Bogatec & Vidau 2020) within the European Science Forum ESOF2020 held on 3 September in Trieste, Zaira Vidau (2020) said that the closure of the border between Slovenia and Italy led

to a new artificial deepening of the differences between people living along the border: “Suddenly we have become the enemies spreading the virus”.

6. Conclusion

Efforts to curb the Covid-19 pandemic in the border area between Italy and Slovenia (the article focuses on the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020 and the period until the beginning of the second wave in October 2020) have shown that border as method is closely connected with the topography of the nationalist discourse, for which the existence of a specific, territorially demarcated territory, which is habituated to the state itself and forms the identification of the common, is of key importance. As (northern) Italy became the first and for some time also the main European hotspot of Sars-CoV-2 infections, this identification mechanism reflected in the calls and concerns such as “We are not Italy and we do not want to be Italy, we can do it”, uttered by the Slovene government spokesman for Covid-19 and reported in many media headlines. The feelings of fear and anxiety that had been unleashed during the pandemic were supposed to concentrate into an act that presupposes a compact and hermetically confined community of citizens. Yet, national borders, which turned out to be still there to keep out outsiders and intruders (in the present case, the illegal immigrants, as the tendency to strengthen control of the Schengen and Italian-Slovene borders with mixed patrols gained momentum right at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic), are far from being covered by a monological imagination of the national perspective, and are not linear, solid, or fixed at all. In the emergency situation related to the health crisis, it turned out in the border area between Italy and Slovenia that borders are not limited to a single border function but rather perform several functions of demarcation and territorialisation, which means that the political spatiality of the nation-state – in this case Slovenia – split on its margins into a multitude of temporary, movable and removable terms and synonyms for border: closed border, protective barrier, checkpoints, closures, pandemic border, barbed wire, panel fence, Schengen border. At the same time, these concepts suggest that borders are always porous, polysemantic and defined by the European integration processes: they require cooperation between EU Member States and cannot be seen outside the processes of globalisation, which are moving into increasingly changing contexts. They are characterised by selective permeability, differential inclusion and multiplication (cf. Mezzarda & Neilson 2013; Balibar 2015). As lines drawn and consolidated by often violent historical processes, borders are points of conflict and dialogical confrontation, of contact and transitions, of integration and separation.

The article illustrates that the border, and even more specifically the border area between Italy and Slovenia, is a very lively and relationally flexible space for members of the Slovene national community as well as for officials, diplomatic

representatives and people who work and live therein. Representatives of the Slovene minority and diplomacy associate it with hope for a peaceful Europe, within which national (including ethnically mixed or transcultural) identities would no longer be a reason for confrontation and violence, but a condition for promoting coexistence beyond exclusive binary oppositions of us against them / they against us. It can be said that in the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, the need to stand together – as a community beyond borders – was indeed strongly felt. It has launched a broader awareness that borders should no longer mark a limited territory, but primarily a space of connectivity, solidarity and dialogue.

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Notes

- ¹ It is significant that the proposal to control the Schengen or Italian-Slovene border was presented by a senator who is a member of the Slovene minority. These are symptoms that confirm the assumption that the protection of national or ethnic identity in Europe today appears primarily as defence against disturbing 'non-autochthonous' elements from the outside, i.e. immigrants (cf. Pajnik & Zavratnik Zimic 2003, 7; Sedmak 2018, 105).
- ² Bauman borrowed the term *adiaphorisation* from Stoicism, which classified things and actions into good, bad, and *adiaphora* (neither good nor bad, indifferent).
- ³ Between 2004 and 2015, around 750 Italian nationals moved to the territory of the administrative units of Sežana and Koper, of which 526 to the Karst (Regionalobala 2016).

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